

THE BEST YEAR
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There can be little doubt that Rajah's mother was a misandrist. Misandrist a much less common word than misogynist or misanthrope, so it might be good to remind you of the meanings of these words. A misanthrope is someone who hates people no matter their sex. A misogynist focuses their hate on women, a misandrist, on men.

When Rajah was just a wee boy, his mother was keen on repeating, "Never hit a girl in the stomach." Rajah never had even the slightest temptation to hit a girl in the stomach, so he wondered at the incessant command, but he never thought to ask his mother why she focused on it. Rajah was proud to follow her command to be a gentleman although it also made him feel sad. As he understood it, a gentleman would look away if a girl found herself in a compromising position, such as if her dress rode up and revealed a bit too much. Yes, Rajah would look away even though he wanted to look. That was what made Rajah sad. Being a gentleman deprived him of so many interesting potential discoveries.

As Rajah approached puberty and began to really like girls, his mother raked up several other gems from her youth. She particularly liked to recall the boys who had been attracted to her. One had bad teeth, so his breath smelled. No way could she ever kiss *him*. Another got so hot and bothered over her that his BO repulsed her. Rajah got the message – better not get too close to a girl you liked and never reveal your feelings to her. If you did, you were only in for scorn, rejection, and humiliation.

Then were the incessant complaints about her mostly silent, explosively angry husband. "How can I live with that man?" she repeated like a parrot. For the first few years of hearing that Rajah sided with his mother. But as time passed his thoughts migrated. One day he had a revelation. It came in the form, "How can that man live with that woman?" Then he began to recognize that his parents were a team, and a vitriolic, uncooperative but well-matched team at that.

With that background added to the normal difficulties experienced by adolescents you can imagine that Rajah's years in junior high and high school did not add up to a social fiesta. His parents, seeing his social reticence and fearing he was abnormal, were upset that he did not date and tried to set him up. But by some strange twist of chance, they only chose the most awkward, ugly girls. And Rajah did not help his situation. The only attractive girls he allowed himself to approach were unassailable prudes. They confirmed his unshakable concept that girls, so many of whom had such beautiful faces and alluring bodies, were ethereal creatures, in effect, nuns. He was terribly frustrated.

Early in his senior year the English teacher assigned the class a major project – to perform scenes from Hamlet. The teacher divided the class into teams and as he called out the names, Rajah prayed he would be on a team with one of the two girls he had raving crushes on. But such was not his luck. At least, however, he was on the team with Janet, a short but cute girl he was somewhat attracted to and also liked, though from an anonymous distance. Janet was more than a

year older than Rajah (he had been skipped) and seemed very mature – Rajah almost felt like a baby next to her – but she was not a bit snobbish and was, in fact, very kind.

Rajah also remembered that the year before, Janet had passed by him in a narrow passageway in class and had rubbed herself against him in a very suggestive way though she made no eye contact. It made him wonder if she were attracted to him, but she never said a word and never repeated her action. In fact, Janet and Rajah had barely ever spoken to each other in three years of high school despite being in many classes together.

Rajah's team was assigned Act 3, Scene 1. Joel, who had starred in a junior high school play, was elected team leader, arrogated to himself the role of Hamlet, chose Janet as Ophelia, and Rajah as Guildenstern, who had a mere five lines out of some 200. For a young man with some dreams of being a great actor (among other greats) it was a disappointment for Rajah.

The students conducted practice sessions outside of school in several of their homes. Rajah learned his five puny lines quickly and spent much time sitting quietly while the others struggled over their larger roles. When there were only ten days to go before the group was scheduled to perform, Joel found that memorizing Hamlet's part was too difficult, said he could not do it, and resigned as team leader in favor of Janet. No one else wanted to play Hamlet with such short notice, but because he had two weekends plus one school holiday, Rajah allowed himself be coerced into replacing Joel.

On the first practice session Rajah read his lines and acted like an automaton. Everyone was depressed because they just knew their grades would suffer. The next day, at the end of class Janet said to Rajah, "We need an extra rehearsal on Tuesday, the school administrative holiday. Come to my home early", she insisted.

Rajah cemented his lines in memory on the bus ride over to Janet's house. He got there a little late and was surprised that no one else from the team was there.

"You're the one who needs the practice."

"Where's your mom?" These were days of few working moms.

"My mom works in Manhattan as an attorney. She puts in long hours just like my dad."

Then Janet switched gears. "Let's get started. First, you'll have to wear tights."

"Are you kidding? I don't want to wear tights."

"Hamlet did, so you will."

"I don't have tights."

"That's OK. I do. Here's a pair."

“They won’t fit.”

“Don’t worry, they stretch. Go change and put them on now.”

“How about I wait till the performance in school?”

“This will help you get used to it, so you won’t have an extra worry when it counts.”

Rajah realized that Janet was right, but suspected that she wanted to see him in tights. He went to the bathroom and put them on. It took some time and work to get them to stretch, and the fabric looked like it was stretched near its transparent limit. He gazed in the mirror and saw it was somewhat revealing but at least that it looked legitimate based on movies he had seen.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Janet was professional and didn’t even glance down. Then the rehearsal began. After multiple repetitions, Rajah not only got smoother with the lines, he slowly began to infuse some of the appropriate emotions. After almost two hours, Rajah demanded a break. “My brain is fried.”

Janet, who looked as fresh as a daisy to Rajah, responded instantly. “Let’s go for a bike ride on the boardwalk. You can use my dad’s bike.”

It was a cool, overcast autumn day so the boardwalk was almost empty. They rode more or less together for about a mile and then Janet spurred ahead. Rajah was up for the challenge. It took him some time to catch her – he really had to sprint and was surprised the little girl had so much energy. He was used to watching girls saunter along like molasses and had never seen them move fast except at a high school dance.

When he finally caught up to her, she had the most infectious laugh and looked prettier than he had ever thought possible. He felt that Janet really had her act together in life.

They turned around and raced back together. They were still flushed and sweaty after they parked the bikes in the garage and went inside. Rajah said, “I’d like a drink.”

Janet responded, “I’m all sweaty and so are you. Let’s take a shower.”

Rajah could not believe what he was hearing.

Janet said, “I’ll get a change of clothes and meet you in the bathroom.”

Rajah didn’t know if he should get undressed. He decided to stay as he was.

When Janet entered the bathroom, she had already stripped down to her panties and bra. She did not appear the least embarrassed. She put her change of clothes and towels down on the bench and turned to Rajah. He had never seen a girl look like that at him but instinctively knew what the look meant. It was the meaning of life. Rajah felt luckier than he had ever felt before.

They undressed each other. Rajah fumbled with unhooking her bra but Janet was infinitely patient and wasn't troubled at all. She held her arms on his shoulders and giggled a bit as if she had just tasted the most delicious candy. Janet removed his underpants before Rajah removed her panties. She was curious and then liked what she saw. Rajah was surprised and relieved to see her approval. Then she signaled that he should remove her panties. He pulled them down very slow so as to savor every second. She stood before him au natural as if it were the most natural thing in the world. There was nothing critical or disapproving in her look. Rajah was stunned. It was not just that she was beautiful and that everything he had been curious about, that had been kept hidden from him, was suddenly revealed. He was surprised that a woman's basic body outline was so similar to a man's. She had a head, neck, shoulders, arms, a torso with ribs, legs, and feet. In some weird way he had almost expected to see a different phylum. Clothing, he felt, not only hid much of what men and women looked like, it exaggerated any differences between the sexes.

All these rapid-fire thoughts did nothing to impair the indescribable joy of the shower. Rajah was not touch-feely and jumped at Janet's first touch, but he found embracing all wet, soapy, and frictionless to be the most exhilarating experience of his life. He was used to taking short showers but this one lasted until the hot water ran out.

They dried each other and then still naked, Janet led Rajah upstairs to her bedroom. He followed, feeling more than a bit sheepish. Then, as they embraced on the bed Janet pled with a strange confession as if to comfort him, "Raj, come into me. Don't worry, it won't hurt, I'm not a virgin."

A medley of feelings flooded Rajah. He was profoundly ignorant. He didn't know anything about a hymen. So, why should it hurt – he wasn't going to hit her in the stomach though he might stab her somewhat below. He was also hurt and angry. He had been told that girls were supposed to "save themselves for their husbands" and Janet made it clear that she hadn't even waited for him. He realized of course, that there was a bit of hypocrisy and arrogance in his feelings since he was not Janet's husband.

Janet sensed his disdain. "I *was* a virgin when I pressed myself against you last year but you didn't react at all. You never even tried to speak to me. I was so hurt."

That assuaged Rajah's hurt ego and started to melt his heart. It had been beyond his imagining that he could have such an impact on such a pretty and centered girl. Janet saw his change and guided him into her.

They were well matched. When Janet climaxed, Rajah felt a sense of triumphant joy he had never imagined before. And when he climaxed moments later it was another feeling he had only had a glimmering of after his one nocturnal emission two years before. A few minutes later, as Janet rested her head on his shoulder, more odd, confounding thoughts bubbled up. "All of my mother's negative talk – did she not ever experience such a miracle? She either has amnesia, or must be insane or worse, out and out mean."

The next few days were among the happiest in his life. He felt loved, truly loved, and maybe even better, he felt like a conqueror. He sailed through life and school up to the moment of the performance. As they approached the stage Janet whispered to him, “I saw my old boyfriend yesterday....”

Men aren’t supposed to faint, but Rajah almost did. He scarcely knew where he was and recoiled from her, lurching backward. His teammates noticed it and almost pulled him up on the stage. He felt rejected, deceived, betrayed, humiliated, and he was not ready to battle with that boyfriend for Janet’s heart. He felt like dying. And that is when he first understood Hamlet. Rajah was Hamlet and Hamlet was Rajah. Janet was Ophelia and Ophelia was Janet. When he spoke his soliloquy – “To be or not to be...” it made too much sense. And when he commanded Ophelia or Janet, “Get thee to a nunnery,” that’s what he felt. He delivered those lines with such demonic intensity that not only Janet, but the whole class, teacher included cringed before him. At the end, the teacher was driven to comment, “Well Rajah, that was a frightening performance. I think most actors playing Hamlet might learn a thing or two from you.”

When the bell rang, Rajah fled the class but Janet raced after him and caught him. She had trouble getting the words out between sobs. “Raj, Raj, you ran from me before I could finish. I saw my old boyfriend yesterday, but I told him that I love *you*. And I do love you.”

Rajah’s head was spinning but he could only think to say something inane. “I have to get out of these tights.”

Janet waited for him outside the boy’s bathroom. When he reemerged from the bathroom, he returned her tights. They both missed their next class using the time well to start to make things right again.

They became regular but secret lovers – as regular as school and parental schedule would allow. Even though Rajah lived very close to the school they always went to Janet’s home because there both could revel in the absence of her parents. Besides, not only was Rajah’s mother a stay-at-home mom, the one time that Rajah brought Janet to his home his mom cast a disapproving, disparaging look that Rajah recognized he could never change.

Janet and Rajah had fun experimenting. One day, Janet got out a medical book and so they studied anatomy. The illustrations were clinical, anything but sexy, even somewhat of a potential turn-off, but their desires were strong and the learning was good.

Some of their classmates could see a change in Janet but everyone could see the change in Rajah. He was on top of the world. All aspects of his life benefited. His grades and his athletic performance improved. He walked around feeling like a conquering warrior and it didn’t hurt his ego that other girls discovered they wanted him and tried to entice him. But he remained faithful to Janet because he enjoyed and admired her too much and was still too youthfully idealistic to stray.

Their romance continued through the winter and the spring. But as the days warmed and the end of the school year approached something new happened. A few times after they made love and

lay close together Janet would cry. Rajah was perplexed and after the third or fourth time, he asked, "Janet, dear, what in the world are you crying about?"

"Please don't ask, I can't tell you yet."

The day after graduation after they had made love Janet began crying again. And before Rajah could ask, her tears stopped and she said, "Let's get dressed, then I have to tell you what I have decided."

When Janet stood up Rajah stared at her. Something in her tone told him that he would have to absorb and retain this magnificent sight for a long time to come. Before she put a stitch on, she faced him directly in all her naked beauty. Then she dressed slowly like a burlesque queen performing in reverse. Then Rajah dressed as Janet sat silent on the bed.

When Rajah was dressed Janet stood up and led him downstairs and outside. She sat down on the front stairs and he followed. "Rajah, you want to know why I've been crying! Raj, I love you. I love you so much. I don't know if I will ever love anyone else as much. You've loved *being* with me. You've loved *making love* with me. But you haven't loved me, you don't love me and I can see you never will. I want someone to love me as I love him. I deserve it. I always took the lead with you. At first that was fine but I wanted you to learn and to want to take the lead. But you didn't. Maybe with someone else you will. I took a job as a counselor in a sleep-away camp. Then I'm going away to college. Rajah, I'm not going to see you again. I don't want to, never ever. It would hurt too much."

Rajah never could remember how he got home. He saw that Janet's words, her mien held compelling finality and truth. And so, they went their separate ways. He never tried to contact her again and she never tried to contact him.

Many years later at a dinner party a friend suggested a game. "I just saw the film, *The Best Years of our Lives*. I never realized how great a movie it is. Why don't each of us describe the best year in our lives and tell what made it the best."

Someone else popped up, "That could be pretty racy."

After some laughter and quiet agreement, the proposer continued. "Well, who'll be first? How about you Raj, got the guts? You look like a pretty happy guy."

Raj's answer was instant. "It was my senior year in high school. A remarkable young woman found me and taught me the secret of life. I don't know if she ever suspected the impact she had on me. I wish I could tell her. I was lucky to be young enough to be pliable when she found me. Through her I first learned of the miracle of women and of love. Through her I came to realize that women are the fount of life. Men may supply the seeds but women choose which one to accept, and once they do, they create life and nurture it. They inspire men to combat, to conquest, to glory, to creativity. This woman helped turn me from a misogynist to a man who really likes women. From that year with her I date my journey to freedom in life. That journey took some years but she gave me that jump start, the key. I learned to forgive my parents. I discovered that

my mother's negative front was in part a defense mechanism that originated somewhere in her childhood to hide a passionate nature. After all, I too kept our love affair a secret. I never revealed it to anyone. And in time, I found true love, learned to take the lead, and realized that in some sense I still followed but that it's OK – it is part of the nature of things.

“So, Raj, speak up, the stage is yours.”