

Deconstruction

I met Jade Yakubu online, in a forum for Irish superfans of IKEA self-assembly furniture. She was an expert on the designs, on the origin of their Scandinavian names, and on the influence of IKEA's aesthetic on the Swedish socio-economic model of the late 20th century. Me, well, I'd grown up in Crumlin playing with Lego, so IKEA was the obvious next step.

In a group chat one evening, Kevin from Kinnegad argued that a Hemnes bookcase wasn't *authentic*, because it didn't have a natural pine finish. Jade sorted him out. *Ab Kevin*, she typed, *don't be judging the furniture by its veneer! There's solid pine underneath.*

The animated dot-dot-dot showed that Kevin was replying, but Jade followed up quickly. *And the Hemnes IS authentic to IKEA's design principle of simplicity!*

Kevin's dot-dot-dots disappeared.

I sent her a direct message, hoping to impress her with my curiosity about the world. *So Jade, is IKEA BIG in Nigeria?* I was an awful eejit – it was like I was telling her she wasn't authentically Irish. But too late, she'd already read it. My cheeks burned as her dot-dot-dot crept across the screen. Dot-dot-fucken-dot. Finally, a ping.

Sorry Mike, no idea about Nigeria. But can confirm HUGE in Ballymun!

Thank God she had a sense of humour. More words seemed too risky, so I responded with a cry-laughing emoji.

A week later I wrote a post about the most common mistakes when assembling IKEA furniture. She added a comment.

So helpful Mike! It's frustrating to build something, then have to undo it because of a mistake.

I commented on her comment. *I know, right!? But most people don't realise their mistakes, so the furniture is screwed up forever.*

She sent me a direct message. *Or maybe they just find it difficult to take the pieces apart without breaking them.*

True, I wrote, there should be a guideline for disassembly.

Dot-dot-dot. Maybe you could write one?

I'd never thought of that. Brilliant idea!!! Maybe you could help me?

Her response? Two thumbs up!

We met *in real life* over Swedish meatballs at the IKEA café. We talked about our favourite designs, and made a few notes for the disassembly guideline:

1. Work as a team (two pairs of hands)

2. Loosen all bolts
3. Support fragile pieces
4. BE PATIENT!

Mam used to say that I'd never meet anyone normal unless I got a less weird hobby, but Jade was smart and interesting and beautiful. We took a selfie together in front of a big blue and yellow IKEA sign. I made it my profile picture in the forum.

Not an obvious couple, was the first comment, with twelve thumbs-up and five rolling-on-the-floor-laughing emojis. *Quite the contrast there Mikey*, commented Kevin from Kinnefad.

What's that supposed to mean, I replied to each, but they added nothing more.

I sent a direct message to Jade. *Have you seen the comments? Let's quit the forum.*

Her response surprised me. *This forum is important to me Mike. I'm staying.*

But Jade, it's full of racists.

EVERYWHERE is full of racists!

So we stayed, and no one in the forum commented on our picture again. She seemed okay with that, but I thought we were glossing over something important, and I was uncomfortable with just pretending it wasn't there. But Jade didn't want to talk about it.

We were both remote workers for software companies, she from a Lagkapten desk in the bedroom of a house in Rathmines that she rented with three other girls, me at the Ekedalen kitchen table in my apartment in Ringsend. We continued to see each other several times a week, and message each other several times a day.

Have you seen your mother's latest tweet, she texted early one morning. Mam had retweeted a warning from an Irish influencer that there'd be a civil war if we let in any more immigrants. The blood rushed to my face. Mam knew I was dating Jade, so how could she post that? I answered Jade with a sad-face emoji.

Mam's shift to the political right had coincided with the arrival of Billy into her life. After only a month he'd moved in with her, all his worldly belongings in a pickup truck. Dad had only been dead for a year.

'What does Billy need that gas-guzzling behemoth for?' I asked Mam on the phone.

'He's a builder Michael,' she said, as if I were slow on the uptake.

'No, he's a retired builder.'

'He has lovely hands from all the building,' she went on. 'Strong, but surprisingly soft.'

'Ah Mam, would you give over,' I said. 'He's not really your type now, is he?'

'And I suppose Jade is yours?'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I hung up.

She called back a few minutes later, assured me I'd misunderstood her, and invited us over for dinner. Jade said we should accept, but I was a bit worried.

I picked up Jade in my van and we stopped off on the way in Kilmainham to look at a piece of furniture I'd seen advertised, a very nice Praktisk cabinet in an oak veneer. Praktisk sounded like it should mean 'practical', but Jade said the meaning was closer to 'handy'. The seller only wanted thirty-five euros.

'I have the assembly instructions too,' he said, 'just in case.'

‘Ah no, you’re grand,’ I said. ‘I’ll be taking it apart and the instructions don’t really work in reverse.’

‘Why would you want to take it apart?’

‘It’s kind of a hobby. Most IKEA furniture isn’t well put together, so I like to take it apart and rebuild it properly.’ He looked a bit put out. ‘This seems well done though,’ I added quickly.

‘Won’t you be needing the instructions to build it again?’

‘Nah,’ I said. ‘Sure there’s no enjoyment to be had in just following the instructions.’

‘Jaysus,’ he said, ‘this is the saddest hobby I’ve ever heard of. You can have it for thirty.’

Billy already had his feet under the table at Mam’s. She served up a massive dinner of ham, green beans, and mashed potatoes. ‘Billy,’ she said, ‘have I told you that Michael and Jade are big fans of the IKEA?’

‘The AyaKiah?’

‘It’s Danish furniture,’ she said.

‘Swedish,’ I said.

‘You have to build it yourself,’ she said.

‘Oh I’m with you now,’ said Billy. ‘It’s very poor quality for the price, that stuff. You’d expect better of the Germans.’

‘Swedes,’ I said. ‘Actually it’s very ingeniously designed, and surprisingly durable.’

He didn't seem to hear me. 'Fake wood, cut by robots,' he went on, his voice growing louder. 'Taking jobs away from carpenters and skilled craftsmen.'

'Ah it's just a hobby for them Billy,' said Mam. 'Michael takes after his father, Lord have mercy on him, neither of them very handy if you know what I mean.'

'Oh right,' said Billy. He lowered his voice, as though sharing an intimate secret with us. 'Well I'll tell you something now,' he said, 'it's very handy to know a handyman.'

Mam thought this was hilarious. 'Oh a handyman is your only man alright,' she said, giggling.

Jade didn't say anything but worked steadily through her dinner. She didn't like mashed potatoes, but I'd forgotten to tell Mam. Billy finished his plate, then leaned back and stretched with a satisfied air. 'Do you know what? They keep blaming the builders for the housing crisis, when the fact is that we're letting too many Africans into Ireland. But sure no one is allowed to speak the truth anymore.' He turned to address Jade for the first time. 'Now of course I don't mean you luv,' he said to her. 'You're already here so good luck to ye.'

I couldn't believe it. I was about to tear into him, but Jade gave me a brutal kick to the shin under the table. She made a shushing face as my eyes watered.

'Sherry trifle anyone?' said Mam.

We had the trifle but didn't stay for a cup of tea. In the van I told Jade that I had zero tolerance for that kind of racism.

'Oh, are there multiple kinds?' She smiled sweetly, and I took that as a cue to continue.

‘Billy’s is the unthinking kind,’ I said. ‘He’s too stupid to know better. But still, I’ve zero tolerance for it.’

‘Only white people can have zero tolerance for racism,’ she said. ‘Black people just have to get used to it.’

At that moment we bounced over the bridge at Portobello, and the Praktisk cabinet struck the metal side of the van, making a booming sound that reverberated around us before fading into a heavy silence. There was a distance between us. She turned away to look out the side window, at a couple huddled under an umbrella at a bus stop, at a queue of people in an Indian takeaway. My hometown. And hers too.

At her house she kissed me quickly and got out of the van. I called after her. ‘Don’t worry Jade, I’ll make it clear to Mam that I won’t be visiting while Billy is around. That’ll sort it.’

She smiled. ‘Families can’t be disassembled and fixed that easily Mike.’

At home, I carried the Praktisk cabinet into the lift and up to my apartment. It wobbled on the wooden floor as the bottom piece was not quite flush with the side panels, a classic assembly error. I decided to start by myself and loosened all the bolts, but the side panels remained stuck tight no matter how much I pulled.

The next morning I left a blunt message with Mam, and she called me back. I expected an apology, but she just said she’d a problem with Twitter. ‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’ve seen your tweets.’ But her problem was that she couldn’t connect anymore. Billy was out, had gone to play golf ‘with the lads’, so I drove over.

‘There’s no Wi-Fi signal,’ I said. ‘Where’s your router?’

‘Where’s me what?’

‘The box you got from Virgin.’

‘On the coffee table,’ she said. ‘Under the pillow.’

‘Why’s it under a pillow?’

‘Billy says the radiation will affect his sperm count.’

‘He’s a seventy-four-year-old racist Mam, that’d be a good thing.’

‘Are you telling me Michael,’ she said, ‘that the pillow is the problem?’

I smiled. ‘You’ll just have to choose between Twitter and Billy’s virility.’

‘Right so,’ she said, tossing the pillow onto the floor.

That night I made chicken fajitas and Jade came over for dinner. I told her about mam’s Wi-Fi and the pillow, but she didn’t think it was funny.

‘Your mother didn’t understand that Billy was wrong?’

‘No.’

‘So nothing is fixed.’

‘Well, impotency is likely to be an issue for Billy.’

Jade looked at me with an expression of infinite patience. ‘I’m talking about his racism not being an issue for your mother.’

After dinner she gave me a hand with the Praktisk, supporting it while I pulled at the side panels. They still wouldn’t budge. I got hot and frustrated and started swearing at the bloody thing. Nothing was simple, and I was screwing up.

‘Be patient Mike,’ she said, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I applied more and more force until the wood finally split with a sharp crack and the broken panel came away in my hands. She looked at me reproachfully. I offered to give her a lift home, but despite the rain she insisted on taking the bus.

Later that evening, Mam called me to say that Billy was moving out. He’d come home drunk after the golf and gotten a bit ‘too handy’ with her, despite her telling him no.

‘I’ve zero tolerance for that sort of thing,’ she said.

At the weekend I fixed the Praktisk with a glue gun, as Kinnegad Kevin suggested in reply to my post. It was my last post before quitting – I knew how important the forum was to Jade.