

# Orotund

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

Ronald knew that to meet the requirements of his law firm he would have to start speaking up more often in meetings, rather than sit with his tongue behind his teeth, and his small fingers pressed inbetween his legs, with the sensation he had to go to the bathroom. It was not that any of his colleagues intimidated him, it was more that they bored him with their talk of taxes and loops, and while he was good at his job, he found the domain---the scope---faintly distasteful, like a lunch he could aesthetically enjoy on the plate---sprigged calamari, for example---but whose whiteness was insipid.

That day was important because a major client from Texas was coming, a heavy apish man they called Jack the Spat, simply because he would eat no lean. Jack was big, and smelled, and he had a huge mustache splat in the middle of his face, out of boldness, an exaggeration of excess, as if to say to anyone who asked—why are you fat?: Tug on this !

Ronald liked Jack. It was a pleasure to meet together in the conference room, tete a tete, over a stack of papers. Jack was easily excitable, a man who did not listen to the facts, but preferred the sound of the words used---offshore extensions, break-it funds, and whorlhole subsidies. Indeed every time Ronald used a bigger word, Jack would make a big grin, heft up in

his seat, and squirt down again, emitting a sharp odor that stang out in the room like mustard gas.

Ronald was used to Jack's farts. It wasn't his style, but he appreciated difference, and accommodated his clients. He accommodated most people actually. Ronald had had his job for twenty years, and in the meantime, he had built a house with white walls, white sofas, and white appliances, everything white, to make his guests feel like he was clean. His office was white as well, with a white desk and white lamps, and white shades. He liked his guests to feel the cleanliness of his ways, because he knew it made them comfortable. That is why, he had read, hotels use white towels, rather than purple, which would show the stains less.

Ronald lived alone, but he did have a mistress who lived across the way, a talkative plump woman who would fill the room with her perfume and leave hairs lying around the bathroom, after she brushed the big yellow-white locks. Over the years, her hair had begun to be different colors---white, yellow, orange, and Ron could trace the length of his relationship by how many hairs he found in his brush.

She used his toothbrush and randomly threw it where she last was, whether in the shower, or haphazardly by her mirror in her private bedroom. Ronald had built a private bedroom for her, so that she would feel at home, and she had decorated it with lush plants that crawled up to the ceiling.

To tell the truth, these plants frightened Ronald. Their heads grew up to the ceiling, and no matter how many years they flourished, there were never any flowers, even though they were called lily of the valley. The leaves were thick and rubber-like, and they stretched forward like hands to grab him, and Ronald was sure that one day, he would die, suffocated in their hands.

In the meantime, he enjoyed his relationship with Linda. When she came, it was a relief---a sudden rounding of his sharp white walls, a sudden burst of breathiness, a sudden flash of life---and when she left, it was a relief, because he would weigh all the comments she made, and turn each over in his head, and summing her up, he always came up with a shallow, unimportant woman who cared about nothing but her own sensations of the moment, the scent of her skin, the lubricant of her vagina, the rose-bud tastes of the tea she liked to sip.

She was not a vulgar woman---rather the contrary---she was always sweetly scented, with her soaps. Newspapers she did not read, and social interests did not interest her. She had a right not to be interested, as she was *one of them*. One of them means she herself was unemployed, she herself had grown up with no mother, just a father, and she herself had to smile and cajole bankers every week, to stay above the balance.

And so when Ronald and his educated friends talked about welfare states, and unemployment balances---he and his friends were of the liberal sort, who could not bare increasing their bank accounts without at the same time noting the unfairness of the imbalance---Linda would look bored, and start eating her

strawberries, one by one, sucking on the pits, and at the end decorously placing the green hat at the edge of the plate.

One day she had made a forest of strawberry heads.

That day in particular was a big one because Ronald had first, agreed to see the Texan Jack the Spat to make him a proposition that would gain the law firm 2 million dollars and leave Jack the Spat all the richer as well. The problem was that it involved a bit of fishy business, and the use of different addresses in different countries, all of which existed, but barely.

The second issue was Linda. Linda was pregnant. Jack wanted this money so as to allow Linda this opportunity, and maybe build a new room in his house, with no plants, but hanging plastic for the child to become addicted to, for more plastic, and then eventually be put in front of a tv screen while Jack went to work, and Linda luxuriated with her lilies.

Jack came in the room. Jack was big, Jack smelled.

« How're you doing ? » he said, bowing to Ronald, and Ronald smelled him so bad, he had a sudden urge to hug the man, and sniff him up and down, and he did not know where this urge came from.

Jack sat in the biggest chair in the office, while Ron scrunched his small self onto a lowered stool.

Ron could not begin. He knew he had to lie to Jack, to convince Jack.

Jack made it easy. He farted, and he said,

« That's the smell of an oil rig blowing up. Yes, the fires have been bad in Texas, and I just lost a big one. »

He rubbed his lips together. « Which means, if I lost ten more, I would eventually have to sell a car. »

He rubbed his hands together. Even this movement created a smell, the smell of flesh and sweat wafted up to Ronald.

Jack was not married, but he had ten children floating about, all of whom he supported with trust funds, so they had yachts, cars, houses, airplanes, and some hobbies.

Ronald squeezed his own thin fingers together, and the sweatiness made the fingers slip and collide, a church with no standing.

« You know we can answer that situation of loss, » he said. « We have a new tax plan.... »

He explained, and as he explained, Jack's eyes brightened, the saliva warming up the pupils, so that a new smell entered the room, like petroleum being slicked up ready for a match.

It was not the sound of new money that alerted Jack's ears, but the pleasure of watching this little man, Ronald, this man he had known for twenty years, suddenly creep up in his voice with something that vaguely seemed enthusiastic, even needy, for Ronald had always done his work with the competence of a square box.

Ronald had never really had the pleasure of seeing someone find him fascinating. Even Linda when she looked at him basically saw a square box, where she could nest her round egg form, and grow her plants. It was an interesting experience for him to feel interesting.

He spoke more slowly, pronouncing each word, and he noticed he began to tell the details that were in the fine print, details that perhaps might alert Jack the Spat to some contradictions, but he knew—he sensed—that Jack did not care, but was enjoying his tongue, the syllables popping out, the way they sounded, and Ronald could have gone on like this for hours, mentioning distribution shelters, clausular hedges, lifted percentage rates, and shifting property rules.

The smell though was intense, because Jack was a fat man with stomach problems, and he did not like to be passive, and so he burped when he could, or squeezed his ass on his seat and made rubbing sounds, and coughed up some sputum, and at one point even sneezed across the table so that his snot carried a faint whiff of tobacco mixed with milk--his morning cereal splotted out the nose as well.

« Agreed ! » Jack the Spat said, at the end of the day, and signed hungrily the forms that Ronald gave him. He did this more out of a need to be more active in the meeting—to assert more of his physical presence—than out of any desire for the cut, or the loss, or whatever it would be, as Jack the Spat was so bored by his accoutrements, his cars and houses, he couldn't care less if there were more or less, but he did like to take up other people's space.

That done, Ronald took the afternoon off from work. He felt pleased with himself, with his newfound skill as an orator, and he looked forward now to talking to Linda, to telling her his plan for the baby. They had to decide how they would continue their family life together, how their new living arrangement would work.

Actually Ronald had nothing particular to tell her. He had no ideas ; he had no vision of this future with Linda, but this was true of all of his life. He didn't have visions of things growing, he had visions of things staying the same. He had not changed his life for twenty years ;. the walls began white and stayed white.

But that was good : complements attract. He had Linda.

And there she was, sitting squat in the middle of her lily garden, tending the leaves.

Something horrified him about the way she looked, her bosom spilling forth in her white cashmere sweater, and her legs plumped out in her warm-ups, and the stomach already rounding

with the feet of the new bambino. Her hair was over lush, and her lips were glossed with pink, and she reached her thick arms to Ronald to draw her to him and plant a big kiss on his angular forehead, leaving a pink splash on the whitish bony skin.

« Hello my friend, » she said. « Hello father of my baby. »

The lilies waved behind her head, and Ronald was aware that he was unable to distinguish were they ended and Linda began, it all seemed one big swirl.

« You know I have been thinking, » Ronald said.

He did not know what he had been thinking, but he had a hunch that his earlier success with Jack the Spat would inspire him.

« Yes my love, my poor sweet, my darling, » Linda now cradled his head in her arms, and began kissing him all over, and he began to blur into her womb, so that he did not know whether he too was a part of the foliage around them.

It felt nice to be enveloped by Linda, to smell her soapy skin, and to allow her quick fingers to stroke his neck, and he began to feel safe, at home, at rest, and he did not feel like speaking further, and so Linda began to chatter, about the baby clothes she had bought, and the crib, and the new soaps she had seen in a specialty shop, and she said to him, in a big punctuating sentence, « Isn't this soft ? » referring to her cashmere sweater, which she had just bought with his credit card.

Linda loved Ronald, and it was not for his unflowing cash that she had stayed with this man for twenty years, never having more or less than what she had now, a bony small form to hug, and a plastic credit card to use. Ronald did not talk much ; he listened ; he understood her words. Her words were simple ; her ideas were clear. She liked strawberries, she did not like traffic jams. She enjoyed waking up early, she was grey and fatigued by nine. She enjoyed dressing little children, math was difficult for her. Men liked offices, women had their cooking.

She cooked wonderfully, and every night she brought big dishes to Ronald who would say, « oh » while she chattered about the ingredients.

Deep down Linda was actually lonely, but she was of the sort that could not tolerate wasting life with self-reflection. There were plenty of indices in her culture---perfumes, creams, special spices---to make such desultory empty thoughts a waste of life. Linda was life itself ; she was a Leo. She even looked like a lion with her big fat head.

Ronald, in her lap, felt his own square lack ; Linda fascinated him ; and now her rounded womb fascinated him. He had built his empire---he did after all have his apartment, his car—and his parents were proud. What else was there to do ? Linda, the baby.

He read enormously, he knew the ins and outs of the Aztec empires, he understood how coconut trees made their fruit. He

could win at any conversation of competitive fact, but he cared not to, because he did not care.

And while Linda took his head and squeezed it in her hands, plump and warm, he began to feel that why should he care, when this felt so nice, the smell of Linda, and the plants that breathed over both of them, and the little feet which kicked ? It was all so nice !

And the plants were growing, Linda said, they were healthy, which was a good sign for the baby, and the baby could have his crib, right there with the plants.

He hugged her back, for the first time, wondering if his thin fingers would have any effect, would indent her fat back, whether she would feel his presence, because he had begun to suspect, in fact, ever since he was born he suspected, that he did not really exist, and was a transitory combination of cells and bones, placed in a law firm, until he would reassemble himself under the earth.

The sound of growing is not strong, and so the fetus could not be heard, and nor could the plants. The plants, taken by the extraordinary outburst of Linda's breath, and now Ronald's breath, had begun to edge their way forward, spread their leaves. For Linda's breathy speech had inspired Ronald to voice his first words, and he began by speaking in Linda's ear, and he said, « I love you, I really do », and Linda for the first time in their relationship stopped to speak, so as to listen, and she thought who is this man who speaks this way, where does this voice come from,

and how is it connected with the thought that crawls in his head? She could not fathom how the breath in the lungs would have any connection to the throbbing vein in Ronald's thin white forehead.

Ronald continued. He loved Linda as he loved his teddy bear when he was four, that he had lost under his bed and could never find again, even though his mother had searched and searched. He had told his mother that the monster had come in and taken it and his mother had believed him, because Ronald was an intense child, with strong beliefs. It was only as an adult, after adolescence and the rest of it, that he had dissipated into this bony frame of a man with no opinions.

He told Linda that his stuffed animal was named Peteso Wheteso, and had a big bulbous nose, and a big stomach, and if you squeezed it, it would make a sound, which frightened Ronald, every time, even though he knew he was the one who squeezed.

Linda listened; she hugged Ronald to her, and she imagined the four year old with his animal, and the more she imagined, the more tears came to her eyes, remembering what she had never seen, and she fantasized that she really loved Ronald although it was true that the only person who really moved her—and this barely---was herself.

The plants themselves were in sympathy, and they moved closer to hear Ronald who now began to remember the hugs he had from his own mother, and then how his chair felt in first grade,

too cold and hard, and it was as if unable to imagine his own son, this meant he could now reimagine his own self.

And so now as he felt the surge to kiss Linda, to wrap his thin lips on hers, it was not clear whether he was kissing and eating her lips or whether he was reaching out to his mother, or whether he, with his thin little baby hands, was squeezing Peteso Wheteso.

The plants as if moved by him, moved even closer to the scene of the coupling couple regaining the man's childhood, together, as the baby grew, and they wrapped their leaves around the couple, as if to shade them from the world that could not care less. For Ronald now was crying, his tears entering Linda's eyes as he held her closer, and she listened, as she had never listened, and he spilled out his dreams to be a drawer, a painter like Michelangelo, and how he hated numbers, had hated law school, hated his colleagues, hated bank accounts, hated paper.

And the smell of the plants entered his nostrils with the fragrance of newly born spuds, so sweet and green, filled with sun, and he now remembered how he felt as a child, holding his scary Petesy Wheteso, dragging the bear around with him in the woods, aware that the color of his bear—brown—had nothing to do with the color of the forest ground, even though the teachers insisted so, nor did they have anything to do with the color of the plastic crayon brown, although he used it to imitate with waxy form the intensity of the smell of the earth.

And Linda smelled so good, and her body felt so tight, and he realised he loved her more than he had ever felt before, and he had never truly hugged her, had never really clasped his mouth over hers to merge with her, and so he stopped speaking, and did it all, hugged, and kissed, smelling the whole time the intensity of the plants as they wound their way around the couple, their leaves thick and fat, rubbery and hard, sticking closer together, uniting, forming a webbed malleable corded green, wrapping themselves around both Linda and Ronald, poor Ronald, so small, so ineffectual, what a child he was, and he suddenly realised he was no child, he was a man, with a man's strength.

And Linda herself was dead. She was found that evening in the dark, in Ron's arms, with plants crowded around her body, wrapped around her neck, and fronds falling in her lush yellow hair. Even in the shadows of the room, under the wavy leaves of plants, her eyes had a still blue moist look, of someone who has experienced, at last, a bliss she had never known.

Pete, when they found him, did not speak. He had already spoken.