

Suffering

by James W. Fried

I first laid eyes on her in a Massachusetts State House conference room. She was taking notes during a debate over a new voting rights bill, and I was there as an ambitious investigative reporter in search of an interesting story.

I nudged Lucas, my friend and fellow reporter. “Know her?” I asked.

He leaned into me. “Jessica Boyd, a committee staffer,” he whispered and frowned, shaking his head. “She’s involved with some dude named Leo.” I accepted the information as gospel. Lucas—single and always on the hunt—knows the skinny on every Beacon Hill mark.

I recorded her name in my small spiral notebook, saving it for future reference. Jessica Boyd. In time I’d call her Jessie.

We met three weeks later when I spotted her hustling up the front steps of the capitol. The gleaming rays of a February sun reflected radiantly off the building’s dome as I stepped up beside her.

“I’m calling security if you keep following me,” I said.

Startled, she fumbled an armful of file folders onto the capitol steps. I offered a lame apology and helped retrieve the scattered papers.

“Jonah Burke,” I said. I was impressed by her surprisingly strong handshake. Her light brown hair hung in seductive curls around her high-cheekbone face—a genuine All-American girl with magnificent green eyes.

“I know you,” she said with a mischievous smile. “I read your articles all the time.” Her forehead wrinkled. “You’re not writing something awful about *me*, are you?”

I grinned. “Please tell me there’s something awful about you to write.”

She flashed a wide, beautiful smile that I instantly fell in love with.

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In the beginning, ours was just a friendship. I had a wife while Jessie, who had been married once before, was currently single. As usual Lucas’s research was spot on—she was dating a guy named Leo. But their dysfunctional relationship soon ended, and I learned that she had muddled through a series of equally unfulfilling courtships over the past few years. Her record of failed relationships had earned her a reputation as a woman who always fell for the wrong guy. “She’s the best,” Lucas liked to say, “but she’s attracted to the worst.”

After she left her Senate staff position later that year and joined a powerful Boston lobby firm, we spent even more time together. I scratched her back, giving her inside dope on breaking news, and she scratched mine by passing on the latest Capitol gossip, some of which I used in my newspaper column and attributed to an anonymous source. We’d make the information-for-rumors trade over drinks at a few Beacon Hill bars. I’d listen to her stories about the legislative crowd, and she would hang on every new revelation I shared about my latest investigation. I became her personal confidant, offering romantic advice that she rarely heeded and always cautioning her against rushing into a new relationship.

As for me, the truth was that I was moving on autopilot in my job at the newspaper and facing an old-fashioned case of burnout. I confessed my frustrations to her at lunch one day.

“The job has grown stale” I told her. “I’m tired of chasing stories about sleazy politicians.”

“Then quit” was her unusually sharp reply. “Stop whining and start writing the way you’ve always wanted to. You’ve got a ton of stories in you—let them out.” But she could tell

that my dissatisfaction with my job wasn't the only thing that was eating on me. "Okay, buster," she said, "What's really going on?"

I shrugged, sucked in my breath, and told her that I was getting a divorce. She opened her mouth in feigned surprise, but it was just an act. She knew too much about my relationship with Joanne for the announcement to come as a shock.

"Don't do it, Jonah," she said in a stern voice. "You're not meant to be single." Then she cocked her head and smiled. "You need mothering."

I was in no mood for her humor. "Look, I was a freshman at UMass when we married. Just kids, for chrissake. The marriage hasn't worked for years."

"Don't underestimate what you have with Joanne. She loves you, and you love—"

"I *care* about Joanne," I said, correcting her. "She's the mother of my two girls, so sure, I have feelings; but the kids are the only thing holding us together. She'd stay in the marriage forever, I guess, but I can't. There has to be something more than just growing old together and punching the clock, neither one of us satisfied."

"Look at me, Jonah. All I'm asking is that you don't do something stupid. I know a thing or two about bad relationships, and breakups aren't always the answer. At least promise me that we'll talk again about all this before you do anything rash, okay?"

I filed for divorce three weeks later, and no, I didn't talk to her again about it. My mind was made up and even Jessie wasn't going to change it. Fortunately, our relationship continued as usual. I stuck with my job, and we saw each other at the Capitol each day. And on most nights, we would conspire over drinks. I enjoyed my freedom as a bachelor at first and loved giving her the details of my new romances...well, most of the details. She would listen, lean her head back, and laugh at my stories about the dating game.

Our routine continued for two more years before things changed. Jessie changed them.

On a cold day before Thanksgiving, she caught me window-shopping on Charles Street and asked if I could meet her later at the bar in our favorite hotel.

“Sure, I’m not the one with a turkey to bake.”

I arrived first and grabbed a seat at our prize table against the picture window that faced the Public Garden. It was where we liked to people-watch. I knew something was up the minute she sat down because she wasn’t her usual perky self.

“I’m worried about you,” she said after our waiter set a bottle of cheap red wine between us. “You seem depressed.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Depressed and lonely.”

“What do you have to be depressed about? You’re a successful reporter at one of the best newspapers in the country.”

“Yeah, the robot who pounds a keyboard.” I cocked my head. “Look, I’m beginning to understand my problem. It stares back at me every day from the mirror. I can’t expect you to relate. Every horny male in Boston is chasing you around...and a few females too. No one’s chasing me. It’s hard to accept that you’re not such hot shit.”

She patted my arm. “Are we feeling sorry for ourselves?” My cheeks burned, but I let the patronizing comment pass. “You’re a better catch than you might think, sweetheart,” she said, her voice softening. She sucked in her breath, bracing herself. “For your information, I know someone who’s had a crush in you for quite a while.”

“Hmm, and who would that be?”

She leaned forward again and locked her eyes on mine, as if she were preparing to share the secret of life. Then her lips formed into a delicious smile. “Me.” And with that one word—

me—she transformed our years of friendship into something completely different. It was surreal the way she effortlessly turned water into wine.

Unfortunately, my response turned it back to water again.

It sounds funny now, but I had never seriously considered dating Jessie. We had built a close relationship over the years, but it was the closeness of friends. I never thought we'd see one another in a romantic way. But now a gulf had been crossed. Her confession had a strange effect on me. I hated myself for how I felt, but her admission gave me a sense of empowerment, as if I now had the upper hand.

"I can't handle a love affair with you," I said and immediately cringed at the harshness of my words. "It would never work. We'd only hurt one another and ruin what we've built between us."

"It's because you think I can't commit. You know how I—"

"Your lack of staying power with past boyfriends has nothing to do with it."

"Well, it's something." She squinted and pursed her lips. "Are you gay?"

"Oh please! Just because a man doesn't desire you doesn't mean he's gay."

"Then what is it?"

"I just... I don't know... I guess I just can't see us...see *you* as anything but a good friend."

Her eyes clouded over, and her mouth wilted into a sad frown. My heart sank. I had embarrassed and hurt her. I leaned toward her, but she recoiled.

"Look," she said, her voice soft, almost apologetic. "I took a chance, thinking you felt the same way as I do. All I've done is expose myself."

I reached a hand toward her, but she put her palms up, ordering me to halt. “No, don’t. Let’s just chalk this up to one of those crazy nights when we’ve had too many drinks and one of us says something silly. This is my night to play the fool.” She stood. “I don’t think we should see each other for a while, Jonah.”

“Listen—”

“No, I mean it.” Her voice was sad but firm and she was already walking away. “You’re a great reporter, a great reader of people, but you’ve never had a clue about me.”

After a brief glance back, she ducked through the revolving door and trudged into the night.

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I tried for weeks to repair the damage—with no success—and when she left for a vacation in Europe three months later, I did nothing but stew in my own juice. Later, after she returned, I received the terrible news that she had up and married again. Ron was her new husband’s name. He was an architect, with offices in Washington and New York. Our friends said he was crazy about her. But what troubled me more was hearing that she was crazy about him too. She had already moved into his palatial estate just outside of Alexandria, Virginia.

Now that it was too late, I developed an incredible craving to go back to the night in the bar when she had opened up and revealed her feelings. But looking back changes nothing. At least it didn’t change anything for me.

I took her advice, though, and quit my job at the paper. Rustling up what savings I had, I put a down payment on a modest two-story house on the southern coast of Maine. That’s where I wrote my first novel, then my second, and then my third. And every female character I created

carried a part of Jessie inside them. I lost myself in my writing, but her shadow followed me day and night.

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Our paths crossed five years later, on a dreary New Year's Eve evening. Temperatures hovered around freezing and huge snowflakes covered the streets and sidewalks like a down comforter. I was in a cozy little bookstore, on the last stop of another boring book tour. I had just wrapped up a labored presentation to an audience of a dozen or so loyal readers and was free to head to my hotel. But I jerked to a stop when I saw Jessie's slender frame standing between two bookshelves. She was examining my new book.

I checked her out: the same light brown hair, longer now, hanging around her face before settling at the base of her neck. My chest tightened as I watched her read the front and back flaps of the book's dust jacket and saw her studying my three-year-old photo.

Gathering my courage, I approached cautiously and touched her on the sleeve. "Jessie?" I said nervously.

She turned, our eyes locked, and neither one of us broke the trance for what seemed like an eternity. Then her mouth widened into that familiar smile. She said my name and wrapped her arms around me in a warm hug.

We walked to the checkout stand and I blushed when she made a big deal out of asking me to autograph her copy, the salesclerk looking on with an approving smile. After the book was purchased, we moved through the revolving front door and into the cold December night. I had an impulse and asked if she had time for a drink or a cup of coffee.

She checked her watch. "I've got a better idea." Her voice had become light and breezy. "Come with me."

She grasped my hand in hers and led me down the wet sidewalk to a sleek black limousine then opened the back door and, with a playful grin, told me to follow her inside. “I’ve got a couple of bottles of champagne I’m taking home. We can open one.”

I ducked into the backseat and watched her lean forward, whispering to the man behind the wheel. He got out and went into the bookstore.

She retrieved a bottle of champagne and two long-stemmed glasses from a compartment between the front and back seats, filling each glass to the top. One drink became two, then three, and our tongues numbed as we relaxed and caught up on old friends, both of us laughing at each other’s stories. The minutes passed, and we tried to find more to say, but groping for words made me feel awkward and foolish. She looked at me intently and asked if I had ever remarried.

“Nope,” I confessed. “Still a hopeless bachelor. Haven’t had a decent offer in years unless you count the come-ons from the prostitutes on Forty-Second Street.”

She giggled. The champagne had taken a toll on her. But the smile left her face when I asked about her husband, Ron. She sighed and stared out the window. “Yeah, old Ron.”

I raised my eyebrows and managed to say, “His firm seems to be doing well.”

She nodded. Maybe a smirk? “He’ll be with the firm till the day he dies...which will probably happen at his desk. He’s what you would call committed”—she used her fingers to paint quotation marks in the air— “to his job.”

Silence filled the interior of the car, so I changed the subject. “The years have been a friend to you, Jessie. You haven’t aged at all.”

The corners of her mouth lifted, and she offered the obligatory compliment. “You look the same too.” We both knew better. My dark brown hair had thinned, and an additional fifteen or twenty pounds layered my body. Still, she was sweet to say it.

“I’ve kept track of you through your books,” she added. “I really liked the first two.”

I looked at the book she had placed on the seat between us. “Hope you’ll like this one.”

“And I follow you on Facebook. Imagine *you* on Facebook!”

I shrugged. “You can blame my agent for that. She says I’ve got to build my brand. I’ve kept up with you too.” She lowered her chin and looked at me through raised eyelids. “Well, in a roundabout way. I keep up with Ron through the newspapers, and our friends make sure I see every picture of you that he posts on social media. His pride is obvious.”

“He’s proud of all of his possessions.” Her bluntness came as a surprise.

I scanned the inside of the limo. “And look at you with a chauffeur and all. Miss Highlife herself.”

The cynical expression on her face told me that she knew my enthusiasm was forced. “But am I happy? That’s what you’re wanting to ask. Am I in love and all that?” I said nothing as she shifted positions on the seat. “Ron’s a decent man. He treats me well...”

“But?”

She paused and let her eyes answer the question. Then she changed the subject. “Are you on the road a lot?”

I nodded, thankful to get off her marriage. “Much more than I’d like. The folks on the tour are great, but the traveling sucks.”

“Well, I love your books, and I’m not just blowing smoke. They’re great. I’m serious, they really are.” She paused and lowered her head. “I even think I’ve recognized *me* in a character or two—or is my ego showing?”

“Every female character I’ve ever created contains a part of you. I can’t help it. You’re all over my mind every day. It’s like a curse.”

“Jonah—”

“No, I need to say this.” I put my elbows on my knees and leaned forward. “I’ve asked myself this question. If I’d known the pain I’d feel later, would I have introduced myself to you that first day? Would I have spent so much time with you? If I could have seen where it all would end, would I still start?” My heart pounded, and my hands felt moist. “Well, I would have done it all the same...right up to our talk in the bar. We had so much fun—we were the best of friends. I wouldn’t trade that time for anything. The way it ended almost killed me but at least I have memories.”

“From my vantage point, you’ve got a pretty good life. A successful novelist. Books in all the bookstores—”

“Yeah, my characters are my friends now. There’s too much pain in real friendships.”

She cocked her head to the side, not buying it. “Your books have too many love stories to just be make-believe. They’re obviously based on things you’ve experienced.”

I let out a small laugh. “Love is just an emotion that invades my characters’ innocence.”

Her hand shook as she lifted her half-empty glass and said in a voice so soft that I could barely hear it, “Well, here’s to the innocence *we* once had.”

We talked more about the past, and as we spoke, a flood of memories came to mind, images of how things had been, our friends, our enemies too. Then the laughter died, and the glow in her face disappeared. I imagined her remembering the words we had spoken on that night long ago.

She placed her hand on mine. “Each memory, every single one, is special.”

I resisted the urge to brush a strand of hair from her forehead. “I’ve had this recurring dream. I close my eyes and I’m back in the bar. Only this time I tell you what I was afraid to say

then—that I loved you...that I'd loved you since the day we first met." I placed my hand on the seatback in front of me, steadying my nerves. "You were my best friend, Jessie, but it wasn't enough. You needed me then. I've needed you ever since. Our stars just never aligned."

Her eyes welled up, and she changed the subject again. "Are you..." Her voice broke. "Are you working on anything new?"

I nodded and tried to blink away tears of my own.

"What's it about?"

"It's about how the simplest choices we make can change everything. How casual choices can lead us down a path we never intended to take. It's about a decision that was made on a cold November night and the consequences that followed."

We drained the rest of the champagne in silence. When our glasses were empty, Jessie checked her watch. "I guess I'd better go."

"Big New Year's Eve plans?"

She rolled her eyes. "We're having a few couples from Ron's office over for dinner. He'll love it, but I'm just not in the mood. You?"

"It'll just be me, but I'm used to it."

What followed was embarrassing silence, two people thinking the same thing but not daring to speak the words out loud. It was New Year's Eve. I was all alone, and she was with someone she didn't want to be with. I could have stayed right there inside the limo all night, and I think she would have liked that too. But it wasn't going to happen. She would go her way and I would go mine. There was nothing either one of us could say or do that would make a difference, so what would be the point of bringing our thoughts to the surface?

I didn't want the night to end, but when her chauffeur climbed into the front seat, I opened the door and stepped out onto the wet sidewalk. She slid across behind me and climbed out, too, standing with one hand on top of the car for support. Then she placed her lips against my cheek and let them linger, as if she were trying to make the moment last. With one last feeble attempt at a smile, she ducked back inside the car, closed the door, and stared straight ahead. Through the window I saw her cheeks, now damp with tears, and as I stepped back, the limo pulled away. I watched the taillights of her car move slowly around a corner before converging into a sea of heavy holiday traffic.

I closed my eyes, and, for just a moment, I was back inside the domed Capitol building, where she and I would talk about how each new session of the legislature was like the opening day of school when we'd run with our clique of friends.

Eventually, I snapped back to real time, wiped my eyes with the cuff of my topcoat, fixed my stare on the icy pavement below, and slogged aimlessly down the sidewalk. Cold moisture collected on the back of my neck, and when I stared into the sky, I noticed that the snow had turned to rain.

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A year passed after our chance meeting. I thought about our talk in the back of the limo, analyzed it, and tried to let it go; but it stayed with me. And then, on a late December night in New York, I awoke from a strange dream with a lasting impression of Jessie, her eyes filled with tears.

There was nothing unusual about me fighting insomnia. Still, this time seemed different. Wide awake at three in the morning, I lay in bed in the darkened hotel room, alone as always, with her vision planted in my mind. I stared beyond the window at the street and for a moment

became one of the flakes of snow falling gracefully to the pavement below. I finally gave up on sleep and pulled on a pair of wool slacks, a sweater, and my overcoat, then headed downstairs. The winter air was cutting as I walked the path that I'd taken a thousand times before.

The sidewalks were still filled with people. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, made my way beneath the haloes of streetlights and traffic signals and on down a cobbled alley, letting my mind wander. I thought about the characters who inhabited my books. They lived because of the words I wrote, but all I ever received in return was silence. They were nothing but stick figures like the crude lines I'd sketched as a child. Yet they were my only true companions—anonymous partners who now appeared as a cancer that had metastasized. I took to my little office each day, shielded myself from the real world, and lived within the sentences and paragraphs I composed. I touched the world through my characters, endowing them with pent-up emotions from somewhere deep within; but none of them touched me in return. So I risked nothing.

The story of my real life was far different than that of my characters. While I could manipulate the course of events in my novels and short stories, I had no ability to change the ending of my own experience. Therefore, I suffered.

At a traffic light I stared at the neon signs up and down the block. The incessant flashings formed the message of prophets: the silence dominating my life was of my own making. No one else could be blamed.

I walked for another hour, looking for an answer to what my dream of Jessie might have meant before I finally surrendered to fatigue and headed back to the hotel room. Miraculously, I fell asleep with her image still fresh in my mind.

Hours later I ordered lunch, prepared for an afternoon meeting with my editor, and opened my computer to check emails. Most were unwanted solicitations, but one was from

Lucas, my old friend.

“Call me,” the message read, “I have some interesting news.”

Normally I might have ignored it—I had become isolated, and my communications with old friends were limited—but there was something intriguing about his message, so I dialed his number.

He was upbeat, said he had read my latest book, and offered congratulations. We talked about other friends—who had done what, that type of thing. Then he got to the point. “I heard about an old friend of ours,” he said. “You remember Jessica Boyd?” There was no reason for me to provide the answer he already knew. “I see that she’s gone and done it again.” He stifled a laugh. “Gotten another divorce. Just read about it in *The Washington Post*.”

I didn’t hear another word he said.

Throughout the meeting with my editor that afternoon, all I could think about were Lucas’s words, and I begged off dinner, saying I hadn’t slept well. I took a cab back to the hotel room, where I opened my computer and typed a message to Jessie, hoping her email address hadn’t changed.

“I heard about your separation,” I wrote, then added, “I hope you’re okay.”

I hesitated, though not for long, before moving the cursor to *send*. Then I sat back, betting I would never hear from her. Over the next three hours I repeatedly checked the computer screen before, laughing at myself, I gave up and headed downstairs. Staking my claim to a stool at the hotel bar, I nursed a glass of my favorite Canadian whiskey, shrank into my depression, and began to frame a story about the past twenty-four hours, starting with the dream and the image it had left. At least the story would occupy my time by allowing me to create new characters.

A young couple—twenty-somethings—sat on the two barstools beside me. He sported a

thin black mustache; she was a redhead. I listened to their discussion as I often do when I sit alone in bars, trying to pick up the words and cadence of real speech. It seemed they had attended a play, one that neither found especially rewarding. I pulled out the pocket-sized spiral notebook I always carry, laid it on the bar in front of me, and began to write down some of their dialogue, entertaining myself for a good hour. Then a little before midnight, after I'd ordered several more drinks, I placed my phone next to the notebook. I saw Jessie's name among the list of new email messages. I was afraid to open it, half dreading the reply.

"I'm fine," was her simple response—and then, "I've thought a lot about you."

I quickly replied. "I've thought a lot about you too." My hands were shaking as I added, "I'm sorry things didn't work out with Ron." I was lying and she would know it, but what else could I say?

The redhead to my left raised her voice and chided her date in a good-natured way. They seemed intent on impressing one another, so I was betting they weren't married.

Another email, this one longer, lit up my phone's screen. "I've tried to prove our friends wrong," Jessie's message read. "They've always said I make bad choices in men. Well, it's true, I do, and I did it again. I guess I just wanted to show everyone I could make a relationship work. I know...that's a pathetic reason to remain in a bad marriage, but there you have it."

I nervously jiggled the ice in my otherwise empty glass and sent another reply. "Why now? Did something happen?"

As I waited for her reply, the conversation beside me continued. The young man's voice was fuller now, the alcohol having emboldened him.

Jessie's next email arrived five minutes later, though it seemed like an hour.

"Something happened," was the subject, and a single sentence lay beneath it: "On New

Year's Eve a beautiful butterfly flapped its wings outside my favorite little bookstore in Washington, and the world changed."

I jumped to respond but caught myself. Instead, I recorded the sentence in my notebook: "A beautiful butterfly flapped its wings...and the world changed."

Just then the redhead shrieked, "What's the color of the sky in *your* world?"

I recorded that gem, too, before placing my pen between the notebook and the phone, creating a divide—a wall—to separate one world from the other.

My heart raced as I stared at my phone's screen and read Jessie's message four, five more times. The black font of her email stood out like bold messengers against a brilliant white background. A shiver ran the length of my body, and my eyes shifted from the screen to my notebook, then back again. The bartender appeared and pointed at my empty glass.

I shook my head. "No," I said, feeling more confident now that a decision had been made. "I'm done."

Turning my back on the couple, I emailed another response. "I'm grateful for the butterfly," I wrote. "Can I see you?"

Her next email was all I needed. "Anytime," she said. "Just tell me where and when."

I signed for the drinks and headed for the exit without feeling my feet touching the floor. The rising voices of the couple I'd left behind didn't interest me at all.