

KJ Hatchings

UMBRELLA

a short story



Umbrella

A short story by

KJ HUTCHINGS

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They walked slowly towards the pub on the edge of the cricket green. The sun was shining and for the first time in as long as Jane could remember, Adrian was holding her hand, perhaps because he was nervous about his job interview.

‘It looks all right, doesn’t it?’ he said, regarding the pub’s exterior. ‘Can you see me as a barman here?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Jane replied. The white pebbledash walls needed a fresh paint job and the plants in the raised flowerbeds were dry and wilted. ‘I think so.’

In truth, she wasn’t sure if she could see him as anything other than a shirt-and-tie civil servant. ‘Yes, it looks quite nice.’

Adrian checked his watch. ‘We’re a bit early. My interview isn’t until eleven.’

He’d seen the position for a part-time barman advertised in the local newspaper and said he fancied his chances; rightly pointing out that the extra money would come in handy. He’d never worked in a pub before but reckoned it would suit him very well: he had the personality and confidence; he made friends easily and imagined that he would soon be on first-name terms with all the regulars. Would that include all the women, Jane silently wondered? Most probably; after all, he had chatted her up in a pub.

To pass some time they strolled around the nearby streets. It was surprisingly quiet considering it was a sunny Saturday morning.

When the time came for Adrian’s interview with the landlord, a man in his fifties called Reg, who beamed at Jane and shook her hand for longer than seemed necessary, she waited in the pub garden at the back, drinking a glass of orange juice and enjoying the early summer sunshine. The interior of the pub was rather dark and dingy so she was happy to sit outside.

Jane opened her bag and pulled out a book in anticipation of some undisturbed reading time. Moving into the flat with Adrian had reduced her reading sessions to increasingly short, snatched moments: the train or bus ride to work, lunch breaks, at night when Adrian had fallen asleep. He didn’t like her reading when they were together in their pokey living room. ‘Take your nose out of that bloody book,’ he would bark at her, telling her to ‘stop hiding behind a book all the time.’

Since they’d been living together there were a lot of things Adrian found fault with, often what Jane said or did or didn’t do, but what annoyed him the most was their lack of money. They never had enough. Their salaries were like fallen

leaves in a breeze – the money blew away from their accounts nearly as fast as it had arrived on payday. Adrian decided part-time jobs were the answer. He said Jane could clean offices in the evening, although he doubted her competency considering her current poor standard of housework at home. Luckily, she'd been offered a job interview for a higher paid administrative position and Adrian had grudgingly said well done, but told her not to get her hopes up. He said Jane had been lucky to get an interview, all things considering.

Before she posted off the application he'd insisted on seeing her CV, which he read with a mocking smile. 'I bet it took you ages to write this, didn't it?' he said. 'Do you want some constructive criticism?'

'I know it's not that good but –'

Adrian had interrupted her. 'It's crap, Jane. Absolute rubbish. Any potential employer would fall asleep reading this. You might have a fancy university degree and all that, but it's obvious you can't write a half-decent CV. It's amateurish. *Boring*. You have to stand out in this world. You'll never get a promotion if you don't change.'

Jane felt a stab of intense dislike for him, but said nothing in response. The weight of her despondency had crushed her ability to reply.

A few days later she found on the living room table a folder containing his curriculum vitae. It did not make impressive reading and Jane noted it contained several grammar and spelling errors. Adrian had listed only a handful of exam results, none above a C grade, and there was no mention of a college. Had it really taken him four years – double the time – to pass a few high school exams with such mediocrity? There must have been several fails and retakes. And even though Adrian said he'd had a job before he came to London, the only position listed on his curriculum vitae was the one he currently held. Jane began to wonder more and more about the boy she lived with; he increasingly seemed like a stranger to her.

These wonderings often made her think back to when they first met. They were once happy together and Adrian used to think she was bright, interesting and beautiful. Jane thought she had met him and fallen in love for the sole reason that he was right for her, that the warm glow she had experienced nearly a year ago had been felt for a purpose and signified far more than she could truly fathom. She used to believe in destiny.

'I still love him,' Jane said under her breath as she turned a page. She repeated

this sentence over and over, calling it silently up to the blue sky and sailing clouds. She saw a plane overhead and imagined all the people on board, a gathering of souls each with their own hopes and loves and problems and trials. But at least they were aloft, going somewhere.

‘Keep them safe,’ she whispered, still looking up at the sky.

Adrian suddenly appeared at the table, looking down at her with a quizzical look. ‘What did you say?’ he asked. He followed Jane’s gaze upwards.

‘I didn’t say anything.’ She could feel her face reddening.

‘You were mouthing something. I saw your lips moving. Brainless Barry at work does that when he’s reading something.’

Barry was his line manager, and Adrian claimed the man was the biggest idiot he’d ever met.

‘Oh, I just saw a plane, that’s all.’

‘But what were you saying?’

Jane tried to appear nonchalant. ‘I said: “Keep them safe”.’

Adrian looked incredulous for a moment and then laughed loudly. “Keep them safe”?’ A smirk continued to crease his face. ‘You’re not all there, Jane, really you’re not!’

‘Well, I think it’s nice,’ she replied with a hint of defiance. ‘If I were on a plane right now I’d like to think that someone somewhere was wishing me a safe journey.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Adrian rolled his eyes and started to laugh again. ‘Anyway, enough of you wishing complete strangers a happy holiday. The interview went really well, thanks for asking.’

‘That’s great.’

‘I reckon the job’s mine but Reg will ring me later today.’

‘I’m sure the answer will be yes,’ Jane said.

I still love him, she thought resolutely. I still love him.

‘Let’s hope your interview goes as well as mine.’

They began to walk home. Adrian dug his hands deep into the pockets of his

jeans.

‘We could do with the money,’ he said. ‘The job you applied for *is* better paid, isn’t it?’

‘It’s a couple of extra thousand each year.’

‘That’ll do nicely. I wish I’d applied for it myself. Then it would’ve been me going to the interview in a couple of weeks instead of you.’ He flashed her a cocky grin.

At that moment he turned his head sharply to check out a pretty brunette walking on the other side of the street.

*

As he predicted, Adrian got the job in the pub and started the next day on the Sunday afternoon shift.

He soon made friends with one of the bar staff, a woman in her late twenties called Karen, who, according to Adrian, was even chattier than he was and had a big, booming laugh. He enjoyed telling Jane about Karen’s blonde hair and low cut tops and her popularity. Everyone loved her, he declared. Reg treated her like a princess and the blokes in the pub were always flirting with her.

He also liked to tell Jane about the flirtatious female customers he encountered on his shifts.

‘Do I have "Shag Me" written on my forehead?’ he asked her after he returned home from an evening shift the following Saturday, whipping off his new jacket and throwing it on the armchair. He had a broad, self-satisfied grin on his face.

‘What happened?’ she asked, determined to sound casual, unaffected.

He eagerly regaled the evening’s events to her. Several women from a rowdy hen party had bought him drinks and pinched his bottom black and blue. They wanted him to go to a club with them after closing time and one of the hens had even slipped her telephone number into his back pocket. He held the scrap of paper aloft like a trophy.

He kept it, Jane thought with dismay; he kept it purposely to show me.

‘Karen said she’d like to meet you,’ Adrian said in a tone that implied he

thought this request was strange. 'I'm working tomorrow. You can come along for an hour or so in the afternoon if you want.'

'OK,' she replied. 'That'd be nice.'

Adrian looked genuinely surprised. 'Really? You don't have to if you don't want to.'

'I want to come along.'

'OK, fine,' he said and gave a shrug.

It was raining the next day. Adrian and Jane shared her umbrella as they walked to the pub.

Karen was the first person she saw as they stepped through the doors. Karen had peroxide blonde hair with brown roots and wore bright pink lipstick. Her laugh was indeed loud and her shirt was unbuttoned rather low, but her manner towards Jane when Adrian introduced them was surprisingly subdued, as if Jane was not quite what she had expected.

Karen poured her a glass of sweet white wine, insisting it was on the house, and Jane sat at a corner table while Adrian wiped the bars and collected glasses. She propped her wet umbrella against the table and took out her book, surreptitiously watching the pair of them through her eyelashes.

'Adrian, we've run out of milk,' Karen said loudly. 'I need to pop out and get some.'

'It's raining, I'll go,' said Adrian.

'No, you stay here in case Reg needs help with the barrels.' She reached for her jacket behind the bar.

'You need an umbrella,' said Adrian. Without a word to Jane he grabbed her umbrella, holding it at arm's length as it dripped water on the floorboards, and handed it to Karen. She thanked him and quickly hurried out of the doors. Adrian carried on wiping and collecting, rinsing and polishing. Jane carried on pretending to read her book.

'Do you want another drink?' he asked her in a distracted tone as he plonked down beer mats on the neighbouring table.

Jane shook her head, smiling at him. 'No thanks.'

'Suit yourself.' He strode off back to the bar.

A dishevelled-looking man came through the doors and took a seat at the bar, ordering a pint of lager. He slowly counted out his money and handed a fist full of coins to Adrian, who pulled a face as he checked the amount.

Jane turned a half-read page of her book. Her job interview was the following day, Monday afternoon, yet she had not been able to focus on it at all. She'd taken the day off work to prepare for it and get ready, but lately it seemed so much in her life was unprepared, unknown and undecided.

The man suddenly lurched off his barstool and came towards her table, pint in hand. Jane quickly turned her attention back to the book, but there was no escaping the fact he was standing over her. He was fair-haired and rather short, and had a large black smudge on his left temple and part of his forehead, and his left eye was red and puffy.

'My name's Johnny,' the man said to her. 'I got hit by a firework. I could've been killed.' He swayed a little as he grinned at Jane, proudly pointing to the black mark on his head as if showing off a battle wound.

'That's terrible,' she murmured. She saw Adrian was watching them from the bar, his attention for once focused on her.

'I'm lucky to be alive,' Johnny continued. 'It exploded when it hit me here.' He tapped the black stain.

'Oh dear,' Jane replied. 'That must've really hurt.'

'It did! It hurt so much! I could've been killed. I'm very lucky to be alive. Lucky Johnny, that's me.'

As soon as the man sat down opposite her, Adrian marched over to the table and stood beside him. 'Sorry mate, but she has to go home now,' he said in a firm tone.

The man looked baffled. 'Can't she stay and have a drink with me? She's very pretty.'

'I don't think so. Like I said, she needs to go home.' Adrian handed Jane her bag and jacket, addressing her brusquely: 'It's best you go.'

'My umbrella...'

Karen wasn't back yet and it was still raining. It seemed to be taking the woman an inordinate amount of time to buy some milk.

'I could come with you,' Johnny said to Jane, standing up.

‘Look, will you just piss off?’ Adrian hissed at him.

He squared up to the man, narrowing his eyes threateningly. Johnny waved his arms and smiled, mumbling something incoherent before he lurched off in the direction of the toilets.

Jane put on her jacket. ‘Your friend has still got my umbrella.’

‘It’s not raining much. Your jacket’s got a hood, you’ll be fine.’ He let out a loud sigh. ‘Trust you to get some weirdo coming onto you.’

‘Yes,’ Jane sighed exaggeratedly in return, ‘that often happens to me in pubs. The weirdo always picks me out.’

He stared at her, narrowing his eyes again. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing.’ She tugged her hood over her head and picked up her bag. ‘I’ll see you later.’

She felt shivery when she stepped out into the rain, although the air wasn’t cold. She walked down the road quickly, her footsteps splashing angrily in the puddles. That evening she went to bed much earlier than usual and pretended to be asleep when Adrian came home.

*

The next day, as soon as Adrian had left for the office, Jane got ready for her job interview. She ironed one of her white blouses and polished her black shoes. There was no sign of the umbrella. Did Karen still have it? If she did, it didn’t matter because Jane no longer wanted it back. She’d buy a new one, a better one.

She made a sandwich for lunch, but could only eat half of it. Then she made her way to Vauxhall and walked along the Albert Embankment. The Thames was dappled with glinting sunlight and as far as Jane could see the sky showed no sign of rain clouds.

The offices where the interview was to take place were full of smartly dressed employees hurrying along corridors and in and out of a maze of different rooms. It looked very different to Jane’s current place of work in Lewisham. While she waited in the first-floor reception room, she admired the riverside view through one of the large windows. To the left, a luxury block of

apartments was being constructed. Opposite were the white flanks of the Tate gallery and to the right Westminster and the Houses of Parliament.

Although the interview went surprisingly well, Jane didn't assume she stood much of a chance. The director and his female assistant seemed pleased and their farewell handshakes were hearty enough, but Jane was still unsure whether she had made the right impression. Had she looked as nervous as she had felt? She was no longer sure how she appeared to others, as if she had become a blurred, shapeless version of herself. They had told her they were interviewing quite a few candidates and it might take a week or two for a decision to be reached, but they would be in touch as soon as possible.

Jane didn't want to go straight home, so instead she went to the wine bar next-door and sat alone at one of the tables by a window eating a sandwich and sipping a glass of Shiraz.

The building site over the road was a hive of activity; the yellow lift attached to the side of the construction rose and descended with impatient regularity. Men clambered here and there over the scaffolding, many of them shirtless in the June sunshine. A couple of workers were leaning against the embankment wall, smoking cigarettes as they looked at the passing river barges.

Jane drained her glass and went to the bar to order another drink. As she waited for her wine, she knew she did not want to return to the flat she shared with Adrian. Every time she thought about it tears began to fill her eyes.

'Are you all right?' asked the barman.

Before she could answer him, there was a sudden booming crash outside which caused everyone in the bar to stop what they were doing and hurry to the windows to see what had happened.

In the street bystanders watched helplessly as workmen dashed around in panic or stumbled about dazed and bewildered, circling around the lift's mangled cage on the pavement. Before long, the sound of approaching sirens filled the air and a fleet of ambulances and police cars lined up next to the worksite.

Several workmen sat on the pavement, some with their heads in their hands. People from nearby buildings crossed the road with trays of tea. Jane didn't know what she could do to help so she stayed rooted to the spot by the window. Fire engines drew up alongside the ambulances and police cars, and she watched with a sob lodged in her throat as a man was laid out on a stretcher. A paramedic pumped the man's chest and as they did so Jane felt

her heart begin to race, willing their hands to bring him back to life again. She held her breath and closed her eyes and when she opened them again, the man was stretchered, alive, into the ambulance and driven away at high speed, the siren blaring. Another man was covered from head to toe with a red blanket and laid out on another stretcher. There was little point in hurrying him to the hospital.

Jane had never seen a dead person before. Adrian once told her that he'd seen a drunk lying dead in a gutter in Streatham, the man's eyes still open and staring up at the sky, a trickle of blood running from the back of his head. She could not take her eyes off the body as it was placed carefully in the remaining ambulance, not wanting to imagine what damage lay beneath the blanket. She could see a youth crying, his yellow hard hat dangling from his hands, and wanted to put her arms around him and cry with him.

After some time, the building site became deserted and eerily quiet. The mangled lift had been removed. And still Jane did not want to go home.

She walked slowly to the Tube station and as she stood on the platform, she thought of Adrian and her life with him. If I get the job, she told herself, I'll move out. That's what I'll do. I'll leave. Perhaps I'll leave anyway, job or no job.

Several trains arrived and departed but Jane couldn't seem to move away from the tiled wall. Tears trailed down her face as she pictured the paramedic's pumping hands and imagined they were trying to press her back into shape, bringing her fully back to her senses, and fully back to life.

*

Jane crossed over Vauxhall Bridge and then turned right into Millbank, hurrying up the steps of the Tate. A sensation of instant calm flowed through her the moment she stepped inside. It had been many months since she'd visited an art gallery or a museum. Adrian thought they were all a waste of time.

She headed for the Rothko room sat on a bench for almost an hour, staring at the Seagram paintings, feeling as if her whole being was suspended within the shadowy, hazy patches of colour. Out of those hovering, receding or advancing shapes, she saw coffins and estranged lovers, doors and gateways, long windows and monolithic stones. Some paintings reminded her of ghosts hanging in the air, slowly floating out of the canvas, beckoning to her.

It's what we all become in the end, Jane thought. Lovers and jobs and where you live were inconsequential but perhaps true love survived no matter what, if you found the right person.

When she emerged into daylight again it was raining. Heavy grey clouds had eclipsed the sunshine. Jane stood on the front steps and gave an exasperated sigh when she remembered she didn't have an umbrella or a jacket with a hood.

'I hope you've got an umbrella,' said a male voice behind her. He had an accent she couldn't quite place.

Jane turned and saw a young, brown-haired man leaning against one of the pillars near the main entrance, holding a folded newspaper. He pointed at the cloudy sky with the pen he was holding in his right hand. 'This'll keep up for the rest of the day, I reckon.'

He was Irish, she realised. Northern Irish.

Jane nodded. 'You could be right. Unfortunately, I don't have an umbrella.'

'Well, you could wait here for a bit,' he said with a smile and tucked his copy of the *Evening Standard* under his arm.

'Wait? I thought you said it was going to rain for the rest of day,' she replied, smiling back.

'I did say that, but I'm no weatherman.'

The man walked over to her, still grinning broadly. Up close Jane saw he wasn't as young as he first seemed. His blue eyes were crinkled from years of smiling.

'Even weathermen can get their forecasts wrong,' she said.

'True, very true.'

He slipped his pen into the breast pocket of his shirt and from the same pocket pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to Jane.

She shook her head. 'No thanks, I don't smoke.'

'Good for you. I'd give up tomorrow if I had any willpower. Is it OK if I indulge? I get nervous talking to beautiful women.'

Jane laughed and rolled her eyes. 'It's OK.'

'I saw you making a beeline for one of the rooms in there. You're an art lover,

are you?’ He placed a cigarette between his lips and cupped his hand as he lit it with a metal lighter. Jane looked at the back of his large hands, which were pale with wisps of golden brown hairs.

He’d seen her; he’d noticed her.

‘Yes, I guess so.’

‘You look like an art lover.’

‘Do I?’ Jane raised her eyebrows, surprised. ‘Is that a good or bad thing?’

‘Good of course! I was paying you a compliment.’ He moved closer as if to divulge something confidential. ‘Actually, I’m coming onto you, but I guess you realise that.’

Jane could feel she was blushing intensely. ‘I have a boyfriend,’ she said.

The man waved his arm in the air. ‘Of course you do! I’d be surprised if you didn’t.’ He regarded her for a moment, his expression softening his audacity. ‘He’s a lucky man.’

Jane stared up at the sky again, unable to look at him at that precise moment. ‘I think I’ll have to take my chances with the rain. I should go home.’

‘Here.’ He gave her the newspaper. ‘It’ll stop your lovely hair getting wet if nothing else.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, I’m sure. I won’t be needing it anymore.’

‘Thank you so much.’

‘Oh it’s nothing. Shame it’s not one of the broadsheets – it would’ve given you more cover.’

She laughed again and took the paper. ‘It’s really kind of you.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ he said. ‘Have a safe journey home.’

‘Thanks. You, too.’

Jane descended the steps holding the newspaper over her head and wondered if he was watching her as she walked away. She resisted the urge to turn around and instead headed for the Underground station. She daydreamed about the man all the way home and thought about the burr of his friendly

voice, his crinkly eyes and his large hands, and imagined his fingerprints on the paper had brushed against her hair. *Your lovely hair.*

When she reached the flat, Adrian was annoyed that she was so late. 'What kept you? You've been gone ages.' He took the wet newspaper from her and tossed it into the kitchen bin.

'The interview began late and then I had to wait ages for a train home.'

'How did the interview go?'

'It was OK.'

'Just OK? Well, I suppose that's to be expected,' he said, frowning at her. 'I've had to get the dinner ready,'

'Sorry.'

Jane went to the bathroom to fetch a towel. When she looked at her reflection in the cabinet mirror she saw two pinches of colour still clinging to her cheeks. Adrian stood behind her, his arms crossed.

'I think they're seeing quite a few people.' She wiped the towel over her face. 'Thanks for cooking the dinner.'

'So there's a lot of competition? Well, don't be too disappointed when you don't get it,' he said. 'We're having burger and chips. Don't be long because I'm dishing up in a minute.'

'OK.'

Jane had decided before she got home to not tell Adrian about the accident. Such a lot had happened today: she had seen a man die but could not relay such a significant incident to her boyfriend. In fact, there was so much she could not share with the man she currently lived with, and there appeared to be much he could not share with her. People are so careless with each other, Jane thought as she combed her hair, careless with their lives and love every day, and sometimes careless about bolting together pieces of metal.

Later, when Adrian was playing computer games in the living room, Jane retrieved the damp and crumpled newspaper from the kitchen bin and placed it on the top shelf of her wardrobe. Before she closed the door she pulled out the paper again, turning it over in her hands. *Your lovely hair.* She had grown unaccustomed to displays of kindness, or even compliments; dismissive actions and coldness had infiltrated too many of her days. Why had she let that

happen?

As Jane held the paper she imagined the stranger's fingertips were smudging with hers. She sighed heavily, feeling foolish and pathetically girlish, as well as aching lonely. She would never see the man again, of course, just as she would know next to nothing about him, not even his name. Standing in front of her wardrobe, these realities pained her deeply.

Jane refolded the newspaper and just as she was about to put it back on the shelf, she saw there was something written in black biro at the top corner of the back page. She looked more closely, her heart racing. The stranger had written "Sean" and a telephone number.

She traced her fingers over the letters and numbers, her heart still thundering. Now this was certainly something to think about. Jane carefully tore off the name and number and slipped the piece of paper into her pocket.

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