

The Day I Saw Janis

“Turn! Turn! Turn!” by The Byrds was playing when the gear shifter on my old Beetle broke off between third and fourth. Vic and I were on the Oakland Bay Bridge, and he was singing along to the radio, crooning “A time to laugh, a time to weep.”

Four lanes of traffic surrounded us as I held the useless metal bar in my hand, my foot on the clutch, the car stuck in neutral and starting to decelerate. Vic didn’t notice what was happening and kept singing, so I held the shifter out to him.

He stopped midline and said, “Far out man.” Then he rolled down his window, leaned his head through and waved at the other drivers, his hair gyrating in the wind. “Get back man! We gotta pull over!” He turned to me. “You got it now. Quick.”

I cut across two lanes. We slowed to twenty-five as I swung into the far right and rolled to a stop, horns blasting behind me. San Francisco perched above the water in a halo of overcast sky, beckoning.

I climbed across and squeezed out the passenger. A tailpipe backfired somewhere, and light flashed across steel beams. The other drivers merged from four lanes to three, and I remember thinking, where the hell did the time go? It felt like I’d only moved here yesterday. Except that was 1967, and this was 1969, and the times they had a-changed.

Not for the better. Vic and his compatriots had fought tirelessly for the anti-war cause, and still the war raged. Near my home in Berkeley, People’s Park had erupted, and Reagan had sent the National Guard. Tempers still flared months later.

My daughter, Cynthia, had just turned one. I blinked, and she was smiling and toddling.

I was suspended between two cities, like my head was levitating. The stench of black exhaust and gasoline stung my sinuses, and the glare off the bay was so bright my eyes began to tear. People were tossing epithets from open windows, and for a moment it felt like I was back in New York.

Almost ten years earlier, Vic and I had rushed fraternity at Brooklyn College and had gone through Hell Night together. The brothers had driven us blindfolded to the middle of nowhere, hours from the city.

The driver, whose voice I couldn't quite place, was making wild turns. I didn't usually get car sick, but by the time they dropped us somewhere in Pennsylvania, I wretched on the highway shoulder. They made us turn out our pockets, took our billfolds and IDs. When their car screeched away, and their taunts died in the wind, and the nearly total darkness tightened around us, Vic chuckled. "I thought these Phi Epsilon guys were supposed to be smart," he said. "I've got \$50 in my inner sole."

In the headlamp of a passing car, he raised his foot above the asphalt and shook it around. It seemed to dance on its own. He took his shoe off and unrolled the bill. "I say we hitch to the next town and get ourselves a couple of burgers and some bus tickets."

Now, we were hitching again. Afternoon traffic devolved into madness.

"These people are out of their freaking minds," said Vic. He had chestnut brown hair and a beard, both of which grew shaggier as the war dragged on. I hadn't seen the divot of his pointy chin in years. He leaned into the road, waving for help.

You would never attempt this in New York City. In California, a light blue Ford Fairlane coupe stopped, and a woman with long, straight hair and a plaid button-down called through the window in a sing-song voice, “You guys can ride with us.”

Inside the car smelled of menthol cigarettes. A raspberry blond, Robert Redford looking dude in a gray suit was driving. He pulled into the next lane and with patience broke loose from the traffic snarl. He made eye contact with me through the rearview and asked where to drop us off.

“Can we go back to 1967?” I asked.

“I never heard of 1967,” he said. “Sounds quaint.”

“Dennis here remains steadfast in the 50s,” said the woman. “He even kept the suit.” She ran her hand down his jacketed arm. “Show them your elbow patches, Denny.” A dimple appeared on her cheek as she grinned at me and batted her blue eyes.

As far as I could recall, no woman had ever batted eyes at me, not even my wife. I thought it only happened in movies.

Most of my life, I had done basically what I ought to have done and what people expected. I had fallen for a nice Jewish girl in college and had married, maybe a little earlier than intended, but there was the deferment. I taught elementary school and worked on my graduate degree, and every Sunday morning would put Cynthia into her carrier and stroll to the park.

“Give me your hand,” the woman said. She was a rosy-cheeked California doll. No make-up required. Chiseled nose, girlish grin, perfect teeth. A picture of innocence. “Come on,” she sang.

“I’ll give you my hand,” said Vic.

“Not you, silly. Not that you aren’t cute.”

Her hand felt cool when I took it. She said to call her Kat and asked my name. “It’s okay to want things for yourself, Henry. You know that, right?”

“He doesn’t know that,” said Vic. “You need to tell him what he wants. It won’t occur to him otherwise.”

Dennis cleared his throat. “Sounds like a grave responsibility,” he said.

The tires rumbled on the ramp to Fifth Street. Kat rolled up her window against the cool, damp air of downtown San Francisco, and we rode past Rincon Hill’s abandoned factories and warehouses.

I wasn’t missing two years. I was missing twenty-seven. Still young, I know, but life had happened without warning and had never stopped to ask what I wanted.

“I take it very seriously,” said Kat. “I only want what Henry wants.”

“You may be waiting awhile to find out,” said Vic.

“He wants love,” said Kat.

“He wants to watch baseball,” said Dennis. It was a good guess. I had been a Giants fan since they were the New York Giants. On Market Street, women in flared pants crowded the sidewalks. “I can drop you gents off at the next payphone if that works,” he said.

“Sure, man, anywhere,” said Vic.

Kat pressed in the cigarette lighter and fished a pack of Newports from her handbag. “I think we should invite them along,” she said.

After a few moments, Dennis said, “I don’t think they would satisfy the dress requirements.”

She smiled and swatted him on the shoulder. When the lighter popped out, she lit her cigarette and cracked her window as she exhaled. Menthol billowed through the car.

“Where you two heading?” asked Vic.

Dennis and Kat glanced at each other, a secret in the air. Her cheeks colored, and he began to hum “Ode to Joy.” Traffic halted, and a group of kids in patterned clothes and leather fringe crossed the street in front of us.

Dennis and Kat apparently were going to a love-in, and it seemed like she wanted me to come along. She took another drag from her cigarette. I began to crave a smoke too, even if they were menthols. How much was all this going to cost me? “Do you mind if I have one of those?” I asked. I had quit when Cynthia was born. She lit another off the end of hers and handed it to me. The menthol cooled my throat. The clouds parted, and sunlight splashed across the street scene. Dennis hung a right and gunned it up a side street.

I collected stamps as a teenager. I married at 23 and fathered at 26. Hard to imagine making it with a perfect stranger.

“I have grass,” said Vic.

Dennis turned in the direction of Lower Haight. “Always good to bring a party favor,” he said.

The plan had been Chinese food and a show at the Fillmore, and now I needed a tow for my car before the city impounded it. We had passed a dozen payphones at least. “We don’t want to crash your party,” I said.

“Nonsense,” said Kat.

We stopped at a traffic light, where a mustachioed man in skintight leather vest crossed the street, singing in a falsetto.

“Let’s check out the party,” said Vic.

Vic had a steady. The four of us would double-date sometimes. “I don’t think so,” I said.

Kat pouted her lips.

“Come on, stop in for a drink,” said Dennis. “We’ll pretend it’s 1967.”

We arrived at an enormous brick home in Pacific Heights with views of downtown and the bay, its pastel blue water dotted with sails. Kat smiled, bittersweet it seemed, like she was remembering something great that would never happen again or maybe imagining something that would never happen in the first place. “At least come inside and use the telephone,” she said.

“I definitely want to use the phone in this place,” said Vic, admiring the facade. “Get you unstuck, right man?”

Inside, The Mamas and Poppas played on a gramophone. Men wore dark suits or checkered blazers, and the ladies bell bottom pants and crop tops. A woman in a black cocktail dress and tiara greeted us, kissing Dennis and Kat on the cheeks. “Where did you get these two young men?” she asked, spilling drops from a martini glass. “They’re so authentic.”

“Yes, very authentic,” said Dennis. “We found them on the Oakland Bay Bridge.”

“How serendipitous. I’m Bianca. Would either of you like a drink?”

“Red wine would be groovy,” said Vic. He held his hand up before I could answer. “My friend drinks whiskey on the rocks.”

“Oh, a real man’s drink,” said Bianca, gazing up at me.

“Should I have worn a jacket?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that. That’s what the men wore when I started throwing these parties. Times changed, but they kept wearing the suits.” She pinched a lock of Vic’s hair. “Until you two rebels showed up.” She smiled and turned to get our drinks. Dennis and Kat had already started mingling.

“We’re only staying for one,” I said to Vic.

“I know, man.”

“We shouldn’t be here.”

“Brother, it’s like the song. There’s a season for everything, a time for every purpose under heaven.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what they meant.”

“I know what they meant, and you know I want peace more than anyone, but there’s also a time to love, and this is that time, man.”

In the living room by the picture window, we drank and smoked grass. “You should have been at Monterey,” Vic was saying for what felt like the fiftieth time. “Holy smokes, man. Hendrix. It was like a UFO came and flew us to outer space.”

Dennis crinkled his nose. “Hendrix is a great showman, but we’re not talking about real musicality. These hacks can’t even read music.”

“Dennis listens to classical,” said Kat, “so when Hendrix learns to make UFO sounds from an oboe or clarinet, it may pique his interest.”

“Classical music’s got no soul,” said Vic. “Not like the blues. It’s about what’s inside of you.”

“The point I would make is classical music is art,” said Dennis, “while rock-and-roll is entertainment. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with entertainment.”

“Hey, maybe it’s time we get going,” I said.

“No way, man,” said Vic. “Me and Barry Goldwater here are conversing.”

Dennis chortled. “You have it all wrong, my friend. I’m a liberal like you. You see, our aesthetic differences are immaterial. You said it yourself, what counts is on the inside. Clothes, cars, music, none of these defines the man, wouldn’t you say?”

“I can’t argue with that,” said Vic.

“Then let’s assume you and I agree on 100% of everything that matters and 90% of everything else. About that other 10%, I don’t blame you for being a philistine.”

Vic grinned and patted him on the shoulder. “Wow, you’re toying with me. I must be thick as a brick.” He took another hit from the reefer.

People were slipping upstairs or down the hallway in pairs or in threesomes.

I drifted off to find a bathroom. No one answered when I tapped on the door, so I pushed it open. A man was on the commode with his sleeve rolled up and a band around his arm. Sweat dotted his face and stained his armpits. “It’s occupied,” he said. I closed the door and hung out there in the hallway, waiting for my turn to use the john. I had seen junkies on the New York streets and in the jazz clubs, but never so close.

Kat appeared in the hallway. “Oh, dear. You seem a bit stressed.”

“I have to pee and this guy’s taking a while.”

The toilet flushed, and he came out looking pale. Blond hair stuck to his forehead. “The lock is broken,” he said. He rounded the banister and trudged zombie-like upstairs.

When I came out, she was still standing there, a little sheepishly. She leaned against the wall with her fingers in her jean pockets. She turned her face to the side a little and grinned, blushing and narrowing her eyes. “Would you like to fool around?” she asked. She came closer until our lips almost touched. If I could only just undo the top button of her shirt, maybe it would be enough.

“My lady and me. We’re a steady thing.”

She spoke softly in my ear. “You shouldn’t limit yourself. So many great friends and beautiful people. Love is everywhere.” My heart raced when she took my hand. She kissed my cheek and whispered. “Such a sweet man. I only want to give you something to remember me by.” She led me to the stairway.

“This is wrong.”

“But here you are and here I am and what a wonderful accident. It’s really the right sort of wrong, don’t you think?” She led me upstairs and down the hall, trying a door that was ajar. A couple was balling on a four-poster bed. “Oops, sorry,” she said casually and closed it. At the next door, a girl in a cherry red tunic dress and ripped white stockings slipped out, her Mary Jane shoes in hand. She wasn’t more than eighteen.

“Hey, baby, where you heading?” asked a shirtless man from inside.

“I told you I wasn’t into this,” she slurred.

“What’s the matter, you don’t like me?” His voice set me on edge.

Kat glanced over her shoulder at me, looking unsure.

Patchouli overtook the dim hallway, and a woman in a paisley dress and headband appeared from inside the room, nudging the guy out of the way. A motherly expression on a sun-weathered face. “What’s the matter, honey? Did we weird you out?”

“I want to go home,” said the girl.

“Let’s talk about it inside and let these nice people go by.”

The girl sniveled and looked at her feet.

“She said she wants to go home,” I said.

The shirtless guy popped his mophead into the hallway. He had a red bandana around his neck. “Hey, you Big Brother or something?”

“Just a concerned citizen.”

“You look like a square to me.” His big brown belt was the only thing holding up his striped, green pants.

“Let her go home.”

The girl turned to me wide-eyed, her pupils dilated. “Big Brother?” she said.

I was a vessel without instruments. “I’m just trying to help,” I said.

“Yeah? Well, get lost,” said the woman in the paisley dress.

“Come on, Henry, let’s go,” said Kat.

“Henry,” said the shirtless guy. “Look at you, cool cat. What’s the matter? Think your shit doesn’t stink? We’re all trying to get our rocks off here, right man?”

He was a parasite, feeding off the movement. Growing up in Canarsie, Brooklyn, I’d defended myself against some tough guys, and this twerp didn’t scare me. I inched closer. “Say another word to me,” I said.

“Get lost, pig,” said the woman in the paisley dress.

Heads poked out of doors to see what the hassle was about. I had marched for peace seven times and now I wanted to rearrange this guy’s face.

And there it was. *I wanted*. I wanted to bang a foxy blonde. I wanted to hang loose at the party. I wanted to smoke cigarettes and drink whiskey. I wanted to hear Janis Joplin sing the blues. I wanted to punch this loser in the nose. The anger tasted metallic. Kat tried to take my hand again, but I pulled away.

The shirtless guy's crooked mouth formed a smirk, and he squinted, one eye smaller than the other. He had a faded scar on his cheek like the threads on a baseball. "Hey, man, don't flip your wig," he said. "Come on, babe," he said to the girl. "Let's hang out." He took her by the elbow and started to lead her back into the room.

I aimed for the scar when I threw the punch. The pain shot to my elbow. The woman in the paisley dress shrieked. The teenage girl booked out of there. He hadn't seen the punch coming and wobbled sideways to the opposite wall, twisting like a rubber band. He steadied himself, straightening to face me, no longer smirking. He lowered his shoulder and lunged, slamming us both against the wall. I heard my head thud against plaster. He spun away before I could hit back.

When he came at me again, I grabbed the stupid bandana from around his neck and yanked it. He went bug-eyed and gagged, his hands going to my wrist, and I thought how easily I could snap his neck. What was I doing? I let go. That's when they pulled us apart.

Half-dressed people were in the hallway. Most had only seen when I nearly choked the guy. A welt formed on his cheek. People came to his aid. He panted but looked satisfied. Tears ran down Kat's rosy cheeks. Bianca's face, which earlier had been flush with booze and giddiness, was colorless. She looked at me in astonishment. "I have to ask you to leave," she said apologetically.

"Ah, Hank," said Vic. "What did you do, man?"

I beelined for the front door.

The sun was setting, its orange fingers stroking the bay's water. I crossed the street and sat at the curb. My hand was starting to throb, my left shoulder too from where he threw me

against the wall. A knot was rising on the back of my head. That dirtbag was still inside, milking it for sympathy. I could only hope Kat understood why I sucker punched him.

I barely noticed when the signal red Triumph TR turned onto Divisadero and started speeding down the hill. The sound of its engine drew my attention. I looked up to admire the car. Its top was down, the driver in a plaid golf hat and wrap-around sunglasses, gaining speed.

And that's when I saw the girl in the ripped stockings, down the street, stumbling from between two parked cars. The Triumph careened toward her. I jumped and waved my hands, shouting for the driver to stop. Tires screeched. The car skidded a few feet from where she stood, oblivious. Burnt rubber filled the air.

“What are you doing?” the driver yelled at her. “Are you crazy?”

She looked at me like maybe she knew me from somewhere. Then she realized what had almost happened and the color drained from her face.

“Come on, let's get you off the road,” I said and started to lead her away.

“What in god's name?” said the guy in the sports car. “Is she with you?”

“Nope, never met her.”

He had a clean shave and a buttoned-up polo shirt with stripes down the front. His car idled loudly. The girl shuffled to the sidewalk, her stockings threadbare, her shoes nowhere to be seen. The last few rays of sunlight angled from between two houses. “This is why I don't like hippies,” said the guy in the car.

This, from a man who wears leather driving gloves. “I'm not a hippie,” I said. “I'm a teacher. And you're a pretentious asshole.”

He shook his head and grabbed his perfectly intact gear shifter. “To hell with you,” he said. He sped away, sticking in first gear too long, so the engine revved. He rolled through a stop and cruised toward the bay, shrinking to a tiny red speck and dipping below a ridge.

The girl gazed into the sky. “The light’s so beautiful,” she said. She had paper flowers in her hair. She turned to me with wonder, her pupils like two dark caves. “I almost died,” she said and started to sob.

Vic was outside now too, standing across the street. I didn’t know how long he’d been there. “I see you’re still winning friends and influencing people,” he said. He crossed the road. “I called a garage in Oakland. They’ll tow your car if it’s still there.”

“I’m glad you got to use the telephone. I heard it was nice.”

He squinted at me with bloodshot eyes. “Dude, what happened to you in there?” he asked.

“I figured out what I wanted.”

“Yeah? Did you get it?”

“Some things were mutually exclusive.”

Vic had been a good friend for almost a decade, but I’d relied on him too much, believing that life for him was somehow easier. I saw it wasn’t true. He wanted to live in a world where all that mattered was your soul. He wanted to meditate and find bliss. He wanted to love lots of women and for them to all love him back. He wanted to end the war. He wanted the will of the righteous and the power of good to overcome greed and evil. He’d be disappointed. The false promise of drugs, the bad habits that eventually caught up with him.

The girl had slumped onto the sidewalk. I squatted down and talked to her. Her name was Sandy. She lived in Upper Fillmore. She couldn’t remember how she’d gotten there. We rode the

bus with her and eventually found the three-story apartment on Pierce Street where she lived with her parents. “Tell your mom you have a headache and go crash,” Vic advised.

She wrapped her boney arms around me. “Thank you,” she whispered and turned toward the gracious Victorian with its yellow spire, walking up the front steps and through the wooden door to whatever life she would end up living.

When we arrived at the Fill, a crowd was waiting to get inside. I remember a bored looking copper, his hand on his nightstick, his mind elsewhere. I can still picture the auditorium with its glass chandeliers, wooden balconies and velvet curtains.

Janis was late taking the stage that night, and the crowd got restless. I heard someone say she was a junkie now. A shadow of who she was in 1967. People started stomping and shouting her name. Finally, the lights dimmed, and she strutted out and broke into an Eddie Floyd song, like nothing else mattered. The crowd went bonkers. For a moment, I saw what our world could be, if only we would stop chasing our dumb human desires.

Sorry as I was when the show ended, the cool fresh air was a relief. Steam rose from our sweaty clothes, and billows of smoke escaped the front doors, catching in the intersection of Van Ness and Market and swirling in the cross breeze, while everybody stumbled bleary-eyed into the night. Vic and I rode the bus back to Oakland together in silence and never spoke of that day again.