

Treating Juno



Ragini Werner

*Where the bee sucks, there suck I
In the cowslip's bell I lie
There I couch when owls do cry.
On the bat's back I do fly
After summer merrily
Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.*
— Ariel's song, **The Tempest**, Shakespeare

I hate stairs. There are stairs going down to physio, housed in the annex across from the tower block of wards of Auckland Hospital. At the bottom, I have to heave my crutches through the door to the gym. Another obstacle. I resent coming here but know it's stupid wishing the accident hadn't happened.

Inside the glass-walled office is Dr. Ljuba (say: Uba) Baróvicza, the refugee from Riga who rules the bin I'm staying in. To me she's Doctor U, the preshrunk shrink. I mean she's short, tiny, five foot at most, not what you'd expect from the colossus in charge of the psychiatric unit at the top of the tower.

What is she doing down here? Standing in for the physio. Fair enough. I tap on the glass.

Doctor U looks up, swivels in her chair. 'Good day, Ariel. Swimming pool first.'

I don't mind the pool. The buoyant water makes the exercises feel easier. The changing room is empty. I share my daily physio sessions with a minuscule old maid, who's constantly hunched over, hugging her pain. Those arthritic claws of hers scare me. If she were a brutal bloke, she'd pounce on me. I bet. I call her The Rapist. So, The Rapist's not here yet. Good.

I slip out of my sweatshirt and baggy shorts and unbandage the knee. In this dim changing room, the scar is lightning vivid. I'm scrabbling through my bag trying to find my togs. Shit. Left on the ward, draped over a radiator, drying out after yesterday's session. No big deal, I'll go in my singlet and knickers. Leaving crutches behind, I hop down a concrete ramp, holding on to the rail, ease into the water and

moonwalk till my bounces no longer touch bottom, relishing the jelly resistance of water. Slowly I swim lengths of feeble breaststroke.

At the deep end, I make a half-hearted start to the exercises. I'm supposed to pedal, forcing the broken knee to bend. I try as far as it will go before the pain starts and don't push further. It's too sore. Instead I thresh about with my good leg and merely play. The sound of splashing echoes round the tiled walls.

'Ariel, you are not trying!'

Doctor U is in the doorway, looking down the pool. It's my Doctor U but different. Same stern face, same sensual lips drawn tight in disapproval, same walnut tan. It takes me a while then I get it. This Doctor U isn't tiny, she's tall so tall she towers over me, she's tall as my lover Juno, wholly unfooled by the volume of water I manage to splash. She startles me into working harder. I wonder if she can see my nipples jutting out from under the wet singlet.

'That's enough, Ariel. Get dressed and come through to the gym.'

Now what? I can't put on my clothes over the wet underwear. Big deal. I'll do without.

Doctor U is waiting by the massage bench, caught in a swathe of dusty sunlight filtering through the grimy windows of the gym. She sets me to pedaling on an exercycle. The knee won't bend enough to complete a turn of the pedals so I just swing my legs up to the point of resistance. My thighs are acting like bellows, puffing air into my baggy shorts. The air feels cool on my damp pubes. I wonder if Doctor U can tell I'm not wearing knickers.

* * *

So what if I know that demented march of hers? I can tell it's Doctor U as soon as the elevator pings and she stomps onto this ward for the adolescent insane. Suits me here. I mean it's winter out there, fucking freezing, but in here it's nice and warm and the beds are soft and the meals are delicious if you like bland food and I do. I love it as much as the insane view we teenagers have of Auckland city and the harbor lights, fucking majestic at night. But now it's daytime and I'm in the

dayroom, thinking of the coolest person I know, next to Juno, listening to her stomping along to her office no doubt.

She stops in mid-stomp. 'Why aren't you in the dining room with the others (say: uzzers)?'

'Not hungry.' I mutter into my fist, hiding how pleased I am that Doctor U has put her head through the doorway and discovered me slumped in my wheelchair, bandaged leg supported, poking out like a lance. A lot of good it is to me this fucking broken knee. I hate it, hate the accident that caused it. I love Doctor U. Tiny Doctor U with the huge Mittel-European accent. I love the way she lengthens the vowels of my name (say: Aair-eee-yell).

She stomps over to me, parked in a thin slash of sunlight, and peers over my shoulder at the sketch I've done. I can feel the sweet warmth of her breath on my neck. I can tell she's had lunch, sweet carrots and beef. Second-hand stew smells delicious on Doctor U.

'May I?' She takes the pad from my lap and looks at the sketch of an oval-shaped face capped with white-blond curls. She scans the intelligent eyes, fine nose, freckled cheeks and fragile lips, all suggested by a few pencil strokes. My drawing is full of vitality. The girl is bright, eager, alert, ready to laugh, ready for fun, all set to fly off in search of adventure.

Doctor U smiles, eyes creasing in that sexy way I like so much and returns the pad without comment. But on her way out, she deals her double whammy. 'Tell me. Why have you drawn your lover?'

Sudden rage explodes in my chest. I chuck the pad onto the floor. 'That's me, you fuckwit! If that's supposed to be my lover you're calling me a fucking wanker.'

'No sweetie (say: zweetee), I'm calling you Juno.'

'My name is Ariel. I'm Ariel, fuck you!'

It's no good. I'm screaming at nothing. The Doctor has gone.

* * *

I detest stairs. There are stairs going down to the gym where the obdurate Doctor U is watching me pedal in silence. I'm wasting her time.

‘Come to the massage bench.’ I reach for the crutches resting nearby on a rope and pulley contraption. ‘No, leave them.’

‘But I can’t walk without them.’

She meets my glare and dares me to try. It’s a short distance from the exercycle, no more than two meters. I begin, placing my good leg firmly down before shifting any weight and lo and behold I’m limping gingerly rubber-kneed. Hey, I don’t need crutches. How about that? I’m walking unsupported, for the first time. It feels scary, but great. I look for her praise, not expecting to find it, and am shocked to see her laughing. I hoist myself onto the massage bench and watch her strap a weight to my ankle.

Doctor U is close very close too close I can smell her sweet clover scent, I can hear her breathe, I can feel her breath on my skin. Her proximity intoxicates me and I’m clenching my fists in case I reveal anything. I flinch when she touches my skin. She stands aside for me to straighten the leg. I try, challenged by the hope in her eyes. She watches my diminishing efforts in silence then swaps the weight for one lighter. The knee is aching now and it isn’t any easier. I give up.

She goes to the office and fetches a bottle of something. On the way back she turns the key in the gym door. Now she’s pouring oil onto her hands, flexing her fingers, and smiling.

* * *

So what if I’m late? Doctor U ignores my scowl, points to the chair opposite her desk, waits for me to swing over there and watches me collapse in silence, favoring my bandaged leg. The crutches clatter onto the floor. I let them lie where they fall. My heart is going pitter-patter like Jerry mouse fleeing Tom cat but for me there’s no flight from this patient puss waiting for her impatient in-patient to start. Talking. Therapy. These fucking sessions are always the same. I’m angry. She’s calm. She waits with supreme serene endurance until her fucking tranquility wears me down. I clear my throat with a rude hoick. ‘So what do you want to know about Juno and me?’

* * *

Juno and me go back way back flash back to nearly the year dot. To the playground to be precise, to the day I started my new school, o brave new world with Juno.

With my creepy face and creepy freckles and creepy hair so white it looked like a halo, I looked like a freak, something light and fragile that should be destroyed. One look at me and the Big Boys tried to break me by the playground wall.

Juno saw me perched up on that wall, cowering powerless, unable to fly, terrified, not of the Big Boys but of the fear they evoked. She saw what was happening and stopped it.

‘Leave her alone, you little pricks, or I’ll sock you.’

Juno was t-a-double-l and hefty on those legs of hers, long for a girl of her age, seven, the same as me. She could look those Big Boys in the eye. She was heavier, stronger too. No choice at all, they had to back down. All the kids backed down from Juno, girls included.

All except me. I hated her. On sight. Maybe I hated her because she was tall and I wasn’t. Maybe I hated her for being protective, for saving me from the Big Boys. I hadn’t asked to be saved. Maybe I deserved to be broken. Maybe because she hadn’t let that happen, I decided to break her instead. I became her tormentor. I tortured her in class, putting up my hand before she did, knowing the answer before she did. I toyed with her at playtime, beating her at skipping, hopscotch, teasing her playing tag. I’d tag her and run away fast, run, run as fast as you can, fleet as my namesake I’d fly out of reach. Trailing a wake of merry giggles, I’d leave Juno behind, glowering in earthbound fury.

‘I’ll get you, Ariel, just you wait!’

But Juno didn’t want me to wait. She wanted to catch me fair go, wanted to snatch me down in mid-flight, and wouldn’t give up until she did. She hated me for finding her funny, for not letting her bully me, for staying free.

Four whole weeks I was Juno-free. Then she got me. She nabbed me in the playground, lurking behind the wall after school and pouncing on me as I went past. My satchel went flying and I was flung to the ground.

I tell you I fought. I struggled, I wriggled, I squirmed onto my back to twist myself free but Juno held me easily. With her body swamping mine, all I could do was gaze into her eyes, so deep purple they looked like damson plums. The tip of her tongue was rosy red and enticing. She was grunting, moist peppermint snorts that tickled my mouth and nose. It was making me laugh. She smelled nice. She felt strong. She felt nice. All at once I felt safe. I belonged.

‘Fair go, Juno.’

I loved giving in, knowing I hadn’t lost. I knew as well as she did that we both had won. We were one. She laughed, loving our closeness as much as I did. She went to roll off but I flung my arms around her neck and forced her to stay, on top, where she belonged.

* * *

I don’t mind stairs. There are stairs going down to the bench where Doctor U is saying, ‘You are doing very well (say: waarry vell), Ariel, walking all by yourself.’ I can feel my mouth gaping surprise as she nudges me down. Doctor U is smiling is purring like Tom Puss with the proverbial cream and her fingers are stroking and rubbing my naked knee.

‘Is this better?’

I can only nod. I’m trembling so hard now she’s pressing and pinching the sore muscles. Her fingers are smearing oil on my quadriceps, she’s rubbing slow circles higher and higher and slowly higher up my gaping thigh, my shorts are gaping wide, and her circling fingers have found me gaping wet inside. And I gasp.

* * *

So what if I puff like a camel on heat? What else do you expect? The ashtray is full and it’s only twenty minutes into the session. I stub this butt, light up the next, shove it in the corner of my mouth, and lean out of range of the looping smoke. Get me. Ariel, Marlboro Man.

'Tell you what, between you and me and the doorpost, I don't really like fags. Faggots yes: but that's another story. Can't not like myself.'

I wait for Doctor U to react but she doesn't bother. That big desk of hers dwarfs her. She is fiddling with her Mont Blanc pen, doodling, waiting for me to say something worth noting. I look out the raindrop-dotted window, at the city smothered in drizzle so dense I can barely make out the buoys in the harbor. It's wet and miserable out there and in here I am warm and safe. I blow a lazy plume of smoke. It tastes like dry shit. I put out the unfinished cigarette and toss the nearly empty pack onto the desk.

'Juno doesn't like me to smoke. Did I tell you? Says it spoils the taste of my kisses. So what do you reckon? I should give up smoking, now already?'

I sneak a glance at Doctor U but she's not smiling. So I smile instead, hiding my despair, and play with the ashtray. I can feel her eyes on me, calm eyes, tolerant eyes, eyes that are waiting, eyes that have all the time in the world.

'What!' The word explodes from my mouth before I can contain it. Doctor U merely gives me a look. 'What the fuck do you want?'

She puts down the pen, fixes me straight in the eye, stern as usual. 'Tell me. I'm wondering where (say: veer) your lover is.'

* * *

Juno and me went stealing to feed our adrenaline habit. After school we'd go down to the mall, where else? One day we were in Macy's accessories, scoring a chiffon scarf for me and a butch leather belt for Juno. She wanted that belt, none other, and I wanted to steal it for her. The silly old bozo at the till was suspicious. He was pulling at his mustache and squinting at me, checking to see where I was hiding behind the belt racks. I could see him wondering if he'd really seen my light fingers lifting that scarf a moment ago. So Juno went off to protect me. She planted herself in front of the counter, blocking his view with her solid body, leaving me free to let my fingers do the stalking and now

you see it now you don't and hey presto I've torn off the magnetic tag and the swag's in my bag and I'm flying out of the store.

Go go go! Let's fly, Juno!

* * *

I like stairs. There are stairs going down to a laughing Doctor U who is lifting my top and sliding her hands over my breasts, smearing oil round my nipples and she's loving my tits and adoring my eyes and I'm holding her hand on my pounding heart. She slips from my grip and unzips my shorts and pulls them off and drops them on the floor and strokes my mound with its crisp nest of curls and she's combing my curls and pressing my mound as if she's kneading dough and under her hands I'm rising in needy reflex.

I love stairs. There are stairs down her uniform not the tweed skirt she wears on the ward but a starched white uniform with not stairs silly but stiff buttons down the front and I'm undoing those buttons and pulling her close to the bench closer so close to my face I can take her with my tongue. My Doctor is drenched in honey sweet clover honey and I'm lapping and licking and sipping her lips and mashing her with my mouth and / *where the bee sucks, there suck I* / and I'm sliding up her and she's sliding in me and we're filling each other and kissing our circle complete. I close my eyes to savor the feeling of U in me and me in U when —

Bang. Bang! BANG.

* * *

'So what if we did lead a life of crime? Proper little criminals we were, okay, but Robin Hood was our hero. I mean we may have been thieves but we never stole from the little shop on the corner, only the big chains and conglomerates, and who gives a fuck about them? So don't talk to me about causing pain to our victims. What victims? We didn't hurt anyone. Not Juno, not me. She'd never hurt a soul, wouldn't hurt a fly,

not even flyaway me. And nothing hurts me. I don't let anyone or anything hurt me. Ever!

Doctor U waits for my rant to wind down. She's ticking her pen against her teeth. "Tell me about your knee."

'What about my fucking knee?'

'You say nothing can hurt you but isn't your knee hurting you? You keep it bound so tight, it must be hurting. I'm worried you're cutting off the circulation. Let me see. Please.'

Damn Doctor U, she's left her desk and is standing over me and forcing me to unroll the shroud covering my knee, the grubby length of cloth torn off the end of a bed sheet because the nurses won't give me a bandage. Finally the knee is laid bare to her stern gaze. The skin is etched with spiral lines where the cloth was wound too tight. She waits for my permission. Her fingers are cool as she probes the healthy patella. I flinch at her impersonal touch. Finally she takes her hand away. I can't escape her honest eyes.

'Tell me. Why do you need a broken knee?'

* * *

Juno and me / *after summer merrily* / out in the real world at last, plucking grapes in a local vineyard. Don't look so surprised. Manual labor is what we wanted to do after finishing school. Yes, I know we passed the exams and could have got us a decent job before going on to university, but hey, we wanted to be out in the sun, so who cares?

So there we were, snipping off dusty clusters of grapes and chucking them into the baskets at our feet. It was dry work and far harder than it looked, back-breaking in fact, bending over the vines like that, and before we knew it the others on the line, the experienced workers, had left us far behind. So Juno and I, we took a break, weren't supposed to but it was too hot and it was too hard plucking grapes so we snuck off and plucked each other instead.

So there we were, having fun in the sun with Juno on top as usual and would you believe it, we're caught in the act by the boss. He gives

us the sack, what else? So we're out on our ears for obscene and not heard of behavior. But who cares?

Not Juno, not me! We're girls and just wanna have fun, and that's what we think we're getting on our way to the bus stop when we find a Vespa scooter, parked out on the road. The scooter is easy enough to steal: key's in the ignition.

Get on Juno, hold on tight, and we're off. We're off we're downhill racers out of spacers we're soaring we're gliding we're flying down the hill and round the bend like a bat out of hell like / *on the bat's back I do fly / merrily shall I live*

* * *

I hate stairs. There are stairs going –

Bang. Bang! BANG. Doctor U has done up the buttons on her uniform and is opening the door to The Rapist who's been banging the door for ages and wants to know why it is dead.

'Not dead. In denial,' explains Doctor U.

The Rapist shakes a tiny fist. 'You can't deny this. Who am I? Doctor. You know!'

Doctor YouKnow is unimpressed. 'Enough of that nonsense. Off you go to the pool. I'm not finished treating Juno yet.'

From the massage bench I watch bemused as tall Doctor YouKnow leaves the gym. Stomping back to me is The Rapist, the-rapist, my tiny therapist, the real Doctor U I know.

'Off you go too.' She looks at the shock on my face and relents. 'Tell you what. Walk in here tomorrow without your special treatment and I'll give you another dose of my crutches.'

* * *

'So what did happen to me in that fucking road accident?'

Doctor U pauses before answering. 'I will tell you. You didn't break your knee.'

Dread fills my broken heart and I know she is telling the truth. Without limping I go to the window and stare blankly at the view. With my back to the desk, I begin. 'No points for guessing what YouKnow stands for in that erotic dream I told you about. Shit! Talk about projection. So what do you think this dream is telling me about myself, Doctor Baróvicza, that I'm just a fucking wanker, doing it with myself like that? Or am I in denial, or what?'

The doctor keeps very still, waiting for me to go on.

'My name is Juno and I am alive and whole and living up here on the top floor of Auckland hospital.'

She waits again, knowing I have not finished.

'Ariel is dead. I killed her.'

She comes over and reaches up to hold my elbows, comforting me, not put off by the slobbery snot mingling with my tears.

'Juno, sweetie, look at me. I know you'd rather be Ariel and keep her alive that way. But you are you and it's not your fault she died. I tell you, it was an accident.'

'I killed her and got off without a scratch. That's why I believed I'd broken my knee. I had to be punished. It was my job to protect her and I failed. I should have looked after her, not driven her to death. Tell me, why couldn't I save her? Why did she have to die?'

* * *

Ariel alive is clever and quick and fast on her feet and always in the lead. Juno is solid and strong and safe and does whatever Ariel wants. Ariel wants to steal the Vespa, wants Juno in front so she can hug her strong back from behind. Ariel is so light she barely dents the saddle.

Now they're off and Juno's steering down that hill and round the bend and here comes the bus and she's swerving and braking and Ariel is flying over her shoulder and she's flung to the ground landing splat between Juno and the bus and the scooter stalls and falls taking Juno with it and the bus driver tries to brake, tries not to hit Ariel but shit he can't turn cos Juno's in the way so the front wheel hits Ariel and breaks her back but she doesn't die straight away, doesn't fly away she waits

for Juno to crawl over to the bus on her knees and when Juno does she
sighs a smile and
says I love you Juno
wasn't it fun Juno
flying with me
wasn't it Ju
no

* * *

No more Juno. That was Ariel's name for me. I'm Jan. That's short for
Janneke, the name my Dutch parents gave me, which no one here in
Auckland can ever say properly. So, I'm becoming Janice. The 'Jan' stays
the same, but the 'ice' is exactly how I feel for driving Ariel to death.

Ariel was. Jan is.

Janice.

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Ragini Werner asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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