

The Romance

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Ten days after Janet met Henry she was fired from her job. She'd been returning from lunch later and later, and the day of her firing she waltzed in at four in the afternoon, her legs bare and her control-top stockings wadded up in her purse. Are you sick? Her boss asked, staring at her glowing white calves. Your legs don't look right.

His name was Mr. Lincoln. He was sitting in his naughahyde chair, staring at Janet over the rim of his eyeglasses. Janet could feel her cheap, unlined wool skirt scraping against her skin. The room smelled like a moldering candy dish, like something that needed to be emptied.

He said, I think something is happening to you.

I think you're right, Janet replied.

Before Henry, Janet always ate lunch in the building cafeteria, ordering the diet plate and reading a gossip magazine – her favorite features were What The Celebs Do When No One Is Looking and Who Is In Love Now? Janet read the articles beginning to end and examined the waxy faces of the stars. She felt consoled by this ritual. Some of the celebs looked like their features were melting off. She kept an eye on her watch and never went over the lunch time limit. She had no desire to leave the building with the

restaurant-going secretaries, who moved toward the elevator carrying swollen purses, claiming they were starving to death.

After she met Henry, that all changed. She wanted to be out of the office building from the moment she entered it. She had no qualms about skipping her lunch ritual to be with him. Her watch was useless because time had bottomed out. They'd rendezvous at her apartment. There you are, he'd say, his hands already on her. He'd back her up against the wall and after that she couldn't be accounted for. When he was inside her she cried out as if the sensation he created was a kind of emergency, as if she might go into shock under his fingertips. One afternoon the landlady pounded on the door. Is everything all right in there? She yelled.

Fine, fine, never better, Janet replied.

The world was shedding its old skin. The office building was like a dream someone else was having. Henry said, Now you are really living. But she wasn't sure if this was living, or if it should be called by another name.

Janet met Henry at a fiftieth birthday party for Mr. Lincoln. The office had rented out a private banquet room at the Sheraton across the street. Somehow Henry infiltrated this party although he didn't know a soul. Janet was sitting in a corner eating a piece of dried-out cake, listening to a couple of powdery women laugh too high and too hard as they chatted with Mr. Lincoln. All the men had sharp creases in their pants and their shoes had been polished into a mirror state. Even the hairs on the tops of their hands seemed to be combed straight. They were the kind of men who made Janet feel acutely

lonely, because she could imagine them taking care of her, and she hated this decrepit feeling of wanting to be taken care of, wanting to hear his shoes coming up the walk. She tried to keep these scenarios out of her mind.

No one in history had ever said to Janet, Honey I'm home! Where are you? But at the party Henry approached swiftly, handsomely. He said Hey, pretty girl, where are the drinks? He was a wiry, dark-haired man with a California tan. He had the look of someone who'd lost his bearings so long ago the lostness didn't matter anymore. Most certainly he didn't need another drink, but Janet led him to the bar anyway. You're like a Siren! Henry said, Leading me to dangerous waters! Are you from another country?

No. I am only from here, she said.

They settled into a corner booth where Janet could no longer hear the voices of the other men in the room. As if they'd been evacuated. Henry kissed her hard and the paper plate fell from his lap.

They left the party and walked out into the street. Rain began to fall and Henry seemed afraid of it. Janet unfolded her umbrella. Here, come under here, she said. His pockets were stuffed with stolen party sandwiches.

Back at her apartment, hovering in the doorframe, he said I can't believe I am not inside you already. I love you. He pushed his fingers in and a living fire flashed all along her spine. Places in her blood she'd never imagined fire could survive, fire burned.

Mr. Lincoln was a divorce attorney and Janet was his secretary. She's worked for him seven years. He was paid hundreds of dollars an hour to handle disputes over children and possessions, who gets the boat and the car, the table and chairs, the autographed

picture of a famous person. One couple fought for years over a model of the solar system. Just let the planets go, Janet wanted to tell them, but she held her tongue.

Janet's job consisted of checking and ordering the files, entering her boss's dictations and being pleasant with the clients while they waited. When they brought children along she offered them candy in a gentle, automatic voice. There was a five-year-old whose mother wanted him on Saturdays, but the father wanted him Saturdays too. Whenever they were alone in the reception area, the boy muttered strange things to Janet, standing at the edge of her desk.

I am looking for the red king

I am a blackened thing

All the way back to the beginning

Janet told Mr. Lincoln about these pronouncements, and he told her the boy was certifiable. Something wrong with that kid, he said. It was the same thing he'd say about Janet when he fired her. Surely, Janet thought, one could go on forever looking for some wrong thing in people, pointing out people who seem uninvited in the world. What use was all this judgment? The wrong people were everywhere – in the next-door apartment where a man lived alone with a plastic reindeer, or at the donut shop across from the office building, where a woman in a stocking cap sat near the front door pulling at her face. It's not a mask, the man behind the counter shouted at her. Your face is not going to come off so let it be.

Janet's mother wanted her daughter to find a husband yesterday. This was her task: find Janet a man before she turns into a spinster. The mother was a small woman without much energy, too many years of wine and pills and unfinished craft projects. She often told Janet, Love makes you feel like someone has been looking for you.

After their first night together Henry entered Janet's life with all the assurance of a detective who'd been sent to find her. He waited for her after work each day, sitting outside on a bench next to a sputtering fountain. One day when she emerged at 5 o'clock with the other secretaries, he rushed up to Janet, almost knocking another woman down. Geez, the woman said, looking at Henry with wide eyes.

He's my new boyfriend, Janet explained.

He pulled her down onto the bench, his stiff, insistent arm locked around her neck.

The secretaries watched with alarm but they didn't intervene. The day had taken its toll on them. Their outfits, tidy and pristine in the morning, were now shoddy. Their once-indomitable hair was coming out of its waves. Their perfume had worn off and now they did not smell like meadow or citrus or anything heavenly but instead carpet cleaner and copy machine off gases.

Once Janet fantasized about becoming friends with those secretaries, maybe inviting them over to apartment where they'd laugh together conspiratorially over wine and cheese, gossiping about the men. But so far she'd made no connection with them. At Mr. Lincoln's fiftieth birthday party, she'd heard one of them say, What is Janet on? Is she ready for prime time? She thought perhaps if they saw Henry reaching for her they'd

realize she was the kind of woman who provoked need in men, a woman men happened to. You should pick me up from work every day, she told Henry.

Whatever you say, he replied. But sweetie honey I'm broke so you need to buy me dinner. I'm waiting for my ship to come in and then I'll buy dinner for you.

They walked down the street to a Greek restaurant where the waiter kept forgetting everything. Sitting by the window, a flickering candle between them, Janet imagined they must've looked like a couple having a celebration – an anniversary, or a promotion. Henry devoured the bread and told the amnesiac water, more more. Music played through faulty speakers and it seemed it was supposed to evoke an island paradise, a life of honeymoons. Janet looked at Henry and wondered, is this Him? The one who will come in the door and say I'm Home!

The candlelight made it seem possible. But a few things troubled her. Why was he always wearing the same windbreaker, a red stained thing advertising a bankrupt restaurant chain? And why was his skin such a peculiar tan, the color of women's indoor sun makeup, the kind that promises Go Outside Without Going Outside? He told Janet his past was so eventful he'd already filled three thousand pages writing about it. The book was called *Autobiography Of A Radical*.

The book covers my experiences as a revolutionary in the 60s, he explained. I was one of the first in line at the Pentagon. Tear gas burning my eyes, helicopters hovering over the square, the night in jail inside the System in the belly of the beast. They were afraid of us hippies, he told Janet. You were a kid in the Sixties. You'd never understand. But history was all about us. Unless you were there, what I am describing won't mean anything.

This made Janet feel inadequate, as if history had passed her by. But history was nowhere when they returned to her apartment and became speechless, so much to do to each other.

A few nights after their Greek dinner, Henry didn't show up when she emerged from the office building. It was a Friday and the weekend was like a vapor filling the crowded elevator, making people lightheaded and suddenly kind. Janet waited inside for an hour to see if he'd appear. The old toupeed security guard chatted with her. He said, Hard to believe Friday is here! Who thought it would ever come!

Janet gave up and walked home, slouching as abandonment chipped away at her posture. Yet she held out hope. He'd seem so anxious to see her hours before, at lunch. Surely he must be lost? Maybe something bad happened to him related to his radical past? Walking home she thought she saw him in the train station, sitting with some other men in the light of the vending machines, but it could've been a mirage born out of desire. Then she thought she saw him sleeping on the library steps. His back was to the sidewalk but she could swear it was his same curved back in the threadbare windbreaker. She thought about tapping the man on the shoulder so she could see his face, but she was afraid that if this was truly Henry, he would be disappointed and ashamed. The romance would be over. She left the sleeping man alone.

When he knocked on the door of her apartment hours later, she didn't interrogate him. Following advice from a women's magazine, she didn't come on too strong and ask him to apologize. He said he'd been caught up in his book and that it was really moving along. He said, I predict the book will break a record, an award-winning record of

recognition. His breath smelled like egg salad sandwiches from someone else's party. They showered together and the indoor tan washed off like war paint.

Her mother lived in the neighboring town in a small gray house with a thin strip of lawn out front. The house was on a flood plain, uninsurable, but her mother couldn't part with it because it had been willed to her by her third husband. She told Janet, This house is the only thing ever left to me! How nice he was!

Janet wasn't sure why her mother cared so much about this dead husband. All he ever spoke about was golf: golf games, golf scores, golf tricks, golf little-known facts. He called Janet's mother My little caddie. They'd only been married a year when his heart backed up and he died, his mouth wide open and full of blood. Janet wanted to get this man out of her mother's head and bring in some new blood. She wanted to bring her a love story for the ages.

Janet's mother had been mailing her clippings from the Singles section. I am a sports nut. Into sitcoms. An executive looking for a girl who knows where she is going. Own my own vehicle. Enjoy a fun night out. A decent guy with good manners. I hope wutg these words I will find you. You should be mentally fit and have a nice heart. I am E-Z to understand, athletic and philosophical. Let's go on a cruise! I'll buy the tickets, you bring the bikini!

Janet never called the men and after a while she stopped reading the clippings. Unopened envelopes from her mother piled up on the kitchen table. The men are EVERYWHERE! Her mother once wrote across the top of one of them, her handwriting

cribbed and urgent, like a warning. When her mother presented her with a ticket to a Singles dance, the thing was so expensive Janet was compelled to go. She wore a dress that showed the outline of her breasts and it was not long before man appeared. I'm Jim, he said. Jim was an heir to an office supply fortune, and he lived in a vast house in the West Hills, a neighborhood where people had tennis courts and pools and windchimes made a sound like dinner-is-ready-dinner-is-ready. He brought Janet over to play tennis and each time he hit the ball she felt an astonishing wayward blast of aggression. The desire to destroy something.

Crap, what did I do, are you trying to kill me? Jim asked, after the ball hit him in the stomach for the third time.

Jim stopped calling Janet after that and Janet was relieved, although her mother was disappointed. Well I didn't like him! Janet said. I wanted to do damage to him!

What are you talking about? Her mother answered. He was a god!

When Henry came into the picture, Janet thought maybe he was the man both she and her mother had been waiting for, the hero coming out of the void or the drowned world, out of the unopened envelopes, the god waiting patiently beneath the panicked handwriting. When their romance was a week old, Janet called her mother to tell her the news. I think I've found one, she said. I think he's the real thing.

This is fantastic! Her mother said. Maybe you're just a late bloomer! I can tell from your voice love has changed you already!

After she hung up the phone, Janet went to her apartment window. Outside cars were stopped on the freeway bridge. In the distance she could see an accident's red lights. People were starting to get out of their cars and walk toward the scene, giving up on the idea of getting home. From the kitchen she could smell something burning. Almost ready! Henry said. He came up behind her and kissed her neck. He told her to take off her stockings so he could find her if he needed to. I mean it, he said. I might need to get to you at any second. Or right now.

Looking back, Janet realized she should've known Mr. Lincoln had it in for her. He no longer invited her to ride the elevator with him. He looked at his watch when she returned from lunch. When she listened to his voice on the dictating machine, it gave her the creeps. No longer was it the reassuring voice of the man who paid her rent, but the voice of the man who was taking her away from Henry every morning. She could no longer make pleasantries with the divorcing people. She pitied them because she was on the other side of love, in its clutches.

When he fired her, Mr. Lincoln said I am letting you go, as if she were an animal released into the wild.

Earlier that day Henry had called her away from her desk. It was before lunch, maybe 1045 am? Janet had no idea. The waiting area was occupied by a divorcing woman and her daughter arguing about schedules. The daughter had gold fingernails spelling out YES (right) and NO (left). Henry sounded desperate. He said, Janet you need to come and get me in my room, room 301, the Jack London Hotel. It's really important! This

could be the end of me! Because at this point she was trying to hang on to him and therefore didn't want him to end, Janet left her desk without telling anyone.

The Jack London was further than she'd anticipated, past all the department stores, through the park built around a stone sculpture of the city goddess. Vandals never left the goddess alone. At night they stole her head or chopped off all her fingers except the middle ones. Janet walked as fast as she could. By the time she arrived at the hotel her feet were throbbing in her work shoes.

Are you sure you want to go in there? A man asked from his encampment on the sidewalk. Yes, I am certain! Janet replied as she entered the Jack London. The hotel was a haven for boy prostitutes and that day three of them were sitting around. One boy, wearing a sweater vest with no shirt underneath, shouted This sweater is scratching the hell out of me! Maybe some beautiful lady will take it off? He was vying for Janet's attention, waiting to be recognized or found or taken somewhere.

Janet climbed the stairs to the third floor. She found Henry in his room lying on a chewed bedspread with only a towel wrapped around him. Empty packets of instant food were scattered on the floor. He told Janet, Beautiful, you have to get me outta here. They're gonna call the cops unless I pay for the room. It's 50 dollars a night. You gotta understand this is temporary, until my book gets published. He kissed her hand. She reached for her purse and her credit card.

The floor of the room felt spongy beneath her feet, sagging, as if a crater were soon to open in the middle of it. Some of Henry's possessions were in full view: a bottle of tanning lotion, a silver flask, a metal box with a padlock. She said, Henry, could you show me your things and tell me about them? But he didn't answer. Instead, he just kept

after her. Soon her eyes were half-closed and the room didn't matter, the room was a shore they were drifting away from, rudderless. Later Janet would run over Henry's possessions in her mind, the way a girl turns over charms on a charm bracelet, wondering what they signify.

When she returned to work late, her legs bare, she knew somewhere in the recesses of her overheated mind this was the end. As a last-ditch effort she tried to convince Mr. Lincoln she'd been having female trouble. He didn't want to hear it again. He gave her a box for her things: half-finished diet bars, celebrity magazines, memos about office parties. One read, Party like you're not in the office! Like you've left the building!

Riding down in the elevator one of the secretaries turned to Janet. She said, I heard you got fired. I'm sorry we didn't get to know each other better. She was wearing a polka dot dress and lots of rouge, like a character in a musical.

She invited Janet out for the first time in seven years. She said, Some of the gals are getting together for a bowling night. You're welcome to come along!

The women congregated at Rainbow Alleys, where each lane had a color. They sat at a table in the red zone. In the heat and light Janet imagined they had all been incubated in the same place and they had a natural kinship. They started to play a drinking game. Every time the boy in the lane next to them bowled a gutter ball, everyone had to take a shot. The boy was enormous and his face had a crumbled texture, like he was midway through sloughing it off. The air of the bowling alley did not circulate, and Janet started to feel dizzy after the third drink. The polka dot woman sat down next to her.

So what does it feel like to get fired, she asked. I have never been fired myself. The beer made Janet moony and trusting. She answered, It feels weird. But I don't really care because things are changing. I'm in love. Getting fired couldn't have come at a better time.

You're in LOVE? a woman shouted from across the table. Do tell!!

Well, I actually met him at the office party last month! Janet said.

Is that the guy you were totally making out with? asked the polka dot woman. I don't think he belonged at that party.

No, he didn't belong there, Janet said. But the fates brought him through the door.

We thought you two were going to swallow each other, another secretary says, the one who started the drinking game. What was up with his skin? Why is it that insane color? Is that quick tan makeup? I used to wear that shit in high school!

Oh, he travels so much, Janet said, in the same Romance News voice she used on her mother. His skin is that color because of all the places he has been. It's not fake.

The table grew quiet. Janet sensed it was time to go. They were turning back in on themselves, on each other. Out in the parking lot the enormous boy was getting into his car. He said, your friends are bitches.

They're not my friends, Janet said. I'll never see them again.

Henry was waiting for her when she returned to her apartment, the smell of a polluted lake on his shirt, a strip of dirt across his forehead, as if he'd just walked away from a

small plane crash. She didn't tell him she'd been fired, nor did she tell her mother when she called the next morning.

Things are getting serious with Henry, Janet told her. He is a very interesting man! He has been all over the world!

Well maybe the world has finally answered me, her mother said. Let me host you for dinner! I want to see you together!

When they arrived at her mother's house she was wearing a celebration dress. Janet knew these dresses – flowers everywhere. This is an occasion Janet! And I presume you are Henry? How wonderful!

At first Henry pleased her mother. He told her, your daughter is a special girl she was there for me in the stars. He talked about his book and his days marching on Washington. Henry devoured the cold cuts and she brought seconds. It dawned on Janet that her mother was in deep diet pill exhilaration. He eats like there is no tomorrow! Her mother said. And in a way, there wasn't. After many drinks Henry started reaching under Janet's skirt.

Janet's mother took her into the kitchen. That is rude of him to reach for you like that, she said. Is he some kind of pervert? In the dining room, she found Henry had taken off his shoes and socks. His perspiring feet left deep instant tan stains on the white rug.

What is coming off your feet? She asked. I don't know lady, Henry slurred. You tell me.

You're the mother.

The night Janet's credit card was declined, Henry vanished for good up the street, saying I'll be right back in a false, unraveling voice she'd never heard before. Yet there was a brief moment when he was by her side and her mother believed in him, when the future had yet to awaken and show its face. During that moment they were electrified by each other. Sparks against sparks, everything erased by the touch of fire, and Janet would never quite lose the memory of that grand radiation.