

Author's note: Janine was written late Sunday (2014-10-13) through early Monday drawing inspiration from a lengthy Google Chat I had with a good friend. Some edits and this note happened on Tuesday. Janine isn't in any way a complete story, although it has the beginnings of one. It was more an outlet for a tremendous bout of low-quality creative energy that was clogging some research pipes. It's also an experiment. The writing style is deliberately coarser and less polished. This is intentional, and aims to help express the feel of the characters. The main character is partially autobiographical.

Janine
by Agatha Mallett

1.

It's another typical day for Janine. Alarm clock goes off at 11. Snooze eight times. Wait for inspiration. There isn't any. Dammit.

Time to get up. Coffee: four scoops, last of the cream. No sugar. Bitter, *as coffee should be*. It's to remind you of something, probably. Tastes good, though. Biochemists say that tastes fall into several categories. The most important are sweets, which contain sugars—and therefore glucose, and therefore energy—and bitters, which contain poison. So, Janine drinks her slow poison and gets to work.

It's four hours later before she realizes she lied. Work is shit—and she hasn't done any. Now would be the time for a long, ironic draw on a cigarette—if she smoked, which she doesn't. It's time to be an internet vigilante.

It's not work, and it's not play—it's *revenge*. It's more like a perversion of play where calling people racial slurs is the opening salvo. In a war. Because internet wars are fun for a twenty-something single chick with unmeasurable self-esteem and a four gigabyte database of witty repartee. It's the sort of game you play for six hours before you realize your life has been reduced to calling out forth-graders on their poor understanding of cosmic perspective. Janine headdesks quietly.

It's the conversational equivalent of having a fencing match with a puppy. It's easy—and not least because the puppy doesn't understand the rules. She lures them into a false sense of security by feigning weakness in an argument. She lets them lay out all their views. Then, she pounces. With all of their material out in the open, picking it apart for flaws is like picking fruit off the ground and throwing it at a dodgeball lineup of tied-down orphans. It's hard to miss, and no one's parents are watching. It's like shooting fish in a barrel, except you can almost taste the screams. The puppies go down like flies.

Just like the time. It's 25:30, a convention she uses since times only become single-digit after she falls asleep. She'd be up for another two hours, but the raster burn from her monitor is making her eyes burn, and she's all out of vicodin.

2.

Another day, another dollar. Or at least another crippling bout of ennui. It's like alcoholism, except the support groups are soccer moms with anti-suicide flags that are *missing the point*. “Ughhh,” she thinks. “Being me is like being the bipolar cross of Alan Turing with Franz Kafka with a dash of Salvador Dali thrown in just for the garish hues.” It's like being trapped in some magical LSDesque fantasy where the insults come from hipsters and complements come from self-delusion. Although, it's hardly a fantasy.

She's sitting at her computer, and she suddenly realizes that it has been an hour since she last breathed. It's probably at least Sunday by now, and still nothing accomplished. It's a devastating lack of . . . of something. She searches for the word. The first hit is a sprawling debate on Yahoo Answers. It's full of the kind of typos high-schoolers are spanked for, which means the oldest poster can't be more than 13. It's an encouraging start, so she reads on—and “*geezus these fools need to learn some complex analysis before blathering about infinity*” and “*by Zeus how did an etymological question devolve into a stream-of-consciousness rant about Republicans that somehow simultaneously invokes Godwin's Law more times than the OP claims he humped Jesus?*”

So. *Purpose*.

She turns on the TV while attempting to find *purpose* and ends up watching a shitty romantic comedy with the emotional maturity of Blues Clues. It's late, and she sortof feels like writing. So, she opens her Macbook, installs 300MB of updates, and immediately hits ⌘+P instead of ⌘+T. Her printer starts up like an old steam locomotive—complete with mechanical creaking and farting noises. She cancels the job, but the printer still chugs away on its bronze-age software for another *thirty minutes*, after which time she loses patience and hits the abort button on the printer directly.

The printer then has the temerity to declare that “The maintenance cannot be interrupted”, which is the kind of third-grade argument it loses to a strong counterpoint from Sir Powerstrip. She doesn't restart.

3.

On a site that encourages smartassery, Janine sees if she can get banned for being a smartass. She gets pretty close. She writes: “Come on, guys! How is this post not self-referential?”, to which one commenter, not taking the bait, warns others that “It's like a prepackaged aneurysm.” Janine takes offense, and writes an angry letter on her blog. An hour later, a Vietnamese spambot expresses its sympathy.

Maybe she can code today.

Janine writes 66 words per minute Dvorak and 68 QWERTY. In C++, it's 91 lexemes per minute, but that's a stupid metric because lexemes are not isomorphic to code structure. And indeed, the number of times Janine has rewritten this source is approaching the number of times she's found occasion to hate herself for dreaming it up in the first place.

All part of the fun.

She gets about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through refactoring some parser and gets bored. Instead, she writes a blog post about goto. It's a self-aggrandizement phrased as a bulleted list, because she's too hammered to format paragraphs:

- Wrote parser with some friends today.
- Used “goto”.
- They started yelling about “standard”s or some bullshit, and so I started yelling back about how the hatred of goto derives from Dijkstra trying to force structured programming into a world that didn't want it. Not using goto isn't "good practice"; it's *a 40-year-old irrelevancy taken out of context*.
- And they took exception to that and decided to delete the repository and start all over.
- So I took a sledgehammer and attacked their china collections.
- Figurine by figurine.
- Plate by plate.
- —until all of their heirlooms and memories were turned to dust.
- And they wept and apologized, but it was too late, *for the dam had been opened*:
- and a river of invective shot forth and severed their puny, Java-corrupted heads from their sad, sad spines.
- and I laughed.
- because it was a good metaphor for hating everybody.
- the end.

She updates her Facebook with a link, and is pleased to discover it gets a “Like” after a mere half hour from one of her rhymes-with-orange-coding-partners turned one-night-stand turned drinking-buddies. He wears a toupée like the asshole hipster he is, and his profile pic sports dumb shoes paired with mauve cargo shorts because he's probably colorblind or at least dropped-when-little.

Dumb shoes's name is François. He had it changed from George, because his French side of the family's influence marked the connection to English nobility one step nary from the guillotine—which is the sort of clemency that's just asking for trouble when you're a statutory rapist with a heroin addiction.

All happy memories, of course.

Dumb shoes wants to come over for checkers tomorrow. It's the sort of retarded proposition that would make sense if he weren't living in Cuba 2500 km southeast. Dumb-shoes says he's in town for some *thing* that he can't be arsed to remember, though, so Janine agrees to meet for biscuits at a local coffeehouse instead of at her apartment, which has decidedly inferior lattes. Which she doesn't drink, but are more fun to make uninformed cultural opinions about.

It's 15:00, the next day and Janine is *wasted*. Leaving bourbon on the nightstand was a mistake. The kind of mistake that looks like green and yellow chunks in a bathroom sink.

The call from François hits her like the punch of Dramamine should have a half hour ago—Katy Perry in the ringer goes off like a Gatling-gun of thunderclaps in hungover ears, and she answers it mainly to silence the din. François is on the warpath—and it looks like the Civil War because he's shouting about reenacting Sherman's March to the Sea. Janine is *late*.

"I changed my mind," she groans aloud. "Being me is like Salvador Dali *vomiting* all over Alan Turing."

Janine pulls on some pants and grabs a train south. More north, but that's because the sun's in the wrong place. She arrives at the coffeeshop just at closing, but François was apparently considerate enough to buy her a scone, which she accepts sheepishly. More out of exhaustion than remorse. It morphs to gratitude as it dawns on her that hunger has just caught up to her and delivered a swift punch to the gut. *Gusto*, is the word she thinks as she eats.

The patio heaters are dying, but they'll remain warm enough to sit under for another fifteen. There's the catching-up sort of talk, which Janine really hates because it forces her to reflect on the lack of *everything* she's been doing since Eris-knows-when. But, François doesn't seem to much care and accepts trivial nothingness as as good an answer as any. He's not saying, but Janine knows this means he can't one-up her. Probably've been masturbating since 2008, she thinks.

It's a good thought, and she chuckles internally while François rambles about how his cat died or something. It doesn't matter. Fuck cats.

A few hours later, the lamps have long since dimmed, and she shivers in the early evening. This sort of conversation is the kind of thing that reminds her that friends are *worth it*—if only to have a companion on which to puke. Your angst over, that is. Puking is unhygienic for hipsters. The hangover is cleared up enough that she doubts she'll do either variety, and she muses on the possibility that they might retire. Separately, of course.

François's remark catches her off-guard.

"He wants to walk me home!," she thinks.

This is the kind of situation where your primal suspicion should be seizing command, and possibly the table's butter knife. But, like one of the delusional, naïve preteens she torments online, the words tumble out before she can arrest them:

"Oh, I'd *love* to!"

It's the sort of sickening idiocy that makes prepubescent middle-schoolers think they're old enough to be *désenchantée*. It's the sort of revulsion you'd get if Star Wars characters dropped their lightsabers and started singing Barney's "I Love You". With Leia in a pink dress replete with Care Bear prints, even. Janine grimaces in poorly concealed internal terror.

François is oblivious, of course, because he's an idiot. It's a lost cause now. She even accepts his smelly leather jacket, which she guesses is for smoking yet reeks even more strongly of fish. They're walking back, and the route is past the elementary school—by this time long closed. And François keeps glancing over his shoulder in a curious yet transparently nonchalant manner. They're alone.

He grabs her shoulders. She's about to struggle, but he's already let go. They've stopped, and a silence passes. He's about to either *say* something or *do* something, and Janine doesn't care which so long as he *doesn't*.

He draws a deep breath and Janine builds a switch statement. She's gotten to "case ILOVEYOU: return slap_him_and_run();" when he decides against speaking after all and produces a fortune cookie from his pants pocket. He eats it, takes the hipster-pen he keeps in his shirt, and scrawls a web address in quick cursive on the paper fortune inside. Impressive, this late and on no writing surface.

Despite herself, Janine is intrigued. François has all the subtlety of a concussed rock. Evasion is as natural to him as Separation of Church and State is to the Far Right. He thrusts the fortune in her hand, and she grabs it reflexively. In the next moment, he turns around and strides back down the walk without a word.

Janine looks at the slip of paper, which is slightly gooey for some reason she quickly decides not to pursue, then down the street where François has just disappeared. The next moment she's running down the street the other way, clutching the fortune. It's too *weird* for François, she thinks. It's like, if NPR started broadcasting MOOCs—or if Tom Cruise weren't demented. It's the sort of thing that lets you know you're lucid dreaming and that you can now fly if you wanted to. Except Janine is not flying—she's *fleeing* from some unknown mystery embodied in a URL some hipster scrawled in cursive like it was his dying wish. The blackness behind her seems to be gaining. She's a foolish child running from the dark-monsters-that-hide-under-the-bed, and she's ashamed.

4.

WiFi link at apartment: 106Mbps, ± 2.4 and 0.01% packetloss. Upgraded, and it's an extortionary \$39.99 per month for the privilege to talk to the whole damn world. Most people would pay that much to shut it out.

That's the entire baby boomer generation, she thinks—then reprimands herself. Some of her best trolling comes at the expense of the elderly.

What do you do with a CS degree when you don't want a job in its misogynistic industry? You break stuff.

It's always the same. People have *no idea* what Computer Science is. Some geriatric relative running Windows ME comes to her graduation or hits her up on Facebook, and they hear the word “Computer”, and then it's:

“Oh that's cool. My computer is moving really slow, could you look at it for me?”

She smiles a slow grin and says *of course*, because that's what family is for. So she fires it up and the first thing she usually sees on their screens is Internet Explorer with half of the screen devoured by 3rd party toolbars or youtubedownloader or Bing search or some sort of antivirus software that was invented before bacon.

So, the *next* thing she sees is the purple and tan Ubuntu startup screen because the first thing she does is wipe their drives and put Linux on there instead. She tells them it's the latest version of Windows *and they believe her*.

And then ten seconds later they are all:

“Janine, I can't find Internet Explorer!”, and she'll answer with the cool voice of practice:

“Oh, yeah: the latest version of Internet Explorer has been rebranded 'Firefox'. It's a marketing

thing, you understand.”

“Oh wow, Janine! Where would I be without you?”

Literally in the stone age, like you still fucking are.

You've got a tablet that eclipses the *entire Earth's* computing power in the 1980s and you use it to play FarmVille. You're part of online communities whose core demographic is angsty, 14-year-old white teenagers who think puberty is about getting hair in new places, having sex in public parks while twiddling smartphones with more smarts than they'll accrue over the next decade, and listening to music with weepy lyrics romanticizing their failed relationships. You're fumbling in the Zeitgeist of the technologists; you're coasting on the embers of hackerdom.

And you can't even find the “any” key.

GOOD LUCK YOU LACKWIT.

Janine pulls up the fortune cookie webpage, which exudes 90s HTML incompetence like rotten Chinese takeout. The `<blink>` tags and animated .gif tiled backgrounds. It's like looking at a trainwreck. A trainwreck with a very, very low IQ.

She's gets over the horror by copy+pasting the entire site into a text editor. She starts reading. It's by François. It's a sob story. Some Numenorean schmuck gets an idea, rage against the machine, so on and so forth. Still a better love story than Twilight, haha. Some turns of phrase keep showing up, again and again—she thinks it would make a good drinking game—not that there's a point doing it all alone; you need friends and nudity to make a drinking game work.

It's probably paragraph three that she realizes what's happening.

“Either that, or I've gone off the deep end,” she thinks.

“Which is another metaphor, but still the reason I'm getting a sinking feeling.”

“Because thoughts aren't buoyant.”

Yar har. It's some kind of code. Sortof the kind of dumb nonsense that you did in undergrad when you thought you could kill RSA by coming up with a polynomial factoring algorithm on your cafeteria napkin. This is *steganography*. *Meant for her*.

She can tell because it says so. “To Janine”. She looks on the website. Big letters. Comic Sans. Hard to miss. It's too blunt for François—although if the past 36 hours have been any indication, François just isn't his usual perverted self anymore. Koyaanisqatsi.

It's pretty easy to work out, of course. It's a substitution cipher, with the word length representing a number, which translates to a position in the alphabet. No shifting even. It's a Perl script and forty milliseconds to decrypt. She replaces “Francois” with “François” mentally in the ASCII text, along with the first-grade misspellings endemic to a reforming idiot:

Dear Janine,

François. I know we never really hit it off, but I think it's time you should know. I'm an arrogant, selfish, dick. I hate myself.

But, I think I hate something else more. It's you. Plural. The whole Earth makes me mad, and it's time to set it right. You're smart. You'll figure this out in time. Meet me tomorrow on the wharf near sundown. I have something to show you.

-François

Yes. An arrogant, selfish dick, *iwis!* So, the hempy courts the wisenheimer. Francie thinks he's a cowboy, with the meet-me-tomorrow-at-dusk line. Precious. Adorable. It's like the wet-dream of a sixteen-year-old if he thought he were six.

Janine looks at the clock in case it's bedtime. 04:37. Close enough.

5.

The alarm goes off at 14:00.

“Lucky thing,” she thinks. “It's duct-taped to the wall and so has an excuse to stay where it is.”

A state easily rectified.

Janine rips it from its bonds and hurls it into her neighbor's wall, where a lull in the conversation develops. The casing is cracked and the antenna for atomic-clock-time-synchronization has ripped out of the PCB. It's an annoying chore, but the solder fumes are invigorating.

It's 15:30 and time for breakfast. Breakfast stains her PJs (which actually aren't, but are really the same jeans she's worn since the train. Sheets should be washed soon, she thinks). That's fine since breakfast and Janine get along like roommates in a maximum-security penitentiary. Janine takes a shower with cold water and swills some lemonade from the carton. If only orphans were allergic to citrus, she gurgles abstractly, with rancor.

It's webcomics and a smattering of shell-scripting until brunch, which is Pad Thai from the local noodle shop. Extra spicy. Hold the lime.

An hour later she accomplishes her goal and gets banned for being a smartass. She thinks this is sort of like getting banned from a spelling bee for having memorized the dictionary. It's a stupid punishment befitting a stupid crime, and it's hard to see the larger perspective if the site moderator's picture has acne and a cheesy smile filled with braces.

So it's vast chasms of nothing-in-particular until sunset at 18:30, which finds Janine shivering in a *very* expensive lambswool jacket on the wharf. Cowboy François swaggers up in a trenchcoat right on schedule and Janine makes a snort of derision. It's not a dignified snort, but the loud, abrupt snort of a pig. She's not embarrassed—that would be the job of *François*.

Taken aback, but still with resolve, François approaches close, towering over Janine like a scarecrow that flunked “Fashion 101”. There's the musk of a thick cologne radiating from his body like the dying breath of a diseased hippie. Its fortitude makes her wheezy.

He grabs her shoulders again, but this time he spins her around and holds her with an arm around her throat. Her aikido is useless; he's tall. It's the sort of defeatist excuse that gets you kidnapped—but, on the other hand, Janine suddenly realizes there's a knife at her throat and struggling would have slit it.

“Stay calm. I wouldn't want to hurt your pretty neck.”

“My neck is *not* pretty, although you do well by respecting its countenance.”

He jostles her through a doorway, and it's the visual equivalent of Ride-of-Valkyries-meets-Star-Trek-Fanfic. Slash fanfic. With all the characters lining up and pairing off in unlikely romantic doubles ten different ways at once. Gross.

Janine wonders at the idiocy of young girls. Texting back and forth about their “boyfriend”s and smiling sheepishly in school after a good shagging the night before—so they'll write amazingly accurate but still shitty slashfic drivel on fanfiction.net and repost it to Twitter so everyone puts two and two together and causes all the parents to meet each other and scream profanity and racial slurs. The kids don't ever meet again, but they send snapchats of their crotches to each other until they reach high school, whereupon they discover that Facebook has a video chat that provides higher bandwidth.

It's another dumb thought that's distracting from the sight Janine now beholds.

The machine is enormous. It fills the warehouse and has the kind of moving clockwork that would make H. G. Wells squeal. Not Jules Verne. Too dignified. That handsome fuck.

Floor to ceiling, the contraption is all spinning wheels and dials and pulleys. It *is* amazing, but Janine likes simplicity and would have kicked the designer in the nuts for not at least making it obvious what it *does*.

She reserves the thought for later, should François turn out to be that designer. Might do it anyway, just for the lols.

“It's an archivist.” François announces, releasing Janine, who pulls her jacket around herself like a bobcat would getting dressed in front of a zoo audience.

“It takes all the files of the world and dumps them here, in plaintext.”

Janine does a back-of-the-brainstem calculation and comes up short.

“Bullshit.”

François shoots her an unforgiving look.

“Not *all* of it, obviously. Just the important bits.”

Janine is starting to see where this is going. She wonders if she'd accrue more felonies staying or in trying to leave. She's just pondering trying to steal François's knife, which has a very vicious and *effective* sort of look to it, when a familiar face darts out of the woodwork.

“Oh,” François starts. “This is my friend and partner-in-crime Tim.” François laughs nervously and the joke falls flat. There's an awkward pause.

“Tim, meet Janine,” he finally prompts.

Tim opens fire first.

“So, Janine, we meet again. So glad to see you've matured. Physically, I mean, since you haven't in any other respect. I'd call you pretty except the ugly heart weakens your complexion.”

Janine's response is canned, but she can still personalize it. Insults are home turf in a lifelong battle. It's like the opposing team is showing up ten years late and hoping it hasn't lost by adjudication.

“Tim. You're a lackwit. A parasite. A pustule on the corpus of all compsci majors. You ought to be ashamed of your existence. My god. It's like you never outgrew the failures of the dismal-excuse-for-a-family you thought you once had. Now die.”

François regards the ensuing, momentary standoff, but the train-of-thought that finally registers the existence of Tim and Janine's prior history takes so long in boarding-at-the-station that their fistfight has already erupted by the time the conductor shouts “All aboard”.

Tim struck first, obviously, since a losing verbal argument could, in principle, be trumped by winning a physical one. But, unlike François, Tim is *not* too tall for Aikido, let alone the Tae Kwon Do/Kung Fu hybrid Janine invented to beat up her younger sisters.

Ahhhh, there was a phase where little Annabelle actually *liked* being thrown into walls. To be honest, Janine liked it too.

Janine has something like 14 years sparring practice to draw from, and Tim is a spindly high school junior who probably has Rickets. It's time for *gender equality*, *Shawshank-Redemption-style*. Tim struck a girl. Janine's fists are a federal divine-wind. A *kamikaze* of righteous fury that trumps the invective of the evolution/creationist debate forum on which she posts cartoons of Hitler. Timothy is a city, and it's time for urban renewal courtesy of the Bolivian Army.

The gunshot goes off like a bomb in the enclosed space. It's a blank, or it went through the ceiling, but the sound reverberates in the minds of the combatants.

Janine releases Tim, who gasps for the breath she knocked out.

“Men. Always sexist, stereotyping pigs.” she murmurs.

“Apparently, so are some women,” François shoots back, coolly.

It takes Janine a second to solidify the situation. François—the idiot recovering man-whore with a failed drug rehab program who wears two arrests under his belt like boy scout badges. François—the wannabe French hipster with an event horizon where his brain should have been. François—the unlaven prick who writes steganographic apologies embedded in 3rd-rate Tolkien slashfic.

Janine is coming to grips with the fact that this *same François* now apparently carries knives and handguns, and wears a trenchcoat and skulks around at night collecting the world's juiciest morsels for archival for what-twisted-purpose-who-can-tell. And now, this *François* is one-upping her on snark? Inconceivable.

“Janine?”

“Janine? You look like someone hit you in the face with a brick.”

Janine is back in the present. The comment is from François again, because of *course* it is. She realizes it's true. She covers by saying she woke up at stupid-'o-clock in the morning—which isn't really accurate because she didn't wake up in the morning at all.

François nods, then calls to some more malnourished urchins that have emerged from the waxworks. It's time for a tour.