

Divine Jo Summers (Extract) by Paul Butler

Divine Jo Summers is a screenplay about a young woman stuck in a dead-end job but desperate to become a published writer. This extract is from the beginning of the screenplay.

INT. MAJOR BOOKSHOP CHAIN - DAY

A long, expectant line-up of people - predominantly middle-class and middle-aged - carry the same hard cover book in their hands. There is an air of reverence about their hushed exchanges.

JO SUMMERS, 25, is particularly nervous as she takes one step closer to the front of the queue. She turns the book over in her hand, examining the cover. It depicts a barbed wire fence over a grey stone wall in stark black and white photography.

The title reads: "*Forbidden Entry*". At the bottom of the illustration is the author's name in mock typewriter characters: *Auberon Smythe*.

Jo turns the book over. On the reverse side is a photograph of the author, a jowly man with grey, crinkly hair. She looks ahead to see AUBERON SMYHTE in person.

The famous author seems like someone from another age with a dark pin-striped suit and a carnation in his lapel. He sits behind a desk between two piled columns of *Forbidden Entry*.

He autographs each book with a glassy-eyed savior-faire, looking up at the person as he signs. He makes some formal yet friendly comment every time.

AUBERON

I couldn't agree more. I think people feel nostalgic about the Cold War because it gave their lives such a sense of trepidation and danger. And it was always so black and white. Modern terrorism is altogether too murky.

He hands the signed copy back to the customer, a shy, round-shouldered man in spectacles.

AUBERON (CONT'D)

(Listening to response)

Yes. Yes. Quite. Same to you.

Hope you enjoy it.

The customer shuffles off with the book, a look of profound satisfaction on his face.

A middle-aged woman with thick glasses is next.

Jo takes another step nearer. There are only two ahead. She shifts from foot to foot. She balances *Forbidden Entry* in one hand and takes out a large padded envelope from her large cloth bag with the other. She gazes at the carpet, listening to the conversation in front of her.

AUBERON

(Smiling)

Oh really? You couldn't? Next time I'll try to write in larger font size for you. Ha, ha.

The lady in thick spectacles laughs nervously, obviously delighted with the author's good humor as he signs her copy.

AUBERON (CONT'D)

Delighted!

The customer shuffles, away her autographed book in one hand, a shopping basket in the other.

A youngish man with his very young daughter now places his book in front of the author.

Jo, who is now next, begins to fidget with her envelope holding it protectively in front of her chest.

AUBERON

(To the daughter)

Oh you're going to read it too, are you. How marvelous!

Father and daughter peel away, leaving just Jo.
She looks down stiffly.

She opens the book in front of him, her movements
as rigid as a robot.
Auberon looks up with the hint of a smile.

AUBERON

Who to?

JO

Um ... Jo. Just ... to Jo.

Auberon lowers his pen to the inside cover.

Jo forces herself:

JO (CONT'D)

You know Mr. Smythe, I'm a writer
myself.

Jo's fingers fumble the edge of her envelope.

AUBERON

Really?

Auberon looks up, taking his time like a perfect
gentleman. He's either genuinely interested or a
great actor.

Auberon begins to scrawl a message in his looping
handwriting.

Jo looks encouraged.

JO

Well, just starting.

AUBERON

Well we all have to ...

Someone bellows from the side, interrupting him.

VOICE O.S.

Fascist! You're a killer ...

TWO SECURITY GUARDS scuffle with a LANK-HAIRED YOUNG MAN a few yards away. They have intercepted him just in time, it seems.

The young rebel's limbs are trying to punch and claw their way through towards the startled author.

Jo catches sight of the young man's blood-shot eyes and unshaven, lean face as he dragged, squirming and writhing away from the desk and the shocked spectators.

AUBERON

Gracious!

Auberon's pen hovers over the fly sheet and he completes his message with surprising presence of mind.

He looks up and passes the book to her.

Jo takes it.

Their eyes remained locked. A security guard leans towards Auberon and whispers:

GUARD

We should get on now.

Jo turns to leave, still holding the envelope.

AUBERON

(To Jo)

Let me know how you get on.

Jo glances back, smiles shyly and leaves with her signed book and envelope.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

There is a muffled, clanking sound and Jo stumbles through the door. She slams it behind her and leans against it as though trying to barricade herself in.

Jo holds both her brown envelope and the novel, *Forbidden Entry*, to her chest. She looks

around her small room, and her gaze hones in on a bulging, loose file folder on the coffee table with the inscription "REJECTIONS" in bold black marker pen.

She looks down at her envelope, pulls the tight wad of a manuscript out of it, scans the cover letter with the opening, "Dear Mr. Smythe," and throws the whole document across so that the papers scatter everywhere.

Still leaning against her door, she opens *Forbidden Entry*, stares at the inscription, "To Jo, good luck, Auberon," then flings it with some force against the opposite wall. It then lands on the floor like a crow with a battered wing.

A wave of regret immediately sweeps across Jo's face and she runs to retrieve the book gazing at the inscription again as she picks it up and opens the title page. She lets the fingertips of one hand trace Auberon's handwriting as though the the letters held the power to conjure.

Then she puts the book on a side table, stoops down and starts one by one to pick up sheets of her own manuscript.

INT. WAREHOUSE OFFICE - DAY

JO

Anyway it's all about connections
and what school you went to.

Jo sits behind a desk as warehouse manager, DAN, 33, punches the keys of his computer.

He is unshaven and bleary eyed but handsome in an odd, disheveled, kind of way.

Jo looks at him frequently as though eager to know his opinion of her.

DAN

(Absently)

Aha.

JO

It's not really about talent. I mean if Auberon Smythe was an unknown author no one would have published his book at all.

Dan is still preoccupied with the screen and when he answers it's something of a surprise.

DAN

So how did he get to be *not* an unknown to begin with?

Jo looks troubled.

JO

I don't know. Maybe he was good to begin with, before he was famous.

Dan's eyes narrow as he fills in part of an order on-line.

DAN

Maybe the same will happen to you. Maybe you're doing your best writing now.

Jo scrutinizes the side of his face to see if he's smiling slightly. She isn't sure.

DAN (CONT'D)

You should have taken some of your own work to show him.

Jo shifts in her seat, a little embarrassed.

JO

I don't care what the literary champagne circle thinks of my work. They wouldn't know an original voice if they heard one.

DAN

I can see you really want to keep away from these people with their money and success. At least you'll keep your integrity working here.

Dan finishes his work and switches off his computer. He gives her a little smile and changes subject without a break.

DAN (CONT'D)

Okay. New orders from head office.

He gets up and goes to a shelf and pulls out one of several cardboard boxes.

DAN (CONT'D)

This is the one.

He pulls out a green sweatshirt and looks at it.

He looks at Jo.

DAN (CONT'D)

Small?

JO

Yeah.

DAN

This should fit.

He throws her the sweatshirt in a ball. Jo takes it then removes her cardigan. She seems slightly self-conscious. Especially as Dan is watching.

Her T-shirt underneath pulls up too, showing her bra for a moment.

Dan continues to watch, not, it seems, from any predatory or voyeuristic tendencies, but from sheer lack of sophistication.

Jo smiles slightly, tickled by Dan's interest. She turns her back as she pulls on the sweatshirt.

Dan shuffles on his feet and yawns.

Jo turns around and takes a look down her front. The legend reads "*Decor Plus - I'm Santa's Little Helper.*"

JO

O God! I don't have to wear this?

Dan looks on approving.

DAN

Sure. It's the kind of human indignity that'll inform your writing.

JO

Don't make me wear this, Dan!

DAN

You should see what I have to wear. Look.

He holds up a large t-shirt with the words, "*Leader of the Elves*," scrawled across it in the same playful italics.

DAN (CONT'D)

Blame head office, not me. I'm just an out of work actor posing as a warehouse supervisor. At Christmas they like staff to dress up so that's what we do.

Jo groans.

JO

That's just it. I can't understand what someone like you is doing in this kind of job either. Don't you feel as though your life is being wasted.

DAN

Yes, but I can pay the rent, and my girlfriend hasn't thrown me out yet. Come on. Let's get to work.

He leads her out of the OFFICE into the WAREHOUSE.

INT. SHOP - DAY

Later.

A very bored looking Jo-wearing her *Santa's Helper* sweatshirt-stamps Christmas baubles with a pricing gun.

Customers mill around her, picking things up from displays. Jo ignores them, swaying occasionally to let them pass.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY - EVENING

The sound of a key on the other side. Jo stumbles through the front door into a narrow hallway.

She looks up the stairs leading upwards from her floor's level. Lively Baroque string music wafts down from above. She stares curiously toward the source for a second before crossing the little hallway to her own apartment.

INT. JO'S ROOM - LATE EVENING

Jo is hunched at her computer. The Baroque music still pulses through the ceiling.

Jo's eyelids flicker as she tries to concentrate.

JO (V.O)

The question was, how was she to seduce him?

CUT TO:

A woman's hand reaching out in the darkness to touch a man's stubbly cheek. When more of the man's features are revealed, the face turns out to be Dan's.

The hand moves down to his neck, down his front. then the logo, "*Leader of the Elves*" comes into view.

BACK TO SCENE

JO

No!

She digs her fingernails into her scalp to concentrate.

The Baroque music upstairs gets louder or, at least, seems to.

Jo stares at the ceiling and sighs.

CUT TO:

Jo knocking somewhat timidly upon an oak door, then waiting. The music is so vibrant it sounds as though the orchestra itself might be in the building.

Nothing happens. Jo looks around at the LANDING which is grand and spacious compared to space outside her own room.

This is the main part of the house. Her own apartment and little hallway is part of an old servants' basement.

Then just as she is about to knock again, the door suddenly opens.

KRISTA LEYTON, 34, appears in the doorway. She wears a red silk dress and her shining black hair is held up on one side.

KRISTA

Yes?

Jo is speechless for a moment. She is suddenly aware of her scruffy jeans and cardigan.

The rumble of many voices mingles with the strings beyond the door. Jo can't see the people inside.

Krista looks at Jo warily as though she might be a hawker, or Jehovah's Witness.

JO

Oh hi, I er ... live downstairs.

Krista strains to hear her through the music and the babble of conversation behind her.

KRISTA

Sorry?

JO

I live downstairs.

Krista still can't hear and seems irritated at Jo as though bothered by a troublesome fly.

KRISTA

Wait. I'll get the music down turned down.

JO

(Mock patient)

Thanks.

Krista turns into the room.

KRISTA

Jason! Could you turn down the music for a second?

Through the part open door Jo sees several handsome men and beautiful women who are dressed in Krista's simple classical style. She also sees how radically different Krista's apartment is from her own.

She peeks at the polished hardwood and the ornate velvet curtains which are open to the crisp, navy blue night.

The music is turned down at last.

Krista steps a little out of the room and pulls the door almost closed behind her.

Anger flashes across Jo's face.

KRISTA

Now what can I do for you?

JO
Your music. It was loud and I want
to work.

Krista peers at her, confused.

KRISTA
Work? You're repairing something?

Krista's eyes flit around the landing for a clue
as to what she might be working on.

JO
What? No. I'm in the apartment
downstairs.

KRISTA
Oh, you live here?

JO
In the basement apartment.

Krista breaks into a phoney smile.

KRISTA
How wonderful! We're neighbors!

Jo hardly has time to register her withering
dislike of Krista before Krista grabs Jo with one
hand and pulls her into the party.

KRISTA (CONT'D)
I'm Krista Leyton.

JO
(Not enthusiastic)
Hi. Jo Summers.

Jo looks around shyly. The swan-like women
continue sipping and talking to the men. A waiter
in a white tuxedo moves from group to group.

But one of the men in the corner, surrounded by
elegant glistening eyed women, makes Jo do a
double-take. It is Auberon Smythe.

KRISTA

Let me get you a drink, Jo.

Jo's eyes remain fixed on Auberon.

Auberon glances up from his conversation and returns her stare at which point she looks away suddenly.

Krista returns with her drink.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

How long have you been living down there?

JO

Six months. You?

KRISTA

Oh years. On and off. What do you do?

Jo glances across at Auberon again and squirms. She grits her teeth and becomes determined.

JO

I work in the warehouse of *Decor Plus*.

She looks at Krista malicious and defiant, expecting - perhaps hoping - to be thrown head first from the party.

But Krista is unfazed.

KRISTA

Here in town.

JO

Yes.

KRISTA

Um ...

Krista makes an interested sound and stares into space for a moment.

KRISTA (CONT'D)
That's one of our companies.

JO
What?

KRISTA
You know Finlinx?

JO
Of course.

KRISTA
It's all the same business.

Jo shrugs and gives a bitter smile.

JO
So you own *Decor Plus*?

KRISTA
That's just a small part of it. And
it's not me. I'm just on the board.

A waiter arrives with a tray. Krista puts down her
empty glass and picks up another.

KRISTA (CONT'D)
You said you were working on
something.

JO
Oh. Yeah.

Jo takes a sip of wine, trying to cover her
indecision.

KRISTA
Are you an artist?

JO
No, no. Nothing like that.

Jo again looks over at Auberon. The women
surrounding him all laugh appreciatively at

something Auberon says.

Krista continues to look at Jo as though expecting more of an answer.

JO (CONT'D)

I'm just, you know, trying something, experimenting with stories ...

KRISTA

You're a writer!

Krista is delighted. Jo tries to shush her.

JO

No, no, not really. I'm just beginning ...

She takes a peek to make sure Auberon hasn't overheard. He hasn't.

JO (CONT'D)

...anyway, I must get on.

She gives a tight, insincere smile.

JO (CONT'D)

Thanks for the drink.

Krista looks disappointed.

KRISTA

Can't I just introduce you to a few friends first?

Jo is clearly torn for a second.

Krista moves in slightly and takes Jo's arm.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

If you're a writer, there are people here you really should meet.

Jo successfully pulls away.

JO
I'm not really a writer. I'm a
Decor Plus warehouse person. I
must...

She moves away to the door.

JO (CONT'D)
Nice to meet you.

Krista goes to the door with her and shakes her
hand as Jo leaves. Krista smiles through the
closing door and gives a little wave.

INT. JO'S ROOM - NIGHT

Despondent and head drooping, Jo sits at her desk
staring at the blank screen.

INT. WAREHOUSE OFFICE - DAY

Dan eats an apple. His feet are crossed on the
desk.

JO
Anyway, I just didn't feel right.
Not in that setting, with those

JO (CONT'D)
people.

Dan coughs, turns the apple around, and takes
another bite.

DAN
(With his mouth full)
So you think you made the right
decision?

Jo frowns.

JO
Yes. She was a snob. So he probably
is too. And she's a super
capitalist. She owns this place
too.

Dan scrutinizes her for a moment.

DAN
Are you serious about getting
published?

JO
(Quietly)
Of course.
(Then)
Don't tell me I should have
shmoozed and sucked up to those
people.

DAN
Be nice to people with good
intentions and huge influence? God
no!

JO
She didn't have good intentions.

DAN
That's not the way you just made it
sound.

JO
She was just trying to jerk herself
off at my expense.

Dan raises his eyebrows and looks away, sighing.

JO (CONT'D)
What?

DAN
Are you sure it's snobbery you're
avoiding, not just the danger of
rejection?

Jo stares at Dan resentfully.

JO
You could be a really nice guy if
you weren't so cocksure about
everything.

Dan throws his apple into the waste basket and laughs.

INT. SHOP - DAY

Later.

A troubled looking Jo-wearing her *Santa's Helper* sweatshirt-stamps candle holders with a pricing gun.

Customers mill around her, picking things up from displays. Jo ignores them, barely swaying to let them pass. She looks even more miserable than before.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Jo sits staring at the "top ten fiction" list of a local newspaper.

It's a depressingly small space with rusty pots and pans obviously pre-used by generations of tenants hanging on the wall.

The door opens to the side and Krista walks in beaming happily. She is wearing designer jeans and a pullover.

KRISTA

Good morning.

Jo folds the paper over quickly.

JO

Hi, what are you doing down here?

KRISTA

Actually, I was going to ask if I could borrow some coffee.

JO

Sure. Help yourself. It's in the cup-board up there.

Jo senses some kind of ruse and shifts in her chair as Krista opens the cupboard behind her.

Krista pulls out a half full jar of instant coffee and looks at the label.

KRISTA

This?

Jo turns.

JO

Yeah.

KRISTA

Great! It's already ground too.

Jo looks straight at Krista trying to gauge the extent of her ignorance.

Krista slinks down next to Jo who looks uneasy at the familiarity.

JO

The kettle's over there if you want to make it down here.

KRISTA

No thanks. I'll just take a scoop if that's okay and use my machine upstairs.

Jo suppresses a grin which turns to discomfort when Krista shuffles her chair closer to her.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

How are you finding *Decor Plus*?

JO

Not bad for minimum wage.

KRISTA

Yuck! I know. They're so exploitative!

Jo's eyes flash and she looks straight at Krista.

JO

"They"?

KRISTA

Oh I don't have anything to do with that end of things. No, it's a multi-faceted, multinational. I just shift figures around.

JO

But you're an owner?

KRISTA

My family. And they own me too, I assure you.

Krista smiles playfully.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

You know, I wouldn't mind making a guess about you.

Jo scratches her head defensively.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

That intensity. That shyness. I've seen it before.

Jo is alarmed and rather insulted but struggling not to show it too much.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

You're the genuine article.

JO

Sorry. What are you talking about?

Krista is as unfazed and happy as Jo is uptight.

KRISTA

I'm talking about an artist. Only a true writer claims not to be a writer. Hacks like to shout it from the rooftops ... because they have no standards.

Jo finds herself relaxing, even smiling slightly.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

True artists also spurn the kind

KRISTA (CONT'D)

of help a groupie like me would try
to give. They don't like it to be
too easy.

Jo laughs cynically—a laugh that reveals that she
knows she's being flattered. And yet her eyes show
she is not finding the experience unpleasant.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

Think about it.

Krista gets up and leaves, giving her another
smile on the way out.