Arts & Humanities

Seven Years: A Short Story

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The beautiful woman next door was moving across the continent from Telegraph Hill in San Francisco to Tribeca in Manhattan. “Can’t pass up the opportunity, Dan,” she said. “It’s time, isn’t it?”

This California creature must have been a huntress in her past life. In her present life, Jenny had a passion to work her body — bike, ski, swim, tennis — and largish perfect teeth for biting or smiling and a girlish huskiness of laugh or gossip, which

had nothing to do with tempting any prey she had in mind. She gave Dan clearly to understand that she liked him very much, he was fun to talk with, she wasn't interested. Such had been the sum of the case for seven years now.

When she moved into his building on Alta, he had proceeded slowly. Anyway, she didn't frighten. She turned out to be, although seriously too young for him, intelligent. That was the last straw. (The phrase made him think of her straw-blonde hair.)

Sure she would have coffee with him. Over the years they had coffee, gallons of cappuccino.

Sure men were always hitting on her. Often there was no one important in her life. But with their first cappuccino, she said, "Chemistry. I should tell you I started out as a chem major although I turned into a computer person. But from my major in chemistry — "

"Where?"

" — Stanford — I learned that the chemistry between people is not just terrifically important, it's *all* important."

"I understand. I'm too old. And you learned that in *chemistry*?"

Her smile blazed with that conquering California brightness. She would let him believe it was just his age. She wasn't the sort to talk about karmic destiny. But for Dan it seemed part of God's plan to bring injustice into the world that the chemistry could be right for him and for Jenny it didn't matter worth a duck's ass.

My, how irate this situation made him. He even brought God into it.

"Do you realize," Dan said, "that in a hundred years, when you're an old lady of a hundred and twenty-three, I'll be a well-set-up middle-aged gentleman of a hundred and forty-five?"

"How many times have you practiced that line?"

"A few."

She was laughing. Actually, she appreciated it. "You do it so well, though. Like a terrific stand-up at the Holy City Zoo. And it's basically a good point, time passing for

everybody and all, seize the day and all.” She was grinning into his eyes, shaking her head, her champion hair flying.

“Doesn’t change chemistry though, does it? How about letting me buy you a sandwich?”

“A juice, Dan, a fresh juice they make here. So I can fight off the ravages of time.”

He learned to like Jenny anyway. He liked her a lot.

Noises came through the wall when she had guests for dinner. He tried for paternal, or at least avuncular, to avoid jealous. It didn’t work perfectly; his internal software was full of glitches and viruses. But she was still terrific.

Sometimes it was a couple of couples — he could hear laughter through their shared wall — not just one similarly bike-riding, skiing, aquatic young alumnus of a major university. She never invited him to those little dinners, although once she left a fantastic feast of leftovers at his door (“We’re on our way to Squaw for the weekend”). Since he was a bachelor of a certain age, divorced, occasionally subject to gloom, and since she actually enrolled in a cooking school one fall, had taken a year of courses, because that was the practical California girl way she went about things, learning to do them right, and since he bought her coffee many times, sometimes juice . . . Well, it was nice to leave the food at his door. She wrapped it in foil so the neighborhood cats wouldn’t get at it.

Sometimes he heard art rock sounds through the wall, a whole season of Talking Heads, and only a low rumble of laughter. And then, despite his resolutions, his avuncular and paternal maturity, he felt an ache of jealousy, unjustified, illogical, the emotion that does no work. Yet he felt it.

Once she seemed sad and explained, “I liked this one. He turned out to be a rat.”

“The Iranian?”

“His father was Commander of the Air Force under the Shah, and he has an MBA from Pepperdine, down south.”

“What did you expect? His MBA is so he can manage the money his family stole.”

“His daddy does that. You’re right, I should have known he was a . . .” Lost for words.

“So?”

She smiled heartbreakingly, her eyes misty. Even red-rimmed eyes suited her.

“So?” he insisted.

“The chemistry was right,” she said.

It made him feel better. He didn’t trust chemistry anymore, preferring biology, philosophy, and beating his head against stone walls. They walked down the hill to the Savoy Tivoli on upper Grant — actually, this time it turned into a light supper — and at the end of the evening she took his hand (my, she did have long, strong California fingers) and said: “I feel so much better. You say just the right things.”

He shrugged and shuffled. “Hardly talked. Just listened.”

“You’re not too old to learn,” she said.

So he waited, and their friendship was clean and nice, but definitely not deep. She bounced back. She had more dinner parties without him. She continued biking with a series of tall, lean, broad-shouldered lads. She went sailing with one. With that one, who worked in biotech start-ups, she went away on ski weekends. Once or twice, when they met Dan in the hall, she introduced him to the boater/skier/start-up expert, but somehow he could never remember his name. Something like Russell or Harrison, something very MBA.

He tried to look on the bright side. A lot of men never made love with Jenny. But then he couldn’t help noticing there were a few who did, so that wasn’t such a bright side.

When the Russell or Harrison deal ended, Jenny didn’t come crying for comfort. She shrugged and said, “I’m getting older.”

“In a hundred years we’ll all be the same age.”

“Is this going to go on that long?” she said. “Back to the Holy City Zoo.”

She was bumping her bicycle down the stairs. She was snapping it into the bolts on her rack. She smelled of fresh soap and, just a little, of lovely light sweat. She was heading into Marin for some serious roadwork and she wasn't inviting him to get his own bike. Chemistry, oh!

"As long as it takes," he finally said. "If love gets you down — "

She shrugged. True love comes and goes, but a good workout is forever. She was wearing sky blue spandex. Her face was tan and her nose freckled. Despite his advice, she got too much sun.

"If love gets you down, remember that not being in love is the alternative."

"When I get back," she said, "if I'm not too tired, oh wise Baba Danawanda, maybe I'll knock — I'll telephone — and if you're not too tired, maybe we could go out for coffee."

She really liked him. But she wasn't going to knock on his door; she would telephone. And she wasn't going to stay in for a glass of wine. She understood exactly the friendly distance she wanted. Chemistry and computer literacy were both beyond him. Maybe a woman this smart, with this high energy, was beyond him.

She got back too late that night to telephone, knock, or drink coffee. Never mind. He had cancelled dinner with a friend, another divorced guy of his age, but what they had to say to each other could wait 'til next time, since it was what they had said last time. He got a little work done, organized his tax receipts for the year so far, read a piece of a book about the demographic shifts in California since World War II. Wished he could remember what it said. Jenny would use colored highlighters and remember.

A few days later she remembered to give him her answer to his self-serving remark that she should look for a man who was interesting. He was trying to use a neutral word. "I'm not into guys that stick up the 7-Eleven to feed their habits, Dan."

"That's not what I mean by interesting. Say, oh, mature, a history in the world, what someone called twice-born —"

"Well, there's got to be something in between the Iranian Air Force commander's son and the biotech start-up kid, but I'm still calibrating. In some ways I'm just slow,

I guess. Hey, twice-born, is that like a memory of another life?”

“Exactly. A sense of other possibilities beyond —”

“Good, great, lend me the book, will you? ’Cause I’ll bet” —laughing at Dan and shaking her head — “’cause I’ll bet it hasn’t made it to the movies yet.”

Jenny was still in the learning mode. If he gave it to her, she’d even read William James and tell him he was a really neat American philosopher. She had lots of friends, lots to do, activities and routines, but in secret, between the activities, she would take the book and sit in a corner with her cell phone off and put on the glasses she seldom wore.

But some nights during those seven years, in the natural course of things, the thought of mortality would come to Jenny, too. A childhood nightmare would awaken her — in that form the thought came. She had broken up with her lover and she was lonely. She called to say, “Dan? Lonely. I’m lonely.”

“Wha-wha?” Because he was asleep.

“It’s Jenny. I’m lonely.”

“I’ll be right over.” Because he was instantly awake.

That was the way it was supposed to happen and that was the way it did not happen. The years of her twenties were going by, she was getting too much sun, the dewiness of her skin was passing and he would say, “Don’t tan. Tan is out, Jenny.”

“Hey! I know! But it feels so good, so can’t I just ration myself to once in a while?”

“Do you want to walk down to the Puccini?”

“Love to, love it. But I’ve this friend from Santa Barbara driving in . . . ”

Dan learned not to feel rejected through these years of rejection. She wouldn’t look and smile straight into his eyes like that if she didn’t really like him. He tried not to notice if she looked into the eyes of other neighbors, passing them with her bike or her racket or her overnight bag. He offered her books and she took them and brought them back, usually stopping at his door, along with a casserole or something in a container which needed to be returned. The contact was maintained. “I’m the steadiest boyfriend of your twenties,” he said, “the one who’s lasted the

longest.”

She laughed cheerily. “Because we never.”

“We practically live together.”

She made a thumbs-up gesture.

“Jenny, you’re great.”

“Dan, that’s what I was going to say about you. You use up all my words.”

As the moving process started, the advance cartons going out, the closing down of her seven years in San Francisco, the questions about a good place to sell her Alfa Romeo — “to someone who likes a terrific little steed that needs a lot of service, Dan?” — he felt loss and gloom descending over him. She was a lightness, a sun-dappled shadow in his life, like the tree on the street outside his window, and he would miss her as he missed that tree when the stupid landlord cut it down because of alleged plumbing problems.

“Speaking of a terrific beauty that needs a lot of service — ”

“Pardon?”

“That’s what you said about your Alfa.”

“Oh, Dan! You’re too late. I found a buyer yesterday, you know the pro who runs the tennis shop?”

“That’s what you are. A terrific beauty who needs no service at all.”

“From you, Dan, from you. But I’m going to miss you a lot.”

In his middle-aged dreaminess, he thought they might cling and embrace, make love just once, maybe on the bare floor of her flat, because of her emotion at leaving her twenties, leaving San Francisco, leaving the nice neighbor who had watched over her for so many years. After all, when he broke up his marriage, that was what happened when Dan and his wife vacated their house. Regret can be a part of desire, can’t it? Even if she felt no desire for him, she might feel a bit of regret.

She gave him her address in New York.

“I only saw you here in passing,” he said, “so thirty-five hundred miles away, why should I see you?”

“It’s close to three thousand,” she said. “We fly shorter now. And you should, Dan, because — ”

“Because why?”

“Because don’t you think you’re important to me?”

“I don’t think so, Jenny.”

She considered. She wanted to be fair. She was honest and a truth teller as only a woman who knows her power can be. She put her arms around him. She was tall, but not too tall. Her mouth was at his ear. “Well, you’re important, dear man, but you know how it is? Important, but not vital.”

The hug was finished. He could still feel her breath on him.

“How do you feel about starting this new life?”

“I’m nearly thirty. I feel like it’s good-bye to my youth.”

“Same with me. When you go, it’s good-bye to my middle age.”

“Oh, no!”

“Well, let me ask you something else. Why —”

And her smile began to widen, that glaring smile of perfect health which he had come to consider a weapon. It was a weapon. She thought he was going to ask why, aside from his age (but wasn’t that enough?), she kept him in his role of kindly neighbor. “Why,” he said, “were all your friends, you know, jocks? Those big Stanford gentleman’s C types. It’s old-fashioned. You’re smarter than that.”

She was relieved. She lowered the decibels of her smile a little. “First thing, you’ve been here so many years and you still don’t understand they can look like that and still operate like lasers. Second thing, I guess you missed the psychiatrist, I guess you were in love that winter. He said he was a Jungian. He was into tarot, astrology, and playing his drum in the woods with a bunch of savage male bonders, but he was sensitive, Dan. He thought he could fly if he just wanted to enough. He dreamed

about it every night — as if he were the only one!”

“Okay, go back to the gentlemen C’s.”

“Besides, Dan, you should know by now. I’m a jock too, only I got A’s.”

His heart was pounding. He had to say it. “And you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

She shrugged. It was wrong to annoy her like this when she had so many things to do. “Model or cocktail waitress wasn’t what I needed. And I’m nearly thirty now, lucky me. I didn’t become a victim of my, you know, genes. You’ve been a nice friend, Dan, but —”

He waited. She blushed. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“ — but you don’t have the least idea about me, either.”

She was right. As a boy, he had thought he could fly by just wanting it enough. Strange that, as bad as the Jungian, he still tried — to make the world into what he wanted it to be.

“New York, is that following your bliss?”

“Dan, don’t be sarcastic. I’m not a new-ager, I’m an upward by leaps and bounder, if that’s a word.”

“I don’t think so, but I doubt it.”

She looked at him with concern. “Are you still upset about something?”

He was upset about the tree in front of their building. He was upset about time passing. He was upset about Jenny.

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Guide to school abbreviations