

7



By

Fred Andersen

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Fred Andersen's, "Seven Snow Whites," is nostalgic, inventive, and reminds me of the travels of life and the way in which we can look back (sometimes) with a calm sense of satisfaction. It would be hard to peg only one genre to this story, but I lean more towards the classification of coming-of-age tale than traveling memory or journalistic moment – both of which still would apply to this piece as well. In essence, our protagonist is young and adventurous and wants to experience more of life. His travels take him up North from New Orleans and he ends up having one of those lessons-in-life moments that occur when you're meant to make lasting memories but you never know that in the present. I think that one of the biggest strengths in this piece is the way in which Anderson is able to compound the lives and expressions of so many characters within one piece. As the reader, you get to meet these people, hear their stories, engage with world that is being created*

in the text. There is power in being able to mitigate the way in which people tell their history, and Anderson has done a great job bringing these fairy tales together. Nice work.

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

Dennis first showed up at a party, just after we moved in last January. Friend of a friend. He came off as this suave character, with the thrift-store sport coat and fedora. Diana went for him right away. She's got a hard shell, but soft in the middle, like an éclair. The rest of us saw where it was headed, were not surprised when he quickly evolved into—or revealed—his true calling: unemployed philosopher. Good weed, deep ideas. But not without his interesting facets nonetheless.

SEVEN SNOW WHITES

3410 words

In 1933 seven fictional women graduated from Vassar College. They would later be known as *The Group* in a book written by Mary McCarthy, who went to Vassar, and seemed to be writing about people she had known. In 1937 Walt Disney produced a movie called *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The women in *The Group* and the dwarfs with Snow White are all characters in a story, but each also stands for something, a single trait or a set of characteristics. In *Snow White* this seems clear, because the dwarfs are their names: Happy, Sneezy, Sleepy, Grumpy, Dopey. Bashful, and Doc, who seems older and wears glasses. In *The Group*, it's not so simple. Whether the characters are based on real people or not, they mostly embody the intellectual, social, and artistic sensibility of the author. Kay is the tragic engine, whose wedding and funeral, only seven years apart, bookend the story. Helena is “droll,” stays single and becomes the Joy Behar of the group; Dottie sleeps with a guy, gets a diaphragm, then breaks up with him; Polly gets involved with socialist neurotics; Priss has a baby and gets caught in a breast/bottle war begun by others; Libby tries to make it in publishing and finds out that poets

don't just *write about* rape. One character who might qualify as the Snow White of the story is rich and beautiful Lakey, but she moves to Europe early on and comes back a lesbian (another character, Pokey, is omitted here despite her wonderfully dwarfish name, because she turns most of her story over to her butler).

But really, the only possible Snow White in the Group is McCarthy herself. Though *The Group* was not published until 1963, Mary McCarthy had been a star of the East Coast literary/political/intellectual world for decades. A fiercely independent female, she made enemies and attracted lovers and husbands who were, or almost were, her equal in wit and erudition. She wasn't terribly sweet to her characters in *The Group*, who are mostly voices for McCarthy's opinions on subjects from class structure to architecture to cooking: ". . . and a marvelous jellied salad called Green Goddess, made with lime gelatin, shrimps, mayonnaise, and alligator pear, which could be fixed the night before in ramekins and then unmolded on lettuce cups." But people read *The Group* for the discussions of sex: "'A climax,' he added, more sharply. 'Do they teach that word at Vassar?' 'Oh,' said Dottie, almost disappointed that that was all there was to it. 'Was that . . . ?' She could not finish the question. 'That was it,' he nodded." (Most of the men in the book, most of the time, are strutting jackasses).

The Group was published in 1963, some thirty years after the events portrayed therein, but still just the bare dawn of explicit sex being permissible as artistic expression and open discussion. Some of McCarthy's former classmates took umbrage at how they thought they were being portrayed. But the book got major reviews, and it sold. Big.

In 1971 my friend Johnny and I on a drunken impulse to "see" New York drove his VW up from New Orleans. Having seen and been impressed, we decided to visit Boston and continued on through a glorious autumn afternoon listening to the Orioles-Pirates World Series

of that year. Johnny soon had to get back for school but I decided to stay in Boston. I had a rolled-up blanket, a gym bag, a paperback of *Goodbye to Berlin*, and some apples I'd stolen in Chattanooga. I met one woman in New York and six more in Boston, five of whom lived in a big flat on a hill in Brookline with a hippie named Dennis. Seven Snow Whites, in a Group. We were all young, primed for expected adventures and satisfactions, children playing at being adults, cuz that's how children learn, by playing. The future was a question to be answered. Diana was maybe Doc, Rachel maybe Priss, Anne was pretty, bashful and usually off with her guy until she wasn't. Gail was either Sneezzy or Helena, Cheryl might have been Dottie, with almost too much experience. Or maybe she was NY Camille, already working her way back to innocence. And Judy was the girl I met at the Halloween party.

These are their stories.

Gail.

These two long-hair guys show up and you could just tell, out of town. Like way out. The tall one with all the jokes bought us a pitcher of beer, and then asked if they could crash at our place. "Or we'll have to go back to New York."

I leaned toward him—the place was loud. "They've got this wonderful thing now, called a hotel."

He laughed. "Oh, yes, quite sophisticated."

I said, "Don't they have those out in Wyoming?"

"What's Why-home-ink?"

A little later the better-looking one with the Chinese eyes told Rachel and I that he was a grad student at Tulane. "They call it the Harvard of the South."

He chuckled, knowing the punchline. Which I supplied.

“Harvard, the Tulane of the North.” This was after we switched to Harvey Wallbangers, so everyone laughed. But if this guy is paying tuition like they pay at Harvard, why are they sleeping on peoples’ floors?

Diana

Rachel, Gail and I all came from Long Island. Rachel went to my high school, though we weren’t close then; Gail was from Hicksville, to her everlasting amusement. We each followed our own path to end up at one of the fifty colleges of Boston, in the same dorm at Mt. Ida, and we three became the Girls from Lon Guyland, whether we wanted to be or not. A lot of the girls there were very WASPy. They thought they were at Vassar or Radcliffe or someplace most of us couldn’t have got into or afforded, even if we wanted to go there, which I did not. Plus the three of us were all in Elementary Ed, so it sort of made sense that we became fast pals, and here we are, three years later, still dorm-mates, you might say.

I have one of the two front rooms on either side of the living room. It used to be the den or library when this was a big family flat. Cheryl has the room on the opposite side, which was the dining room, you assume, because it connects to the pantry and kitchen. Both these rooms have wainscoting, fancy light fixtures and double doors that open onto the living room. Rachel and Anne have the two rooms behind mine with a shared bath, but no windows, and Gail has the back room that looks out on the yard and the neighbors’ yards.

Cheryl is the youngest of us, though you wouldn’t think so talking to her. She has green fingernail polish and plucks her eyebrows excessively. She’s an artist at heart; has read everything and seen every artsy movie. She works as a clerk at the water department, and every

Friday she celebrates her paycheck and two days of freedom by bringing home a bottle of Johnny Walker Black, which we all drink as fast as possible, and do knife hits of hash. She says I have an “impish smile”—that’s how she talks. “It gives you away. You’re not a kindergarten teacher, you’re not Jenny.”

“Who’s Jenny?”

“From *Love Story*? You haven’t read that book?”

“No.” I had avoided it on purpose. “It got terrible reviews.”

“Oh, I know it’s crap. But I tell you, sweetie, once you start, it’s like watching a train wreck. You can’t look away.”

“Well,” I had to laugh. “I have been in a *streetcar* wreck. I had to walk home from Kent Street.”

“But no, you’re more like a mythical heroine, like Andromeda.”

“There she goes again!” cried Gail. “With the litur-arry shit. Diana, you should never read that Love Story book. He makes a terrible crack about Mt. Ida girls. Asshole!”

Rachel

Dennis first showed up at a party, just after we moved in last January. Friend of a friend. He came off as this suave character, with the thrift-store sport coat and fedora. Diana went for him right away. She’s got a hard shell, but soft in the middle, like an éclair. The rest of us saw where it was headed, were not surprised when he quickly evolved into—or revealed—his true calling: unemployed philosopher. Good weed, deep ideas. But not without his interesting facets nonetheless.

“So you get it, right?” He’d fix those serious eyes on you. “That those who believe in JFK conspiracy theories are missing a much larger conspiracy. He was killed by the KGB and the CIA because he wouldn’t go along with the plan to escalate the Vietnam War, which would isolate Red China, which is the real threat to Western values. You know, there are no flies in Red China?”

“Really?” I might have offered. “Why not?”

“They killed them all. That’s a level of fascist regimentation the West can only dream about.”

Soon he moved in to Diana’s room. Her rent did not change—the apartment is in her name. Total \$375—\$75 each. But Dennis contributed to the food fund, and in fact, since he didn’t have a job, he soon became the main shopper for the weekly list that hung on the wall by the stove—the basics: bread, vegetables, soup, cereal, milk. And he helped take care of our cars, the plumbing, the cleaning, and so forth. Kind of like having a live-in houseman. Except he was so not a servant. Like the time he thought the cable box on the power pole outside the front window was spying on us somehow, so he climbed up there with some clippers to cut the wires and nearly electrocuted himself and would have broke something except he landed on the hood of the car down below. And the telephone was out for a week.

Eventually Diana broke up with him, but he wouldn’t leave. We all decided he could sleep in the corner of the living room on a mattress on the floor, if he picked it up every day and put it in the stairwell. Which he usually did. And he got the hall closet for his stuff. For this accommodation he paid \$25 a month, which cut everyone else’s rent by five dollars. So there was some good out of it

Judy

At Peter Bent Brigham, I was a nurse.
Cheryl came in for cysts in her uteruse
From talking we knew we liked one another
We shared a kind of sense of humor
Thank goodness she didn't have a tumor.
Now she's going with Jimmy my brother
Who still lives in Reading but visits often.
At the Halloween party Cheryl lay in a coffin
And I met this new guy from someplace or other.

Camille

I picked Karen up at the housing office and we headed up to the West Village. It was early, almost no one around, which can be a blessing, I suppose, except when you need to come up with the rent by Monday. These two boys were there. The tall one in a flannel shirt, the other one in a pretty tight tee with muscles to burn. There was that song then, "Country Roads." That's what I thought these two looked like, and they had stumbled in by accident, which people sometimes do at the Troika, but much more often, they come in with a purpose.

We, Karen, Odessa and yrs truly, were waiting to dance and chat and maybe end up on a date. Being so dead we were sitting in our blooming bodices alternately complaining, joking, and gossiping. In this dome of boredom we started playing with The Roads. I was pretty sure they'd never seen anything like us, but Muscles said "We're both from out west, but we came up from New Orleans. We been in The Quahtah."

As if that explained something. Things picked up when a group of white-american kids walked in all Dolled up in platform shoes and polyester V-neck cut to the navel. And the girls also looked nice. Nicer, really, since girls know how to dress and boys don't, even when they put on makeup.

Odessa took Muscles out for a spin. I said to Flannel, "You're one of them construction boys."

"Yeah, but I just quit. So I'm travelin.' Or dis-lodged. We slept in the car last night, in Jersey. Sittin' up." He looked across the bar at the beer bottles standing against the mirror on the back wall, softly lit, like chorus girls. "Schaefer. Is that any good?"

"Lord I never touch that nasty stuff. All yellow and foam. Like piss."

"No it's *amber*. And only Oly has pee in it."

He wasn't making sense. Deliberately, I could tell. I gave up.

He ordered a bottle of Schaefer. "You need a drink, there. Whadda ya like?"

"I like rum and pepsi."

"Not coke?"

"Coke is repulsive. Walter makes mine special." With a trick shot glass that looks full but only has about a thimbleful inside. It's for those who think young, and us girls who have to keep our minds clear all night.

"I have to say, women here in The Apple sure know how to dress. We were up on Fifth Avenue a little while ago, and down here too. You look like you're goin' to the ball."

"The Hooker's Ball," I said. "This ain't nice, it's trashy. For the clubs, for dancing and going to Nathan's."

The Country Roads ended up spending the night and a couple more with Karen and I. So they saw how we are at home, which is casual but still stylish. Flannel did not use deodorant but flossed his teeth three times a day. On Monday his guitar was stolen from their car, which was not locked—simple child—parked over by Cooper Union. Then they left for Boston. But we made the rent.

When I think of him now it's in the flannel shirt, sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched over the guitar trying to play "Country Roads." But he plays like he's using a comb.

Anne

I'm sitting in an old barber chair in this fake-funky *fun* restaurant I call home thirty to forty hours a week waiting for my last table to shovel it in maybe order dessert and most important leave a tip. I was *never* going to be a waitress but at this point my whole life is a confusion of was-never-gonnas and if-I'd-only-knownas, and hovering over it all, I-can't-go-on-another-daya, and above that sorry-dear-you're-stucka. Joe is gone not just from my life but from my zip code and from my future. He couldn't resist the lure of the West Coast, and more particularly the lure of the ex-girlfriend lying out there breathing alluring breaths.

I wish I could just say that's-six-months-of-my-life-I'll-never-get-back and move on. In fact Joey-boy gave me a valuable lesson: I can't be someone to someone until I am someone to me. A centered and together person. Which oddly enough is what I thought I was when Joe and I were happy. And we *were happy* damn it! Until we weren't. Or I guess he weren't. Cuz I'd go back there right now, blissfully ignorant, despite that sword hanging by a thread.

Cheryl

After dinner we walked down by the river in the darkness. The wind was blowing cold, rattling a loose No Swimming sign. The lights of Cambridge shimmering on the water.

“When I was a boy,” Jimmy said, “I used to go down to the Skookill at night by myself, and just stand there, for hours.” His voice was so low, and he was looking out at the river, so I could barely hear him. But then a puff of breeze brought his words more distinctly, as if the wind itself were talking. “My older brother had just died, and my mother was so goddam sad. I was only twelve years old, I couldn’t help her and I couldn’t stand to be in the house. She cried every night, or got into these long emotional phone calls with her friends. I had to get out.”

He was silent for awhile. I squeezed onto his arm, fighting the cold. I said, “That’s how old I was when my parents finally got divorced. I was glad my father was gone, though I loved him. But he had put her through too much hell. No matter what he did she wouldn’t divorce him, until finally. She focused on us kids and her chores every minute of the day until dinner was over and the dishes clean. Then she put herself to sleep with vodka.”

The wind blew and we stood there a long time. “So we all have to die,” he said. “Because the reality is we’re really each of us alone in the world. And who would want to live forever alone?”

“That’s so dark.”

“Actually, pink. Floyd.”

I laughed, though I didn’t get it. Later, I got it—but not really.

They let me sleep on the couch at first, in the living room, where Dennis had his mattress in the corner and slept with a shirt tied around his head with two black socks. Then Cheryl started spending a lot of nights away with her boyfriend Jimmy, and she let me stay on the other

twin bed in her room. Sometimes she would have a guest—Jimmy, I presume, but I was pretending to be asleep and never opened my eyes.

On Christmas Eve Eve, we had a nice dinner at the flat. Rachel made Cosmic Roast Beef with carrots and onions cooked in the juice, mashed potatoes, green beans with almonds that were either slivered or silvered—never did get totally straight on that because there was also wine and rum and whiskey involved. Christmas Eve itself, Gail and her boyfriend were the only other ones in the house. Everybody else had somewhere to be. Two days later I left for home. I got a ride to New York with Judy's father, who had come to visit for the holiday.

The question is, who was I in this story? Prince Charming? No. Since I met all the Snow Whites as a guest, I did not make a single romantic advance toward any of the women, nor they to me, though I suspect Gail might have wanted to. Was I a single trait dwarf? Or a McCarthyesque 'thirties chauvinist pig? Not those either. I had grown up with brothers but no sister. This few months was my crash course in feminine . . . presence, I guess you might call it. Proximity with no intent; a female person peering into the refrigerator, or walking around in rumpled pajamas, or sharing a drink just to be drinking. And this was the very early seventies in Brookline among college-educated self-directed women who had experienced some things and wanted to experience some more. "Hey baby, how about a leetle (whatever whatever)?" would have brought laughter, most likely, or low-grade scorn.

Jack

I gave Judy's friend a ride to New York. He had been staying there, not with Judy, he didn't mean anything to her. Just at the house, like they do now. He was an okay kid. He said, "I'll be glad to get back down south. Two months of Boston winter is enough for me."

I said, "It's not even New Year's."

"It's enough for me. I just came up here to see what it's like. So I came, I saw, I slipped on the ice." He chuckled at the little joke, didn't bother to see if I got it. What he surely did not understand—because how could he—is that I see the world now with the same eyes I did when I was his age. I am still that same kid. So I told him that. He gave me a look which I could not read—after all, I barely knew him. He didn't know exactly where he was going, so I dropped him off at the Jackson Heights subway—you can get anywhere from there.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *When I finished four years of my college draft deferment and found out I was 4F anyway (a very quaint sentence), I took a graduate course in writing. Not in style or technique, but in content. For most of the next decade, I lived short periods in various towns and cities, traveled by thumb, by bus, by "borrowed" car, worked mostly menial jobs, seeing how people act, hearing what was on their minds and in their hearts. I kept journals, wrote bad poetry, and read: John Barth, James Baldwin, Austen, Nabakov, Hunter Thompson, Chandler, Mosley, Dorothy Parker, Bob & Ray, Mad and National Lampoon. There came a day when I decided to write fiction, and it was mostly about characters like those I had met in these non-adventures. And I am still writing about them.*

The Snow Whites are based on a real experience, my first encounter with women living in their natural environment. And Jack's statement about youth and age rang a bell that I still hear. Writing this I was of course thinking about The Group, but also Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories, especially the ones about his life among working class people in shabby neighborhoods. Camille is also based on a real person, but the Troika bar is more or less transplanted from Herr Issyvoo's Berlin. And to be clear, I never stole any apples in Chattanooga. That was Johnny.

AUTHOR BIO: Fred Andersen is an author of short stories, novels, and historical pieces who lives in Arizona. His stories and articles have appeared in *Imitation Fruit*, *Thriller*, *Close 2 the Bone* and *American Heritage*. His novels include two Classic Hollywood murder mysteries, *Lily Torrence*, and *Pamela Carr*, which delve into the lives of brilliant, ambitious and often loathsome people who made movies long before the era of #metoo, when rape, "accidental" overdoses, homosexuality, and mobster connections were never more than hinted at in the media, or hardly even in private. Fred's other books include *Line in the Sand*, a contemporary story in which a Mexican drug cartel takes on a Phoenix elementary school teacher . . . and loses; and *The Dead Cartoonist*, about an artist/writer whose life hardly matches his gentle family comic strip, and who may have died or been kidnapped, but let's pause the story to read a few cartoons. You can find out more about these books at fxandersen.com (link?) or at <https://www.amazon.com/Fred-Andersen/e/B07XJL38QK> (link?)