

A Tale Of Trudy And Nancy

I thumped to the living room floor with her body pressing me into the oriental rug. My struggles to free myself and rise were muted by some sense of fair play and adult dating decorum. I wanted off the floor, but did not want to hurt her with too explosive an effort to escape. Pinned for the moment, she pressed her lips against mine, and my mind raced for some gentle, artful escape.

Siren Song 1

My adolescence was marred by an extra heavy dose of hormonal drive, but happily my sense of civility, aided mightily by my social ineptitude, kept me on the sidelines through high school, with no harm done.

Perhaps my greatest test in high school came on the night of my senior prom. My circle of friends were all going to the prom event and then a big party at Ralph's family's Pocono mountain home. Many of us thought the after-party in the mountains would be the serious fun, but Ralph's girlfriend Cindy exerted her considerable social control, based on her complete control of Ralph, declaring that prom participation was mandatory in order to attend the mountain house bash. This created a problem for me, as I was not dating anyone, but wanted very much to hit the after-party.

Cindy and her sisters-in-manipulative-control presented the solution: I could ask Debbie to the prom. Cute little Debbie. She occupied the far rim of my social galaxy and I knew almost nothing about her, but promptly sold myself on the idea that the prom and it's after-party, as Debbie's date, would be fun.

A little research was in order. I had limited social access to some of the most stunning and advanced young women in the school. Being merely their own age, I was beneath their notice from a mating standpoint, a noncombatant, and so safe to talk to. These were young women who were seventeen going on twenty-five, the stuff of adolescent fantasy, who had been going to senior proms for years, asked by older guys. They regarded the remaining high school time swirling around them with half-lidded boredom, so much living had they already done. I asked them: did they enjoy these events? No, they did not. The stated reason: the guy did not want to dance, and for most of the evening they just sat.

Aha. The key to prom happiness revealed. And this wisdom was now mine, simply for the asking.

I had use of my family's Chevy Kingswood Estate station wagon, a gigantic behemoth, and as I drove Debbie into downtown Philadelphia, freshly photographed in our ridiculous prom attire, I pronounced that I stood ready to vigorously dance the night away, certain that this would set the stage for a big night. After all, was I not turned out in a powder-blue tux, the lapels of which had flight potential? Was not my shoulder-length shag hairstyle coated with enough hair spray to form a passable helmet? I was so ready.

Debbie responded, "Oh, I don't dance."

Such are the hazards of being manipulated into asking an unknown girl on a first date that also happens to be the senior prom. I was so caught out by this response, completely off my

research findings, that we drove down the Schuylkill Expressway in silence for some time. I recovered myself, resumed the work of making conversation, and we arrived.

True to her word, Debbie would not dance. She would insist upon sitting the entire event out. Not feeling compelled to sit it out with her, I found full employment dancing with many girls I knew whose escorts were also committed to the no-dance approach to the evening. It was a sweaty, happy time. I checked back with Debbie several times to see about dancing, and she remained resolute in her misery. Fair enough.

Phyllis was a frequent dance partner that evening. Intelligent and independent minded, I knew her from several classes but had never considered asking her out. Not a classic beauty, Phyllis was attractive because of her strength and energy, which was now finding expression in a sultry sexuality that was difficult to miss. And now she was for some reason unknown to me deeply angry at her date, and showing sudden interest in me.

Dancing can be a thinly veiled mating ritual, with fast-paced numbers to demonstrate athleticism and a sense of the aesthetic, and slow numbers to gain rather immediate intimate contact. This is certainly how Phyllis saw it. And now she made a proposal: If she and I would leave the prom together, right now, abandoning our respective mismatched dates, she would reveal her garden of delights to me promptly.

Now, for a boy of seventeen who has been obsessing about sex for several years, this was a very attractive proposal, worthy of serious consideration.

I did not have the wisdom or perspective to parse Phyllis's motivations and her willingness to use sex as a weapon, or I would have gone running from the dance floor. For me it was as simple as the prospect of the long sought sex act on one side of the scale, and the seriously bad behavior, the dishonor, of abandoning Debbie in a downtown Philadelphia hotel ballroom, on the other. Gritting my teeth with the effort of it, I politely declined. My deflowering would have to await some other occasion.

Crutches As A Prop

My senior year at Penn State was a time of gathering empowerment. As I drilled deeper into my major field of study, finance, I kept bubbling up to the top layer of students. Key concepts sat naturally with me, and I moved through my coursework with grace and purpose, showed well in my classes, and became confident that attractive and lucrative work waited for me after graduation. Adding to my sense of self was a deep dive into professional ski instruction. This was my second year with the Oregon Hill Ski School, and I was progressing toward testing for certification as a full professional, a credential that could see me hired at any major ski resort in the nation. A big decision was looming: plunge directly into the business world? Or take a few years as a ski professional and then hope to still be taken seriously in the corporate world?

A nasty fall while playing with acrobatic ski jumping put that question to rest. Magnetic resonance imaging did not exist in 1977, so I could not know that I had severed my left anterior cruciate ligament. The knee was weak, painful and unstable, and all my attempts at denial each time the swelling reduced saw me collapsing to the ground in pain anew. So it was that for some portion of my senior spring I made my way between classes on crutches.

There I was: obviously a strong student with a firm grip on some tricky concepts, while also an object of pity as I hobbled about.

Amy did not belong in a 400-level finance class. Registering for it was a mistake and she was at sea. She looked upon the wounded warrior who owned the subject matter and maybe saw an alternative to dropping the class. The flirtation began. She would cook dinner for me in her apartment if I would help her with some classwork. Perched upon my crutches, this seemed a fine trade.

Dinner included wine, which led to more wine, not so much coursework, and the eventual recognition that it was far too late for me to make my way miles across town to my own apartment. Better if I stay the night.

Amy allowed that I could share her bed with the understanding that we would not have sex. This was a source of both disappointment and relief for me. Disappointment, because a full-blooded 21 year old in his prime is driven by a biological imperative. Relief, because some earlier outings had revealed a tendency toward an embarrassingly rapid conclusion once committed to the work.

So we spent a night of gentle fondling, spooning, dozing, and awoke to a bright morning. My forbearance, partly driven by fear of failure to please, was read by Amy as shining proof that next to her lay a real gentleman, a man of his word, a man in control of himself, a man who understood the value of sexual tension and yearning, a man who could be trusted. And now she wanted to screw the daylights out of me. I followed her change of heart and did her bidding, and promptly found further cause to doubt my usefulness in a one-night stand. But I also observed the power of sexual patience, of gently deferring, waiting until a relationship is developed and ready for closeness, intimacy, and maybe a little embarrassment.

The Power Of Leaving

Erie, Pennsylvania is often a grim place. The prevailing weather pattern brings precipitation southeast across Lake Erie from our Canadian neighbors and the Pennsylvania hills immediately south of town scrape it from the sky. Many days of rain, many days of snow. The occasion of a sunny day that coincided with a weekend was cause for festival. Add to this the Rust Belt presence of heavy industry complete with foundries and fly ash, and you have the makings of a dour world view.

GE had hired me into their Erie-based locomotive manufacturing plant, making me one of thirty members of a financial-leadership training program based there. All new to town, we looked to each other for a social life while competing with each other for rapid advancement within GE. Many of my fellow trainees were glum about this posting in GE's little Siberia, and were obsessed with getting promoted to sunnier places as quickly as possible. I took a brighter view, calling out the great parties we had, the beach along the lake, the access to great cross-country skiing owing to the reliable snow cover in winter. My fellows, particularly the ones who had schooled in Boston and knew something about having a good time, would view me with a jaundiced eye when I was effervescing thus.

My old college roomie Mike, now working in Manhattan, suggested a one week trip to the Club Med resort on the island of Guadeloupe. This promised to be exotica in the extreme, something well beyond anything in my life experience, yet the cost was in reach and I agreed. In 1979 the Club Med concept was fresh and raging. Neither the threat of herpes nor AIDS had yet burst into view, and a resort concept that openly promoted casual sexuality was possible. I became

deeply infatuated with a Parisian medical student, settled for a woman from Brooklyn, and came home to Erie with a changed sense of the world and its possibilities.

Now I deeply disliked Erie. Now I was the one seeking a way out within the GE system, just as many of my peers were finally warming to the town and its possibilities.

I learned that upon completion of the training program, I was slated for a two-year assignment in the cost accounting department, not my idea of a good first step toward a shiny and exciting career, and certainly not in the now-reviled Erie. Immediately I was clear on the idea that I would not accept the offered position.

This left me with two possible paths. I could appear to accept the position, while actively seeking work outside GE, or I could be completely frank and truthful and refuse the offer, facing possible, maybe even likely, dismissal. If I appeared to accept, co-workers would begin putting time and resources into my training, only to be betrayed and disappointed by my sudden departure for some job outside GE. If I openly declared my refusal, I could find myself living in my parent's basement in Philadelphia, unemployed and mailing out resumes. I was confronted with a classic high road versus self-interest conflict.

I chose the high road. I told the program director that I did not want the cost accounting job, and in fact, did not see any position in the Erie plant that attracted me. I further stated a keen interest in transferring to GE Credit, headquartered in Stamford, CT, and hoped that some position might be available there. Lastly, I was taking a week off to go skiing in Vermont with friends, and would check back upon my return.

A week later I struggled with whether it was worth shaving off my nice little vacation beard to go in and get fired. I shaved, suited up, and went in to accept my fate.

The news: there is an open position in GE Credit, here is a plane ticket, please go interview for it.

In hindsight I see that the Club Med experience, while not the most virtuous of my life, put my fledgling career with GE in perspective. Since my position was revealed to me as not the shiniest work and existence in the world, I found it easier to take the gamble, be true to my better instincts, and prevail.

This was a very bright, powerful moment in my life, and people around me could see it. I had dared to seize control of my life, on my terms, and won a new beginning in Stamford, CT, just outside of New York City. A very exciting prospect when viewed from a swirl of fly ash on a heavy manufacturing plant in the Rust Belt.

This kind of personal energy has a magnetic quality, and I found people drawn to me even as I prepared to leave. Two weeks before I was to leave for sunny Connecticut, I went on a local ski club day trip by chartered bus, and met a really pleasant young woman named Maureen. She was a good athlete and my command of skiing as a recent ski instructor attracted her notice. But mostly she was intrigued by my story of self-transformation, of taking control of my life, of leaving Erie behind for greater things. Maureen was a newly minted dental hygienist, still lived at home with her parents, and felt trapped and dead-ended. Attracted by my flame, she joined me for dinner that evening, then a party, and, somewhat wobbly, we landed at her home, with her parents away for the weekend. I would stay the night.

Maureen was so very pleasant, and I really liked her, and no how wanted to use or hurt her. Added to this was the knowledge that my early sexual encounters with a new partner were

rarely the stuff of legend. Taken together, I looked for some way to defer a bit. On learning that Maureen had no birth control precautions in place, I offered that we should spend the night together but not consummate. She received this as high gallantry and we found other ways to give pleasure to each other.

A week later, when I was days away from leaving with most of my possessions boxed for shipping, I had Maureen over for dinner. I do not recall what I expected, but what I got was a pre-dinner breakdown from Maureen, with her sobbing in my arms as we stood rocking gently in my living room. She was happy for me but also shattered for herself as she confronted her seeming inability to take similar control of her life and step into her own larger world.

That deep and teary embrace was the end of our intimacy and after a subdued dinner we went our ways. I carried a painful new lesson on love and its consequences, and I wonder to this day what Maureen carried away, and where she ultimately carried it.

The Promised Land

Coming from Erie, Pennsylvania to Stamford, Connecticut was a remarkable lifestyle upgrade for me. Career prospects were bountiful and so were attractive, available women. No foundry smokestacks belched ash, and the GE Capital headquarters building boasted a paved parking lot and even had carpeting on the floors. Quite the upgrade coming from a circa 1940's heavy manufacturing plant.

The cost of living was much higher than I was used to, and I answered a classified ad to rent one of three bedrooms in a house. My new housemates were friends, local to the area, female, and very attractive. We quickly bonded and in less than a month left the house in favor of a beautiful condo flat with a third floor deck overlooking a pool. I would come home from work, pull off my tie, and be presented with a glass of white wine that complimented the cheese on offer. I had come a long way from Erie in a very short time. Both Sue and Wendy were in relationships, but they delighted in bringing girl friends in to meet me.

So. Abundant women and I didn't have to leave the apartment to look them over. So very far from Erie.

I discovered that in the Stamford of 1980, an unattached man in his late twenties with no obvious defects and solid earnings prospects was a rare find. Thus began a period of several years where I had a lovely time making up for the very thin years in Erie.

I slowed down and took a more relaxed approach to the women around me, going out with this one and then that one, my behavior anything but serious or earnest. If a woman that I found attractive wanted to move swiftly to intimacy that was fine by me, but such casual encounters never lasted long. I eventually learned that sex is never really casual, regardless of what is represented. Betrayal is perceived, feelings are hurt, and a reputation for callous behavior can develop without bad intent. I was becoming a man with a checkered history, and I did not like it. In this same time I began to despair of ever finding a true life partner. All around me I saw unattractive marriages and relationships, nothing to rival the lifelong partnership of equals that my parents enjoyed.

A Day On The Bike

I have always enjoyed cycling, often with friends, and occasionally as a solo meander where I might spend the better part of a beautiful day stringing together surprise visits with friends or an unplanned stop in a coffee shop. I had some really great days where I set out on a Saturday morning and did not make it home until near midnight, having spent hours with friends in neighboring towns.

On one such ride I passed through the Connecticut town of New Canaan on a brisk November morning. I noticed a little ski shop and stopped in to warm up and have a look about. Never go food shopping when you are hungry, and, I might add, never look at ski parkas while you are cold. I took an interest in a lightweight wind shell and started into conversation with the sales clerk, Trudy. She was short and compact with an athletic build and dark, pretty eyes. We quickly took an interest in each other and some time later I left wearing my new wind shell, her phone number tucked in its pocket, and a plan to play platform tennis the next morning at a nearby private club followed by brunch. Our plans were a little compressed because I needed to drive to Crotonville, NY in the afternoon to report for a one week management course at GE's internal training campus.

Platform tennis is great fun, and very popular in Connecticut in the cold months. Trudy and I had a fine time and then enjoyed an upscale brunch. Along the way she shared that she had choreographed a play that was to open on the coming Friday at the New Canaan Playhouse, and asked that I escort her to the big event. We planned to first prepare dinner at her New Canaan apartment, enjoy a glass of wine, and then attend the play. Perfect. I gave her a kiss goodbye, promised to see her early Friday evening, and left for Crotonville.

Crotonville

In 1983, GE's training campus on the Hudson River north of New York City resembled a very basic college campus. The residence hall was arranged in quads, each formed by a living room and bath shared by four rooms. The furniture was bulletproof rock maple and the interior walls were painted concrete block. Outdoor walkways led to separate buildings for classrooms and dining. And the bar. GE facilities always had a prominent bar.

The Management Practices Course was intended to sharpen the skills of new managers who were expected to rise rapidly. Late Sunday afternoon we met for the first time: three instructors and thirty students from GE facilities across the nation. We would meet morning, afternoon and evening. There would be group projects that called for working late into the night. This would be no vacation, and the bar seemed safe from us.

The pace was intensive and we quickly came to know each other as we shifted from one break-out group to another to consider problems and prepare to present solutions.

One classmate caught my eye immediately. Nancy Bleecker. A pleasant and attractive woman, I had known of her for years as a rising star in Information Technology, a solid second baseman on GE Capital's championship softball team, and a first rate setter on GE Capital's coed volleyball team. And she was married and had moved away to GE's aerospace plant in Valley Forge, PA.

But now she was back. Her husband of six years had shocked her with his insistence on ending the marriage. She resisted hard until she understood it was really over, and they went on to an

amicable divorce. The ink was barely dry on the papers and here she was, still a bit in shock and not sure where life would lead next.

As the week progressed we sought each other out more and more at meals and breaks. Thursday evening was the one night off, and we skipped the bar in favor of several games of racquetball, then spent hours sitting against rolled up gym mats, lost in conversation. Friday afternoon class was dismissed and I made a point of carrying Nancy's bag to her car and shared with her my growing sense that something important was beginning between us. I asked if we might see each other Saturday evening, maybe cook dinner together at her place, and she agreed. Very bright, shiny, important stuff. I was thrilled to think that maybe, just maybe, I had found my life partner, my soul-mate, my outdoor adventure buddy, all rolled into one.

New Canaan Playhouse

Driving to my home in Norwalk, I considered the evening ahead of me. I had promised Trudy that I would be her date for the opening night of her play.

Utterly aglow with the prospect of Nancy and where it might lead, I no longer had any interest in Trudy. But I had promised to be her escort for the evening and did not want to spoil her opening night by leaving her flat. I resolved to follow through with my commitment to Trudy for the evening, get home early and intact, and focus on this bright new idea named Nancy.

And then my car started to slip and buck a bit. It grew worse and I began to consider that I might not make it home with what seemed a failing transmission. In 1983 mobile phones were not yet a thing, and so I was relieved to make it to my mechanic located just a few blocks from the house I rented with co-workers Charlie and Ryan. I handed over my keys, grabbed my bag and walked home. There I could call Trudy and explain the problem. I'd love to go to the play with her, but had no car for the evening. The only chance of saving the plan would be for her to use her car to come get me. She hesitated for a moment and then agreed. So it was that I arrived at Trudy's apartment in Trudy's car, and we set about cooking up a meal.

We were into our second glass of wine as dinner was sauteing over a medium flame when Trudy's hand came to rest on my backside and offered an encouraging squeeze.

As little as a week earlier I would have found this to be an agreeable change of plan, but now I was distinctly uncomfortable. The idea, the possibility of Nancy was squarely in my mind, and I knew at a gut level I had to honor this idea at all costs. Allowing my evening with Trudy to take a turn for the bedroom would deeply stain my new beginning with Nancy.

And I had no car. I could not leave. Still, I felt I could get through the evening, virtue intact. It would just take a little strength of will. A little resistance to old patterns of behavior. How hard could it be?

Trudy's signals of interest grew more obvious as the wine drew down. She literally chased me around the ottoman in the living room, leapt across it, and landed on top of me on the living room rug. Athletic indeed.

A week prior I would have been enchanted. But not now. My mouth contorted with the pressure of her lips as she drove me into the carpet, I somehow managed to express that we

really ought to rise from the floor and get to her grand opening. Clearly disappointed, she agreed and off we went.

The curtain went up, the curtain came down, and I thought I was close to regaining my home and unfettered self-determination when the other shoe fell. Trudy had told her parents about me, and we were to meet for a midnight dessert at a New Canaan cafe. Horrors. The stress induced migraine headache that had been circling for the kill was now full on me and I was miserable. Still I soldiered on. I was pleasant, maybe even engaging as I fought off the head-splitting migraine, steadfastly plodding toward the finish line.

Trudy was keen on heading back to her apartment. More horrors. By the standard of 1983 gender roles this was an amusing reversal. Trudy had the car. Trudy had control. Trudy wanted to bed me, and I just wanted to get home. Safely home.

I begged. I told her about my blinding headache. I pleaded that I would be no good to her in my condition anyhow. As I got out of her car in front of my home, I murmured something about calling her. I did not.

Cooking In South Salem

Saturday I called Nancy and confirmed our plan. I borrowed a car, drove to her nice little condo just over the line into New York, and we whipped up a stir fry and continued to drill in and learn more about each other. One pleasant evening followed the next as we became very good friends well ahead of any intimacy. What was happening between us was so important, had so much potential, that I was happy to wait. It seemed vital to first really know each other.

Only when it was clear we were in it for the long haul did I risk the possibility of an unsatisfactory first encounter. When she might be understanding. And I might survive a little embarrassment.