

We're Grownups, After All

by Danny Goodman

Dennis saw her picture in the morning paper. He knew it was Maggie—she still had her dark red curls and the freckles along her cheekbones. Maggie's new bakery had opened in Soho, the article said, a sister location to the flagship on the Upper West Side. Dennis jotted down the contact information and tossed the newspaper onto the kitchen counter. The obituaries, he left untouched. He poured a cup of coffee and rubbed at his knuckles. *Osteophytes*, the doctor had said. Dennis referred to the bone spurs as nubs. He blamed typewriters, the constant poke and impact of finger against metal key, and he took any opportunity to inform people of his theory. Once, his niece asked how long it had been since he last used a typewriter. Dennis took a moment, touching the nubs to her cheek. *Twenty years*, he said. *It's all computers, now.*

Dennis called the bakery and found he was nervous. A young girl answered the phone. She identified herself as Angela, and Dennis asked if he could speak with Maggie. *Margaret Oliver?* she asked. *Ms. Oliver will be in later today, but she's very busy.* Dennis paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. Angela sounded like a sweet girl, sweet but curt. He asked her to pass on a message to Maggie. There was little he could say after so many years. *Dennis Seaver would like to have coffee*, he said. He left his phone number. Angela thanked him for calling, and the line went dead.

Dennis grabbed the Sports section and sat on the couch. He hadn't been retired long—a bout with cancer pushing him there faster than he would have liked—but he already didn't care for the new writers the *News* had hired. They were children, Dennis thought, who knew nothing beyond Bonds and A-Rod and steroids. Dennis remembered when the Mets, in the 1981 draft, took a junior college pitcher in the twelfth round who wanted an extra \$10,000, but they gave the bonus to Steve Phillips, a fifth round pick, instead. Dennis called the Mets for comment, but few paid attention to the move, at the time; Dennis knew, in his heart, that the Mets had made

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a mistake. Like they always do, he had thought: Phillips was a *bum*, but this kid, this Roger Clemens, man he was going to be something. Dennis floated the story to his editor, who quickly shot down the piece. *Nobody cares*, his editor had said. Moments like that were burned in Dennis's memory. He loved sports writing above all else. He was a damn good writer, the best the *News* had for years. He was sure, though, that nobody would remember in the end.

Dennis returned from a bike ride along the Hudson to a voicemail from Angela: *Hello Mr. Seaver*, she said. *Ms. Oliver can meet you later today, at the shop. Two o'clock. If this doesn't work for you, call me back.* Dennis thought perhaps Angela wasn't curt but, rather, direct. He liked that. Dennis pulled a hard-boiled egg from the refrigerator and walked into the bathroom, started the shower. He chewed and let steam fill the room. The heat helped soothe the nubs. Dennis stepped in cautiously. The beating water felt good against his sore thighs. He remained in the shower longer than normal, finding solace in the rhythm of the beads falling on his pallid skin.

Dennis read the sign above the bakery, *Oliver's Twist*, and chuckled. He wasn't a man prone to a private laugh, but the irony of the name was too much. He had tried, he remembered, to get Maggie to read Dickens several times in college. She preferred Bukowski and Kerouac. *Dickens*, she had said, *is dead. Let his books die.* It was around that time, near the end of college, that Dennis considered proposing to Maggie. He picked out the ring during his summer semester in Galway; he made a date at their favorite restaurant, one along the water that Joseph Mitchell had written about; he ordered her favorite wine, a semi-dry Sauvignon Blanc; there was a rose on her plate when they arrived. Then, Dennis left the ring in his pocket. The choice didn't feel, at the time, like a conscious one. The ring simply remained in his pocket. They had a lovely dinner, and Dennis believed that was all he deserved. Maggie, as far as he knew, was none the wiser. Dennis remembered the feeling in his stomach that night, like the wine was acid, searing

away at his insides. As he opened the door to the bakery, a small bell ringing, Dennis felt much the same.

Maggie stood behind the counter wearing a green apron, her red hair pulled back in a ponytail. Dennis thought little had changed. She still smiled that bright smile, the one that could pull a person in from across the room. Dennis chose a table in the corner and sat down. He ran his fingers through his hair and took long, deep breaths. His hair had gone silver in recent years, and Dennis was self-conscious that he looked older. He caught Maggie's eye and waved. She held up one finger and walked into the back of the bakery. She emerged a few minutes later, a brown sweater supplanting her apron and her hair no longer pulled back. Dennis thought she looked like autumn. She stopped at the table and grinned.

"Dennis Seaver," she said. "My god."

"Hello, Maggie." Dennis stood and nodded. He wanted to hug her, but he wasn't sure how.

"Please, sit." Maggie turned and raised two fingers to a young girl behind the counter. "Still drink coffee?" she asked.

"I do," Dennis said. "By the gallon. Doctor keeps telling me to cut back."

"He obviously doesn't know who he's talking to," Maggie said. She smiled from the side of her mouth.

The young girl approached the table holding two mugs of coffee. She smiled at Dennis but kept her eyes down. Dennis noticed her freckles.

"Thanks, honey," Maggie said. "Hold down the fort for a bit."

As the young girl walked away, Dennis smirked.

"Angela?" he asked.

Maggie nodded, sipped her coffee.

"I knew I liked her. A real firecracker on the phone." Dennis took a drink and tensed his eyebrows. "Yours?"

Maggie sat up straight in her chair. "My one and only."

Dennis nodded and kept the mug on his lips.

"She's sixteen. Thinks I'm the devil."

Dennis rubbed his nubs and leaned forward, as if to say something. He wanted to say something clever, but he wasn't that sort of man. "As she should," he finally said. "It's her right as the daughter."

Maggie and Dennis smiled, simultaneously. For Dennis, it was an uneasy, nervous motion. He was suddenly unsure why he had called, why he wanted to see Maggie. So many years had passed.

"How about you?" Maggie asked, interrupting a dialogue Dennis was having only in his mind. "Any kids for the insatiable Dennis Seaver?"

The question sat on the table. Dennis drank his coffee, enough to see the grinds floating at the bottom like bits of earth. He wanted to talk to Maggie. Dennis felt a warmth in his stomach before he spoke.

"A son," he said.

Maggie's eyes were large and comforting. She sipped her coffee. Dennis knew she was waiting for him to say more. He slid the coffee mug from hand to hand across the table. Angela appeared and refilled the cup. Dennis winked and thanked her.

"Ever get married?" Maggie asked.

"Briefly," he said, grinning. His failed marriage, comparatively, left him less apprehensive. "You?"

"Angela's father died a few years back." Her voice was very matter-of-fact, as if she'd answered the question countless times before.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dennis said.

He hated death, which felt like a silly thought. Didn't everyone? He remembered a ballplayer, a spunky kid in the Mets farm system, who used to say, after every game: *It's a good time to die*. Every time Dennis heard him say the words, he was confused. They kept him awake some nights. Finally, after his last assignment with the farm team, Dennis asked the ballplayer why. The kid looked at Dennis, pulled off his cap, and put both hands on his shaved head. *'Cause Denny, without my cleats on that field, I ain't got nothin'.*

Maggie leaned forward and held her mug with two hands. Steam from the coffee drifted up and created a hazy screen between her and Dennis.

"What are you doing here, Dennis?" she asked, her voice suddenly stern. "Why did you call me?"

"I don't know," he said, unable to fabricate a response. "I saw your picture in the paper. We're all grown up now. But you, you look the same. I wanted to see you."

"Why?" She put down her mug, the ceramic clanking against tabletop. "It's been thirty-three years."

Dennis took a deep breath and tried, unsuccessfully, to filter his thoughts. "My son, Andre," Dennis said. "He died." He closed his eyes. Saying the words out loud, it seemed, made them real.

"I'm so sorry." Maggie held Dennis's hand. "When?"

"Not long ago," he said. He kept his voice steady. "His friend called me. It was an overdose."

"Oh, Jesus," Maggie said. Her eyes were again large, but Dennis found no comfort in them.

"I didn't know he was using drugs."

"How old was he?"

Angela walked towards the table, but Maggie flipped her hand to keep her away.

"Twenty-nine."

"Such a baby," Maggie said. She put her hand on Dennis's cheek.

The touch felt incredible. Dennis wanted to laugh and cry and scream all at once, but he wasn't a man prone to such things. He could feel Maggie's fingers causing goosebumps across his wrinkled neckline. He was, suddenly, twenty-five again.

"He wrote me a letter a few months back," Dennis said. His voiced cracked. "We didn't know each other very well. Spent most of his life with his mother on Long Island."

"Like his father," Maggie said. She smiled, and it pulled Dennis in.

"He told me about this girl he loved," Dennis said. "*She's it*, he kept writing. Then he lost her. I think that was everything for him."

"Did you visit him?" she asked.

“No. I got the sense he didn't want to. He just needed to let me know that he was still there.”

Maggie nodded but said nothing. Dennis stared at her. He wanted to lean over the table and kiss her. He had countless questions to ask her, probably countless more to answer. Things had never really *ended*, at least not in any way that could be explained. Maggie, their life together, his feelings—everything had become too much and not enough and beyond reach. Dennis wasn't the kind of man, ever, to demand. Instead, he just let her go. But none of that mattered. He hadn't seen her in three decades yet, at that moment, she was his closest friend.

“It's a good way to think of him,” Maggie said. “Still there.”

Dennis allowed himself to smile, really smile, and become caught up in the woman sitting in front of him.

“At the end of the letter, Andre asked if I remembered a particular baseball game—game four of the division series, when the Mets played the Giants. It was years ago, but of course I remembered. *That Bobby Jones*, he wrote. *What a bum*. It made me laugh out loud.”

Maggie was smiling when Dennis looked up at her. “That's your word.”

“Yeah. That's my word.”

The bakery had grown quiet in the late afternoon. Dennis found he had little left to say. There was so much still unsaid, but today wasn't the day. Dennis wanted another day with Maggie. He pulled a business card from his pocket. The matted paper rubbed against Dennis's rough skin. He stared at Maggie, whose freckles seemed more vibrant than when they were young.

“I want you to call me,” he said. “I want to see you again.”

Maggie grinned and ran her fingers over Dennis's knuckles. He allowed himself, for a moment, to imagine a life with Maggie, one they hadn't, but perhaps should've, lived. They'd both had children, made the best of their choices. It didn't seem like enough now, not to Dennis. Somehow, he missed the son he barely knew, wished he'd been a better father. He wanted more than settling. For his whole

life, he feared not being good enough, not being the sort of man capable of greatness. But there, in front of him, Maggie sat. She always made him stronger, he thought.

Dennis's stomach began to settle a bit. He wanted Maggie to know there were regrets in need of disclosure. Decisions that should've been made differently. He thought of that young ballplayer, his cleats on the field. Some things weren't worth living without. He turned the card over, and he wrote.

