

HANK

A couple of days ago I quit reading a FaceBook piece about personality types of chickens, turned off my laptop, and lay down on the couch, disgusted with myself. Two hours scrolling through my feed and what did I have to show for it? A mind jumbled with marginally entertaining junk. I took a half-hour nap and woke to a crazy good memory of a cute, auburn-haired girl in college named Jeanne.

We hung out some our sophomore year, at the cafeteria, mostly. She was an animated talker and her braids flipped around, hardly ever resting on her shoulders. Our conversations traveled to unpredictable places. She was clever that way. Her voice was enchanting and I longed to curl her braids in my hands and pull her close.

In the fall, Jeanne and I went to see Rare Earth at the gym on a Saturday night. The Student Union sponsored rock concerts five or six times a year in the early 70s, one of the more productive uses of our student fees. The band started off with their bit hit, "I Just Want To Celebrate." Many of you are probably too young to remember but the song is joyful and celebratory, as the name says. The drummer set the tempo so slow I figured he might have been on Quaaludes or some other downer.

Jeanne got way into it right away, dancing with arms above her head and braids flying about. The whole crowd was digging it. I stood up and danced close to Jeanne, hoping her braids would hit my face. The music was way worse than their album, but it was super cool to be with other students, hear our music loud, be free, and drink wine or smoke weed if you felt like it.

The week after the rock concert, Jeanne and I had lunch together, and as we left the cafeteria, she invited me to her off-campus apartment to spend Sunday afternoon together. I was exuberant. When I told my dormitory roommate about our plans he smiled and turned back to his sociology textbook.

"What?" I asked. "You know something I don't?"

"Man, you've got it bad." He shook his head. "Nothin' I could say would make a difference."

"Fuck you!" I said and left.

Before the door shut all the way I heard him say, “Thank you!” It was the funny way that Earnie, one of our hippy friends, had learned to fend off offensive remarks from the fraternity boys.

I arrived at Jeanne’s a tad early and heard the soothing sounds of Crosby, Stills and Nash’s “Wooden Ships” coming from her apartment. I closed my eyes and pictured the two of us sitting on her couch, moving closer, then our first kiss in each other’s arms on her couch, wrapped in her braids. Anticipation is so delicious. I took a couple of deep breaths to calm my heart and knocked.

When the door cracked open a bit, I saw her bell-bottomed jeans and bare feet. Anticipation grew as the door swung wide open. I took one step in and quickly jumped back outside in shock. A bronze and black snake as thick as my wrist was wrapped around Jeanne’s neck a couple of times with three feet to spare hanging off her shoulder. The snake’s head was facing me, black unblinking eyes, like a skeptical father staring down a new boyfriend. Jeanne greeted me with open arms, smiling face, and auburn hair in perfect, tight braids, exactly as I’d envisioned. I’d longed to be wrapped in her arms many times, but wasn’t thrilled about the threesome.

“This is Hank, my roommate.” Jeanne’s voice was peppy and her face delighted. I hoped it was because of me, but I wasn’t sure. She wagged Hank’s head up and down like he was nodding at me. “Say hi, Hank.” He didn’t say a thing, but his black, forked tongue flicked out and in a couple of times.

I was tickled pink when she crossed the room, put Hank back in his terrarium, and skipped over the beige-colored shag carpet back to me. “Bald pythons are docile, you know.”

I was lost for a second in her green eyes, then stammered, “I ... I didn’t know that.”

“I’ve had Hank for three years. He’s the perfect roommate! Did you know pythons can live to be forty?”

Jeanne was definitely an outlier. We hugged, just the two of us, and I handed her the bottle of Boone’s Farm Blackberry wine I’d brought. Nothing but the best ... okay, cheapest.

“Aren’t you thoughtful.” She flashed a sassy smile. “I’ll get glasses.”

I waited on the couch feeling my heartbeat, thinking how cool it was to see her braids bouncing free without Hank wrapped around her neck.

She poured wine, held her glass up and said, “To new friendships.”

“Has anyone ever told you your braids are groovy? They go perfectly with your winsome smile.”

“Ah.” She grinned. “A young Shakespeare.”

Jeanne and I and an unforgettable afternoon playing records, dancing, and checking out the couch. The only thing that could have made our time any better would have been to have Hank in another room, because I swear he kept his eyes glued on us the whole time.

When it was time for me to go, Jeanne gave me her phone number and said she’d like me to call her. On the walk home I wondered if calling that evening might be too soon. Unfortunately, I didn’t get a chance to call because I met someone else and we ended up getting married, not that day, but a couple years later.

After twenty-something years of married life, the happily-ever-after part ended, but by then I’d lost Jeanne’s number, of course. Thankfully, I’ll never lose her completely because I still remember our times together, her adorable auburn braids, and how elated she looked with Hank wrapped around her neck and shoulders.