

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 35

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January 2011

## Bad

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### Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Shirley (2011) "Bad," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 35.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol10/iss2/35>

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## Sullivan: Bad

### BAD

Shirley Sullivan

Kate didn't know anyone at the funeral, or the reception, including the deceased. She never did. She would check the obituaries in the newspaper then show up. It calmed her that there were no expectations of her among strangers; she could say whatever came into her head. She could say she'd been out of Hollinswood Hospital for three whole months, following her six-month stay for depression. It was lovely that no one fussed over her or even cared for that matter; she wasn't that important. What she didn't ordinarily discuss with anyone was the reason for her depression, since she and Dr. Springer, while searching for the definitive fix, had yet to get to the bottom of it. All they knew was that she'd taken a spiral down, after Elliot Markham slept with her once then disappeared without a single phone call. Kate dutifully took her prescribed meds but didn't buy the notion that the explanation for all her troubles could be as simple as one thoughtless boy. The afternoon she left Hollinswood, Dr. Springer walked her to her father's waiting sedan, sparkling from a recent polishing, and handed over her suitcase. "You're just fine."

"She's just fine," her father said.

She tried to smile. "I'm just fine."

The receptions which followed the burials were filled with welcoming family. In spite of faces filled with painful astonishment, she found them ready with outstretched arms and comforting hugs. "Thank you for coming," they would say. "How very kind." There was also plenty of liquor. There were tables of food, hams and gelatin salads, ambrosia, piles of biscuits. "How will we go on without him?" A squeeze of the hand. "God knows." Often, there were little iced cakes.

Today's reception followed a service at Our Lady of Redemption, a Catholic Church, not far from her apartment. The mourners filed from the church and walked, in twos and threes, the younger ones

supporting their elders the short distance to the family home. Kate walked among them. Entering the house, she saw a photo displayed on a hall table of a somber young man in a dark suit. A mere boy. There were rosaries next to the frame and colorfully wrapped Christmas gifts, as if he were expected. Women in dark clothes took their seats against the walls, looking at something Kate couldn't see, while the children played at their feet. She wandered through the rooms of the house before she came to a bedroom with a mirror attached to the door. In the mirror she saw herself, dressed in a good black dress, with her mother's pearls at her throat, and looking, at age 28, like someone she never thought she'd resemble: a wild-eyed, slender, and fragile woman with flyaway hair who spied on the bereaved.

She returned to the living area and found the makeshift bar, a table protected by a white cloth, where shot glasses of tequila were lined up in rows. She picked one up, finished it off then picked up another. Knowing she wasn't supposed to drink while on the meds Dr. Springer prescribed for her, she downed the second shot.

As people began to crowd in, she found herself standing next to a man in sunglasses and combat fatigues. The name on his jacket read 'Sergeant Morrison.' "You a member of the family?" he asked, and she knew he was mocking her. He was sunburned, hipless, with his hair flattened from wearing a beret. Later, she would say he seemed guarded, measuring and evaluating something in the air between them.

She looked around at the mostly Hispanic crowd. "Do I look like I'm a member of the family?"

"Nope. You look like an Icelandic princess."

"What about you?" she asked. They moved to the buffet table and helped themselves to the guacamole.

"I guess you might say he was family." He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "We were in the same unit."

"Where was that, Sergeant?" They moved back to the bar for refills.

"Kandahar."

"Afghanistan?" She took a step backward, splashing tequila on her skirt. "God, I've never known anyone who's been to Afghanistan."

"Figures." His gaze was directed at the front of her dress.

"What a terrible Christmas for this family. Of all the funerals I could have wandered into, I guess I picked the wrong one."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know any of these people."

"I knew it," he said. "You've got the look."

"What look is that?"

"The looking-for-trouble look. You teach school but you're bad."

That annoyed her. She didn't care to resemble a teacher. She wouldn't tell him that's what she did. "I'm not a teacher," she lied.

"But you're bad. Right? A bad girl? That's why you're here: looking for what? Kicks? Escape? Oblivion, huh?" She saw herself reflected in his glasses. "Here among the mourners," his smile was brilliant, "you can bet your ass someone feels worse than you."

The word 'bad' echoed in her head, and she suddenly wanted to be anywhere other than standing with this soldier. Without a word, she walked off.

At the place where she'd been sent to rest, she'd been told repeatedly that she wasn't bad. But there were others, patients who stole the food off her plate; they were bad. There were daily therapy sessions held in rooms with large windows, overlooking fields of grazing sheep, and everyone sat on the floor in their socks, smoking and eating jellybeans and talking nonsense. She wanted to tell them all to shut up. There were gardens of flowers that flourished there, azaleas and hibiscus, great patches of color. The air smelled delicious.

On visiting day, she sat in the garden with her parents, in chairs set out by the staff, wishing her mother could stop asking, "Is it our fault?" Her father, avoiding her eyes. "There's nothing wrong with our girl," he would say. "Look at her. She wants to come home."

"No, she doesn't," Kate would say, and, while they discussed her, as if she weren't there, she painted her nails the same color of lilac as

the wisteria growing against the wall. Her mother brought her things wrapped in tissue, things she'd kept for years: a child's nightgown with pleating at the bodice and a coloring book, along with some valentines. Kate put them in a drawer in her room, alongside a package of Moon Pies.

One month in, she ran away. It took them three hours to find her, in a Trailways bus terminal, wearing aerobic pants and a gray sweatshirt, seated on a wooden bench next to a young priest. She tried to explain to him about Nancy, the woman in the bed next to hers, who'd been trying to chew off her feet. She wanted him to know what it felt like to live like a child confined to her room. Speechless, the young man offered her part of his fried-egg sandwich, which, at first, she accepted then handed back. Afterward, after they took her back, exhausted and no longer able to play gin with Nancy, she took up bird watching and spent a good amount of the day leafing through *The Audubon Handbook*, studying the different species, spotting them from her window. She learned all their names: 'Orioles,' 'goldfinches,' 'pygmy nuthatches.'

'Warblers.'

The sergeant was at her side again. "Don't make a scene," he said. "I just need to know if there's anything to do in this town," he asked.

"Like what?" she asked, hands on her hips.

"I'd like to buy you a drink."

She felt the heat in her face. She thought a moment, making her decision. "Okay." Then, "I have a 25-year-old bottle of scotch at my place."

"Well, goddamn." He took Kate by the hand and pulled her through the crowd until he found the dead boy's mother. "Mrs. Salazar, I want you to meet a friend of mine—."

"Kate." Kate stepped close, no longer a stranger, and took the woman's hands in hers, so warm and moist from being held. "Hello. I'm so sorry. It's a dark day."

"Que guapa," the woman said. Her head was covered by a black

shawl. The two women embraced for a moment.

Outside the house, the afternoon had passed. The air smelled sweet. They walked without speaking, moving through oblongs of moonlight that lay along the sidewalk, until they reached the short distance to her apartment. Up one flight of stairs, she inserted the key in the lock and pushed open the door. "Forgive the mess, I wasn't expecting company." She turned on a lamp and closed the door to the bedroom. A noble pine stood in a corner, hung with colored lights and angels made of flaxen yarn. "What's your first name?" she asked, noticing his cheekbones were pink with sunburn, his neck, the back of his hands.

"Jimmy. Who're you again?"

"Kate." She plugged in the tree lights, pleased with the glow they cast, like a twilight inside the room.

"Okay." His eyes were all over her.

"Merry Christmas." She rubbed the back of her neck beneath the blondish hair. She was going to have to tell them, the members of her therapy group, Brad and Harry and Foxie, what she'd done. She'd have to face the questions and explain. "Okay, okay, at least I wasn't alone. I was socializing, like you suggested. I was living."

And someone would speak up and say, "Forgive me for stepping in here, but I do want to get this right. You did what?"

There were shelves and shelves of books and more on the floor. Inexpensive prints covered the walls, of elephants gathered at a watering hole, herons standing on one leg. "Make yourself comfortable," she said, picking up newspapers scattered around. Then she went to the kitchen area, separated from the living room by a tiled counter, where a dark-eyed canary sat on a perch inside his cage. "Hey, Benny," she said.

Benny went, "Peep," and dropped to the floor of the cage, seizing a seed. Kate pressed a finger through the bars to rub his head.

"Silly bird," she said affectionately, as he rustled his feathers, then she took a tray of ice from the fridge and began the familiar ritual of

mixing drinks. "You like Manhattans?"

Jimmy removed his jacket and dropped it on a chair, then undid the collar of his shirt. He shook a cigarette out of a pack and lit it, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "You can skip the vermouth."

She poured strong drinks and mixed them with her finger, then handed one to him. Maybe tomorrow she'd defrost the chicken in the freezer, roast it in the oven. Use her china and good linen napkins. The two of them, a dinner together, with candles. Like regular people.

He took the extended glass. "This is good. You know how good this is? Being here, with you? Usually if I have a drink with a woman, I get stuck with the bar bill. Sometimes my lighter disappears." He lifted the glass and took a long pull. "So how come so many books? You a writer?"

She'd always wanted to be a writer. "I'm a translator." Another lie.

"Get outta here. You speak Iraqi?"

"Do you?"

"I know how to say 'fuck off.'"

"I'll bet you do. Was your father in the military?"

"My dad's a minister." He punched the pillows on the sofa then sat. He sat with his legs wide apart. "He doesn't believe in my war. Or any war."

She walked to the sofa and dropped down next to Jimmy, clasping her arms around her knees. "What does he believe in?"

He passed a hand over his eyes. "A disciplined life."

"Do you go to church?"

"I went inside one of those Muslim temples once or twice. Rows of people on their knees, their heads to the floor. I envied them until I began to wonder how many of them were blowing us up."

"My father served in Vietnam." Kate glanced across the room, at a photo of her father in uniform, and looked away. "I actually think he liked killing. He talked about what he killed for sport, like he was proud of it, the monkeys and the parrots. He talked about the Mekong

River, the boats passing, with low-slung masts, on their way to the China Sea. He told me what he could buy on the river, the women and the drugs. He talked about the clubs.”

There had been dances at the hospital. She wore her dancing dress while, from the terrace, piano music floated in through the French doors. She had closed her eyes, pretending her partners didn't resemble baboons. One, two, three. One, two, three. Around they went. Rapturous. Later, they ate vanilla ice cream, the smell of jasmine vine permeating the air.

“So are you a hero?”

Jimmy fiddled with his watch. “I was just one more faceless motherfucker standing on a road, knocking the dust off my boots, waiting to be suited up after Salazar got hit. Manny-fucking-Salazar.”

“The boy in the photo?”

“We shoveled him off the road after the bomb he was trying to dismantle went off.”

“You dismantle bombs?” She fingered the pearls at her neck, cool against her skin.

“It's like the moon over there. Only worse. Not knowing who's civilian, who's military. Who's holding a cell phone or a detonator that looks like one. They're just waitin' for us to leave. Best we could do was play the radio all night.”

“What was the toughest part?”

“I don't know. Maybe the sandstorms. Staying away from the Russian tanks. We didn't have anything to kill a tank.” He flashed a smile. “Is this turning you on?”

“How do you deal with it?”

“Oh, I deal with it. The docs load us up with all kinds of shit—Zoloft and Valium—then send us back in.”

She was on Zoloft.

He sat forward, his elbows on his knees, doing something with his shoelaces. “I've been extended. I'll be back over there in a week.

In time for Christmas.”

They finished their drinks and looked off in different directions.

“So what’s next?” he asked, squinting through hazel eyes.

“More liquor.” Kate pushed off the sofa and headed to the kitchen. Through the window she saw it had begun to rain, pounding the dark street silver.

“Who’s this?” Jimmy asked. He’d followed her into the kitchen and, spying the canary’s cage, bumped it, causing the bird to spread its wings in alarm. “This your bird?”

She walked quickly to the cage and steadied it. “It’s okay, Benny.”

“Benny, huh? Birds make me nervous. They never shut up. Right, Benny? You ever shut up?”

She saw that the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. She wondered why she wasn’t afraid.

Returning to the living room with the bottle, she refilled their glasses. She stood in front of him. “Why’d you come on to me at the reception?” she asked.

“You wanted me to.”

Leaning forward, she touched the front of his shirt, where it was damp and warm. He took her hands, putting both of them behind her, holding her captive. “I’ve been dreamin’ about you,” he said.

Dancing with baboons, dreamin’ about you.

He put a hand on her throat and slid his tongue deep inside her mouth. “Know what I’m thinking?” he asked. “You are bad and we should get loaded. You an addict? ‘Cause I’ve got some good stuff here, and I figure you for one of those intellectual chicks who wants to get in over her head. Right?”

“I don’t do street drugs,” she said.

“You don’t do drugs. That’s okay; there’re other things. I know what you want, standing there all dressed up in your good dress, pearls and all, waiting, right? You want danger in your life. I can do that. I’ll take your clothes off, lay them on the floor real careful. I won’t rip

anything. I'll show you what you want." He rubbed his hand over his mouth.

She took another sip. When her glass was empty, she would pour another. When the bottle was finished, she'd find the next one.

"Kiss me," he said. "I know you want to."

She didn't say anything. She turned her face toward him, opened her lips, not caring if he was diseased. "I'll do everything," he said. He pulled her to the sofa. "Sit on my lap." He found the buttons to open her dress. "Raise your arms. Good, you're my good little bad girl. Jesus, look at you. Now close your eyes. We'll pretend we're on the river sailing toward carnival night, and there're orchids growing on the masts." The air between them grew humid, thick. "I won't hurt you. I'll take care of you. I'll fuck you all the way to the South China Sea."

Slowly, as the hands on the clock ticked away the passing time, the apartment filled with shadows cast by the single light from a lamp. Kate, in a state of suspension from all that was ordinary, felt something change in the night air, a forfeiting of all claim, and with it an unfastening, a loosening of her skin. She imagined that someone had set fire to the trees growing out of the sidewalk, and the flames grew as she watched, grew 20 feet high.

When she next opened her eyes, it was still dark, although she knew it must be dawn. Last night's rain had chilled the room. She had dreamed a river of fathomless depths had flowed across the floor, and, as it rose, reaching the bedclothes, she saw her father in an open coffin floating on the water. Thinking she was sinking, she clicked the lamp on next to the bed and read the time. Five o'clock. There was blood on the pillow slip and more on the sheets. In disbelief, she rose, leaving Jimmy asleep, and walked naked and barefoot through the living room and into the kitchen. That's where she found Benny, on the floor of the cage, his head at an odd angle. There was enough light from the Christmas tree to see the blood on his feathers.

With an intake of breath, she realized Benny was beyond help. Wondering if anyone was in the street, she walked to the window and looked out. There was no one up except for a man at the window of a neighboring apartment, both his hands to the glass, staring out. She opened her mouth to scream and stopped. The minutes ticked by.

Back in the bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed and waited for Jimmy to stir. "What happened to Benny?"

"Go back to sleep," he groaned.

"I need to know."

He pushed up and looked around before he saw the dried blood on the palms of his hands. "What the fuck?"

"Benny's dead."

Jimmy put his head in his hands. "Christ. What happened?"

"You killed him?"

"Lemme think. I can't think." They sat in silence. "My head's killing me." He looked thinner in the light and pale. Diseased. "What I remember is being pulled in by some sound, must have been a waking dream, like crazy squawking. I followed it to the kitchen and it grew, this noise. It got louder. It just kept on coming, I had to make it stop." His eyes, unfocused as a dog's, avoided hers.

It was his story. The cool air washed over her like water. She folded her arms around her torso and imagined lying at the bottom of a lake, wings wrapped around her body. She fell back on the bed. Benny was innocent. He wasn't bad and neither was she.

"Don't cry," Jimmy said.

She listened to the bedsprings give as he got up. She listened as he crossed the room to the bathroom, urinated, washed his hands and dressed. She heard him say something, something about Salazar being the lucky one, then she heard him open the door. Close it. Footsteps in the hall. Then nothing.

The world wasn't even up yet, hadn't had its coffee. She jerked up.

*Where are you, little dark-eyed Junco? White-winged Crossbill? In*

response, she heard the sound of their wings stirring, flapping, and beating against the air. *Fly, fly*, she cried. *It's no longer safe*. She left the bed and ran to the kitchen. She watched from the window as Jimmy stepped off the curb and into the road. Even from that distance, she saw the defeat in the set of his shoulders. As it began to rain, he turned up the collar of his jacket, set his black beret squarely on his head then took off running in the direction of the bus stop. And as he ran, he resembled her father, but only for a moment, then he was made of undulating lines of water as rain hit the glass, leaving him distorted and dissolving.