

jean and darren

Jean gazed down over her right shoulder as they trudged uphill. The Commons grass glinted in the September sun. No kids around, just the expanse of grass. The school year had begun; the Duck Pond lay empty and gray. Overhead the sun gave just enough warmth to keep people going. She didn't know how far the group had walked. She only joined by accident, intersecting the protest as she turned the corner of Charles onto Beacon. The leaders had already climbed the entire route to the State House where they now stood in a jumbled group. She didn't look behind to count how many more came or to note her place among the marchers.

Of course she knew the march was futile. When had the USA ever been discouraged by protests against war? Never.

The street underfoot was smooth, but now Jean heard something like the rasp of wheels, and grunting. She turned her head. A man pushing uphill a wheelchair. The chair was occupied. Not by a legless war veteran. In the instant she thought that would have been too easy, too obvious. The grunting fellow continued to grunt as he came abreast of her until Jean could see the chair was occupied by an elderly woman. The woman wore a snuggie knit hat. A buttoned tweed coat. An afghan over her lap and legs covered beige support stockings. Jean spoke aloud, Wow this woman must really be anti-war. Good for her!

Nope, she's not anti-anything except when she's anti-everything. She's demented and also occasionally deaf. I don't leave her home alone. This is the hardest part of the push, do you think?

Oh, sorry, I only just got here. I didn't know...

The organizing was none too good I guess. Not that it will make any difference in the outcome.

She thought he sounded bitter. He looked to be maybe thirty, past army age. Before she could ask anything else he smiled. Do you think an old guy of thirty –two could invite you to stop at the cafeteria past the State House, to have a cuppa with me and my old lady? The smile was half-way between sheepish and despair. It's my birthday.

Are you offering cake to go with the coffee? Otherwise no deal.

Absolutely. Besides, I'm desperate to take a leak and I don't like to leave Mam untended. It makes people uneasy, and then she gets uneasy, and then all hell breaks loose.

Oh. Okay. She blinked. My name is Jean. What's yours? Darren. The climb uphill hadn't yet peaked but the police railings placed beside and in front of the State House stood in sight. Six cops on foot wearing bullet-proof vests, two mounted. We don't need to stay for the speeches, Darren said.

Inside the café Darren ordered two pieces of cake and two coffees. He fled to the Men's room. Mam sat. I pee my pants she said. Who cleans you? Jean asked. Darren does me. He's my son. I got two daughters but they aint worth shit. Does Darren go to work? But Mam's attention was gone. She was humming something that might have been Happy Birthday. Jean sipped her coffee when it arrived but she left the cake until Darren returned to their table. Mam tells me that you have two sisters. Is that true? Not any more. His face twitched before he answered. I would have done my part anyway, if they weren't passed. The two of them at once, and here's the survivor. He tilted his head toward his mother. I don't believe females should take on all the family work alone.

Should I sing Happy Birthday? Nah. He smiled. There's no candles to blow out. I could hum very softly, Jean offered. Okay, he accepted. That would be very sweet of you. Do your friends at work know it's your birthday? Today's a holiday, Darren responded. I guess you want to know if I work. You can ask. I'm an archivist at the BPL. I juggle my hours a bit, nobody notices. I pay a woman to stay with Mam while I'm at the library. Otherwise she'd have to go into a nursing home.

But maybe she'd have friends to talk with? Or some activity? I investigated up down and sideways. Believe me, this is the best I can do for her. I'm sure, Jean responded. And make time for a long peace march, too.

I read about wars all day. That's what archives are, one war after another. It's discouraging. Jean nodded.

The following Tuesday after work she walked over to the main library. Why not, it was a cultural public treasure. One day each week they showed a movie, sometimes a documentary sometimes fiction. Sometimes it was a three day series in a different language with subtitles. This was not the first time Jean attended, so nobody need consider her going a big deal. There was enough time before the film to check the Reading Room. Of course Darren was not here, why would he be? She inquired at the desk. Where are the Archives kept? The fellow behind the counter answered, I'll ring for Darren. That was so easy Jean blushed.

When Darren appeared he grinned, and then he blushed also.

Jean and Darren began to make time during each brief interval between the Archives closing and the hour Darren had to release the woman who stayed with Mam. He didn't invite her to his apartment, which Jean learned was in the South End. He kept Mam's wheelchair under the stairs and carried her up and down to their second floor apartment.

Jean's studio apartment was much nicer, she intuited. One large space on the second floor of the building her office occupied. She worked as the accountant for a realtor who owned the building. She paid low rent. The room was a portion of her salary. The realtor made sure there were no roaches or mice. Sometimes Jean recalled that as a Certified Public Accountant she could command higher pay and move to a larger apartment. But then, that wouldn't be actually gaining, would it. Darren thought it would. Privacy wasn't an issue, however. Her studio was private enough, and of course she had a key. Really, the issue was time.

Jean suggested he ask the woman who cared for Mam if she would stay later. Until ten o'clock, Darren reported, one evening a week. She doesn't want to be walking around the South End at night. I need eleven minutes to race from the library to Charles Street, and twenty to race home.

We could meet on Boylston Street for supper. And then race together

to my apartment. And then. Jean gestured to indicate fuck our brains out. And then you could leave. Running. Jean hoped Darren didn't notice how her eyes welled. Darren wasn't looking at her. He was very busy tying his shoes.

Jean's room was warm and pleasant enough. Darren told her the story of how his mother and sisters had been in their car when a gas truck burst into flames right ahead of them on the highway. Mam survived, hospitalized for a month. She still was under sixty years old. Jean began to bake for Darren, brownies and cupcakes. She bought wine. She carried home fresh flowers to put on the side table. He called her 'Jeannie with the light brown hair.'

As spring approached Darren began to think of another way to meet. The woman caring for Mam came five days a week and Saturday mornings. No Sundays. He thought he could carry Mam down to her chair and meet up with Jean in the Public Garden. Sure, she agreed. The forsythia were in bloom. The anchored Swan Boats looked freshly painted for the tourists. They could sit on a bench if the day were not too chilly or rainy. Rain could be a problem. Over Mam's head they chatted about the war, the historic library archives and the global wars they documented. Jean spoke about costs, and who paid taxes and who cheated. Darren remarked how nice the Garden grass looked, how well-tended the trees. He knew the names of trees. Tulips bloomed red and yellow in neat beds. It was so peaceful. Mam dozed. When she woke a thread of baba escaped her mouth and ran down her chin. Darren wiped it with a cloth he kept in the basket hung behind the chair. Mam asked Where's Maureen? Her other daughter was named Carol. Jean asked Where's your father? Gone, Darren replied. Heart.

In May, Darren thought, Well this is it. He didn't have a ring in his pocket but he presented his little sheepish smile to Jean. We could find a larger apartment. Together we could afford the rent. Maybe in Brookline. Or if you prefer, Somerville. I can live anywhere along the subway line. You could still work at Madoff's Realty or you could get a job that pays more. I want to marry you. He took Jean's hand.

Jean took a long breath. Could we take a honeymoon, or a vacation?

Do you want go to the Conference of National Archivists, like you talked about? Do you want children she asked. She turned on the bench to face him. How could those things become possible? I know you love me. But that would be our life. Mam is not the child I hoped for.

I know you love me. He kissed Jeanie's hand he still held. This is not the world I hoped for. He paused. This is the first time ever I proposed to a girl. How did I do?

It was clouding over. Jean looked up at the sky. For a proposal? Maybe the part about you want to marry me should come first. They stood up and began the stroll toward the Garden's exit.

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