

## **From Rags to Love**

by James Lynn Smith

“I’m off to the Supermarket now, Henry,” Janet said. I hope they still have a fresh supply of fish since it’s Saturday. If not, we’ll just have to settle for caviar and prime rib.”

I laughed at her little joke and noted the big smile that displayed her pearly white teeth. *Man, she still cheers me. So lucky to have her in my life.* “I’ll keep the home fires burning, honey. If eating busts our budget and the mortgage company takes the house while you’re gone, we’re still okay. Last week I asked the lady at the sporting goods store for a tent suitable for a shapely blonde like you to sleep in.”

“Aw, you,” she said. Her loose curls jiggled as she shook her head in mock reproval. “I’m off now, bye.” She closed the front door behind her, heading for the car.

Janet was my everything. All that I did was with her in mind, no matter how mundane or tedious. I had three years of college before dropping out to tend to family affairs when my parents became needy. It was after several low paying jobs and hand-to-mouth living when Janet came into my life. Currently I was a property appraiser after closing my lawn maintenance business. She was employed as an office assistant, making about the same income. But those first years together were tougher. Had it not been for the uncanny love we had for each other, we would have ended up in the poor house. Our toil and struggles became meaningful labors to support our love, and our work ethic became a part of it.

Janet was also brought up in a family of modest means. Both parents were

now deceased, and she had one sister, Grace. But it was not just her upbringing that attracted me. She was a beautiful person, in both personality and appearance. Our teenage daughter, Betty, resembled her except in hair color; hers was darker, like mine.

“Where’s Mom,” Betty asked, stumbling in from her bedroom, still groggy with sleep.

“Off for groceries. Goodies are laid out for breakfast. You want eggs, there’s the frying pan.”

“Couldn’t Mom have made them before leaving?”

“Not for lazybones like you. She had to get on with the day and you should appreciate that. It’s more work to live on a limited budget than easy street.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before, about a thousand times.”

“But you still enjoy hearing it, don’t you?”

“You wish. I’m not Mom, you know. I don’t understand how she stays so cheerful with so much to do. You, too. You’re always busy.”

“As an adult, you will be, too, if you don’t get a good education. So catch up on your theme paper assignment before Monday.”

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I had lots to do, but a brief jog—more of a lope—was next on my agenda. Every morning, I did some form of exercise for the good of my body. Yard work is exercise, but of a limited type. Some muscles overwork while others get minimum use. It was great when Janet could jog with me. Her cheeks would acquire a pink flush plus her slightly upturned nose made her look a tad elfin. When we stopped for a rest, she would smile, and, to me, it was pure magic.

Returning home, I was in time to help her unload the groceries from the car.

“Okay, buddy,” she said. “We did get fish. They were so fresh a few tried to swim away. There I was, trying to be an experienced shopper, but chasing wiggly,

squirring fish filets down the aisle.”

Chuckling, I said, “That’s a picture not soon forgettable.” I opened the car trunk. “After we get these groceries put away, I’ve got to repair the same two lawn sprinkler heads again. It’s aggravating to deal repeatedly with faulty equipment when I’m two months behind looking at bills and doing paperwork on our budget.”

Janet came over, put her hands on my cheeks, and gave me a firm kiss. Rubbing my back with her arms around me, she smiled and said, “My sweet guy can handle it. As long as we’re moving toward something, it doesn’t matter if it’s a slow go. Stopping and letting the ghouls of gloom clobber our brain cells is the only way we can fail.”

It made me feel better, as always when she saw me feeling down and responded to it. A better life partner I could never have. Sometimes I felt too dependent, but isn’t that what love is all about?

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That evening, after we supped and put our dishes away, we spent an hour watching TV. When I turned it off, Janet said, “Did I mention our friends Bonnie and George Brown are getting divorced?”

“That knocks a hole in our list of couples to have over as guests. What happened?”

“Don’t know, exactly. But ever since she was promoted and makes twice the salary he does, things have gone sour.”

“Sounds like a sex role stereotyping conflict. Maybe he feels emasculated.”

“Whatever,” Janet said. “It’s a real issue, no matter how you look at it.”

“Why can’t he be happy for her? Do you think it’s more than that—like another man in the picture?”

“Can’t say. Don’t know that I would if I could.”

“Hmm. That’s a peculiar statement.”

“Well, the feminist movement has had different effects on different couples.”

“I suppose it has, glad their response is not ours.”

Her face beamed. “Me too. Let’s get ready for bed.”

That night, we cuddled and embraced for a long kiss before falling asleep

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Monday morning I went to the kitchen in robe and slippers to get breakfast started before going to work. Soon the aroma of coffee filled the air.

My wife entered with her morning cheer just as I was pouring the coffee into cups. “How’s my gorgeous hunk of hubby this morning?”

“Great. You didn’t wait until I brought the coffee back to you.”

“Up a little earlier so I can get Betty off. She has a special event just before classes this morning. Speak of the—darling.”

Betty bumped into the kitchen, sleepy-eyed and yawning. “Hi Mom, Dad. Am I alive yet?”

“You look less alert than a hibernating frog,” Janet said. “Didn’t get to bed early enough?”

“I was on the phone with Phyllis Brown. Her parents are going to divorce. She was bemoaning the lifestyle complications. Rumors are that there’s some guy her mom’s been seeing. Nobody really knows.”

“That’s sad,” Janet mumbled. She exchanged glances with me. “But it’s not us. We’re a cheerful nest of odd birds, right?”

“Right,” I said. “Come here. Group hug.”

We three wrapped arms around each other for a brief squeeze.

“Nice,” my wife said.

“Okay ladies, the next thing is to smell eggs and bacon cooking, so ‘woman’ your stations while I get it going.” I loved the group action around breakfast

preparations and wondered if it were common with any of our neighbors.

As a family, we couldn't claim to have come from rags to riches, but, from rags to love, we did.

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Monday night our short TV time was interrupted by a phone call on our landline. Janet went into the kitchen to answer it. It was hard to understand her words, but she sounded skeptical, excited and then cautious. When she returned to the den, she sat quietly.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Would you believe a telemarketer?"

*Hmm, on the phone a long time to say "not interested."* But I let it go because on the TV, the NCIS crew was about to make an arrest amid explosions and pyrotechnics. After the show, we retired to the bedroom. Janet was still rather quiet so I looked at her for a long time.

Finally, glancing at me, she feigned a smile. "It's all right. Just tired, I guess."

I had learned years earlier that she sometimes had to go inside her head to figure something out, and it was best not to pry until she was ready to talk. Later, when I came from the master bath, the lights were off and she was in bed. She seemed asleep already. That night we did not have our usual kiss.

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Tuesday morning she was late following the coffee aroma to the kitchen. When she entered, there was no bright greeting and she was quiet.

"Janet, is there a problem you want to talk about?" I asked.

She sat at the table and her head made a slow turn to face me. Gazing directly into my eyes, she said, "There's no problem."

"You seem distant, preoccupied."

Those eyes, again, seeming to send a warning. The voice, low and level, “There is no problem.”

Withdrawing my probe into her mood, I finished making breakfast myself. She sat at the table without helping or voicing another word, silently chewing without apparent pleasure.

I left for work puzzled, but sure that when I returned in the evening, she would be herself again.

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Tuesday afternoon, when I drove home and pulled into the driveway, Janet’s car wasn’t there. She usually gets home before I do. I felt as though some alien reality had settled on our home. Picking up the mail and going inside, I searched for a note or some indication of her whereabouts. There was nothing. My mind raced to scenarios of a wreck, a meeting she forgot to tell me about, or her wandering about, feeling distracted and unsure. *Something about that phone call started this.*

I was about to call the office where she works when I heard the garage door opening. Janet strolled from the garage through the laundry room into the kitchen, placing her purse in the usual spot and looking through the mail.

“Welcome home,” I said, trying to sound normal.

She looked at me briefly and then back at the mail in her hand. “Hello, dear,” she said slowly, without inflection or concern in her voice.

*I might as well be the refrigerator standing here. She’s civil but not engaged in the present.* “How was it today?”

Usually anxious to tell me about some event of the day, she merely said, “Oh, you know, the same old grind.”

It was that way all through the following hours, when Betty came in from an after-school event, when we prepared dinner together, during TV watching, and

when we settled into bed. The only words between us were those needed to accomplish the necessary.

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Wednesday afternoon, Janet was late coming home again. *Why wouldn't she tell me if something came up?* I called her office, knowing some staff had a later shift. It took several rings before someone answered.

“Baker’s Health Products, Tomas speaking.”

“Could you tell me if Janet Regan is still there?”

“Mr. Regan? I don’t believe so. Hang on, I’ll ask.” Silence followed for a short time, and then, “Henry, they told me she left early, around two p.m. Said she had an appointment.”

“Thanks, Tom,” I said and hung up. *Maybe she had a doctor’s appointment.* I looked at the calendar where she scribbled future appointments. Nothing was scheduled for today. Then I remembered something. Last night, around three a.m., I heard her moving around. It sounded like the closet door in our tiny guestroom opened. It had a characteristic squeak.

Reaching the guestroom, I saw her high school annual on the bed, turned to a page with photos of her classmates. One was a photo of Frank Dunn. I remember her saying that they had once dated. She mentioned him when we went to her high school reunion together. He had been a top student, was awarded scholarships, and achieved success in some field I couldn’t recall.

The sound of a shuttle stopping outside indicated Betty would be coming through the door from her after-school play practice any minute. I would ask her if she noticed her mom’s change of demeanor. It might be informative.

The front door swung open and our gangly teenager entered. “Oh, hi Pops. Mom here yet?”

“Not yet. Put your satchel down for a minute, I want to ask you something.”

“Sounds serious. Am I in trouble?”

“No way, it’s just that your mom seems a little immersed in her own thoughts lately. Not talkative as usual. Has she said anything to you about what’s on her mind?”

She hesitated, looked at the wall, then the floor. “Well, she told me not to say anything, but the truth is that I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“What do you mean?”

“She just said something may happen that would make a big difference, and we may have to prepare for changes in our lives.

Those words chilled me. *What change? Her parents are deceased. No relatives are close or needy, most are more secure than we are.* I knew she hadn’t had medical tests lately that would be giving a bad lab report at this time. She had been in good spirits. *Why won’t she confide in me?*

I made a decision to cancel all appraisals for tomorrow and try to track her movements. It was not something to feel good about, but an ominous gut perception was creeping up my spine with poisonous thoughts for my brain.

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The next morning, after Janet and Betty had departed, I packed a sandwich and left home. My plan was to drive to the offices where Janet worked and park inconspicuously while watching her car. If she left in it, I would follow.

I underestimated the patience needed. There was no way I could be a police detective on a stakeout. Restless, I turned on the radio only to turn it off again when the news became depressing and the music jangled my nerves. Those poisonous thoughts began their work. I wondered, could Janet have a friend who was ill or had a run of bad luck? No, that wouldn’t be something she would keep from me. Could the phone call have been a threat to our daughter? No again, she had shown no extra concern or protectiveness concerning Betty. We were not

wealthy so extortion or blackmail would seem an unlikely motive. However, if someone knew something another wanted to remain private, they could blackmail them into doing an illegal favor or paying small amounts of money over a long time.

*Why won't she talk to me?* Time passed and I forced myself to eat the lunch I prepared. The pang in my stomach wasn't really hunger, it was tension. Then she came out of the office building and crossed the parking lot to her car. Waiting until her car was moving, I started my engine and eased in behind her. Fortunately, my white car was like hundreds in our town, so it would be inconspicuous staying several car lengths behind. After a few blocks, she parked diagonally in front of a narrow, nondescript building wedged between several older, brick, retail businesses. Janet locked her car and entered the glass door in front.

Parking on the street nearby, I went to the entrance. There was no sign as to the owner or business in the building, merely an address number. I opened the door to a narrow area; there were only stairs leading upward. Apparently the second floor connected with the upper floor of adjacent buildings, common in older parts of town. The stairs, a combination of metal and wood, creaked as I slowly ascended them. At the top, a hallway with several doors appeared. One was glass with an aluminum frame.

Hearing voices from that area I cautiously approached and peeked in. Several people, one of which was Janet, sat on folding chairs. They were looking in a direction parallel to the hallway toward a side of the room away from me, so my observation was undetected. My angle prevented me from seeing who or what they were viewing, presumably a speaker or screen. Nothing indicated what was going on here. *A club? Invitee sales pitch? Or group therapy?* Words were not loud enough for me to hear clearly, but the way participants spoke out with emotion suggested the latter. I stayed for a while, listening, trying to fathom what

was being said. Later, the sound of rustling and chair movements indicated the meeting was ending. Turning away from the door, I rushed downstairs to my car.

A few minutes later, Janet exited with the others, said something to one of them, and then went to her car. When she pulled out, I followed. She drove slowly, as if looking at addresses. They are difficult to see from the street, sometimes impossible, so impatient traffic was backing up behind her. Finally, she pulled into a parking place. There was no space for me to park nearby, but I saw her enter a building with a sign in front. I circled around and drove by again, traffic behind me honking at my slow movement, so I had little time to see more than the address number.

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I went home to mull things over and determine what firm was at the address where she last stopped. In my study I evoked Google Maps on my PC. After typing the address, a map popped up, locating the firm with a red marker. A right click and selecting “What’s here” presented the name of a law firm, “Barnsworth and Associates Legal Offices.” I pasted that firm name with the city into my browser search engine. Several hits came up. I chose one to examine the types of legal services offered. There was probate law, tax law, and estate planning. I couldn’t see any connection to our situation. *What estate we have was wrestled from our modest work income and invested for growth after tedious studies.*

Probate? We already had wills. Farther down the list of legal services were business law, family law, domestic violence, and divorce.

*Divorce.* My eyes fixed on that word. A mental image of Janet’s open high school annual came to mind. *Frank Dunn.* A bolt of heat hit my chest and belly as adrenalin rushed into my bloodstream. Dizzy, nauseous, and unable to sit still, I began pacing through the house. *I’m losing my mind. How can this be?*

Thinking back, I tried to remember any evidence of disharmony. Nothing

serious came to mind. But had she silently dreamed of a different life, wishing her husband were more affluent? Was Janet such a perfect actor that her apparent love was only pretense? Was Dunn the one on the phone?

I felt reality had become an unfathomable mystery, one capriciously handing out illusions of security, confidence, and trust, only to destroy it all with a malevolent swipe of its gigantic paw.

But was the problem me? Did I simply not measure up somehow? I was average height, not overweight, and had a fit physique, though no hunk. Janet and women before her told me they liked my smile and eyes. They said they were hooded by dark, expressive brows. No strong case for rejection there. My hair was a deep brown, a touch of gray along the edges.

And I worked hard. With no special degree that set me on a high professional scale, I nevertheless learned how to invest and almost built a decent, growing retirement account...but was it enough for Janet?

A heavy weight seemed to pull downward on my internal organs. I felt chilled, though sweating, and hurt too much to cry. Stopping before the front door, I leaned my head against the inner glass pane and muttered, as though broadcasting to all outdoors. "I can't live with this feeling. Fool or devil's unknowing pawn, I've got to confront Janet about this."

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Later that evening, I heard the garage door opening. *That would be Janet.* The minutes it took for her to park, exit and enter the kitchen seemed much longer. Yet the normalcy of her movements when she came in, putting mail on the counter and purse on the chair by the table gave me comfort. *Surely all this worry was needless, after all. She's back to normal.*

However, when seeing me, she stopped, her face unreadable. "Henry, we need to talk."

An invisible fist grabbed my gut and my heartrate increased. “Yes,” I said weakly.

She took a deep breath. “I haven’t known how to say this. For some time I’ve compared our life with that of others, wondering what it would have been like if we’d never met.”

Nodding, I said, “I never suspected until lately, when you grew so...distant.”

She turned slightly and looked out the window. “Those thoughts covered all sorts of scenarios: what if one of us met someone rich or famous and became involved? What is really important? All that has come back again because of something that has recently happened.

*Yes, that phone call.*

“I didn’t want to pain you with this or confuse Betty because it’s my issue and I’m the one that has to get my priorities straight.”

When she turned back to me, I asked, “Thinking about this is what’s been bothering you?”

“Yes, it has, and I’m sorry.”

“But, you have to choose *him* just the same. Right?”

She gave me a quizzical look. “Choose him? Henry, what I’m trying to say is, once again, I’ve realized our love and family life are more important to me than anything.”

The huge paradigm shift almost made me dizzy. I didn’t understand. “Then you’re not leaving me for Frank Dunn?”

“Leaving you for...?” Her brows rose with sudden realization on her face. “Oh, Henry, I’m so sorry for my recent distractions. What’s put me in a self-absorbed tizzy is that— I am going to be a millionairess, many times over. An unexpected boon from a old, disregarded, mineral inheritance. Scared me so much I started going to a support group for people having huge life changes. And Frank’s

going to be my lawyer. He's recently joined Barnsworth and Associates, soon to be a partner in the estate planning area."

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A natural question was why didn't she tell me to begin with. Though she later told me her unshared thoughts were really about the deleterious effect wealth can have on family relationships, she didn't have to. I knew by then. Our love was deeply interconnected with what we had attained together. Even loving ecstasy was wrapped with the pride of overcoming difficulties. It was a legitimate question as to whether freedom from necessity would give great financial power and influence while undermining the valuable ability to love deeply. Possibly she was elated, then frightened, to learn that a bleak prairie once owned by her grandfather, who kept mineral rights, had begun to gush profusely from test wells. She was the only heir.

Wednesday morning at the breakfast table Janet said, "I don't even know how to *want* things the rich take for granted. How does an ordinary person even think responsibly when coming upon great wealth?"

Ideally, it must be done with care, and her earlier reticence was an attempt to save Betty and me from what she was going through until she was more grounded with the issue.

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In time, Janet created a joint charitable remainder trust with the two of us as trustees. I became the investment manager and doubled its value in ten years. We still worked together with passion and had pride in what we accomplished years ago. But now, there was time and the wherewithal for doing even more.

It was a challenge for Betty to understand our restraints on her use of money when there was so much available. But she eventually became involved in our charitable giving, seeing tears of gratitude when we funded additional personnel

for a nursing home. We also helped add a wing to a Children in Crisis facility. Betty saw how the skill we acquired in our modest beginnings optimized the use of money to make a real difference for the needy. Her exposure grew into a desire to manage important causes. She was later accepted to a great university with intent to get a degree in business administration and follow it with a master's in project management.

All I can say is that I'm proud of the femmes in my little family and couldn't feel more love for them. That feeling, however, flows over to people we help and engenders in us enormous gratitude that we can be in this position.

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