

# Finding Dana

Flash Fiction for Guests of the Wordfeeder

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October 4, 1966.

“Jeff?”

For a moment, sitting there in the twilight of their bedroom, he thought he heard someone calling his name from whatever was playing on the TV that Dana insisted had to be on all night. He turned to look, wondering for the moment at how surreal the flat screen seemed on the wall behind him, like a painting come to life, not at all what he expected. Slowly, he turned back to stare at her face, barely illuminated by the soft light coming from their lamp post through the blinds. It was the middle of the night, 3:48 AM to be precise, according to the glowing numbers on the radio across the bed, on the nightstand next to the side where he'd been sleeping.

He was up, but tired. He never did need much sleep, but lately, now in his early sixties, getting up in the middle of the night had become routine. Sometimes, he'd go downstairs to do the dishes leftover from a late dinner the night before, or write pieces that no one would ever read. Writing was the passion that practical choices and the circumstances of life had denied him, but not so that it made any difference. Finding Dana made whatever he hadn't accomplished seem unimportant.

He would stay down until he was tired, so his restlessness wouldn't disturb her, and then go back to lay beside her, tucking his hand under her side to help him fall asleep.

Tonight he sat on the edge of her side of the bed watching her face – ever so slightly older, but then even more beautiful than the evening he'd first seen it. What he saw was as new as it was familiar. If anything could be both at the same time, it was Dana. She was the girl, now woman he'd love to meet, and yet somehow had always known. Forty years together and still he couldn't take his eyes off her, but instead of love which was obvious, what he felt was sadness and fear. The night seemed like such a waste of time, given how relatively little they had left. What, maybe 20 years if they were lucky, if he could live that long? A long time when you're twenty, when there's more after that, but no time at all when there isn't.

It was a ridiculous...

“Hey, Jeff?” He heard it again, now with the sound of other voices and music in the background.

Whatever it was, he'd ignore it.

...a ridiculous question, the kind only an over-active mind would consider. On one hand, he wanted to go first, to never have to live without her. On the other... On the other, he loved her too much not to be there for her until the end.

“Hey, buddy,” his friend, Howie, was standing next to the booth Jeff had been holding for them, seeming unusually short, an anxious waiter holding a tray over her head while his friends blocked the narrow aisle. Pushing on Jeff’s shoulder, he tried again, “Jeffrey, honey? I really need you to...”

“Yeh. Hi. Hi. ..Sorry, I was just... Actually, I’m not sure what I was thinking about.” Looking up, his eyes blew past his chubby friend, past “Bunny,” the girl he’d been dating, to her friend with the green eyes, short blond hair and instantly familiar smile.

He stood up carefully, worried he’d forget that the booths were one step up. He’d made a mental note not to make a fool of himself when he first got there and asked the girl at the door if he could hold the table for his friends. “The Pub,” which was all the simple sign over the door said, was one of those places every college town has, right off campus, where bad cheeseburgers on Kaiser rolls and fat steak fries couldn’t have tasted better.

“Hi,” he smiled back at her, extending his hand. It was too proper, close to weird, he knew that, but he had to be sure. “I’m Jeff,” he told her, as if she didn’t already know.

“Jeff,” Howie decided he needed to make a formal introduction. “This is Dana. Dana, this is Jeff.” For some reason it made her giggle.

He was still holding her hand, but finally let go on the way to inviting her to sit next to him on his side of the booth. Howie and Bunny squeezed in across from them. The table, he thought, was too wide, too far across for them to talk.

Turning to his left to face her, while Howie passed out their badly typed menus in plastic folders, he said it again. “Hi.”

“You already said that,” she answered, leaving him to wonder if she punctuated every sentence with that same smile.

“Yeh, uhhh... We need to go out.”

“We are out.”

“I mean on a date?”

“This isn’t a date?”

“I meant, without Howie, Bunny, or any other animals.”

“Don’t you want to see how tonight goes?” she asked, knowing already how it was going to turn out.

“No, no. I mean, I already know we’re going out again.”

“You do?”

“ I just wanted to get the award moment after I walk you back to the dorm out of the way now... so I can spend more time kissing you goodnight.”

Suddenly, Howie and “The Rabbit” as he sometimes referred to her in private, stopped over-talking each other and were staring across the table, their eyes moving from one of their friends to the other.

Pausing for a moment, Dana leaned forward, planting a gentle, perfectly long-lasting kiss on his lips, a little bubble popping as she broke away. It felt like a week before he opened his eyes, but she waited before saying anything. “There. Now that that’s out of the way, maybe you can buy me something to eat.”

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