

Relentlessly Mundane

By Jo Walton

23 October 2000

Jane hated going to Tharsia's apartment. It was hung about with tapestries and jangling crystal windchimes and a string of little silver unicorns, and it reminded her of Porphyria and everything she wanted to forget. If Tharsia had been able to get it right it wouldn't have been so irritating; it was just that little silver unicorns look so tacky when you've been used to the deep voices of real unicorns and great silver statues that speak and smile. Jane's own apartment was modern and spartan. Her mother approved of how clean it was but kept giving her houseplants and ornaments to, as she put it, "personalise the place." "You always look as if you're going to move out at any minute," she said. Jane threw them away. She didn't want personalised; she wanted functional and clean, in case she moved out at any minute. Eventually her mother gave up, as she had long since given up complaining about the huge belt-pouch Jane always kept on, and Jane's lack of a boyfriend since Mark, and her working out too much. Jane's apartment stayed bare and devoid of personality. The room she liked best was the shower, brightly lit and white-tiled with copious amounts of hot water flowing whenever Jane wanted it. She had missed showers most of all, in Porphyria.

She walked briskly up the three flights. Tharsia's apartment would irritate her, but she could deal with the irritation. At least walking up the stairs would be exercise, partly making up for the fact she'd missed her fencing lesson to come here today. She'd make the time up. She knocked. The bell, she knew from experience, rang a ghastly madrigal, a tinny parody of the tunes the minstrels used to play in the Great Hall. She couldn't understand how Tharsia could be content with this. Well, she wasn't content, of course.

Tharsia opened the door and smiled at Jane. Her dark hair streamed loose on her shoulders, bound by a single leather thong around her forehead. She was wearing a purple robe belted with silver leaves. Since college Tharsia had made a living of sorts telling fortunes with cards and runes and tea-leaves, supplementing her income by giving chair massages to busy executives. Jane, who was an accountant, and whose clothes tended to combine conservative with sensible, was constantly surprised that this worked for her friend.

They embraced. Jane felt the familiar mixture of affection and irritation sweep over her. "This had better be important," she said. She didn't believe for a minute it was. In the fifteen years since they came back from Porphyria, Tharsia had called her over urgently every couple of months. She almost didn't know why she kept coming.

"It is," said Tharsia, and she looked serious. Jane followed her in. There was a

loom with half a handwoven cloth in the corner. Tharsia's weaving was improving, but still terrible. The colours on this one were so ugly that it took Jane a moment to notice the man standing next to it.

"Mark!" she said, and felt her heart beat suddenly faster. She was so shocked she allowed her real joy in seeing him into her voice. "I thought you were in Florence?"

"I was; I just got back," he said. "Hi, Jane." The casual tone he used was more painful than anything since -- since she had seen him the last time.

"Hi," Jane said, trying not to blush. She had been fifteen when they'd told her in the High Temple in Porphyria that she would always love Mark as much as she did then. She hadn't thought to ask if he'd always love her. If she had, she'd have stayed, like Kay, stayed where she was wanted and useful and where everything was noble and beautiful.

... Not everything, she reminded herself for the millionth time. She wasn't Tharsia, to forget how scared they had been, to forget the very real danger, the evil and hideous things they had faced. Faced, and fought, and defeated. In Porphyria things were all very obviously what they were.

"Terry told me you were coming over," Mark said, sitting down on one of Tharsia's squashy chairs and disarranging the lacy drape.

"Yeah," said Jane, feeling tongue-tied and idiotic.

"Tharsia," Tharsia corrected, automatically. She liked it now, though when she'd been twelve and in Porphyria she'd been only too pleased to have them call her Terry or Teresa and treat her as normal.

"OK, sis, Tharsia it is," said Mark, obligingly, as he had so many times before.

"So, what were you doing in Florence?" Jane asked him.

"Giving a talk, looking at some old stuff, that sort of thing," he said.

"Did you find anything?" Tharsia asked.

Mark snorted. "No. I've come to the conclusion there's nothing to find. We were the only people ever to go to Porphyria, if influence is anything to go by. How are you, Jane? Pass your exams?"

"Yeah," Jane said. "I'm fully qualified now. They gave me a raise." Also since she'd last seen Mark she'd been commended by her coach and had moved up a grade in fencing, but he'd only scoff if she mentioned it.

"Still carrying round your survival kit, I see," Mark sniggered. He was getting a potbelly. Jane had once stupidly let him see what she carried in the belt-pouch -- water, antibiotics, painkillers, Swiss army knife, needles, her favourite books and an encyclopaedia on CD-ROM, a solar powered reader, a plastic coat, a flashlight, string, a few other oddments. "They'd have been useful last time," she'd said when he laughed, and he had looked at her patronisingly and said that she should grow up and accept that they weren't going back.

Tharsia brought tea in lumpy homemade cups. Tea was a taste they'd all acquired in Porphyria and still shared. Jane took it and sat down, on something sharp. She fished out a silver unicorn, meant as an earring. It must have fallen off the line of them strung across the ceiling, probably knocked off by Mark, the clumsy oaf. Jane handed it silently to Tharsia, and tried not to be irritated. She did like Tharsia; after all, they had been best friends in school. Jane admired her a great deal for the way she had coped in Porphyria, for how hard she had worked to channel the magical energies she alone could handle, for how she had risked her own life in single combat armed only with magic while Jane and Mark held off the knights of the Doomguard and Kay lay on the floor at Tharsia's feet, turned to stone. Jane would always remember standing in slick blood fighting for her life against men twice her height and weight and hearing Tharsia's declaration, "You can't hurt me, you can only kill me." It made up for a lot of tacky unicorns and madrigal door chimes. She just wished Tharsia could find some better way to cope with losing all that magic than pretending she still had it. Jane sighed, and sipped her tea. Camomile. Not bad. It must be something serious. When Tharsia was happy she tried, and failed, to make up Porphyrian blends.

"So, what is it?" Jane asked. "A dream?"

"Jane!" said Tharsia, sounding betrayed, though it had been a dream last time. "No. A letter. The police. Apparently some schoolboy's gone missing out in the woods, and they want me to come in and answer some questions to see if the case has any connection with -- with Kay."

"Don't they ever give up?" Mark asked, rolling his eyes.

"I don't think so," Jane said, grim. "There's probably one of those for me at my parents', and for you too, Mark. Have you been home to see?"

"No," Mark sighed. "That case dragged on and on for years. I thought they'd given up. Do they think we're some kind of serial killers or something?"

"I suppose they do." Jane shook her head, thinking of Kay. "We didn't have any sort of explanation, after all. The four of us went into the wood, lots of people saw us. Ten minutes later, from their way of looking at it, three of us came out, torn and bedraggled and a year older, except they didn't notice the year older bit."

"Nobody ever did," Mark said, "Funny, really. Even Father just said I'd grown."

"I never even thought that they'd miss Kay," Tharsia said, dreamily. "When I read the stars. It was just completely obvious that Kay couldn't come home -- after all, statues can be alive there, and they can't here. If you die somewhere and get your life back magically it isn't going to stay the same if you go home again."

"Kay wanted to stay anyway," said Jane, comfortingly. "None of us could have done anything to change that, nothing could have dragged Kay back here if there was any chance of staying, flesh or stone."

"If we'd thought of it--" Mark began.

"Oh shut up with that broken record," Tharsia snapped at her brother. "Yes, if we had we could have said that Kay had mentioned suicide and gone off to the lake, but they dragged the lake twice as it was."

"I almost thought they'd find Tamarren's sword," Jane said, smiling. She set her cup down. "It was the same lake in the same wood, even if it was in a different world. I wonder what they'd have thought if they did."

"You two are both as bad as each other," Mark said. "You with your survival kit and fitness training and you, Ter-- Tharsia, with your fake Porphylian styles and magic. You both want to go back. Well I'm glad I'm in this world with comfort and technology and no evil creatures trying their best to kill me." He sounded sincere, and Jane wondered if he still woke in the night weeping. They were none of them untouched by that year out of time.

"We'll just stick to the story we gave them, then," Jane said. "We don't know what happened, Kay wandered away from us, we didn't see anything untoward."

"I wonder if it is a murder, this time," Tharsia mused, her eyes on the hanging crystals that fractured the light. In Porphyria looking at a crystal like that would have given her vivid visions and she would have begun at once to prophecy in powerful and unstoppable verse. "Or if maybe that boy has somehow found a way into Porphyria."

"But if they needed anyone it would be us!" Jane said. "We're ready. We understand it! We promised to go back if--"

"They didn't need someone who understood it and was ready last time," said Tharsia. "They told me in the High Temple to come back here, that our own world needed me more than Porphyria. I didn't realise I'd only have this shadow of my magic." Jane and Mark exchanged glances, their minds as perfectly in accord as they had been fifteen years before when their lives had depended on each other. They remembered how impossible it had been to console Tharsia for the complete loss of all magical ability when they got home. "But what they needed to save the world was children, raw power, innocence.... I do wonder where that child is."

"I do hope I'm not going to be put in prison for murdering him," said Mark.

"They could never prove anything with Kay," Jane said. She looked past Tharsia's drapes out of the window at the world so real and hard and sharp edged and ambivalent. She sighed, and wished for the millionth time that she had stayed, like Kay. Then for the first time she really entertained the possibility that Mark might, after all, be right, and they might never be going back. She shook her head. It couldn't be true. If she really thought this was all there was ever going to be, that life was never going to be for anything again, then what purpose was there in going on?

"I wonder," said Tharsia, still looking at the fractured light, "I wonder if there might be a way to save this world." Mark made a noise with his tongue and Jane started to ask from what, but Tharsia ignored them and went on, "Not by a sword, not by a word ..." and then suddenly collapsed in tears. Jane got up and put her arms around her friend and rocked her.

"Put the kettle on for more tea, Mark," Jane said. Somehow, she felt fifteen again, she felt like Sir Jana and not like Jane. As soon as he had left the room she bent and whispered to Tharsia "That was real, I know it was, don't cry, I can tell the difference. We can do it. We did it before. Yeah, it'll be harder without a temple and an army and swords and things, but you know I'll help. If you tell me what."

Tharsia sniffed, and wiped her eyes on her voluminous sleeve. "Making up the clever plans was always Kay's job," she said.

"So what would Kay do?" Jane urged.

"Kay would say 'I wouldn't start from here,'" Tharsia said, and they both giggled, because it was what Kay always said at the beginning of clever plans. Then Mark came back in, turning Jane's heart over again, as every time she saw him.

"So you think an art historian, an accountant and a fake fortune teller can save the world?" Mark asked, sceptically.

Tharsia looked up at her brother. Her not-tested-on-animals mascara had run all down her cheeks. "We're definitely going to need help. I wonder if that kid who disappeared had any friends. But Mark, bear in mind that four kids saved the world."

"That was different," Mark said. "That was ..."

"So real none of us have ever got over it," said Jane. "And if you've saved the world once, well."

"But saving *this* world," said Mark, indicating the world with a gesture that seemed to encompass everything from war, pollution, and starvation to Tharsia's terrible weaving.

"The first thing," Jane said, decisively, "The very first thing we're going to have to do is find out as much as we possibly can about what the worst problems are. And then we'll have to get together and work out where to start."

She thought she'd probably start by looking for some plants for her apartment.