

*Jana*

*Michael J. Sahnó*

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Published by  
SAHNO PUBLISHING  
P. O. Box 46506  
Tampa, FL 33646

First Edition  
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-944173-02-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 1944173029

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data  
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Names: Sahnó, Michael J.

Title: Jana / Michael J. Sahnó.

Description: First edition. | Tampa, FL : Sahnó Publishing, [2015]

Identifiers: LCCN 1944173029 | ISBN 978-1-944173-02-9

Subjects: LCSH: Lesbians--History--20th century--Fiction. | Homophobia in the workplace--History--20th century--Fiction. | Discrimination in employment--History--20th century--Fiction. | Employees--Dismissal of--Fiction. | Day care centers--Fiction. | LCGFT: Humorous fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.A46 J36 2015 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

Cover Design by  
Ryan Ratliff: RR Web and Print

*“It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious.”*

—ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

# Chapter 1

I'LL NEVER FORGET that conversation. We stand talking in the hallway of the Kiddie Korner Child Care Center, outside what we call the Day Room, Wendy Simpson and me. Wendy's blonde hair is bright from the sunlight behind her, and her eyes have the surreal glow of a hardcore caffeine addict. In her case, I think it's just self-absorption.

"You know, Jana," she says. "We could rilly do something with your hair."

I strain not to frown, and make sure to respond in even tones. After all, I'm a more recent hire than Wendy. "Excuse me?"

"We could rilly do something with your hair."

"My hair."

"Yeah, like have you ever gotten a perm?" She says *perm* the way another person might say *orgasm* or *diamond*.

"No," I say. "I've never gotten a perm."

"You should get a perm. I could help you pick out some eye-shadow that would rilly highlight your hair and eye color, too. You could have a whole new look."

"I think I like my *current* look, thank you." I smile when I say it, but my tone is no doubt like cold water in her face.

"Well..." Her eyes dart back and forth, and she looks down, like someone caught in a lie.

“Well, what? Are you trying to say something about the way I look?”

“Well...yeah.” Her eyes meet mine. “I mean, I don’t want to be *rude* or anything, but—parents don’t like people who don’t look... professional.”

“You think I look unprofessional because I don’t have a perm? Because I’m not wearing eyeshadow?” My voice goes up an octave.

“You don’t have to yell at me. I’m just trying to say that people have a better impression of the center if you look nice.” She brushes her hair back. Beads and baubles clatter.

“Nice? What does ‘nice’ mean? I mean, I’m clean, my hair’s not messy...I’m wearing a blazer, for Pete’s sake. Not that I’ll keep it on while I’m working with the kids....”

She looks at me in frustration. Obviously a hopeless case. “Never mind,” she says. “I can’t explain it.”

“Sure you can. You can explain it.” I’m on a roll now. “You can look like someone who just graduated from junior high —”

“Oh!” she says with a gasp.

“— while I’m unacceptable because I don’t put half a can of styling mousse in my hair or wear a lot of beads and bangles. Well, girl, I’m not about to try to become Miss Homecoming Queen, okay? I mean, I don’t have to apologize for looking like a dyke and dressing like a dyke, because that’s what I am: a dyke. Do you really think anybody has a problem with that?”

Oh shit. I wasn’t out to her. Guess I am now....

While I speak, she looks angry, confused. But the word *dyke* really throws her. First she looks blank. Then her expression changes to one of abject horror, as if she’d just witnessed a murder. Her eyes widen.

“You mean you’re...you’re one of —” She takes a step back.

“Yeah, I am. Don’t worry, you’re not my type.”

“That’s disgusting!”

“Hey, maybe I think what you do is disgusting too. By the way, next time you decide to dole out fashion advice, call someone who cares.” I walk away, my footsteps echoing down the hall, and I feel her eyes on my back like sunlight through a magnifying glass.

# Chapter 1

SO, OKAY. CALL me weird. Call me anything (within reason, of course), but don't try to placate me by calling me normal; it's an insult. Call me weird or strange or the great euphemism, *different*; call me butch, a dyke, call me Jana Odessi, a twenty-four-year-old white American lesbian living here in Hartford, Connecticut, in the year of our Lord 1994, but do not—I repeat emphatically, do *not*—call me normal. It's such a copout, such a lame way of dealing with someone you might not understand.

You can call me an autodidact also, which just means that I've learned a lot of what I've learned on my own. I did a couple years of college (back in those glorrriious George Bush the First days, when you could practically get a grant for being a lesbian, for Christ's sake), and in fact, I dropped out after my sophomore year as a result of sheer financial necessity. But I managed to learn a few potentially useful things, and although I was a Failed Musician at the time, I somehow gained an orientation for other areas of interest.

So when I dropped out, I educated myself in my free time. I read Kant and Descartes and Hiedegger and all those dudes, until the whole scene bored the absolute shit out of me. Then I did this women's studies thing—which my formal education had sorely overlooked—a lot of Emily Dickinson, and Anne Sexton,

Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and so on, and so on, ad infinitum. Imagine Sylvia Plath and a bag of Fritos at three p.m. on a Saturday afternoon in August on the east side of Hartford. Eech.

After that, I discovered Radclyffe Hall, then Rita Mae Brown and May Daly, and whoooooe, let the sunshine in, babies! I was off into Literature Fantasyland, which led me to a final assessment of all the philosophers and sociologists and historians and biographers I'd been considering looking into:

To hell with 'em.

Eventually, I thought about adding one to the pile—a book, that is. I didn't exactly have the love stories of one of those pizzeria slut types, or some mall rat with leather jeans and a Jim Morrison complex. In fact, my intellectualization had been one of my relationship problems. I never fell into the stereotypical “you must be the dominant one” syndrome, but because I knew words like *ontological*, people assumed I was an Intellectual Snob looking for nothing more than lovely fluff in chiffon with the body of a model, the tail of a Bardot, and the brains of a small soapdish. (My friend Danielle has a great saying about such bimbettes: “She’s like a cheesecake soufflé: light and fluffy, but bad for the heart, and with no nutritional value.”) So, even when I wasn't *with someone*, I'd be having a conversation and the other party would be chatting me up about their best friend “Candy.” Spare me, please.

Well, I needed some sort of material for a book before I could write one, and my relative celibacy had, for some time, kept me from collecting any real romantic stuff. It never occurred to me that a *major life crisis* would be just the thing, if only one would come ambling along.

And last year, one arrived, as crises will. It did not amble, of course. In fact, it bashed into my life like a renegade vigilante group on acid, and I'm still reeling ten months later....

I'm walking down Gold Street, on my way to my job at the fabulous Kiddie Korner Child Care Center, and this guy is walking toward me. Now, you have to get the picture here. It's a beautiful spring morning in Hartford—it's May, in fact. And I'm heading toward work and thinking about all the lovely-looking orchids opening up, when along comes The Guy. And he's, oh, I'd say thirty or so, and very, sort of, disheveled in a way; not dirty, but not perfectly clean cut, either. He has a real hideous blue collar look to him.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm no snob—hell, I'm poorer than most blue collar workers in *this* state—but this bozo looks like he probably has duct tape on about half of everything he owns. Put it this way: if men were my bag, this dude would not be The One. And he's looking at me, real serious and pseudo-seductive, and I'm staring ahead, stone-faced, thinking, *Oh God*, when all of a sudden, as he's just about beside me, just about to pass me by, he gives me this *Sssssss*—a really long indrawn breath between his teeth, which he has, by now, with all the grace of a werewolf, *bared* for me—and then! Then! Like he's about to drop to the pavement in mute and desperate adulation of my nether parts, he goes, “Ooooooooooooooh.” Just like that. Looking at me like I'm Little Red Riding Hood and he's the Big Bad Wolf and making a sound like he's either discovered the secret of fire or someone just checked his prostate.

I'm so appalled, so absolutely flabbergasted, and nauseated, that I can't even chuckle. I barely have the *cojones* to give him my best purse-lipped, vacant-eyed Betty Boop look. “Buzz off,” I manage to tell him.

I mention this not to show you what I have to put up with, but to give you an idea of how bizarre life in Hartford, Connecticut can be. I mean, in New York City the bizarre is the norm and, ipso facto, not bizarre at all. Here, it's sporadic, and usually manages to be annoying in some way that, while perhaps not patently obvious, offends the sensibilities nonetheless.

So, how do I describe Hartford...poetically? (*The claustrophobic streets, the grim grey buildings, the shattered cement...*) It is a knotty problem. This is a city “in transition,” and its new direction is not great. In fact, I read somewhere that there is now a 35% “occupancy deficiency” in Hartford. Translation: over one third of all Hartford office space is now empty. Is that good? Probably not.

There’s also a sharp, acrid odor of pollutants in the air, although it’s not noticeable to locals. The sky is never quite clear above the city—it’s not Nebraska—but when it comes close, like on a day as temperate as today, the city itself is transformed: light gleams off the Gold Building, and the streets are filled with sleek-looking businessmen in paisley ties and lovely young bridesmaid-types in business clothes. (How uncool those squared-off padded shoulders look—a blatant bowing to male hegemony, although in a select few cases, it *is* a kind of improvement, giving at least the appearance of something other than spinelessness and “demure” acquiescence.)

Hartford has a strangely appealing quality on days like this, a kind of warped, limited ambience. Young black boys saunter down the street swinging gym bags, and elderly white women cross the street, with great tact and subtlety, to avoid them. On a clear day like today, there is a curious electricity, as if a passing rainstorm just ended, but of course, it is either the blood shaking off its winter torpor or the loud buzz of raging hormones.

Across the street from Southern New England Savings, a vendor sells natural soda, bottled spring water, and “frozen yogurt on a stick.” He wears a turquoise T-shirt, and he must have a lot of turquoise T-shirts, because he wears one every day, and yet he always looks clean. I know him: his name is Carlos Pareja, and he speaks little English, or pretends to anyway, beyond “Thank you,” “Have a nice day,” and various prices from his list.

He grins at the nice lady from the daycare center. This does not necessarily indicate that he likes me, but, since his daughter is “a member of the Kiddie Korner family,” he is diplomatic enough

to be polite. Perhaps he's sincere, and I'm being ungenerous. He, at least, did not "come out" against me in the past year. (The irony of that expression is only too obvious, but I'm not trying to be cute here.)

I stand across the street from two young women, in front of Southern New England Savings, and I overhear their conversation. They have many things in common, starting with the face that they both want someone with a nice car to drop into their lives. It's okay if he's a yuppie, but even better if he's "really rich." And good-looking, of course. He must be loyal and faithful, apparently in a spaniel sort of way, but the most important prerequisites are the money, the expensive car, and good looks.

Both women are in their early twenties, obviously poorly-educated, and not attractive. They aren't clearly worthwhile in any apparent way (certainly their value system is lame, at best), but they seem quite confident that they will attract—*lure*, I should say—wealthy, eligible, loyal bachelors. Their calves are a bit on the chunky side, but their rear ends are plump, and clearly outlined through tight-fitting skirts. They would be comical if they were less pathetic.

Are they kidding themselves? Maybe all their talk of finding someone with a Lexus is just bravado, and beneath those heavily made-up masks are tormented creatures crying out for recognition, barely able to keep up the act. Maybe they know, deep down, that they will marry the first slob who comes along and offers them the inevitable gold and diamond cliché, then cheerfully abide whatever abuses "the old man" dishes out, until they are bloated from too many Hostess cupcakes, their legs as big as truck axles, their faces like the faces of Sharpeis.

Well, enough about Hartford. I'm supposed to be talking about myself, and I find it really hard to do that. In fact, the reason probably *isn't* that I have some big fear of intimacy or of being

# *Want More?*

Welcome

I'm truly grateful to you for taking the time to read this novel. It is among the great accomplishments of my life.

If you'd like to check out my other novels, please visit my website at <http://www.msahno.com/books>. If you join my free email newsletter, you'll get news on upcoming events, along with my free e-book, *Marketing for Authors*.

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- Mike