
JOURNAL OF THE BALINT SOCIETY, VOLUME 48, ISSUE 1, FEBRUARY 2021

The Junk Lady and the Golden Chain

Balint Society Essay Prize 2020 joint winner

Jenny Jack¹

¹ Consultant Psychiatrist, Sheffield: jennyfjack@gmail.com

'So say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveller sitting next to a window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views you see outside.'

Sigmund Freud. *On Beginning the Treatment* (1913).

The story begins when Asha is twelve. Like a girl in a fairy tale she does not have a name, though in her mind, this is the name that Nina gives her.

Nina picks the tomato out of her sandwich, lays it on the grease-stained cardboard packaging on her lap. She needs to eat. She can feel the acid building beneath her ribcage, knows if she does not it will erupt in an embarrassing gurgle. It is, after all, lunchtime. Protected time. In the group, they are protected for one hour each week from the demands of the day - the medication charts which need writing, the phone calls to relatives, the patients waiting for their dark moods to lift, for the tormenting voices to be gone. Nina knows that, strictly, they are not supposed to eat. Jo, the facilitator turns a blind eye, although she never eats herself.

Sometimes, if the patient presented has an eating disorder, or the story is particularly tragic, Nina will lay her sandwich aside. She chews quickly now, as Rachel talks. Rachel's hands fidget in her lap, and she twists a slim golden chain around her wrist. Rachel is twenty-six, pale and nervous. She is five years older than Asha, the girl in the story, though Asha had a husband back in Iran. This seems too young, to Nina. Nina is twenty-eight, older than both of them, wider than Rachel. Nina is getting married in the Autumn, her mind full of burnished flowers, of ivory silk shoes crunching through fallen leaves.

She is hoping in the next few months to lose some weight. She slots the corner of soggy bread into her mouth now, thinking that Asha's story is about to get worse,

¹ Jenny Jack is a Consultant Psychiatrist working in a Recovery Mental Health Team in Sheffield and have been leading Balint groups for Foundation, Core and GPVTS trainees for the past 4 years.

that she is about to stop being a carefree twelve-year old running through the compound belonging to her wealthy parents. Nina imagines the baking sun casting shadows of mango trees on to a courtyard. Do they have mangoes in Iran? Some kind of orange fruit anyway, the juice running down Asha's chin, her slim hand wiping it away.

The nurse in the Crisis team wanted Asha to see a female doctor. Rachel is the only female doctor they have. She has been in the team four months. Rachel pauses. She is feeling her way along the thread of the story. Opposite her, Nina watches Gavin spoon pasta quickly from a Tupperware container, his cycling helmet laid casually by his chair.

Asha's father did not like her running like a boy in the compound. He worried about where she was going, what she was doing. He worried about the family's reputation. He worried she was not pure. He arranged a medical examination, then married her off as soon as he could.

Rachel stares straight ahead as she talks. Her fingers, twisting the gold chain, move faster, and Nina worries that it might snap. Asha's teenage years spool forwards. Darkness. They are indoors now, and the courtyard is gone, yet in the shady rooms there are glimpses of sunshine through the windows, the shadow-patterns of leaves. Asha's husband beats her. Rachel swallows. Sometimes, even though she is far away in Rotherham now, Asha still glimpses shadows at the window. That is why she keeps the curtains shut. But she can't keep out her husband's voice.

Nina returns the half-eaten sandwich to its packaging, balances it on the arm of her chair. Gavin keeps eating, methodically. Beside him, Shola, who has worked as a psychiatrist in Nigeria but must retrain in the UK, is motionless, his face impassive. Jo sneaks a glance at the clock, pouchy white hands folded in her comfortable lap. Her dangly earrings catch the light. *Free Association*, she had instructed them at their first meeting as a group. She spread her arms as she spoke, smiling around at their nervous faces. Her lips, pillar-box red, echoed her nail-polish. *Say whatever comes to mind. There is no right or wrong.*

‘When we got out of the car,’ says Rachel, ‘there was all this rubbish piled up outside the house.’

It seems to pain her, the rubbish. Nina imagines a kind of scaffolding. Looking beyond Gavin, she sees the desks they pushed together against the wall earlier, left over from a board meeting, to make space for their intimate circle of chairs. The expanse of wooden surface. She imagines these desks stacked, higgledy-piggledy outside Asha’s house as Rachel and the Crisis nurse step from the car, imagines the muddy, puddled ground tainting the toes of Rachel’s ballet flats.

Had Rachel mentioned a rat? Nina gives a slight jerk, knocking her sandwich to the floor with her elbow. ‘Sorry.’

She bends to pick it up, with a glance at Jake, next to her. He flushes, mumbling, pulling his legs out of the way. Nina sits back, brushing crumbs from her fingers. She cannot be sure if the rat was in the story or her imagination. On the corporate blue carpet at her feet, there are no rats. Still, she feels her toes curl.

In the two-up two-down terrace, Asha lives with her mother, her younger sister. The family live together in one room. Upstairs. The room furthest from the front door. The sister goes to school. A ray of sun lights the murky puddles as she steps outside. She is small enough to slip through the scaffold, her satchel across her chest, to skip from the story, appearing only as a snatched glimpse later when Gavin, blinking, says, ‘I’m wondering about the sister...’ Nobody else wonders. Perhaps, says Jo, Gavin is holding the hope for the group. Somebody needs to hold it. It is breakable.

In the doorway, through which hope has recently departed, Rachel ducks her head. She is drawn across the threshold by an older woman, tiny, nervous in her movements, beckoning her up the stairs. This is Asha’s mother, who may or may not be tiny, though in Nina’s mind the stairs are narrow, rickety, the lower rooms in darkness. As in all good fairy tales, the characters expand or shrink obligingly to fit their circumstances.

Upstairs, in a room bare of carpets, of pictures, of possessions, the mother retreats to the corner. She has brought her daughter across the sea, and although Nina

knows that they have flown, in a noisy plane full of chattering people, in her mind she sees a boat. She sees Asha curled inside the boat's ribs as her mother stands at the prow. Her mother summons her strength, she summons the power of waves and wind. She steers them, through the force of her will alone, and she hauls Asha, shipwrecked up the beach. Now, she has delivered her to Rachel, and her strength is spent. She sits back. She waits for this shining girl with her hair like corn and skin like milk to work her magic.

But Rachel is slipping from the story, along with the nurse, who left some time ago. 'We will ask the doctor to sit out now,' says Jo.

Rachel is no longer Rachel. She is the doctor, cast adrift from the group. As she pushes back her chair, they turn from her to the bundle of rags in the corner.

In the bundle of rags is a girl. Her name is not Asha, but this is the name Nina gives her. She is the most powerful person in the room. She is the most helpless. She lies on a mattress, and above her the closed curtains are murky, caked with dust. Her mind is a blaze of light, of images. It is full of screaming. She is the focal point in the darkness.

The clouds outside must have shifted. Through a flaw in the vertical blinds, a spar of light comes to rest on Nina's face. She shunts her chair a little to her left to escape it, and beside her Jake flushes again. His is the type of mottled skin that flushes easily. Along his jawline sprout tufts of mousy beard. He moves his chair in turn, though Shola, beside him, remains still. Through the blinds, Nina can see the well-kempt lawn, trees, and, beyond, fields rolling into the distance. They are on the edge of the city, where it meets the countryside. The leafy suburbs. Yet like a palimpsest, in grainy black and white she sees the view through Asha's curtains. The stacked rubbish. The terraced house opposite. The grids of terraces all around.

'I was wondering where the rubbish came from.' Jake flushes again, at his own audacity in speaking.

Jo swivels to look at him.

'What is your phantasy about that?'

Jake's ears, catching the word 'fantasy', turn pink. He shrugs, mumbles.

'Maybe neighbours put it there?'

And now, Nina can see them. Skin heads in tracksuits, bearing the flag of St George, but also pitchforks. They prod at the rubbish, and the rats run out. Inside, Asha and her mother cower, listening. In Asha's head, the voices mingle with her husband's.

Shola clears his throat. 'I was wondering,' he says slowly, carefully, 'if they put the rubbish there themselves. To keep people away from them.'

The group regard Shola, who never flaunts his superior experience, whose daughter is doing her GCSEs. Other than Jo, he is the only one with children. In Nina's head now, the neighbours melt into the background. The lone figure of the mother stands on the scaffold. At night, she sneaks out in the moonlight, to tend her barrier, to drop scraps of food to the rats.

Jake is staring at Shola, his mouth opened slightly, and Nina sees that he finds this preposterous. The idea that someone would pile detritus around themselves, so as not to be seen. Shola shrugs benignly. He has dropped his idea into the pool of the group and now he will let it be. The ripples may spread, or they may fade. But in Nina's mind something is waking, lumbering from a sea of rubbish beneath a twilight sky. The face emerges of a wizened old woman, bent beneath her carapace of discarded belongings.

'Like in *Labyrinth*. The junk lady, in the rubbish dump. It's a film,' she adds, seeing Jake's incomprehension, but Gavin is nodding. He clips the lid back on his Tupperware.

'I remember that. David Bowie in tight trousers playing the Goblin King.' They laugh, and even Jo smiles, indulgently. Perhaps it is Gavin who is holding the humour, as well as the hope. He taps the lid of his box with his fingers, his expression thoughtful.

‘The weirdest bit of that film was when all the creatures came into the girl’s bedroom at the end. I mean she opened her bedroom door, and the rubbish dump was still there. Like opposing worlds colliding.’

Nina has an image, suddenly, of her teenage self, on the sofa at home. She is in the den, her feet on a beanbag, and she has covered herself with a knitted throw. The thick, lined curtains are closed on the darkness outside, and *Labyrinth* flickers on the TV screen. Her Mother is upstairs, working. Her father is working late. She is alone. She has a bag of Doritos, and she moves them mechanically to her mouth as she watches, orange dust coating her fingers. This is how her father finds her, just as the rubbish dump on the screen comes alive, as the junk lady heaves herself into view.

He stands in the doorway, in his dark winter coat, a striped scarf around his neck. He stands for a moment, then he turns away.

Eating again, he says.

‘Opposing worlds, like the world inside Asha’s house, and the world outside.’ Gavin continues enthusiastically. ‘Or the contrast of where she is living now with where she came from in Iran.’

Her memory is composite. Nina knows this. As the others talk, she sees her father in the doorway, herself on the sofa. She cannot say for certain which film she is watching, which scene would be showing if someone, right at that moment, could pause the TV. None of this matters, because this is what she remembers. On the sofa, she makes herself small, beneath the throw, beneath her baggy layers of jumpers. She covers her face with her hair, curls into herself. Less is more. The junk lady, crouched beneath her shell.

‘I wonder,’ Jo is saying, ‘If we can also see the rubbish as a metaphor for something inside as well as out?’

The empty bag of Dorito’s rolls to the carpet at Nina’s feet. Her father’s footsteps climb the stairs, and she sidles to the door, her jumper sleeves pulled over her hands. From the kitchen, she will add to her pile, the scarlet wrapper of a pack of

Kit-Kats, the cellophane of some dried-up madeleines found at the back of a cupboard, a strawberry yoghurt carton.

‘Perhaps she feels dirty. The patient. Because of what’s happened to her.’ She glances towards Jo. ‘Maybe contaminated.’

‘Maybe it’s easier if the rubbish stays outside,’ says Gavin. ‘Where she can’t see it.’

Later, the sight of the pink yoghurt in the toilet bowl will tell Nina that her stomach is empty.

‘But what is the feeling?’ Jo’s gaze sweeps around the group. ‘She feels dirty, but what is the emotion she can’t acknowledge?’

There is a silence. Nina’s cheeks feel hot. *Fat slag*. She sees herself hugging the wall of the school corridor, unable to hide her bulk. Hears the *phut* of projectile spit, feels someone else’s chewing gum hit the side of her head.

Smoothing her blouse over the bulge of her skirt’s waistband, she lowers her gaze to the spotless blue carpet. She is Dr Nina Carr. She is successful. She is getting married. It is almost eight years since she last searched for the yoghurt in the toilet bowl. The black straps of her shoes dig into her ankles. She sees herself in the wedding dress shop a few days before, on a scalloped, satin chair watching the bubbles rise in her champagne glass. The dresses she has discarded heaped on the facing sofa.

At least, her mother says, we can buy some shoes.

‘Shame?’ She looks towards Jo, hesitates. ‘Maybe anger.’

The girl on the mattress raises her head. Her fingers, birdlike, clutch at the neck of her hijab. Her eyes are mistrustful, her jaw clenched. In Iran, she went to university until her husband stopped her. She studied maths. Somewhere in the film reel of her mind, beyond the harsh words, the lightning bursts of pain, is a quiet room, a blackboard, a scroll of algebraic symbols.

‘She might feel resentful,’ Nina continues. ‘Of the doctor. Being close in age, but in a privileged position.’

‘Ah, the doctor,’ prompts Jo. ‘We seem to have lost her.’

'The doctor has been buried in the rubbish,' blurts Jake, then falls silent, looking down at his lap.

Turning, Jo bestows on him a lipsticked smile, as in the room with the bare floorboards, Rachel crouches by the mattress. She stretches a hand towards Asha, but she does not touch her. Her hand hovers, uncertainly, as she waits, balanced there until the backs of her calves begin to ache.

'And what might she be feeling?' Jo keeps her eyes on Jake until his creeping flush matches her lipstick.

'Frustrated?' He offers, glancing around him for moral support. 'Guilty?'

Asha lifts her gaze to the level of Rachel's outstretched wrist. The golden chain, the single bright object in the room. In another life, she had worn jewellery. Perhaps, she will wear jewellery again.

'I think that she would feel guilty.' Shola's voice, as he steps in to rescue Jake, is deep and assured. 'Like the mother. She wants to help, but she can't.'

Although Rachel's chair is pushed back from the group, Nina sees, in the periphery of her vision, her feet cross and then uncross. The anxiety of being both in and out of the discussion. Present, but silent. Nina can empathise with this, from the times when she has been the doctor, when she has brought her own patient, her own self to be held up, turned this way and that, subjected to the group's scrutiny. Rachel's hands are folded in her lap, the gold chain snaking finely across her wrist.

Jo glances towards the clock. It is time to bring the doctor back in, but as Rachel talks, Nina hears only the thread of her voice, reflecting on what has been said, holding on to it as she allows herself to retrace her footsteps back down the stairs, through the front door, beneath the scaffolding. Nina sees the bracelet around her wrist, its quicksilver flash, as she negotiates the puddles, as she lifts her hand to open the car door, as she and the nurse drive away, the rubbish vanishing in the rear-view mirror.

From her window, Asha raises her hand to pull back the curtain, to watch them go. Light, faint as water, falls across the floorboards of her room. Nina sees the ellipse

of a face through grimy glass, fabric draped across a forehead, a single, wary eye. Then the curtain drops.

In the last seconds, Nina's mind wanders, to the shoes lying on her desk in her flat. The flat she shares with her fiancé, its bay windows overlooking the park. They are nestled in their box, on a bed of lilac tissue, the glint of seed pearls like the bubbles in champagne.

You should wear your hair up. Before they left the dress shop, her mother had stood behind her, piled the swathes of hair between her fingers as she had not done since Nina was a child. For a few seconds, Nina allowed herself to become visible in the ornate mirror propped against the wall, her hair clasped in her mother's hands.

We'll look again next week, her mother said, letting the hair fall. *Plenty of time to find the perfect dress.*

'It's time,' says Jo now.

They have fallen silent, as the clock hands crept towards the hour, and now, as one, they glance up, as if for confirmation. A sense, as they shuffle back their chairs, of a collective exhalation. Gathering bags and coats, they turn to each other, picking up threads of conversation from an hour before. Gavin packs his Tupperware box in his rucksack, buckles his cycling helmet. Standing, Rachel gives herself a little shake, as if to release the tension in her limbs. She blinks, seemingly surprised at the light streaming through the blinds.

They leave the desks where they are against the wall. As she passes, Nina feels her legs flinch from the dark space beneath. There are no rats here. Still, she feels exposed, tensed for the scurry, the brush of whiskers, as she tosses her leftover sandwich into the bin by the door.