

Not-John

‘Sorry to disturb you,’ the figure in black said, ‘I know it’s been a long time’.

Gaping, I stepped back from the door. I didn’t recognise the person standing before me. He was dressed in dense layers of black, which I thought must have been very hot in the late December afternoon. There was a sort of a ragged scarf that was tied around his neck, a canvas bag over his shoulder. He leaned against the doorway as if it cost him some effort to stand. He had a narrow face, the skin raw and red, the body spindly.

Was it John?

John was handsome, always laughing. John was soft-chinned and round-shouldered; he fizzed with vitality. I realised I had already forgotten the precise details of John’s face - I couldn’t picture the bridge of his nose or whether his teeth were crooked - but I had a sense of him in my mind’s eye, the whirl of his energy.

This person was not that person.

‘I’ve been away,’ Not-John said, as if he’d been in Europe.

His head inclined slightly. I became aware my mouth was hanging open, so I rearranged my face. The figure’s eyes were grey – as John’s had been – but dimmed with what appeared to be milky glaucoma. I noticed, with some disgust, that the whites of his eyes were bloodshot and tinged with yellow.

I found my voice. ‘I didn’t know -’

He shook his head. ‘I know what I look like. I haven’t been seeing many people, except my family you know. But anyways, I’m sure you and Maëlle would have rather...’

Not-John seemed to be both hot and cold, sweating but also shaking slightly. Behind him, the last shafts of sunlight were retreating reluctantly from the courtyard. We lived in St Kilda in those days, and I could hear the sounds of a dog barking and the ding-ding of a tram, the distant cries of people leaving the beach. I thought about their happiness, about beer and ice-cream and oiled skin, and wondered how I ended up trapped in this terrible scene.

Unable to think of anything else to say, I invited Not-John inside for dinner.

Have you ever heard of the Ankou?

There's no reason why you should have. It's not well known.

I first heard about it in France.

We - that is to say, my wife Maëlle and I - were travelling in Brittany, visiting her family who lived there still. It was cold and wet, the villages miserable. One day, Maëlle's grandfather, Loïc, took us to a church in Ploumilliau ('Plouilio', Loïc said stiffly, insisting on the Brittonic name), a Gothic pile in the heart of the village. Gargoyles regarded us as we escaped from the rain. Walking past plaster effigies of saints in that dark and airless space, Loïc stopped and pointed at a small niche in the wall. This was where the statue had been, he said. *Ervoanik Plouillo*. The niche was so unobtrusive I might have missed it.

The statue disappeared a long time ago, Loïc explained, before even he was born. It was an anomaly, a holdover from the older Celtic beliefs, the myths that had endured despite the Church's best efforts. The statue had, it seemed, inspired the fascination and horror of the villagers. Whispers of magic and devilry. A woman broke into the church one night and painted the statue red. Eventually, the priests had it quietly removed and destroyed.

It was a statue of the Ankou, and he's Death's henchman.

Fading sunlight, Not-John at my doorstep.

Maëlle was sitting by the window when we came into the living room. She was reading James Baldwin's *Another Country*, belly swelling beneath her. She was at that stage of pregnancy that strangers mistook for serene, but that was actually somewhat agonising, with unexpected kicks and knocks inside her ribcage. As she looked up, I saw her flinch with recognition. Her hair, a deep red, was wet from the shower. In her shapeless white dress, hands clasped over the pages, Maëlle looked like a fat, frazzled angel.

She rose but made no movement towards him.

'Shit! Hello! It's been - fuck how long has it been?'

I brought Not-John to the couch.

‘It’s good to see you again!’

I can’t quite recall the next part of the conversation – we must have talked awhile. Well, Maëlle talked, very rapidly, voice high and eyes bright, about her pregnancy and our lives and the friends we had in common. She didn’t ask him any personal questions. Not-John sank on the couch, shifting uncomfortably in his black shrouds, his canvas bag sagging beside him. A bundle of bones. Drinks were brought, stilted questions posed and left to wilt. There was a small purple lesion on the side of his neck, barely visible.

At some point, I excused myself to make the dinner.

Maëlle had a recipe for mango pasta she was very attached to, and though the mangoes were a little soft and bruised, I decided it would probably be fine. An image came to me of John sitting on that same couch months – maybe years? – before, telling foul jokes and laughing. We were quite friendly at one point. How many times had we had dinner together in this apartment? The air was hot as we had no air conditioning, my fingers sticky with minced mango. Why were we acting this way?

Returning to the living room, I felt as though I had interrupted a moment of intense discussion between the two of them: Maëlle turned toward me, her mouth slightly open, cheeks reddened, while Not-John continued to look at her with those dimmed but penetrating grey eyes.

Loïc told us many stories about the Ankou.

The Ankou is the underling, the servant, the one who fetches the corpses. His cart was always piled high, his tastes indiscriminating – the old man, the baby, the whore. In his flat, black Breton’s peasant hat, the Ankou trundled through fields and down alleys, stopping to knock on doors. The cry of the owl announced his arrival. In the times of plague, the pile on the cart would grow to a great, tottering, unwieldy height, a travelling tower of bodies.

Villagers passed one another spells and incantations – if you left the church with the wafer still in your mouth unswallowed, you might avoid the Ankou’s knock. The woman who gave birth must stay indoors for thirty days afterwards. There was not just one Ankou – each parish was believed to have one, so there

were hundreds, thousands of them, each one going about their work with patience.

And the detail I cannot forget:

The Ankou wore the face of the parish's most recent dead.

You might open the door one night and be greeted with the face of your neighbour, face white, eyes blind.

'You're the fifth I've visited today,' Not-John said over dinner.

My cooking was not a success. The mango tasted too sweet, the pasta was thick and chewy like loops of small intestine. With every bite, the mess on the plate seemed to grow bigger. Maëlle was eating even more slowly than I was. She'd been telling anecdotes, trying to force some laughter into the desolate atmosphere.

'You've gotten around!'

Not-John nodded. He hadn't touched his food.

'Yes, people to see today. Rachel and Steve first, in Fitzroy. Then Grace and Sam over in Elwood. We chatted for a bit. And finally, Reece and Gordon, we spoke for a long time.'

I took a sip of water. I thought: that was three visits, not four. Who was the fourth? Not home? Omitted or forgotten?

I was finding it difficult to meet Not-John's eye. The food on my plate, the fruit-clotted innards, hardly offered a better view.

'Yeah,' Not-John said, 'I've seen them a bit, actually.'

Maëlle was white-faced, sweating.

He continued: 'Not the others. But they've been helpful while I've been moving.'

Moving where?

There was something gnawing at me. I was forgetting something.

'I think my parents are finally coming around to what's happening. Mum's been fucking losing it the last few weeks. But they're getting there.'

I felt a little needle of pain in my belly.

Not-John leaned over and started rustling through his canvas bag.

'Oh, I have something for you. Why I came actually.'

In his open bag, I got a glimpse of a jumble of possessions – a tea kettle, a clock. He pulled out a small stack of books and placed them on the table: Patrick White, collected Australian plays, some feminist criticism.

We looked at the books, stupidly.

‘I thought you’d want them back.’

Maëlle and I looked at one another.

Her lip quivered.

She leaned back in her chair, then forward again, bracing herself on the table. Then from her an eruption of orange vomit: lap, chair, table, everywhere. A few flecks landed on Patrick White. As I helped Maëlle to her feet, I saw Not-John convulsed with laughter.

It echoed after us down the hall.

Loïc saw the Ankou.

This was before the Germans and the occupation. Loïc and another boy from the village, Yannick, were playing in a field by a ditch. Suddenly, the sound of wheels, the smell of meat, and a flash of black, the top of a hat glimpsed. Yannick threw his companion to the ground, and Loïc lay face-down in the dirt, his eyes closed and struggling to breathe. A shadow passed over them. Later, blinking and sitting up, Loïc turned to his friend: ‘What did his face look like? Tell me about his face.’ Yannick was pale and said nothing.

Within a month, the boy was dead from polio, as were many others during that outbreak.

Just stories, just words.

After showering and helping Maëlle into bed, I went back to the living room. Not-John had left – but it was as if he had seeped into the walls, leaving the room feeling unbearably squalid. The furnishings looked cheap and ill-fitting; every surface felt engrimed with dirt. I cleared the table slowly and deliberately, like someone recovering from an injury. The warm light, the sick-sweet smell of mango. At the place where Not-John had been sitting, I fetched a rubbish bag and swept his plate, knife and fork inside, along with the stack of books. Holding

the bag at arm's length, I noticed that he had left his scarf under the table. I picked up the scarf with kitchen tongs and dropped them both into the rubbish bag.

When I returned to the bedroom, Maëlle had wrapped herself tightly in the doona and was moaning softly. Smelling sourness, I put my hand on her forehead, and it came away slick with sweat. I fled to the bathroom and vomited noisily.

Maëlle from the bedroom: 'How are you feeling?'

'Fucking fantastic how are you.'

I crawled into bed and lay on my back. I could hear her breathing and felt the bed trembling beneath me. We lay there for hours in that warm, stinking room, half-asleep and talking in circles. Periodically, one or the other of us would stumble to the bathroom and eject more of the bright orange.

Maëlle was especially concerned about the cleaning:

'Are you sure you wiped everything down?'

'Of course I am.'

'I mean, did you really clean it? Did you scrub every surface?'

'I did.'

'I think we should throw everything away.'

'I think that's wise.'

I could feel Maëlle beside me, shaking with anger and sadness. 'Why would he come here?'

'We were friends.'

'But I mean, why would he risk it? Didn't he know I was pregnant? I think it was really unfair of him.'

A silence. Maëlle covered her face with her hands as if the darkness was painful to her.

'Did we know, David?'

'Know what?'

'Did we know he was sick?'

'So that's what you two were talking about while I was cooking.'

She persisted. 'Or were you told and didn't tell me?'

'No. I don't know. I'd remember.'

'Because one day he just stopped coming over. And I can't think if we knew why, or cared, or if we did know and didn't do anything. I just can't work it out. He seems to think we knew.'

Some memory hovered in my mind – what had been bothering me before. The fragment of a phrase, a piece of unwelcome knowledge.

I pushed it away.

‘He’s wrong.’

She nodded. ‘He must have misunderstood. We’ve been going through a lot ourselves. We’ve been busy.’

Silence, then Maëlle, her voice thin but certain:

‘We can’t have him here again.’

In the morning, we woke up feeling much better.

Not-John never reappeared, of course.

Although we knew his number and where he lived, we never wrote or called or visited. In fact, we never spoke about him at all, and as the summer ended, life cluttered in and he was forgotten. Besides, there was the baby to think about. By not speaking about Not-John, it was amazing how his flat presence receded in our thoughts.

We practised displacement and avoidance.

We avoided looking too deeply into our own hearts, for fear of the coldness that lurked inside.

Early the next year, Maëlle and I saw the Ankou again. It was on a television ad. This would have been I suppose about six months after Not-John showed up, the autumn of ’87. It showed a grim reaper in a sort of nightmare bowling alley, knocking down humans with a huge black ball. The human pins were white, middle-class – a dad with a suit and tie, a young man in a torn shirt, a little girl. A mother in yellow with an infant. The camera pulled back, revealing that dozens of grim reapers were bowling on an endless series of lanes. It was ghastly and melodramatic. Almost ridiculous. Maëlle left the room without speaking, as if she’d heard the baby crying.

This was all a long time ago now. Maëlle is long gone, of breast cancer. When I think about her, and the way she was at the end, the face of Not-John returns to

me. I think about the virus that ravaged the man's immune system, I picture the opportunistic infections that pickled and dissolved his flesh, destroying his body.

I think about the awful pointlessness of having such thoughts – who cares about what we did or didn't do? And what harm did we really do? We cut off a friend that we thought was dangerous to us. A dying man returning our books to us. We were not so bad; just scared and weak and passive. Not so bad, really, when you compare us with so many others.

I find I cannot reconcile the two versions of him in my mind. The earlier, golden one, the one who told the dirty jokes with glee; Not-John sitting slumped at our table in his folds of black. I think about the lesion on his neck, the scarf, the knocking at the door. Maëlle in the hospital bed, red-faced with pain. Loïc lying in the dirt. The Ankou passing by, his death-mask hidden, the cart groaning.

I like to imagine Not-John was cremated, the ashes scattered on the Peninsula somewhere on a clear day – but just me being fanciful, another way of depersonalising him. I don't know what happened to him in the end. He was disgusting to us, and we wanted him gone.

Purple lesion, white hands. Orange vomit.

Knocking.

Laughter.