
Mrs. Jones

JEANNETTE GILLESPIE

H*mm...nice ass*, thinks Janet, as she walks up behind the tall man in the checkout line. She stands close enough to catch the scent of his cologne as it mingles with the antiseptic smell of the drug store. His dark tailored suit contrasts sharply with the whites of the wall and display cases. Her eyes wander slowly up from his well-formed asset, to his broad shoulders, then past his sun-tanned neck, and drift softly on a mass of thick black hair.

After paying the clerk, the man turns to leave and their eyes meet. A smile traces his lips. Janet smiles back at the twinkling blue eyes staring down at her. She thinks he's going to say something, but his eyes linger for a moment...and then he's gone.

Janet gives a heavy sigh then glances down at her watch. "Oh shit—six twenty! Give your hormones a rest and get yourself in gear, girl," she mumbles.

"I'm sorry, what did you say, Miss?" asks the gangly young clerk, his skinny eyebrows raised, and his long pointy nose staring at her from beneath wire rimmed glasses.

"Oh, nothing," she says to the nose. "How much do I owe you for this hairspray?"

Her thoughts still on the tall man with the pleasing *derrière*, she argues with herself. *I'm acting like an idiot. Here I am, a thirty-one year old mother going through a divorce...and all I can think about is the possible size of some man's "willy."* Okay, so it's been over nine months since I last had sex, that's still no reason to be getting weak-kneed over some hunk in a check out line. *With my luck, he probably doesn't have any teeth*, she decides, and pays for the can of hair spray.

The clerk's inquisitive eyes follow as she walks to the pay phone by the door. He stares appreciatively at the long brown hair moving in pace with her quick lengthy stride.

Outside the drugstore, Robert chastises himself as he walks across the scorch-

ing pavement. “What a dope!” he shouts to the heavens. “Why didn’t I say something to her?” His voice chokes off as he opens the door of his brown Pontiac and the heat from the interior comes rushing out like a blazing hellhole. He quickly starts the engine as beads of sweat begin to escape his underarms. His foot reaches for the gas pedal. He pauses, then steps out of his car and looks back through the glass doors of the drug store. He sees the woman standing beside by the payphone, digging through her purse.

How, in this life, did I manage to get so much crap in the bottom of my purse? Janet wonders, as she searches for a dime. Finally, after retrieving the buried coin, she dials the number and her foot taps impatiently to the sound of six rings.

“Hello,” the surly voice of her fourteen-year-old answers.

“Hi Danny, it’s me, Mom. Is Charley home yet?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he answers. “He’s out back peeing on the neighbor’s dog.”

“What!” she shouts, breath quick and eyes wide, but relieved that she hadn’t shouted the *big* word.

“Ah Mom, I’m just jerkin’ your leg,” he says in his dry, condescending manner.

“Real funny, Dan,” she snaps. “Maybe I’ll come home and jerk *your* leg if you don’t watch yourself!” She glances out the glass doors and notices the man with the “hot looking hunky” leaning over the roof of his car.

“You keep an eye on Charley till the baby sitter comes, okay? She should be there any minute now. Don’t leave for football practice till she gets there. You hear me?”

“What about Cathy? She’s here, why can’t she watch him till Marsha gets here?” he argues.

“We’ve gone over this before, Danny. She is too young.”

“Oh, all right. I hear you,” he grumbles, and deliberately drops his half eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich behind the couch.

“Do well at practice tonight, Baby,” she says, forgetting he hates her to call him that.

“Yeah, sure,” he answers.

“I love you, Dan,” she tells him, and waits for his response, but only hears a click, and then silence.

Why is he always so angry? Janet wonders, as she walks across the parking lot of the strip mall. Droplets of perspiration trickle down between her breasts as she tugs at the hem of her new mini skirt, feeling self-conscious. Most of her friends don’t have the nerve to wear a mini, and Janet feels half naked.

She has completely forgotten “Mr. Tight-ass,” until she pulls her station wagon from its spot and sees him sitting in the brown Chrysler—watching her. *No, no, no*, she thinks as she starts to drive past...but she can’t resist. Her car stops next to his and she looks over at his grinning face. Head tilted, she lowers her lashes. A slow, easy smile spreads across her face, lingers a few seconds...then she drives away.

Robert’s jaw drops. *Okay, now what am I supposed to do? If I’m not mistaken, she just gave me a catch-me-if-you-can look. Hmm... This might be interesting*, he thinks.

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A block away, Janet looks in her rear view mirror and sees the brown Chrysler. *Is he following me?* She checks her mirror again as she pulls onto the interstate. *Yes, he’s still there.* Two miles down the road, she takes the exit to the Holiday Inn. She had worked there last summer as a part time waitress, and Janet tells herself, *What the heck? Surely it won’t hurt to have one drink with him in the lounge.*

Hmm... a hotel, thinks Robert, *she doesn’t look like the type of woman that would move this fast.*

The parking lot’s full, so she parks all the way back by the rooms. “Oh shit! This guy’s going to think I’m a prostitute!” She anxiously grabs her purse and jumps out of the car as he’s walking toward her.

“Sure is a long way to come just to get a drink,” she says quickly, her voice climbing each word.

“Can I buy you one?” he asks, in a slight southern drawl.

“Sure,” she says, taking in his full set of teeth and again looking into the most penetrating blue eyes she has ever seen...the kind of eyes that always make her want to act stupid and drool on herself.

The small lounge is dark. Three people sit at the bar and five businessmen sit at a table next to the door. *Everyone must be in the dining room*, she thinks, as they slip into a private little booth tucked behind a lattice screen.

They both order Scotch and introduce themselves. He says his name is Bob Richardson; he sells sports equipment, and lives in German Village. “No, I’m not married,” he says in answer to her straightforward question. The ice cubes clink as he puts down his glass and turns to read her face. *She cuts right to the chase*, he thinks admiringly.

”Well, my name is Janet...Janet Jones, and I live here in Westerville.” She

sighs heavily before continuing. “Wish I could say that I’m single, too...but no, I’m not. My divorce is almost final, though, if that helps my case any.”

Robert smiles and moves smoothly to her side of the booth. The scent of her perfume is soft...like the softness reflected in her eyes. *Don’t get too caught up in this woman*, he warns himself. *Lots of baggage comes with this package. The soon to be ex-hubby will probably be lurking in the sidelines...and maybe even some kids. On the other hand, that’s her baggage, not mine.* He likes her silky voice, her hands...and the way they move.

His soft eyes trace over her as he says, “Darlin’, I’d be willing to take on your case any day.”

His arm goes up to the back of her chair and rests warmly on her shoulders. Small tingles course through her body as his leg eases against her thigh. She thinks she should move her leg, but somehow, it just won’t move.

They sit talking for over three hours, telling each other about their lives, (mostly her telling and him listening) their likes and dislikes. It feels completely natural as he leans over to kiss her.

She’s unprepared for the consuming passion that quickly flows through her veins. *Wow*, she thinks, *can this man ever kiss!* His lips are soft, warm, and exciting. She savors the scent of his breath and the taste of his tongue as it teasingly brushes against hers.

Here you go, acting like an idiot again, she tells herself. *Haven’t you had enough trouble with men in your life?* She thinks back to the day she had finally had enough of her husband John’s infidelity, and had tossed his clothes out on the sidewalk. *Okay, so the sex with John was great, but women seem to let sex control their emotions. I thought I’d finally learned my lesson*, she reflects.

Now someone please tell me what I’m doing with my hand rubbing the inside of this guy’s thigh? His tongue slips further into her mouth as she questions her sanity. *Man...I’m so friggin’ hot I think my panties are starting to smoke!*

“Do you think we could get a room?” he whispers.

“What!” Her offended eyes stare at him coldly. “Just what kind of girl do you think I am?” She quickly removes her hand from his inner thigh where she had almost, but not quite, reached the critical spot. “Why, for all I know, you could be Jack the Ripper!” But then she thinks, *Yes, and by the way I’ve been acting, he could think I’m Linda Lovelace.*

He leans close and teasingly says, “Excuse me, Miss. I don’t know what could

have given me such an idea.” His laughter starts in his eyes then flows from his mouth in amusement.

Janet laughs in spite of herself, then regretfully looking at her watch she says, “This has been a very interesting evening and I wish I could stay, but I really do have to go now.” He calls the waiter over, pays the tab, and takes pleasure in the scent of her hair as he helps with her coat.

Evening has smothered the heat and moonlight paints a silvery pathway as they walk to Janet’s car. As he reaches to open her car door, Robert smiles. He feels like he just stepped off a roller coaster...and he’s keenly looking forward to the next ride.

As she rolls her car window down, he leans over to ask, “Are you sure you won’t give me your number?”

“Let me think about it,” she answers.

He stands watching as she pulls away and the taillights of her car disappear.

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All the way home, Janet keeps glancing at the cocktail napkin he gave her with his phone number written on it. She argues with herself: *Now don’t let your brain turn to mush girl. Go home and toss this number in the trashcan!* She often has to give herself a good talking to. The problem is...she seldom listens to herself.

As she pulls into her driveway the car lights splash across the cozy brick ranch nestled in trees and slightly overgrown shrubbery. Janet prefers the natural look to the stuffy, well-pruned lawns of her neighbors. At least that’s what she tells herself.

“Why can’t I just once pull into this stupid driveway without having to move a stupid bicycle!” she grumbles.

As she steps into the living room, the dim light coming from the kitchen outlines the relaxed contemporary look of the room. She takes off her shoes and her toes dig into the long shag carpet as she calls out, “How are the kids, Marsha?”

The seventeen-year-old baby sitter quickly walks from the kitchen to meet her. A short, mousey haired girl, she stands there in all her bulk, eyes averting Janet as she speaks. “They’re fine, Mrs. Jones, they’re all asleep. Uhh...Mrs. Jones,” Marsha mumbles, “I kind of had an...ah...accident while you were out. The glass on the oven door kind of...ah...shattered when I put a loaf of frozen bread dough in it.” Her voice trails off as she follows Janet’s quick steps to the kitchen.

The kitchen is small with an open breakfast bar dividing it and the combination family room/dining room. Janet’s heart sinks as she looks at the mess. Splin-

ters of glass tossed around the linoleum floor like a hailstorm of broken shards, dirty dishes still on the table and a half full carton of milk souring on the counter. The hellish screams of *The Exorcist* jump from the family room TV and bounce off the walls.

“Marsha, why didn’t you sweep up this glass?” asks Janet. She crosses to the family room and angrily twists the knob until the screams fade to a choked silence.

“I couldn’t find the broom,” she answers weakly.

Janet marches quickly to the broom closet next to the stove. “Right here, Marsha, where it always is,” she says, holding the broom aloft and scowling like a drill sergeant.

“Uh...I got to go now, Mr. Jones,” says Marsha, backing five steps—then turning to escape. *Yeah, get your little fat ass out of here*, thinks Janet. She hears the door slam, and her broom smacks at the floor with vengeance.

Bent over, the dustpan still in her hand, she hears a noise and glances up. Her twelve-year-old daughter, Cathy, stands in the doorway rubbing her eyes and yawning. Her tangled bed-hair hangs down over one eye. She’s short for her age, with delicate little bird bones, blonde hair and green kitten eyes.

“Kit Cat,” says Janet, “What are you doing out of bed, sweetie?”

“I heard the door slam,” her sleepy voice answers.

“Come on baby, let’s get you back to bed,” Janet says, as she shoulder guides her back to the bedroom.

Cathy’s bedroom hasn’t changed in the last five years. Her stuffed teddy bear and her Raggedy Ann doll still sit watchfully staring at each other on the dresser...as if daring the other to move. The dandelion paint on the walls blends with the soft yellow, blue, and green of the flowered comforter on her small twin size bed.

“I need to talk to you about something, Mom,” says Cathy, parking herself under the covers and propping sideways on one elbow.

“Sure, what’s up, Kitten?” Janet asks.

“You know that boy, Billy...the one that lives next door to old man Sweeney?” she asks.

“Yes, I know his mother, and it’s not nice to say *old man Sweeney*,” she scolds.

“Well anyway,” says Cathy, “I let Billy kiss me today, and Mom, it felt really strange.” She sighs heavily and stares up at Janet with large puzzled eyes. “I don’t know for sure, but I think maybe I’m in love with him.”

“Oh baby, that’s not love,” says Janet, squeezing her lips to hide a smile. “That’s just hormones. Your body is going through a lot of changes right now, and you’re going to have this same feeling about a lot of boys. I’ve been known to have a few hormonal attacks myself. Now you get to sleep; you have to be up early for school in the morning,” she says, turning off the light.

She walks down the hall and opens the door to Danny’s room. The hall light falls on chaos...clothes scattered everywhere. A half full bottle of Doctor Pepper sits precariously on the edge of his nightstand. Walking over to retrieve the critical bottle, she looks down at the sleeping boy. A childlike innocence plays across his features, and seems in conflict with the six-foot-one body. She reaches over to brush the hair from his face...He scowls, and rolls over.

Being a single mother is no picnic, thinks Janet, as she turns to go to Charley’s room, *but I guess it still beats the alternative*.

“Oh no...Not again,” she moans, and turns to go check in the living room. He’s not there. As she walks down the hall to the bathroom, she wonders why he can’t seem to spend even *one* whole night in his bed.

“Wake up, honey,” she says, as she gently pulls her six year old out of the bathtub. *At least he doesn’t put water in it*, she sighs.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” asks Charley, rubbing his eyes with the back of his fists.

“Come on, baby, you’ve been wandering around in your sleep again,” she whispers, as she tousles his thick black hair, and envies his dark brown eyes—with lashes a woman would die for.

Helping him into bed, she moves Daisy, the stray Benji-looking family dog they found eating out of the neighbor’s garbage can, to the other side of the pillow, and tucks them both in. Glancing down at Charley, she again thinks how lucky she is to have such a sweet child. *He’s not perfect, mind you. Oh no, none of my brood is perfect*, thinks Janet, *but neither is their mom*.

Back in the kitchen, she rushes through her mundane chores then takes a break to watch the late news on TV. Nothing really grabs her attention...her mind is too distracted by her own day’s events. The off button sends the outside world into blackness, and Janet retreats to her bathroom shower.

The water descends with hot stinging satisfaction as Janet stands face upward, inviting the steamy liquid deep inside her pours. She squeezes the shampoo from the soft tube, and sighs with pleasure as her fingers massage the thick slithery lather through her hair.

Reaching for the bar of soap, it slips from her hand. As she bends to retrieve it, her eyes come level with her archenemy. *You are the problem*, she thinks, looking at the soft mound of hair. *Why do you keep harassing me*, she asks her silent nemesis? *Just when I'm getting my life halfway back together, you have to come butting in!*

She quickly finishes her shower and walks to the dresser. The hum and warmth of the hairdryer soothe her as she stares at her mirror image. *I'm certainly not a teenager*, she silently tells her image, *so why do I insist on revisiting that age? I really do have to learn more self-control.*

After changing into her warm pajamas, Janet crawls into her bed and turns out the light on her nightstand. She lies there with eyes closed for a long time. Her body is still, but her mind keeps traveling. She crosses years of mindless wandering sprinkled with moments of clarity and purpose. *In truth, I'm probably being a lot harder on myself than I deserve*, she finally decides. *I haven't had much luck with men, but I'm a good mother...At least, I try to be.*

Realizing that cooperative sleep is evading her, she drags herself from the bed, goes to the kitchen, and makes herself a scotch and soda. After walking to the living room, she fumbles with the radio until the soft sounds of "Me and Mrs. Jones" float across the room. Lowering herself languidly onto the sofa, she lights a cigarette and inhales deeply, then studies the cocktail napkin on the sofa table. The numbers in black ink show up vividly on the white napkin. She leans forward and gingerly picks it up.

Hmm, she thinks, as she slowly leans back and closes her eyes. The romantic notes of the music drift across the room as she softly sings along with Billy Paul: *"Me and Mrs. Jones, we got a thing goin' on. We both know that it's wrong...but it's..."*