

# Miss Jane: The Lost Years

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## 1.

What starts, starts somewhere. This the place, the where, Miss Jane encounters a force intent on shaping / re-shaping farm girls, one lucky / unlucky Cracker hick / chick per term. Blank-canvas classroom, second floor, fluorescent lights seizing. A non-emphatic day, a filmy hour, the ninth month of an over-long year is the when. At this conjunction of there / then, as if pre-destined, Miss Jane enters the system, fulfills a quota, succumbs to the mechanics of applied professorial desire. Transmogrifies, one might say, into a standardized course.

How did this happen? How might it not? In any universe actual or invented could our Miss Jane have side-stepped her Lost Years plunge with Prof P? Was what occurred—and will again on these (unsparing) pages—*preventable*? What if Cracker hick / chick Jane had been smarter / dumber, more suspicious / more oblivious, more jaded / more innocent at the cellular level? If, if . . . if only. Alas: our Miss Jane inhabits some of all and most of none of the smart / dumb / suspicious / oblivious / jaded / innocent categories because our Miss Jane is a creature-in-flux, a being in-progress, *not altogether anything quite yet*. As such, she is overly susceptible to calculated ridicule, the readiest of suckers for agendas of improvement pimped by con artists in the shape of higher education despots.

Yes.

Now is as good a time as any to cough up your who-the-hell-cares about Cracker farm girls, to express your gut resistance to yet another academia-sprung tale of

power politics, sexual politics, age versus youth, authority's manipulation of head-to-pubes-to-toe confusion. As is your right. Moreover, any assumption regarding an absence of thematic variation: fully justified and totally correct. Thematically we will stay the course. Power politics. Sexual politics. Age versus youth. Authority's manipulation of head-to-pubes-to-toe confusion. The world's themes do not change, why should they here? For variety, look to the ways / means of struggle and resistance, flare-ups of native cunning. No fairy godmothers will appear to offer assistance. Cracker farm girl Jane will be on her own puzzling out the what of this and on her own now travels the muggy, airless hallway of a public university, South Atlantic region, to attend the scheduled class she mistakes for history, not her future. She carries a notebook. She carries a pen. She is wearing a homemade paisley smock with billowing sleeves over sailor jeans. Her face is flushed.

By reason of cloying heat?

The breathless, claustrophobic humidity of the humid South?

Initially.

## 2.

Settle in, Miss Jane. Familiarize yourself with this site. In flashback it will return—repeatedly. Beige door, beige walls, beige floor, plastic chairs orange as sunset, big, battered, sticky table because seminars require replenishing liquids (coffee, Fresca, Tab) and liquids sometimes / often spill in response to: 1) nervousness, 2) fury. There will be no (heaven forbid) lectures. Only discussion. A civilized discourse in which every voice will be valued, respected, allowed its day and say—except when it won't.

What?!?

You heard correctly.

We will strive not to get sidelined by such an infuriating state of affairs so early on. We will *strive*.

Entering, our Miss Jane smells chalk, sweat (her own, others), an unseen chocolate bar. There is not *quite* enough space around the Department of History seminar table for thirty undergraduates, three graduate teaching assistants and one professor. All will have to wedge. Indoors (in general) Cracker farm girls (in general) fall prey to breath-sucking claustrophobia. But Cracker farm girls are also (in general) polite. If conditions demand, they draw in their elbows. Elbows tucked, Miss Jane selects an orange chair at the table's south corner and, once wedged, breathes shallowly. Another cause for Miss Jane's alarm: the difficulty of taking notes, scrunched, for our Miss Jane, note taker of the highest order, deems anything said by anyone other than herself worthy of record.

Those now assembled are here for the duration of (at least) one class conducted however the fashionably

late headliner cares to conduct it. Thirty-three seated women give Prof P's Greek fisherman cap / red beard / turquoise necklace / denim shirt / silver bracelet / faded Levi's / scuffed brogues their rapt attention—or as rapt an attention as can be mustered in a stuffy, windowless classroom on the first day of class, new semester. After TA introductions: the syllabus. Pass it around. Follow along. They will read Chopin, Greer, Millet, Friedan. They will read *Our Bodies Ourselves*. They will be divvied up into four study groups. They will investigate female subjugation, oppression, repression, historical origins and psychological fallout of same. They will write three papers. They will self-grade. They will meet with their assigned mentor once weekly.

Questions?

One.

*Why is a male teaching women's history?*

The multi-colored locks of twenty-nine long-haired femmes sweep forward, fifty-eight ears listening hard for the why behind their dick-in-jeans prof. The thirtieth? Distracted by flickering fluorescence, an ache behind the brows, the need to sneak-lick sweat off her upper lip. The room is so very, very *warm*. Comrades on either side sit so very, very *close*. In quest of air, space, a little goddamn breathing room, Miss Jane leans unmistakably backward, breaks the circle, the chain, thereby drawing the unwanted / unnerving counter-attentions of the man in charge, who seizes the opportunity to ask, not answer.

“*Jane*, is it?”

It is.

It is Miss Jane.

### 3.

In the near still-vivid past, moon-faced, freckly TA Alice arrived at a judicious decision: flimsy hair presents best short and feathered, even if such a style accentuates the moony effect. Even if, in muggy season, strands stick and clot around the forehead, cling to temples, negate the more attractive pouf achieved at seven a.m. On the campus of a public university, South Atlantic region, September, late morning, esthetically speaking, TA Alice could use a second hair wash, a reparation impossible to achieve what with classes, what with studying, what with TA-ing. Upshot: on a moment-to-moment basis TA Alice must overcome the dismay of sticky hair to pursue education's higher call.

*If you imagine female vanity the single cause of this constant negotiation, your bias is showing. Also (apparently), you have no quarrel with simplistic descriptions. Also: you are definitely not a woman.*

From the onset, Miss Jane feels predisposed toward TA Alice. The reason(s): multifarious. Three of Miss Jane's eight aunts are moon-faced; two of the three allowed Miss Jane, playing dress up, to talc their red cheeks white. In Miss Jane's memory, the pleasing scent of talc mingles with "dancing" eyes and merry tunes. Once, strolling campus, Miss Jane happened to stroll behind TA Alice who seemed, with her cap of hair, a she-monk among Victorians. To stand apart in such fashion, Miss Jane interpreted as bravery. Bravery is not a skill Miss Jane takes (or has ever taken) for granted.

Alone with her mentees in the student lounge, TA Alice reveals other laudable attributes: sympathy, empathy, insight, erudition, an egalitarian state of mind.

“We’ll collaborate, we’ll discover, we’ll share findings,” says she, thrilling her flock. (Collaboration is a club to which her mentees have not previously been invited.) A prank? A ruse? No, no. No, no. TA Alice is absolutely sincere. TA Alice absolutely believes the times they are a-changin’. In the unfortunate play out of Unfortunate Events to come, it is not TA Alice’s ethics that will be called into question. TA Alice’s ethics are beside the point.

And why beside the point?

Because TA Alice is operating under three (false) assumptions: 1) that colleagues keep promises; 2) that her mentees will remain her mentees; 3) that there will be no poaching, plucking, or flagrant example of Prof P swinging his big stick and pulling rank on a TA. In consequence, round one of Miss Jane’s Series of Unfortunate Events will also deliver a nasty shock to TA Alice, severely testing her baseline optimism and intersexual goodwill.

All very worrying.

All quite discouraging.

For the record: we stand in solidarity with TA Alice. She and her cohorts—without question—are being mistreated by the system and the system’s practitioners. But we cannot, *must not*, permit ourselves to become diverted by midnight rallies for union representation, fiery bonfires, fiery speeches, profs and administrators burnt in effigy because we are pledged to stick with Miss Jane’s lost-years story and Miss Jane, mere student, wouldn’t be invited to TA protests, not even by politically inclusive TA Alice.

#### 4.

This the means by which Miss Jane learns of her hand-off, moon to stick. Between library one and library two: an incline of soil and brick slows the progress of flatlanders the likes of Miss Jane. Between points one and two: Prof P presides, chatting up another long-haired / long-skirted femme, his silver regalia gleaming. Does Miss Jane's inner eye catch sight of that unnatural glint as farm girls on the roam are wont to do? Likely. The problem (one of them): Prof P catches sight of Miss Jane as well. "Jane! A word!" Several words, actually, delivered as *fait accompli*: Miss Jane's name now resides on Prof P's roster, TA Alice kicked to the curb.

"But," says our Miss Jane.

"She was so...," struggles our Miss Jane.

Feeble as protests go, but Miss Janes are hardly trained to "but" professors. Furthermore: sorrow is often inarticulate. Together they walk the path to Prof P's office, fourth floor, a slog during which Miss Jane's inner eye *should* have noticed a series of pitying / been-there-done-that girls giving *her* the eye. While collecting his mail, Prof P leaves Miss Jane to view his diplomas (Swarthmore, Harvard, Harvard), shelf upon shelf of books taunting Miss Jane's egregious / infinite ignorance and, on what scant wall space remains, artistically blurry images of one girl child, one boy child, ID-ed once Prof P returns as *his* photographs and *his* children (in that order), their birthing agent (lovely Lynette) uncredited.

"And you?"

Her...what? Achievements to date? Miss Jane adopts a

middle distance focus, the better to mentally collate her pitiful few: All-Conference basketball. All-Tournament basketball. 4-H Good Citizen. A gift certificate, once, for selling yearbook ads.

“Scholarship student?” Correct. “First in your family...” Miss Jane waits. Surely Prof P will provide another clue? And so he does, twisting his jewelry, smiling in advance of another poor, unlettered, first-generation college rube’s confession. Yes. Miss Jane is the first of her family to matriculate at this public university, South Atlantic region, or at any university in-state or interstellar. Two for two, Prof P is feeling his oats, the satisfaction of his own analytic brilliance. Miss Jane is feeling warm. She would like to open a window. She would like to know whether Prof P’s reading list will match TA Alice’s reading list because she has already ordered several volumes of the latter, pre-paid with dwindling scholarship funds, and isn’t entirely confident that the student store will refund her outlay because an instructor swap is not a situation / dilemma our Miss Jane has previously had to negotiate or underwrite. “Only child?” *Buzz*. With that tell-me demand Prof P’s winning streak sputters to a close. Miss Jane is the fifth of five children—a (crowded) biographical fact that (perhaps) explains why Miss Jane is not now hotly offended by Prof P’s preening, prying interrogation but rather a tad flattered. For whereas TA Alice was kind, Prof P is *taking a personal interest*.

Indeed he is.

Indeed he is.