

# Goddess

*by* Ben Tanzer

"So, do you still think I'm hot? I mean, do you think men still find me attractive?" Jenny asks.

This is never a good question to answer, much less entertain. I know this as surely as I know anything. Still, let's break it down. I am married. Jenny is married. There is history. I know her husband Robby. Robby has a violent streak. And Jenny is not all there anymore.

And yet, I have wanted to fuck her since high school and so maybe we could get together on the sly. No feelings involved. No strings attached. No nothing. Just sex.

"C'mon," Jenny says, "it's just a question and you don't have to read anything more into it than that."

She says this as we sit in a booth in the back corner of Thirty's and she is staring into my eyes. She says this with her hand now resting on my shoulder and knowing there's history.

She remembers that, doesn't she?

We're in high school, its senior year and Jenny is a goddess, an untouchable goddess with a brown bob haircut, freckles, crazy green eyes and ridiculous soccer calves. Everyone wants her. Not just me, though maybe no wants her more than me, something she knows all too well.

She and Robby though, they've been together since eighth grade and nothing is going to change that, regardless of how many other girls he bangs. It's a love story. Jenny is the beauty and Robby is the beast. We're all friends, but it doesn't change the fact that he is a behemoth, a football playing, head-smashing, unhinged behemoth.

Now, does that mean Robby goes around beating people up? No, it doesn't, because one, if it doesn't involve Jenny he doesn't really care, and two, he knows what he's capable of when he's enraged and he would rather avoid having anyone else end-up like Jimmy Woods.

Jimmy Woods thought it would be funny to provoke Robby when we were in ninth grade and egg him on from behind as we waited in line to go into school.

“What's up you big retard, how's the weather up there?”

It was stupid shit like that mostly, stuff Robby could ignore. But then Jimmy fucked-up.

“Yo, Robby, did Jenny tell you how I fingered her on Saturday night? It was sweet.”

Robby doesn't say a word. He just turns around and punches Jimmy as hard as he can in the mouth. Did Robby think he would knock out six of Jimmy's teeth? Or, break his jaw? Who knows, but did anyone mess with him after that or even bother to talk to Jenny? No, never.

And yet does this mean I am not supposed to find Jenny attractive? Or, wonder what might have happened if I had gotten to her before Robby? Might we be together? Does Jenny ever think about this as well? I think she does. I definitely want to believe so anyway.

Which is why despite everything I let myself sneak off with her at parties, never making a move, just hoping to lose myself in those eyes, and that smile, if only for a little bit. It is also why I am in the kitchen with her at Judy's party near the end of senior year and pretending to listen as she talks about some soccer game against some other high school.

“And then,” she says, “hey, are you even listening to me?”

“I am, really. Go on.”

“Yeah,” she says smiling, “what did I just say.”

I can try to lie here. I don't.

“No idea,” I say.

“I thought so. So, look, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what?”

“Well, you know Robby and I have been together since like eighth grade, right?”

“Right.”

“And it's great.”

“Okay.”

“But you know sometimes I wonder what I've missed, and I guess, I don't know, do you think other guys find me attractive?”

She puts her hand on my shoulder as she says this. Fuck. I should deflect this question. Or, something, but I can't. I want her and maybe this is an opening.

“Yeah, are you kidding, you're gorgeous. And so cool, anyone would be thrilled to be with you.”

“Anyone,” she says leaning forward.

I pause. I look at her. I close my eyes and lean in as well.

Bam!

Something, or someone, has hit me in the lower back. I can't breathe. I am lying on the kitchen floor. I can't see Jenny anymore, but I can see Robby and he is looming over me and smiling as he drags Jenny out of the house. I should get up and chase them, defend her, maybe. Do something. But instead I lie there, feeling sorry for myself and thinking about lost opportunities as opposed to what Jenny may or may not be going through.

I don't see Jenny for a week. No one does. There are rumors of a black eye, maybe an accident, but nothing more. She comes back to school, finishing quietly, no more parties, no more late night conversations, just Jenny and Robby, Robby and Jenny, graduating, and leaving for college together, off to some small school where no one knows them.

Some of us leave home and come back. Some of us never leave. No one knows much about Robby and Jenny though. We've heard they're married, that they live in Colorado, no New Mexico, maybe Michigan, they have kids, he's an engineer, no something with software maybe, and Jenny, no one knows, not for sure anyway.

Meanwhile, we have our own families, and raise our own children, who go to the schools we went to. And when we're not eating pizza at Mario's or Manicotti at Little Venice, attending parent-teacher conferences at MacArthur or Thomas Jefferson, working, or hanging out at Oquaga Lake, we drink at Thirty's, we always have Thirty's.

It is at Thirty's when we hear that Robby and Jenny are coming home. Someone spoke to someone who sold them a house. Robby's mom is sick. His company doesn't care where he works. They want to raise their kids where they were raised. After all these years they want to come home.

There are rumors of course. Jenny apparently has some low-level type of brain damage, nothing terribly noticeable, some memory stuff, maybe, some emotional moments, but all of it subtle. There had been a car accident, which may be the real reason they are coming home because Robby can't care for Jenny himself, or won't. No one knows for sure what's true though. Just like no one knows if it really was an accident, or, if maybe it was a fight and Robby actually pushed Jenny out of the car.

When I initially hear all of this, I don't think that I've been thinking about Jenny all these years. Not as I got married, or as I have tried to hang-on to a marriage that is fine enough, but stale. I don't think I've looked at other women either, but now that I know I'm going to see Jenny again and talk to her, I start wondering if we will be able to steal away and pick-up where we left off that night in the kitchen.

Soon it is all that I can think about. Well that, and whether I am part of the reason she wanted to come home.

And now here we are. At first, all I can think about is sleeping with her. But the more we talk, the more tired she seems and the more desperate. And maybe it's my imagination, but maybe it's not. She's also not really as beautiful as she was or I hoped she would be. And maybe she does seem a little off or emotional because she's definitely gripping my shoulder a little too tightly, which is maybe making me feel a little trapped.

"So do you find me attractive," she says again, "or what?"

"I-I-I don't know," I stammer.

"You don't know, c'mon what the fuck?"

I see Robby across the room, laughing, lumbering around, big and loud, always big and loud. I look into Jenny's eyes, which are no longer so green, and are actually sort of gray and sort of dead, and

lacking any kind of spark. I also see the trace of crow's feet creeping out below her temples and the way her jaw sags when she leans forward.

She seems so sad and beaten down and maybe this is my imagination as well, maybe, but I am really not looking to be a hero, I never was, and either way, this definitely isn't what I was hoping for when I hoped we would find a moment together.

"C'mon," she says, "this isn't right, please say something, anything."

There are probably a lot of things I could say, but I don't. Instead I get up, I head towards the door and I don't look back.

