

A Time in my Life by Sheila Swartzman

He left me on the beach and went back to his boyfriend in Johannesburg.

Of course, I didn't know about Johan until many years later. He told me that he had a family emergency and had to drive back immediately to take care of it. I believed him.

"Don't worry about the concert," he said. "I've given my ticket to a friend and he'll take you to hear the Beethoven so you don't have to go alone." Oh, good, I thought, I really wanted to hear the concert but I didn't have a driver's license yet and going alone to a concert in an unfamiliar town was daunting to me. He gave me a quick, aseptic kiss and drove off from Clifton beach in the Cape. We weren't really dating seriously, in the early sixties but were companions: we studied together, went to concerts and enjoyed each other's company. We used to joke that if no one else wanted to marry us by the time we were thirty, we would then marry each other.

I did not think I was attractive; I felt like a typical bluestocking - the word *nerdy* wasn't in usage then - with thick, coke bottle glasses and frizzy hair. He had a large, soft body, with a sway back, bad posture and skin and he had a curiously high-pitched voice. He had been a year ahead of me at Medical School, but had to repeat a year because of poor grades in Pharmacology. I had to prod him along to complete our assignments: he seemed distracted most of the time. We studied at each other's houses and I liked going to his house as his mother made the most delicious cookies, which she always gave us during our nightly sessions of black coffee and cigarettes. They paid off - we both passed without any problems.

After graduation I hardly saw him - we were in different residencies- he started Psychiatry and I went into Pediatrics and pregnancies. Our lives diverged - I immigrated to the US and he went to Canada and we lost touch until I landed up in Toronto as well, following my husband. We made contact immediately. He had married a girl I knew from high school - she lived on the same street as me and they had two children.

We went to see them in Hamilton, an hour away from Toronto and they seemed happy and contented. Once again, we moved back to the States, to San Antonio. I returned often to Toronto as my parents and brother still lived there. On one of my trips, in 1982, I went for the bar mitzvah of a close mutual friend's son and she took me aside and told me that he and his wife had split up because he was gay.

At the celebration I could hardly recognize his wife- she had transformed herself from a mannish frump into an elegant, slim, blond fashion plate. She said that they were all going back to South Africa even though they were no longer together and that she had a job in the nascent television industry.

"I have to talk to you," he said.

We made an arrangement for him to come to my parents' flat the next day. I felt acutely uncomfortable around him. Why? We were good friends, had been for years, and had shared the confidences and stresses of Medical School, then why did I feel so apart from him? Was I just another uptight, bourgeois suburban housewife after all? Why did I shrink from any intimate confidences that he was trying to share with me? I did not want to know about the nightly trips he took to Toronto's gay bars and bathhouses in the aptly named Queen Street – Toronto was a Mecca for gays in those heady days of the early 80's. We made desultory small talk: I wished him well for the move back to Johannesburg – he was going to open a family Psychiatry practice there for adolescents. He had a rueful smile on his face as we hugged goodbye. We had said nothing of importance.

In 1989 I went back to Johannesburg for my in-laws' fiftieth wedding anniversary bash. All their friends were coming and I invited some of my old school friends as well. I called him up and asked him to come. There was angry clattering of kitchen utensils in the background and a male voice shouted something indecipherable. He sounded strained but said he would come. He did arrive, but much later, after most people had gone, but still we said nothing other than pleasantries. He looked much the same, perhaps a little grey around the temples. It was the last time I ever saw him.

Our mutual friend called me in 1996 and told me that he had died, miserably, from complications of HIV-AIDS. He had contracted the disease long before the benefit of the retroviral drugs. He was fifty- three. I remembered my stint in the mid – seventies as an Intensive Care Fellow in Toronto, and looking after several men with Pneumocystic pneumonia, a disease I had never heard of until then - we called it Acquired Autoimmune Deficiency of Unknown Origin. Did he look like those emaciated waifs at the end? I found his ex- wife’s phone number and managed to reach her in Johannesburg. She told me that her children, who had a hard time understanding their father, had become ultra religious; the son was a rabbi and both had gone to Israel. However, they came back as he became more and more infirm and were reconciled with him.

“But did you know, when you married him?” I asked her. I had thought of him as asexual: I could not envisage him as a devotee of gay bars and bathhouses, but of course he was. “I did, in a way. The sex was not good but I thought I could change that.” She was quite matter of fact.

Her son was studying Psychology now, as well as being a proselytizing Rabbi. I thought of the difficulty that I had in trying to reach him, from my own inability and reticence and his acceptance of my cowardice. Perhaps, had I been older as I am now, with my own niece flamboyantly bisexual and greater knowledge of the anguish that people go through I might have been a more receptive and empathetic friend. Perhaps.

She told me that Johan was with him, to the bitter end.

And yes, I married his friend.

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Date Written:

Date posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site, Oct 2022.