



REJUVENATION

By

Frank Diamond

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Frank Diamond's, "Rejuvenation," has a smooth empathy to it. Apart from having a great name, I was expecting Casino and got an amazing sense of care and kindness, Diamond has done us all a service for showing us what it truly means to take care of yourself and learn to love someone again.

Our main character is a woman of morals and standards, not necessarily mine but I get it, and is adjusting to a life without the man who forced her hand in compromising those morals and standards.

She is better off being without his man-baby ass, but can't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel – more than likely from society instilled anxiety and a lack of self-confidence.

But she is a good woman, and, in the great scope of time, springtime always brings new shoots and winter is over.

“Rejuvenation,” works not only because of its delicacy of character and sense of growth, but for the way in which the style guides you to feel. Some people hate it, some people enjoy it, some people find a nice middle ground, but the 2nd person does have it's place in poking and prodding the reader into an experience and Diamond uses it well to let this character's humanity shine through – maybe even a bit of another's humanity as well.

This story has heart.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

However, that course also looked at the intransigence of human sex trafficking and the harm caused by ubiquitous pornography that's only a mouse click away. Porn rewires the brain, and perverts —perverts as a verb — normal relationships. The girls in the adult entertainment industry often suffer from abuse and drug addiction. They die young partly because they have the highest suicide rate of any profession.

So, porn is harmful? Case closed?

Not necessarily. The adult film industry dwindles not because of any ethical backlash, you also learned, but rather the competition of porn produced by amateurs that floods the internet. Free expression. Good. The college also offered a course investigating porn “as an art form that requires serious contemplation.”

REJUVENATION

“Prude” and “close-minded” and “old-fashioned” and “intolerant.” That mean-spirited chant stains your mind as you hustle through the streets of the Fishtown section of Philadelphia to the El that will take you to your Center City job. You work in the public relations department of one

of the biggest health insurance companies in the country. It pays the bills while you wait for your metaphysical water to break, and you finally give birth to your novel. Of course, unfortunately, that entails actually sitting down and writing the thing from prologue to epilogue. You have about 25 versions of the first 100 or so pages.

“Girl, that doesn’t matter now,” you remind yourself.

That’s on hold. A lot’s on hold. Thoughts of the breakup crowd out everything else.

Andrew called you those names as your relationship deteriorated and passive aggressive crossed the line into cards-on-the-table verbal assault. He spat them out — you saw the spittle like someone sitting too close to a stage can see an actor’s spray — during the screaming finale, when you finally kicked him the hell out of your apartment for good.

He wasn’t finished, though. He tried one final tactic, re-sorting to pleading, which only added to your disgust with him.

“Please, don’t do this to me,” he whined, standing next to his luggage in the hallway.

He’s 6 foot 3, and for the most part retains the broad-shouldered, long-legged, narrow-hipped build of the speedy tight end who’d did college on an athletic scholarship. Dark eyes, dark hair, dark brooding silences. He writes poetry.

On paper, a catch. It’s amazing what dating apps leave out.

You said: “If you forgot something, leave the message with the manager. Do not contact me directly in any way. Understood?”

“Please!”

You closed the door before he could weep again. He’ll live with his parents until he gets his swag back, or at least can fake some swag. Then he’ll latch on to someone else. He won’t want for female companionship, especially if the new girl buys.

“I am not a prude,” you keep telling yourself as you pick up your pace to catch the train that will get you to work about 15 minutes early. After all, the two of you cohabitated for more than a year, a situation that must not have pleased your parents at all but, hand it to them, they never voiced their opposition. You’re not old-fashioned. You like sex. You like.... But thank-fully you never needed to explain any of this to the folks.

“You’re an adult,” Mom had said evenly when you disclosed the new living arrangement, and as Dad banged on some pipes down the basement.

Twelve years of Catholic school education had been erased in the first semester of university, when you took a women’s study course. The syllabus roved over various topics, but primarily focused on subjugation enforced through the patriarchal systems of mainstream religions.

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These contradictions remained unresolved on graduation day. You'd figure it out eventually.

Meanwhile, Andrew had been seriously contemplating porn for some time before you found out. A distracted air that seemed to ride him like a low-grade fever had been the first clue. Less vroom! in the bedroom. The final clue had been an easy find: You checked his browser history on the computer.

“This is what you've been doing while you were supposed to be looking for work?”

“It won't happen again. I swear.”

He got a job, finally, but kept sneaking about watching porn again and again and again and that's when you stared down the barrel of a future that would entail couples therapy, re-lapses and tearful promises, feelings of inadequacy and despair as he fed the monster that mattered more to him than you. He even tried to enjoin you to watch with him but, no, you saw what he'd seen and how could you love a man forever who's enthralled by those images, those videos? You, yourself, the prude, had years before watched porn but that had been a stage you regretted and not a lifelong companion, as apparently Andrew wanted to make it. You are not old-fashioned. But what he watched made you nauseous. Those girls were physically abused.

“It won't happen again,” Andrew had cried. “I swear.”

“Yes, it will. But not under my roof.”

You hurry on. Overcast gray enshrouds the streets. Where the hell is the sun? The nights get longer, in a few weeks will be Thanksgiving. No more hopscotching between Andrew's and your families. At least there's that.

Still, the coming four-day holiday weekend stretches out before you like an ocean missing an horizon and you're already bracing yourself for the solicitous avoidance of the Andrew topic by your parents and siblings. You'll play with the nephews and nieces a lot, that's what you'll do. You'll organize touch football during traffic lulls on a back street, making sure the littler kids don't get run over and killed. That would put a damper on things.

You know Mom already spread the word. You can just hear her: “I don’t believe she’s quite ready to talk about it yet.”

But one of your sisters, the one you’re closest with, might probe a bit. Oh, hell, maybe you’ll just plead COVID and stay home this year.

As you ascend the El steps to the train platform, the scenes of the breakup replay as they’ve been replaying almost constantly since that night. You say, “I refuse to think about this anymore,” but then that’s all you do. You just might still love him, that’s the problem. Crazy. Why?

You two talked about the future: career paths, a home in the burbs, rug rats.

Now look. You’re 30 years old without a boyfriend. You’ll avoid the minefield of the empty and desperate hookup scene for as long as possible. (Is forever possible?) Friends try to cheer you, but you don’t like that either because it smacks of condescension. Most of them are married or engaged and a few of them have had babies and you want that too, damn it! Is that so bad?

“Will I ever get it?”

You think of the older women you’ve known who’ve either never married or married and then divorced and who live alone. Most of them seem happy enough. And some of the women who did marry and had children and fulfilling careers wound up miserable; you can see it in their faces.

Lincoln said: “Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.”

Well, maybe.

As you bustle into the El seat that you usually get (commuting is an art) and gaze out at the graffitied encumbered neighborhoods the train passes through, the Andrew loop starts all over again.

You scrunch against the window side more when someone plops into the seat next to you. You’re about to whip out your cell to ward off chit-chat when the guy (you can tell it’s a guy) says: “In all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world....”

You think: “What’s this shit? I don’t need this,” but then see that it’s only Mike Lancaster, one of your work buddies.

“Casablanca,” he explains.

“I know. Old movies are a hobby.”

“Old movies are an obsession with me.”

After preliminaries — “Hey!” “Yo!” — you and Mike ease into the easy rapport of two in the trenches, complaining about bosses, about technological failures on the job, about the “now you see it, now you don’t” offer to employees to work from home. Hybrid’s the word, haven’t you heard? Big Brother needs to see you at least three days a week.

You’d discovered only recently that you and Mike have prob-ably taken the same train into work on those days when you both needed show up, but never ran into each other.

Until now.

You and Mike sit a few cubicles away from each other and you like the guy, but not in that way because first of all, you were all Andrew, and second, Mike’s not really your type. A bit overweight, somewhat of a know-it-all, a tendency to laugh at his own one-liners even if no one else does.

Calling him an Eagles fan doesn’t capture it. He’s been on TV at least three times; one of those guys spelling out the team’s name with a letter painted on his chest and letting the world know who he roots for even when it’s cold enough to make eyes tear up; even when snow settles like pads on his bare shoulders.

Mike’s a bit much.

“Two more weeks,” Mike says.

He’s leaving to go to an advertising agency that one of his friends started.

“I’ve got stock in the company.” He may be joking; you can’t tell.

“And how many employees, Mike?”

“Let me count.” Fingers flip up as if he might be ordering drinks. “Two.”

“Good luck with that,” you say.

Mike’s short, not much taller than you and because he looks like a guy who can’t defend himself, he’d gotten a black belt in karate. You found that out about him. His light brown hairline rests high upon his forehead and promises to recede even more. A bald spot about the size of a tennis ball sits at the center of his cranium; the second front of the anti-follicle attack.

You wish he’d lose the beard that he’d grown probably to compensate for the creeping baldness; it makes him look older and exposes sadness in the eyes that perhaps he should keep to himself.

You stop: Why should you care? Even though you find his basic goofiness attractive, and he makes you laugh, you recount the reasons that you draw a line: It’s too soon, you’re not ready for another serious relationship. This crazy scheme to team up with his pal to start an advertising

agency can easily fail and you don't want to be paying the freight again. Most importantly, he's taken. You've met his significant other. She's nice enough.

Mike met Andrew at the same company event and now asks how he's doing.

"Nix," you say.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

You usually respond: "I'm not," but realized people saw through that.

Instead, you impart some old-fashioned wisdom: "Cherish your girlfriend."

He shakes his head, casts his eyes down on his hands resting on his thighs.

"What?" you ask.

"Nix."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Some things you need to talk about," he explains.

"Who?"

"Couples."

"Meh. Talking," you say.

"And some things you need to let go."

"Not always possible for the obsessives of the world."

"Until the next obsession. What happen with you and ... Andrew is it?"

"Was it."

"Well?"

"You, first."

He sighs, glances at you. He usually doesn't hesitate to share.

"What the hell, I'm leaving the company anyway," Mike says.

"Yeah, what the hell."

“What happened with us? Everything and nothing and through-out it all, the one big thing.”

“Being?”

“Kids. Children. I wanted to get married and start a fam-ily. She said that’s what she wanted, too. She said. But then I stumbled upon some text messages....”

“Right. Stumbled upon.”

“OK. She acted strange and I looked. Guilty. But I’m glad I did because I found out about him.”

“Sorry.”

“You know, I always wonder what goes on in the head when a guy finds out his girl cheats and he murders her. I mean to kill somebody. How can that happen? You read those stories all the time. You see them on the news. A guy kills someone he swears he loves. I could never understand that. Then this happens and I think, ‘I kind of get it now.’”

“Mike.”

“Joking! I would never, of course.”

“Good to know. I don’t want to be a character witness.”

He becomes animated, embarrassed by the darkness he’d re-vealed.

“It’s been a month. I’m OK. I’m moving on.”

“Good to know.”

You don’t reveal that despite the fact that men commit over 90 percent of homicides in the United States, you discovered during the Andrew breakup that if pushed enough you could kill, and not just in self-defense. Of course, this is theory and thoughts are not actions. So you keep telling yourself anyway.

Now, you say: “Not wanting to have kids. That doesn’t sound as if it was the main problem.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t, but I think it was. Cheating, that’s her changing the subject. Not only does she not want kids but she feels that it’s immoral to bring children into such a world. Me, I think kids make for a better world. I think kids are....”

He sighs, looks toward the front where passengers gather to get off at the next stop.

“Are what, Mike?”

“It makes me sound like my grandmother.”

“Spill.”

“OK. I’ll say it. I think kids are a blessing.”

He bows his head. This isn’t the Mike you’re used to.

“A blessing,” you repeat.

“And I don’t mean that in a religious way. I am not reli-gious. Not really. But, yeah, kids are blessings, I believe.”

You say: “She could have just told you that she didn’t want kids.”

“Amen.” He clears his throat and then adds: “Your turn.”

But they had reached their stop.

“Next time,” you promise.

When they get off, he stops on the platform, immobile as everybody around you scurries about. You wait.

“Listen,” and when he says your name, the voice cracks a bit, “I always found you attractive.”

“Shouldn’t you be surprised? You’re not.

“How so?”

“Your looks. Your laugh. The way you manage to exert your calm over a project when things aren’t going well, making the rest of us feel calm, too.”

“Sounds like something you memorized.”

He looks at the ceiling, the way he does.

“Look, we’re both bruised. I’m just saying that when I leave the company we can get together for a bite and a few drinks.”

“Can we have this conversation walking? I don’t want to be late.”

That’s when he comes out with the date for the date. The first Friday after his last Friday on the job.

“Nothing major. Nothing dramatic. Hey, maybe karaoke. You like karaoke?”

“Sometimes.”

“The acoustics down here are great, by the way.”

“Please don’t.”

Too late. Mike breaks into song.

Remember to let her into your heart

Then you can start to make it better

Somewhere someone yells an echoed approval and claps.

Mike sounds exactly like Paul McCartney, circa 1968. You shiver in the wake of a sudden warm breeze kicked up by the passing locomotive two tracks away. You swallow, and fear that you might tear up. Do your knees buckle a bit?

All you can say is: “You’re good.”

“That song’s about the rejuvenating power of love.”

That snaps you out of it: Mike being Mike.

You say: “I thought it was about John Lennon’s son.”

“That too. It’s about a lot of things.”

“So, you’re into old songs and old movies.”

“And new songs and new movies.”

You say: “Well, that narrows it down. Shouldn’t we walk?”

We start off.

“You do want to have kids, right?”

“Mike! Are you kidding? A question like that while we’re just, really, still only friends?”

You smile, though. He’s certainly unique.

“Sorry. Theoretically, I mean.”

Your sigh confirms it.

You sense that he's about to belt out another song.

"Mike! Don't!" you say.

"OK, but I'm still waiting for an answer."

"Yes. I'll go out with you. Holy mackerel."

"Mackerel. Love it!"

He looks down, you look up. A smile so big spreads across his face that it chases the sadness from his eyes.

"Just one date," he reminds you on the escalator. You must be looking skittish. "Nothing major."

"One date," you promise. But you sense it'll be more.

That's when you realize that you actually skipped a few times while walking beside him. When was the last time you skipped like a kid? You're smiling. The Andrew breakup loop: Where'd it go? You've escaped it, at least for now. At least while you're with Mike Lancaster.

"The rejuvenating power of love," you say. "Sounds about right."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: "Rejuvenation" came about for the simple reason that I wanted to write a short story with a happy (but, hopefully, not sappy) ending. My daughter, and some nieces and nephews are about the same age as the narrator, and I've heard them talk about the modern dating (and mating) scene and think that it just must be really difficult to have to navigate those waters in the online age. Trying to live a meaningful life and adhering to ethical standards not only matters but are ingredients for having fun, and possibly even finding happiness. My stylistic influences are all over the place, but Margaret Atwood and Raymond Carver would certainly be on my list.

AUTHOR BIO: My poem, "Labor Day," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. My short stories have appeared in *RavensPerch*, the *Examined Life Journal*, *Nzuri Journal of Coastline College*, the *Fredericksburg Literary & Art Review*, and the *Fictional Cafe*, among many other publications. I have had poetry published in many publications (including in *Fleas on the Dog*). I live in Langhorne, Pa.