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JANE JUSKA

Unaccompanied Women

Late-Life Adventures in Love,
Sex and Real Estate

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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CHAPTER I

puzzle pieces

When I was thirty-seven years old, I met the man of my dreams. He was a tall man, of course—Who would dream up a short one?—and slim with bright blue eyes that sparkled with the fun of life. He was funny, clever, witty, and occasionally profound. He was smart. He was cultured. He was single. His name was Dan. The year was 1970, when all things were possible.

Not long before Dan and I met, I left my brief and unhappy marriage and, with a five-year-old son to support in all ways, never thought about male companionship; indeed, I needed fewer not more complications, and life had taught me that adding a man to one's life was just asking for trouble. Everything was simpler without a man, and that included sex, which I had taught myself to do, thereby freeing me from the emotional trappings that came along with another person. No need to ask "Was it good for you?" No need to wonder if he'd call. No need to worry that you weren't pretty or clever or imaginative enough in bed to ensure a repeat engagement. No need to heap blame on yourself when your husband turned away from you, no need to wonder what an orgasm felt like. Do-it-yourself sex was the answer to a lifetime of insecurities and unmet needs. It was, after all, the seventies, when hedonism was in and your mother's admonitions were out. Besides, it was boys, not girls, who went blind.

In the seventies the California high school in which Dan and I

taught English was wild. Built for fifteen hundred kids, it housed almost three thousand teenagers, and in the seventies a lot of them were stoned a good deal of the time. Like, hey man, why not? So were some of the teachers. Everyone smoked something, and during our fifteen-minute morning break the faculty lounge, a cloudy haze, looked like a cocktail party with bad furniture. The talk, though, was great. We were all young and smart and funny and occasionally profound. One day as I stared out the window onto the quad where hordes of kids jostled each other or held each other up, Dan came up behind me, put his arm around my shoulders, pointed to the theatre of the absurd going on outside, and said, "Someday, my son, this will all be yours." I collapsed with laughter, and we became fast friends.

Dan taught me to love opera, black-and-white movies, and, on Sunday afternoons, champagne. Accompanied by the glories of *La Traviata* played at top volume on his fine stereo, we toasted each other, celebrating our like-mindedness on books and music and people, very few of whom escaped our often malicious judgment. From opposite sides of the room we drank to our superiority.

Dan lived alone in a tiny redwood cottage high in the hills, at the end of a long path that wound up through madrone and live oak from the street below; it was the most romantic place I could have imagined. On the evening of my undoing, Dan, in his Levi's and sweater, relieved me of the bottle of champagne I had brought; from inside the cottage I heard Tosca lamenting her lover's fate. Overhead the stars were beginning to shine; inside, a fire burned brightly in the fireplace. Was this a night made in heaven? Without a drop of champagne, I was tiddly on the promises implicit in the evening before me.

I don't remember dinner, though I can safely say that it was wonderful, for Dan, along with everything else, was a wonderful cook. He seemed to do it easily, as easily as he gardened, as easily as he selected the perfect concerts for the two of us to attend, as easily as he shushed those in the movie audience who whispered

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during the film and who fell silent when Dan unfolded his six-foot-tall frame in their direction. I suppose dinner that special evening was something like coq au vin, with a salad at the end of the meal—made of endive from Dan's garden; but by the time we had the salad, which I'm sure was sprinkled with just the right amount of vinaigrette seasoned perfectly with herbs from the same garden, I had had enough champagne to require Dan's steady arm as I plopped down on the floor before the fireplace. Dan sat nearby. Well, one thing led to another, and before I could stop myself, I leaned my head against his long thigh and waited for what would come next. What came next was Dan's hand on the top of my head, and as I lifted my chin for the kiss that would seal the deal for all eternity, I heard Dan say, "Oh, dear heart, don't you know?" And suddenly I did. Dan was gay. How could I have been so stupid.

Dan was my first gay friend, though not my last; he was, however, the only gay man I have ever known who preferred the company of women. Men were for sex, and Dan had a lot of sex, as he would proclaim to me in the years to come, but women, he averred, made better companions. And so I, along with others like me, all of us unaccompanied by men of the traditional sort, became Dan's companions. In public Dan and I looked like a couple—a man and perhaps his wife, perhaps his lady friend, maybe even his lover—who clearly enjoyed each other's company. In private we kept our distance, sipped champagne, and dined on nasty little quips about people who, unwittingly, had incurred our contempt.

Eventually we lost touch, as they say. Dan moved to another country, and, forewarned and forearmed, I resumed a life empty of men. It would be almost thirty-five years before I ventured once more into the world of sexuality, a world that in fact had been there all along had I had the courage—or perhaps the desperation—to peek into it.

For thirty-three years teaching had been my passion, until, like passions of every kind, it wore me out. And so I left. In retirement my life became plain and simple. I lived in a little cottage on a

little street, around the corner from the post office and the bank and the movie theatre and restaurants Italian and Chinese and French and Middle Eastern and Mexican and Indian as well as, if you felt like American, a soda fountain—malts, lime rickeys, the works. My neighbors said “Good morning,” and so did I; we were friendly and at the same time respectful of one another’s privacy. Unlike me, who was a renter, most of them had lived in their houses for many years. So when a single man, young, no more than thirty, bought the modest house next door to me for nine hundred thousand dollars, we raised our eyebrows in wonder: My neighbors had become millionaires almost overnight. My cottage, too, shot up in value, and I began to worry that my landlords might raise the rent accordingly. The fear of being ousted, of being unable to pay increased rents, is endemic to renters; deep down we know that nothing is really ours, that, except for the protection of a few good laws, we live at the mercy of those who own the property we pretend is ours. So we try not to think about those very real possibilities, which resurface every so often, against our will, in the middle of the night. I put myself back to sleep by reassuring myself that, someday, I would be able to buy a small place, not for pride of ownership but in the interest of getting a good night’s sleep.

In the meantime I went about the business of the retired person: Being Busy. Instead of rising every morning at five A.M. to prepare myself for the onslaught of one hundred sixty hormonal teenagers, I sang in a choir, taught a class in writing at San Quentin State Prison, taught a few classes at a nearby college, and every Thursday morning escorted women into Planned Parenthood for abortions they had chosen to have, no matter the calls and the hoots of the self-righteous, who thought the choice belonged to them and not to the women who walked beside me. I was one of those newly retired people who say, “Oh, I’m so busy I hardly have time to catch a breath!” Being Busy, like Staying Active, is not only the American way and so commendable in and of itself; being and staying busy—a full-time job—is useful for keeping at bay

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those deep-seated emotions that threaten stability, that can turn a plain and simple life into anything but.

Well, I failed at retirement, at keeping busy, and my punishment was that “anything but . . .” happened to me. A deep-seated emotion—desire—unseated itself, rose up and began to knock insistently at the door of my sexuality. I wanted to invite a man into my life. The problem was that, despite senior hikes, senior bird-watching, senior mixers, even a couple of senior dances at a church the doors of which I had not darkened in over fifty years, I couldn’t find one. I took classes at night; everybody in them was either married or thirty-two or both. I went to a reception for college alumni; everybody there was married or one hundred and seven, so I just gave up; celibacy was better than this eternal hunt, and not nearly so humiliating. Then suddenly one autumn evening as I walked home from the movies, genius struck, albeit briefly, and there plopped into my mind what it was I wanted and how I would get it. By the time I got home, a personal ad, fully formed, was ready to go: “Before I turn 67, I would like to have sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me.”

No use in trying for busy any longer, the cat was out of the bag. I could no longer suppress my need not just for sex but for touching, for intimacy, for a man right next to me or on top of me or underneath, whatever we found that was to our liking. I wanted a full life and had to admit that I didn’t have one. I was greedy, needy, ready, and determined. Next day, I went to the library, just down the block, where I searched *The New York Review of Books* for instructions on how to submit what it was I wanted and whose results I was prepared to live with. Or so I thought. Holy cow and Lord A-mighty.

The New York Review is a highly regarded publication full of long essays on everything—politics, literature, art, science—with a back page devoted to ads—real estate, seminars abroad, employment opportunities, and, occupying the most space of all, two, sometimes three columns of personal ads. It seemed to me that

men who read such an august journal would be a cut above the men who read ads in a regular newspaper; I expected the *Review* to provide a filter, leaving the dregs for those who weren't me. I expected to get a little class out of all this. What I got were sixty-three-and-counting responses to my little ad and a new life I barely recognized as my own. Never again was my life plain and never ever simple. Did I get what I wanted? Yes, I got exactly what my ad asked for, along with a life that got tossed around like a shoestring in a windstorm, that got twisted into knots, until it freed itself only to be buffeted about again by forces beyond my control.

At times my life seemed not to belong to me at all; it dizzied and upset me at the same time it filled every nook and cranny of me with men, some of whom I came to love, some of whom loved me back . . . or not. To keep my sanity—truly, to quiet the din in my head, the roar in my ears—I wrote voluminously in my journal. In the end I made the journal into a book called *A Round-Heeled Woman*. As Mark Twain says in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of . . .” Then he goes on to create his richest character ever, Huck, and we forget there ever was a previous book.

Likewise, the publication of *A Round-Heeled Woman* brought with it another new life. So, as Mark Twain claims he did in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: “told the truth, mainly,” I will, too. I will tell you about my lives, so various and new, and about the people in it now as well as then. Along the way, if I learned anything—and I did—I will tell you that, too.

I know right this very minute that I’m different from the person I was before I went after what I wanted. During my late-life adventures I gave away myself, sometimes bit by bit, sometimes wholly. Fortunately, I got most of the pieces back, though not in the same order. I think what I’m after now is making the pieces of me fit, smoothing the edges so they don’t rub up against one another and hurt. Have I given up the passionate life? I’m still deciding. Maybe writing this book will help me find out.

CHAPTER 2

friendship

"To one, whom I have known long, and accompanied far, whom I have found wakeful over my sickness and kind in my sorrow, glad in my prosperity and firm in my adversity, true in counsel and trust in peril—to a friend often tried and never found wanting."

—LORD BYRON in the dedication of the fourth canto of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" to his friend John Hobhouse



ou're a fuckin' whore!" His voice over the telephone is scratchy and high. How did he get my number? I am paying the phone company to unlist it, so I was surprised when Denny called from somewhere in Indiana, southern Indiana it sounded like, to tell me that he was forty-two years old and reading my book. "I'm just thirty-four pages into it but hope to have a longer conversation when I'm finished." I thanked him for his call and hung up.

One week later he was seventeen pages from the end. "Jane," he said, "there's a theme running through your book, the theme of a need that never got filled." I'm always interested in what people get out of my book, so I listened. "Jane, you took drugs, you tried alcohol, you tried sex, and none of it satisfied you. Have you thought about Jesus Christ?" I decided not to tell him that yes, I