



WE,
JANE
A NOVEL
AIMEE
WALL

We, Jane

Aimee Wall

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FIRST EDITION

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1.

WHEN JANE CAME INTO HER LIFE, MARTHE HAD been living in Montreal for three years. The move had initially been an impulse, an escape from an increasingly claustrophobic St. John's. She'd arrived with enough savings from her last restaurant job to float her for a few months, taken French classes, found waitressing jobs and people to drink in the parks with. Then she had decided to go to grad school. She never quite found her footing in that world but she did meet a tall Danish boy in the library. Within three months, she had gotten pregnant, he had accompanied her to the Morgentaler clinic, and they had fallen in love. Within six months, they'd moved in together, a Parc Extension three-and-a-half they could barely fill with the suitcase each of belongings they'd both moved to the city with. Within another year and a half, Marthe had dropped out of her program and Karl had packed back up his single suitcase and moved home on a few days notice. Her little Montreal life was stripped bare again.

Marthe was then working in a café that served lattes

with hearts drawn in the milk, and expensive eggs, the kind of place where people endlessly had their phones out, documenting their breakfast, taking selfies in the bathroom by the light of the bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The same couples ordered the same fourteen-dollar cocktails to start off every Sunday brunch; super fashionable young women stole bits and pieces of the decor, walking off with a last cappuccino to go and the beautiful antique mirrors from the bathroom tucked into their supple leather totes.

She could get in the groove of it sometimes, weaving around the tables and the toddlers—so many strollers, suddenly, children everywhere—spending the morning wondering if person after person would like something to drink? Un petit jus, un café? Very occasionally she could even summon up something like charm and feel she was pulling off her part, the little Montréalaise waitress in the hip café, but her shifts were so early and mostly she felt old, exhausted by the idea of a cute outfit, a new cocktail.

She had asked for more shifts when she was dropping out of school, just months before Karl had left, and she'd gotten them, and the money wasn't great but it would do. This was a period of transition, she reasoned, and she was trying to relax into it, to take this time. Swan around with lattes and flirt with the customers. But she was bored, and restless, and she was crooked at work instead and she knew it showed.

A trio of girls would often come in late in the day, clearly after jamming together in some nearby loft space, and Marthe would feel a sharp longing for their little gang, their bathroom sink bleach jobs and matching stick-and-

pokes and white bobby socks with beat-up black oxfords, their bikes and their ratty guitar cases and their carefully sourced nineties windbreakers. Their shared aesthetic. Marthe had lately been envying any women she saw who seemed to be part of a clan. The old Greek ladies in sagging knee highs shuffling out of church together at the crack of dawn; the three generations of women next door in bright salwar kameez, sitting out on their scrap of grass in plastic lawn chairs, passing a baby around; the bright-eyed recent grads she ran into here and there who were always in the midst of starting some collective or other, to make films or performances or to start an organic farm. Marthe had friends in the city but she didn't know how to convene a clan, so she told herself stories instead about how she was really more the lone wolf type anyway.

2.

One night in the early fall days after Karl's departure, after their break-up really, though he had somehow managed to skip the part where he actually had to break up with her by simply informing her that he had bought a one-way ticket home to his country and would not be returning, Marthe had gone to an outdoor film screening in Cabot Square. She'd gone alone, joining a crowd of mostly women sitting on blankets and little folding chairs at one end of the park, its usual occupants crowded out down into the other end.

The film was a documentary about a Dutch doctor who travelled by boat to countries where abortion was illegal, picking up women and administering the abortion pill to

them on board, back out in international waters. They went to Ecuador and unfurled a banner off the Virgin of El Panecillo with a number to a hotline that would give instructions on inducing a miscarriage. It was all more spectacle than practical really, it was media attention, the ship a galvanizing force for frenzied activists on both sides. But they were doing something. Marthe had heard about the ship before but hadn't known they were using the pill. She had been imagining a kind of miniature surgical theatre on board what turned out to be something the size of a crab boat. Really, the doctor was there to monitor women who took a pill, illegal in their countries, that made them bleed. Adjust the blanket around their shoulders. All that fuss for that.

Partway through the film, Marthe noticed a man standing just to the side of the screen, facing the wrong way. He had dark circles under his eyes, an otherwise pasty white face, a shaved head. Camo pants and a scruffy black backpack. One hand on the handlebars of a beater bicycle. He was surveying the crowd. Marthe drew her knees tighter to her chest. The pigeons flustered around his feet and he was motionless, scowling. She tried to return her attention to the screen, where a mob of similarly twisted white male faces were spitting mad screaming at the little crab boat as it tried to dock in Poland. But the man remained at his station, just to the left of her peripheral vision. At a crescendo in the film, as the women on board tried to dock the boat, tried to find some way through the angry mass on shore, the man suddenly wrenched the backpack off his back and threw it to the ground and

Marthe flinched, ducked her head. But nothing happened. He put one foot on the bag and kept scowling theatrically and the woman next to Marthe thrust her chin in the man's direction and then shook her head, and Marthe relaxed slightly, smiled at her. Shook her own head at herself. They were in Montreal. It was not likely.

When the film ended, a woman got up with a microphone to introduce someone connected with the boat doctor, and the crowd thinned quickly. Those remaining, Marthe among them, slid a little closer.

There was a dampening Q and A, a lot of fired-up audience members wondering how they could join up, as if it were a navy fleet, and the guest speaker smilingly shrugging that there was no real way to join up or work with this particular group, apart from giving them money and attention. It wasn't a fleet. Marthe wished they at least had ambitions of a fleet. Something. The crowd stirred and mumbled. It was starting to turn. Marthe was itching again. The women felt like she did, maybe. It had been two years but Marthe was still angry at the indignity of it all, at the insistence of the physical body. She wanted there to be a fight about it. She wanted to join up but there was nothing to join.

3.

Marthe wanted there to be a fight about it but really she'd gotten off relatively easy. Marthe had been pregnant for seven weeks but only knew about it for the final thirteen days. Thirteen days in which she had become obsessed

with the now-glaring fact of her mammality—was that even a word—it was all she wanted to talk about, it had really only just occurred to her then, her mammality and her heavy little breasts and her bloated little belly, she had felt heavy, milky, full already. During those same days she had begun to receive messages online from a tall lanky boy who had been, briefly, back home, a lover, years before, except she never would have used that word then, so European, he was a Christmas boyfriend, home in Newfoundland for a few weeks and then gone again.

The messages related the information that he had recently discovered that his dick could reach his mouth, or, Marthe extrapolated, that he had figured out how to suck his own dick, and did she wanna see? It was the first time she'd been on the receiving end of this particular kind of unsolicited communication and she had responded, light, giving benefit of the doubt: Dude, I think you've been hacked. But there were more messages, always late at night, that said no really though, what if I really can. And so she began to realize that this might just be a boy who had actually discovered how to contort his body so that his mouth could reach his own dick and he was so very proud of that feat that he thought she would be interested too, in the middle of the night in a city half a country away.

The thing she used to laugh about—she was careless, she drank too much, she'd always gotten off scot-free, and the thing she used to laugh about was that she must be fucking infertile or something because seriously. And then she was in fact very fertile, and she was convinced her belly was already swelling and her body felt so given over

to this one purpose that for days after the nice Québécoise doctor pronounced her officially no longer pregnant she was urgently hungry, like she had never felt hunger before, as if her body was going no, no, it was so full in here for a moment, fill me back up, fill me with sweet, soft things. She ate entire frozen pizzas, buttered white toast with milky tea.

The doctor had said tilted uterus, the doctor had said imagine the letter Q where most people have a P. Marthe had paused and the doctor said you have to picture *la majuscule*, a capital Q. Marthe liked the thought of the Q but was mostly seized with a sudden flood of hilarious empathy for menstrual art, a new understanding, an urgent desire to smear the fact of her mammality, her aborted moment of mammality, all over the walls. She wondered if it might lead her to some kind of understanding of the urges of the boy with the contortionist dick pics, except for the part where he got to live in his body that way, so uncomplicated, so entitled, except for the part where that made her want to scream: why does he get to and I don't, why does he get to and I don't, over and over, why do I have to, this life in this body, why does he get to and I don't.

She felt that someone had done this to her. The body. Stuck her with it. She felt, possibly belatedly, utterly betrayed by it. She read an autofictional novel by an Argentinean woman the same age as her who had an illegal abortion in a stranger's apartment. *A pregnant woman is a woman who cannot escape herself*; she read, and then she cried for herself and her own inescapable body, never mind the author and her actually harrowing ordeal.

The boy who had made Marthe pregnant was prone to existential despair. Later, she would sit patiently for hours as Karl ranted about feeling wrong in the world and how there was no point to anything, but at that stage they were still new, he was still restraining himself to the occasional dark comment, pissing hopelessness over some moment or idea that had given Marthe a sliver of light and not really understanding why she got so upset when, a week after the procedure, as she was still bleeding into fat diaper pads, he said as they walked home from some party that she was probably overthinking things.

Marthe had shut up about it but was left wanting to do something. It would bubble up in her regularly. But the way forward wasn't clear. People were less riled up and organized about something that had been legal for years, particularly in a city with multiple options for access. It was the precarity of it that got to her. How she was supposed to be grateful for the opportunity to make a decision for herself. How easily she could have been living somewhere where she wouldn't have gotten to decide, how easily it could still be taken away. But precarity was a slippery concept to fight. And Marthe had always been more of a joiner than a real activist anyway. She was a body in the crowd, in the street, at the protest or the march. She shared the articles on the internet, she'd even written a withering comment or two, she went to the documentaries and nodded and murmured afterward.

With Karl's departure, the simmer of Marthe's restlessness had started roiling, fed by a new manic energy but still without real direction. So she went to documentaries.

She thought maybe an art project. She read about the Gynepunk cyborg witches hacking reproductive technology in Spain; she wrote the first paragraph of three different essays. She sent unanswered messages to the administrators of defunct pro-choice groups. She went looking for a fleet.

And then, Jane.