A Most Exciting Ride

Judith C. Sullivan
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"I'm sorry, Miss North. There's just no way I could give you a raise at this time."

The speaker was a balding, middle-aged man seated behind a desk covered with papers. Invoices, contracts, and blueprints spilled over a drafting table beside the window, and more blueprints were stacked like rifles in another corner of the room. The disorder around him seemed to be an extension of his personality, for his shirt was wrinkled, his sleeves rolled up, his collar unbuttoned, and his expression was one of perplexed annoyance.

Standing in front of the desk was a young woman in her early twenties, short, slightly plump, with brown hair and eyes—altogether an average sort of person, except for the desperation in her voice.

"But, Mr. Franklin, I've been with you for a year now. I've done a good job and put in a lot of overtime..."

"Look, Miss North," he said, leaning back in his chair, "I appreciate the work you've done, but you know I gave you this job as a favor to your stepfather when your folks moved to Florida. I just can't afford to give you a raise, and if we don't get out of this building slump soon, I may have to let you go. I'm sorry but that's the way it is. Now, why don't you go on home for the day. I've got a lot of work to do."

Jenny North turned and left the office. She wasn't really surprised at not getting the raise, but the possibility of losing her job was a shock she didn't know how to handle. Numbly she straightened her desk, covered her typewriter and walked out of the building.

The bus ride home passed in a blur. When the doors opened at her stop, she automatically got out and started walking down the block towards her apartment. Dimly she became aware of her surroundings: the sound and color of the fallen leaves crunching under her feet, the warmth of the setting sun on her back. A squirrel ran across the sidewalk with his cheeks full of nuts. Jenny stopped and watched him scurry across the grass and up the great oak tree in front of her house.
Through the branches of the tree, she could see the corner of the old Victorian house she lived in. The paint was peeling off the outside, and a few bricks had fallen from one of the three chimneys that stood even higher than the tree she was looking past, but Jenny was still glad to be living there. As she moved closer, she looked up again at the front of the house and saw a white cat sleeping in the warmth of the sunshine that poured in through one of the gabled windows on the third floor. Jenny smiled for the first time that afternoon as she recognized her cat Caesar, who she felt was her only real friend in the world.

Hurrying up the staircase, Jenny rounded one of the many turns and ran straight into her landlady. The armload of sheets in Mrs. MacKenzie's arms went billowing down the staircase, draping themselves over the steps and railings. Jenny grabbed the other woman instinctively to keep her from falling.

"Drat it, girl, don't you have any better sense than to go running through the house like that? You like to gave me a heart attack, and look at them sheets. I just washed 'em, and you done got 'em all dirty again."

Jenny sighed, then she turned and went downstairs to gather up the sheets. She handed them back to the old lady saying, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Mac. I'll be more careful next time."

"You dratted girls don't have no respect for other people. And you don't have no business going out and taking jobs away from hard-working men trying to take care of their families."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry about that, too," said Jenny as she started to move past Mrs. MacKenzie on the narrow staircase.

"Girls oughta stay at home until they get married like they used to in my day," was her parting shot. Then the old lady turned and went downstairs, shaking her head and muttering angrily to herself.

Jenny unlocked the door to her room and went in. She leaned back against the closed door, her eyes shut tightly against the tears that threatened
to overflow now that she was safely home.

She opened her eyes and looked around the room. The shabby second-hand furniture and her meager personal treasures were a disgrace to the elegant style this room had been built to contain. The rose-patterned wallpaper was faded now and the varnish had long ago been worn off the floorboards, but it still embarrassed Jenny that she couldn’t afford to fix the place up the way it should be fixed. She had tried to liven up the room with bright travel posters and several green plants, and she kept everything clean, but still there was a stamp of defeat on everything.

In one corner of the room a kitchenette had been built. She went there now to get Caesar some food. Jenny always felt like a giant around the miniature stove, refrigerator and sink in her kitchen. She smiled wryly as she thought that it was about the only time lately that she felt bigger than anything.

She put Caesar’s food dish on the floor and went over to the old sofa that doubled as her bed. Sitting there, she watched the shifting shadow of the leaves perform a silent dance on the floor as she thought, finally, about her interview with Mr. Franklin.

As the daylight faded from the room, Jenny came to the conclusion that she had to stop blaming everyone else for her problems. A stepfather who took away her mother, a boss who overworked and underpaid her, and a landlady who resented her were problems Jenny could handle. She decided to fight back.

Caesar jumped onto the sofa and began to groom himself, but he stopped with one paw curled halfway to his mouth when Jenny began to talk loud.

“Caesar, have you heard the old song that goes, ‘There’ll be some changes made today? You haven’t, huh. Well, from now on there are definitely gonna be changes made in my life. You just wait and see. I’m pretty sure I have enough money saved up to go back to college, even if I have to take it one course at a time. Once I finish the two years I have left, I can get a better job and begin to live at last.”

Jenny ran to catch the bus before it pulled away from the curb. Mr. Franklin had kept her overtime again, although he knew she was starting her class tonight.

“How typical,” she thought, as the bus rolled through town toward the college. “He’s too cheap to pay me enough for the work I do during office hours, but he doesn’t mind asking me to work overtime for free. Now Caesar and I will both miss supper tonight.”

As the bus neared the college, Jenny began to feel the old familiar knot of tension in the pit of her stomach. “Stop it!” she told herself. “You can’t spend the rest of your life being afraid of new experiences.”

The bus stopped, and several people got off with Jenny. She was surprised to see that most of them were older than she was, and they all were heading into the campus.

“Well,” she thought, “if those folks have enough nerve to go back to school, as old as they are, there’s no reason why I ought to be so nervous. My word, some of them must be nearly forty years!”

She made it to her advertising class just ahead of the instructor and found a seat on the far side of the room next to the windows.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “I’m Mr. Morrison. This is Advertising 341, Section 4. This class will, I hope, be an interesting one for all of you. The more you participate, the more meaningful each class will be for you. Since every business must advertise its products or services in order to survive, there are many opportunities for careers related to advertising. This includes all the broadcast and print media, as well as government and industry. Whether you use this class as a stepping-stone to further studies in business or not, you will never be able to see or hear an advertisement again without remembering at least a few of the principles of advertising you will have learned in this course.”

As Mr. Morrison talked on about careers, Jenny began to smile. For the first time in over a year she felt excited about the future. She settled back in her desk and looked around her at the other people in the class. There were several people her age, and one man, who seemed to be a few years older than Jenny, turned and smiled at her as if he had been waiting for her to look his way. Jenny blushed with embarrassment, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn’t. The man turned back to the front, and Jenny mentally kicked herself for her shyness. She thought, “The very next time someone smiles or speaks to me, I will not blush like an idiotic, self-conscious teen-ager. I will smile and be friendly right back.”

Class ended early, and there was a shuffling of feet and some desultory conversation as the students headed for the door. Out of habit, Jenny slowly gathered her things together and was the last one to leave. “Coward,” she told herself fiercely as she left the room.

“What was that?” said someone.

Jenny looked around and saw the man who had smiled at her standing at the head of the stairs and looking at her expectantly.

“Oh. I wasn’t talking to you,” Jenny admitted, blushing furiously.

“Well, then, who is the coward?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Gathering her courage, Jenny took a deep breath and smiled up at the man. “I guess I was just thinking out loud. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize about,” he said. “By the way, I’m Jason Richards. You’re in my advertising class, aren’t you?”

“Yes. My name is Jennifer . . . Jenny, I mean. Jenny North,” she stammered and wished the floor would swallow her. She wanted to leave more than anything, but her feet refused to move, and now he was talking again.

“If you’re not in a hurry, would you like to go over to the coffee shop and get something to drink?” Jason asked.
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“Oh, I don’t know...” she said, trying to edge toward the stairs.

“Come on, a cup of coffee will be good, and I promise not to bite you.” He smiled down at her, and this time Jenny smiled back a little more bravely.

“Okay,” she said.

When they reached the coffee shop, Jenny was overcome with hunger. While Jason chatted about the weather, the class, and his job, Jenny ate a sandwich and listened to him. She thought he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. He was tall and well-built, with dark curly hair flecked with gray. His eyes, though, were the most attractive thing about him. They were dark brown, framed with thick black lashes, and they showed every variation of emotion he was feeling.

“Why on earth,” Jenny wondered, “is he spending time with me?”

They talked for a few minutes after Jenny finished eating. Then she said she ought to be going home.

“Thanks for having coffee with me, Jenny,” he said as they walked to the waiting bus. “See you next week.”

When Jenny got home that night Caesar was waiting for her at the door. He loudly announced his impatience and disgust over the delay in his suppertime. Soon he was quietly eating, and Jenny went into the bathroom to bathe. The bathroom had once been a large dressing room and it was the only part of Jenny’s apartment where the furnishings actually fit the room. She felt very safe in there, surrounded by the warm unscarred wood and wallpaper unbleached by the sun. Sometimes she imagined herself to be the elegant lady for whom the house was built. Tonight, as she stood before the mirror removing her make-up, she was oblivious to the charm of the dressing room, as she preferred to call it. She was too busy thinking about the evening and her unexpected date. Finally she shrugged at her image, unable to think of any reason for Jason’s interest in her, and turned on her bath water.
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The next week after class, Jason asked her to have coffee with him again. After they had given their order to the waiter, Jason turned to Jenny and said, "Last week I talked so much you hardly got a word in. Tonight I want to hear all about Jenny North."

Jenny looked up sharply to see if he was putting her on. Then he smiled at her, and all her suspicions melted quietly away.

"Well, I was born and raised in a little town about twenty miles away from here. My brother Todd and I were like best friends when we were growing up. We had some wonderful times together — Mom and Dad and Todd and me." She smiled at the memories that flashed through her mind. Then, her smile fading, she focused her eyes on the table top and spoke rapidly, her words tumbling over themselves as she recalled the part of her life when her world fell apart.

"Todd was killed in Vietnam, and my father died two months later, when I was fourteen. After high school, I came to college here and took a two-year secretarial course and went back home. I worked in a factory near Jamestown and lived at home with my mother until she remarried and moved to Florida. Now I live here in town and work for Franklin Builders. End of story."

Jason was quiet for a moment after Jenny finished. Then he reached over and put his hand over hers and said, "You've had a lot to handle, haven't you? You're really something, you know that?"

Every week they would meet after class and share each other's life. One time Jenny mentioned a restaurant she passed every day on her way home from work. She thought it was the most glamorous-looking place she had ever seen. The next day Jason called her at work and asked her to have dinner with him that night at Alexander's, the restaurant she had been longing to visit. Jenny was thrilled. This would be their first real date, and she was actually going to be one of the beautiful people eating in Alexander's.

She dressed carefully in the new dress she had
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bought during her lunch hour. She was still amazed at being able to wear a smaller-sized dress than any she had worn all year. As she put on her make-up, she thought, “Jenny, you must be in love; you’re looking better every day.”

When the doorbell rang, it startled Caesar so much that he ran and hid under the sofa. Jenny giggled out loud as she went to let Jason in. While he helped Jenny into her coat, Jason frowned as his eyes roamed over the apartment. When she turned around, though, he smiled at her and bent down to kiss her quickly on the lips.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said. “Are you ready to go?”

Jason’s car was waiting outside. It was a beautiful celery-and-cream-colored Oldsmobile. On the way downtown, Jenny leaned back in the luxury of the velvety seats.

“You can’t imagine how wonderful this feels, after all those bumpy rides in the bus, Jason. I had no idea you had a car like this. Somehow I just figured you were struggling along like everybody else, trying to make ends meet,” she said, laughing.

Jason frowned at her words, and then he shrugged, saying, “I’m struggling, all right, but I have a very rich old aunt who likes to save her tax money by giving her charities, like me, a new car every year.”

Dinner at Alexander’s was everything Jenny had dreamed it would be. They passed the evening with small talk and gentle flirtations. On the way home, relaxed by good food and wine, Jenny leaned against Jason and murmured, “This is the way life ought to be all the time...full of beauty, and comfort, and wonderful people.”

Jason put his arm around her and pulled her closer to his side. “Jenny, one of these days you’re going to have all those things. You’re the only person I’ve ever known who really deserves the best there is in life, and one way or the other you’re going to have it.”

A freezing wind had blown up during the evening, and, as Jason walked Jenny to the house, a few flakes of snow began to fall on them, but Jenny was so wrapped up in happiness she didn’t even feel the cold. As Jason kissed her good-night, she thought she would burst with joy. Nothing in her imagination had ever prepared her for the terrible passion she felt when she was with this man.

The days grew shorter and the weather worse. Jenny made a few applications for jobs at several businesses around town, but by the end of November she stopped because the weather made it so difficult to get out and make it to interviews. Anyway, Mr. Franklin seemed to think business was picking up, which meant her job was still safe, for the time, at least. Then one Saturday morning as she lay in bed watching the snow fall past the window, the phone rang.

“Miss North?” the voice said. “This is Ms. Strickland at Reynolds Aluminum. Your application has been processed, and we were wondering if you could come in Monday morning for an interview. Our advertising department is expanding its personnel, and they feel you might be an asset to the company.”

Jenny agreed to be there at nine o’clock Monday morning. Ms. Strickland thanked her and hung up, but Jenny sat for a moment with her hand still holding the receiver, astonished at the incredible, marvelous changes that had taken place in her life in just a few short months. This naturally led her to thoughts of Jason. She could hardly wait till their date tonight to tell him the good news. She wrapped herself in the blanket on the sofa, and Caesar immediately jumped up in her lap. She stroked him absently as she thought about Jason. They had been dating every week since school started, but he was still a mystery to her. No matter how much of her life she shared with him, he always kept a part of himself locked away from her.

“Well,” she said to the now-sleeping cat, “maybe some men are like that. Anyway, he’ll really be impressed when I tell him about the new job that’s almost mine.”

That evening they went to a movie and didn’t get a chance to talk much until they were settled in the corner table at the little out-of-the-way restaurant Jason had found a few weeks earlier and that Jenny thought of as “their place.” Jason had not said much in the car as Jenny chattered away about the job offer and her plans for spending all the money she would soon be bringing home. He had smiled and said all the right things, but Jenny felt sure he wasn’t really paying attention to anything she said.

Finally she ran out of cheery small talk, and there was an awkward silence between them unlike the comfortable silences she was used to when just being near someone she loved was sufficient.

“Is something wrong?” she asked. “The movie wasn’t that bad, you know.”

Jason pulled his gaze away from the candle he had been staring into and looked at her. “There’s something I’ve got to tell you, honey. I’ve been trying all day to find the right words, but there aren’t any.”

He reached across the table and held her hands gently in his. “Jenny, you’re a very special person, and I care about you more than I’ve ever cared about anybody before in my life...except myself, I guess,” he said, as if mocking himself. “That’s why I have to tell you the truth about me, even though I never planned to.”

He took a deep breath. “I’m married, but we’re separated. Last spring my wife took off to Europe after one last big fight with me, and she cut off my living expenses before she left. I’m supposed to be earning my own way in the world as she put it. You see, Jenny, I’ve always had all the things money could buy, and I can’t live without them. I guess that’s one reason you have fascinated me so much, the way you get along on so little.”

“Well, Leslie called me last night from London. She said she’s coming back to me. She wants to start over.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Damn it, Jenny, I need her money to make it, but I want you too.”
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All the time he had been talking, Jenny had sat quite still, but inside she felt as if her mind would explode with all the thoughts whirling around. "This is insane," she thought, "It just isn't happening like this. Everything was supposed to keep getting better, and this is the same kind of crap I've been getting all my life."

She looked at the other couples in the room, eating and drinking as if nothing had happened, while all the time Jenny's whole world seemed to dissolve before her eyes. The vision blurred. Mastering her tongue finally, she muttered, "Jason, I think I'd better go home now, if you don't mind."

She walked out of the restaurant without waiting for Jason to pay the bill. As she sat in the bitterly cold car, Jenny tried to calm down and think clearly again. By the time Jason got to the car, she had made a decision.

As they headed back toward the city, Jason talked about ways they could get together even after Leslie got home. Jenny smiled at him as he talked and seemed to relax again within the softness of the beautiful car she loved so much.

They stopped in front of Jenny's house. Jason started to get out and open the door for Jenny, but she stopped him.

"Thanks for everything, Jason," she said, leaning over to kiss him lightly on the lips. "And thanks for inviting me to share your life with you and your wife, but I don't think it would work out, after all."

"Jenny, wait!" he said as she pulled away from him. "I love you. You can't just walk out of my life. I need you."

"I'm sorry, Jason, but the price is too high. Maybe your wife can afford it, but I can't."

She opened the car door and stepped out. "Goodbye, Jason," she said for the last time, smiling as she closed the door behind her. It really had been an exciting ride, all of it.