

# Transition

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*All love is doomed, seen in the light of death.*

— Anita Shreve, *The Boston Globe*

**I**t's difficult to say how much time passes between Red's final view of his love, and the next time they meet, harder than remembering how long it's been since they first met, or clarifying the contradiction in that first sentence. Of course, whenever it is begins, exists, and ends. Frankie Valli is ruling the charts, and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" is playing so often in the Bar that it seems as if something "too good to be true" is almost a promise. Another lie, as it happens.

But, this is not more about the Kid coming out. If it was, I'd already be carrying on like I did about San Francisco — with flashing lights and celestial choirs — all duly experienced that day, but none applicable to the actual subject of this narrative thread. Nor, is this Red's first love. We've already met Danny, his high-school dream. That ended as such fantasies must, with pain and heartbreak. Then came Dex, for whom he would have died. That also ended as such fantasies must, with heartbreak and pain. Then came Pat, another sort of agony altogether.

For nearly a year, Red lives in unremitting despair. Nor can he achieve closure. Pat has moved back to his ship, so he might as well be on the moon. It's like living with an open wound; not knowing, not understanding, not healing. Never before has the Kid experienced such desolation, and thinking it's all his fault makes it worse. Pain consumes him, his social circle diminishes. He stops playing, stops writing, stops making music. The droogs

move on, returning to their lives, or their fantasies, whichever, and except for me, he's left completely alone. When he returns from California after Christmas he finds a job at a local dinner theater, but it's sheer will that keeps him working. Little by little, he loses himself. Bits of his soul wither and fall away. He learns what it means to be bitter, and he vows he'll never let it happen again.

I have no idea what to do. Red's mental state is beyond me. Most of us are prepared to deal with physical problems; shattered limbs, concussions, sprained ankles and wrists. But, hearts are something else. Walls go up. Communication ceases, and, let's face it, depression isn't credible in the sixties. Red's generation considers psychology a pseudoscience. It will be some time before it becomes fashionable, and everyone in the country (so it seems) starts forking out obscene amounts of money for fifty-minute conversations.

Time does heal. After many months, the numbness begins to fade. But, something is gone. The future no longer seems inviting. Doubt raises its ugly head, and cynicism creeps in. I'm there for him, but he's determined never to fall in love again. I tell him, these things happen. At one time or another, they're part of almost everyone's life. But, he won't listen, and he is now not so kind, not so open, not so sweet. Gradually, he begins composing again, and that helps a little. He starts with an opera, a dystopian saga of war, hopelessness, and ruin. After a while, however, that becomes too dark, even for him. That's when he realizes he has to make an effort to return to the world.

Bit by bit, Red's *joie de vivre* begins to reassert itself. After some success in local theater, he starts "dating" again. The car is still a draw, but he has no interest in relationships. Sex is a constant, domesticity anathema. He collects new droogs, plays poker once a week with some straight buddies and wins more often than not. He also takes his first steps into the world of

pornography. But, he isn't as enthusiastic as he was. Life is not so new anymore, which would have happened anyway. It always does.

It's early July, 1969. The poker game is called off. It's been co-opted for a party. Not a big leap, really. Every week there's more drinking, and last time, they smoked pot. It still doesn't do much for Red. He's beginning to wonder why everyone carries on so. He tries it whenever it's available, then has to fall back on scotch, a habit he picked up in the Navy when all they had was alcohol. Since his ill-fated love affair, he wants to get high, but booze just doesn't cut it. Dramamine used to work better.

His date that night is a boy named Kelly. Nineteen-years-old, not very bright, but really cute, and he can dance. Granted, that's pretty shallow, but the sex is terrific, which is all the Kid wants right then. Kelly goes home afterwards, too, so it's uncomplicated. Red can live his life and continue to heal without fretting.

By midnight, the party is almost out of control. There are, maybe, forty-five guests, drinking, smoking dope, and raising hell. Kelly and Red are entertaining everyone with an obscene version of the Charleston. So, it's not surprising that he misses Pat when he walks in the door.

It's been eleven months. Red has played this scene countless times; so often, he can hardly react. When he first looks up, it's not at all like he imagined. Pat has a date, for one thing. A young woman, if you will, one of Red's card-playing cronies. Who knew? The Kid can't move. His face is frozen. Pat's grin beams like a laser across the room, and all Red can do is stare.

Gradually, he comes back to his senses. He tries to smile, then just waves. Kelly takes his hand and they cross the room. Somehow, the Kid greets Pat's date, introduces Kelly, and gets "introduced" to Pat without screaming. How he does it, I'll

never know. But, he does, and, as might have been predicted, less than an hour later the two of them are in a gazebo, in their host's garden, rutting like a couple of dogs.

Aaaaauuuggggh! Where's his common sense? Where's his self-respect? What is it about love that makes bright people so stupid? For close to a year, Red wants to die. One smile from a dumb kid, and it's back to champagne and roses. Granted, it's the dumb kid he *wants* a smile from. But, eleven months, for christ's sake. Come on.

Thus, begins the next phase of their relationship. But, things have changed. How could they not have? This time, the Kid isn't so quick to invite Pat in. He's still in love. He will be for the rest of his life. But, he's learned a lesson, maybe not a good one, because it's going to be harder now. He learns not to open up, not to trust, not to count on anyone else. Above all, he learns not to let anyone move in, something he'll cling to like a leech for at least thirty years.

For the next few months, they screw when they can, hang together and fitfully attempt to repair their relationship. As an interesting side note, Pat's ship is actually in New York City on June 28, 1969, when *Stonewall* erupts. He's involved to some extent, but he's in uniform, and still wants to use the G.I. Bill to study Economics at Stanford, so he decides not to rock the boat (I couldn't resist) and stays in the background. Whatever, his riot stories are first rate, and when he gets back, he and Red, as well as their peeps, take heart and party like hell.

They're no longer monogamous, which is never exactly mentioned, Red being more prone to sleeping around than Pat. Nor do they discuss the pantyhose question. Also, the fact that Pat is soon to be done with the Navy and plans to return to California takes *forever after* out of the equation. The only thing the Kid remembers from this period is the moon landing on July 20th, 1969.

Red is getting a blow-job when that banal phrase rings out, forever commemorating one of the most significant events in history. “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” Not that getting one’s dick sucked is such a big deal any more. But, how many of us can remember exactly what we were doing when Neil Armstrong said those words. Red can. I should say so. Pat makes sure of that, and the Kid will always love him for it. Three weeks later, Pat is released from the Navy and goes home.

Weeks pass, months pass, years pass. They always stay in touch. Red visits Pat a few times while he’s at Stanford, once for a rousing (straight) frat party, once after he’s actually married a sweet young woman about whom the Kid remembers nothing except that she didn’t seem to notice him getting a blow job in her living room. Then, “Last Romance,” the previous chapter, that last road trip down Highway #1, and the inevitable clutter we accumulate when we move on to other lovers and new interests. That’s a glib way of saying that I can’t remember how much time passes before the phone rings and another wrinkle is added to the long, long love affair with the damn sailor who broke the Kid’s heart.

“Hello.” The voice was unfamiliar. “I’m calling for Red. Is he there?” That’s a stretch, but it mimics our present style.

“This is he?” I remember the Kid raising his voice, making it a question.

“Do you know who this is?” The voice on the phone was soft and feminine.

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“It’s Nancy.”


“Nancy who?”

“Nancy Fitzpatrick.”

“Who?”

“It’s Pat.”

The Kid always pauses here. However long it’s been since San Francisco, this is many years before *transgender* becomes an everyday word. It seems more rumor than fact. For Red, that changes in an instant, and Pat’s choice of the name *Nancy* makes it more surreal than he can fathom. Sonarman 3rd Class Kevin Fitzpatrick is dead. For a while, that’s all there is to it.



As it happens, Nancy is the second male-to-female transgender in Red’s life. The first, the managing editor of a prison jerk-off magazine, makes the change before they meet, so he never knows her as a man. Their relationship is strictly professional. For her, the Kid writes straight porno. She pays cash on delivery, a refreshing change after having to wait six months for Random House. That lasts until she makes a blatant pass, is rebuffed, and abruptly stops buying. #*MeToo* goes both ways, doesn’t it?


But, that was novelty. Having known her only as a woman, there were no pronoun problems, no question of an insensitive faux pas, nothing but curiosity. Why would anyone go through all that? As a cisgender person, Red kept asking that question, particularly when Nancy called one day and told him she had established a relationship with a lesbian named Audrey. What? You cut it off for that?

We now know it’s quite common for female transgenders to seek partnerships with other women. Gender definition has nothing to do with sexual preference. Indeed, one of Nancy’s biggest concerns turned out to be queer men who are aroused by the idea. That’s not the same as *knowing* you need to change. And, it’s permanent. No do-overs. You better be damn sure. Not that knowing any of this would have helped. Red just stood there with the phone in his hand, trying to breathe.

“Uh, Pat?” he asked.

“Nancy,” she answered, firmly.

Finally, he knew why Pat left.



Red wants me to mention that he wasn't shocked. He insists he isn't judgmental, and I admit he tries not to be. But, things have changed since the legs of the world opened. We found our voice and haven't shut up, leaping madly from LG to LGB to LGBT to LGBTQ to LGBTQA to LGBTQAI+ ... every letter and a plus sign shattering another ancient shibboleth.

When Red first spoke to Nancy, she was a stranger. “Pat is dead,” was all he heard. It was almost unbearable; unbelievable, even to him. Sexual surgery was still rare, gender orientation not discussed. Nancy was the second transgender he had ever met. He hates to admit he was shocked. Not everyone is a bigot because they aren't prepared.

Then, weeks do pass, months do pass, years do pass, and relationships are rebuilt, this time without sex. It *is* part of the conversation — Nancy's sex drive is still primarily masculine — but there are no more blow jobs, just old friends sharing dirty secrets, managing to visit and giggle once or twice a year. It isn't always easy. Toward the end, Nancy is living on a two-masted sloop, sailing around the Caribbean, dropping anchor here and there, while Red is fighting off entropy in New York City.

Their last trip together is already fading, so I have to write quickly. Two brilliant days sailing together down Florida's east coast, sheets snapping, pelicans diving, Miami rising like Oz from the sea, then anchoring in Key West. They take Nancy's dinghy to dinner, watch cruise ships disgorge fat tourists, kick chickens out of the way (look it up), and smoke dope.

During a week at anchor, Red learns more about lesbians, transgenders, and lesbian transgenders than he thought there

was to know. For example, they can never just take it easy. Newly built vaginas must be dilated every day, forever. The body thinks of them as wounds; it wants to “heal” them. There are detailed drug regimens forcing constant physical redirection, redistribution, and redefinition, continuous monitoring of unfamiliar health issues, and the endless demands of age.

It caught up with Nancy in September of 2018. She had stretched her health to the limit, exhausted herself physically (living on a sloop is hard work) and been exhibiting disturbing heart symptoms for several months. In the final analysis, she died of the flu. How much her long journey exacerbated that isn't easy to say, but there is this. Of all the people Red has ever known, Nancy is the only one who made a plan and stuck to it. She fought the world, her parents, her body, everything she had ever been, and in the end it made her happy.

The Kid was deeply moved by Nancy's death. For Pat, he will mourn forever. ■