

Susan Johnson

SHE LOOKS A LITTLE LIKE JANE FONDA

I saw Nicky yesterday. Her little white face held her tight-lipped grin and her chalky teeth peeped out. She used to reckon she looked a little like Jane Fonda only smaller, but since Fonda started on her health kick the gap had widened. Everything about Nicky is small, from her peaked face and pointy teeth to her tiny hands, as boneless and insubstantial as a baby's. She said she was planning on going back to London, buying a motorbike and riding straight and pure down the highway into all that sulky greenness. Through a friend of a friend she knew where she could buy this fantastic BMW there, they were giving it away, really, it was practically free.

I'd seen her off at international airports too many times, rocky with Bloody Mary's and dangerous hope. She liked the idea of re-inventing herself, of leaving her old self behind. She always came back, mostly disappointed and much earlier than she'd planned, but she was never defeated and she was always capable of further hope. She had successfully escaped the malaise of our generation by refusing to become cynical, although she had more reason than most for taking it up. It was not a conscious refusal, it was a refusal of her blood, her nerves and it was as natural to her as sleep.

She used me as a kind of reference point, as a human lighthouse useful for warning her off submerged rocks. She had never taken advice from anyone in her life but she felt obliged to ask for mine occasionally. Ever since I had been assigned to look after her when she was the new girl in infant's school, she had seen me as the sensible type, conscientious, someone who would never forget to wash their hands after they'd been to the toilet.

She'd arrived at school fresh from a year in America: in Australia in the 60s anything from there deserved attention. I made sure she sat next to me in the playground, I held her hand as if it were a trophy. When her attention wandered I made up stories to bring her eyes back to mind: it is a skill I have never lost.

I told her my mother was a wonderful singer who had given everything up for love. I told her the story of my mother's final concert, how my father had become so jealous of the kissing in the love scenes he had forced her to wear plastic lips. Later I would recognise some truth in a six-year-old's fibs, but the lips were pure invention. Nicky

says she has been looking for a pair ever since.

In highschool Nicky turned tough. She ran with the wild boys, she shoved glass jars filled with a sticky substance under your nose and claimed it was captured semen. It turned out to be Clag glue but knowing this hardly helped: I was shocked that she had even thought of it in the first place, that she must have known what the real thing looked like in order to have come up with an appropriate substitute.

She was quick on her feet, she had a talent for making people laugh. It was a time of anti-heroes and Nicky and her friends were always being suspended for smoking or racking off school: they were rebels and they were feared.

When her friends were around she was always having a go at me for being a conch, but at least three times a term she would appear at my back door after school asking if she could listen to records. She was always having problems with her boyfriends: boys who had left school were the best, but they always seemed to provide her with the greatest trouble.

I saw less and less of her as her notoriety spread. She was always getting hauled over the coals for something: I remember Melbourne Cup day in our fifteenth year was exceptionally hot and Nicky had been reprimanded for cutting off the sleeves of her uniform in an attempt to escape the heat. The air that day was completely devoid of moisture: the whole school was listening to preparations for the race, making the thick air move with hundreds of paper fans. After the race I went to get an apple from my bag and found my locker ransacked.

I went immediately to the form master. He came with me to inspect the forced door and said he would see the headmaster about it that afternoon. There was nothing more to be done he said, I may as well go home.

In the morning I found my locker covered in Clag, my books a smeary mess. I knew immediately Nicky had been involved but I also knew I would never speak of it to her. Later at assembly the headmaster gave a speech about the hoodlum element in the school: I bent my head and looked down the row of girls standing on either side of me. Down the end of one row I saw Nicky lean forward, her Jane Fonda eyes glance momentarily into mine. I could see her sharp little teeth pressing on her bottom lip.

She became, of all things, a hairdresser. I had visions of this female Sweeney Todd, an unreliable personality with shears. Her father was a company director, her brother became a doctor and her sister a solicitor but I think they knew Nicky was a wild card. Her mother, a timid woman who was an even smaller version of Nicky, stood in her mock-Tudor kitchen and said that at least it was some-

thing. Nicky lasted in the job barely a year.

I heard nothing of her for a while: I went on to matriculate like the good girl I was and started university the following year. The year I graduated an old friend from school turned up with a remarkable story: he'd seen Nicky on a street corner in the city, dressed in a no-nonsense uniform and banging a tamborine: she had joined the Salvation Army. After we stopped laughing I realized it suited Nicky perfectly: none of this wanking Hare Krishna stuff for her, she would make an infinitely more ferocious Major Barbara. She'd given him her address with shining eyes and a vigorous God Bless You. I went to see her.

She lived with a Salvation Army family and was engaged to their son, who was away somewhere spreading the word. I waited for her in their lounge room and we politely smiled at each other: when Nicky walked into the room I saw that she had changed. Her hair was long and curled, her little lips painted pink. I liked her better when she wore one tinny earring and a Lionness cut. Our conversation was stilted, we arranged to meet again in a coffee shop.

It was there that she told me the story: the bars, the drugs, the ravenous boys. One night she had found herself in a Salvation Army hostel with no memory of what had gone before. They had given her a cup of tea; she had stayed. She told me she had a new life now but she loved to see old friends. She talked of our schooldays with nostalgia, she remembered teachers and incidents I had long forgotten. I could see they had already become mythical *best days of my life* stories to her.

Eighteen months later the engagement was off and she had left the Army. After that she became a secretary, an atheist, a gardener with a great love of beer and a traveller. Once, when I was living in another city working for a women's group, she turned up on my doorstep and asked me if I could teach her to be a feminist. She had cut off all her hair and bought a pair of overalls in preparation.

Nicky is the storyteller in the relationship now, perhaps she feels the need to scatter some glamour into my worthy but pedestrian life. Last year she was driving cabs and there was nothing she couldn't tell you about underworld crime, all of it fantastic. For the first half of the year she went to uni part-time as well but she gave it up, buckling under both the workload and the discipline it required. She said the lecturers told her she was one of their best mature age students. She felt she would have got distinctions if she'd kept going.

She'd arrive at my house after a particularly gruelling twelve hours at the wheel, her eyes gleaming with No-Doze. She told me of

her famous passengers: how George Harrison, on a secret visit to Australia, had invited her up to his motel room for a drink. Nicky expects something will happen to her: one day she expects to be famous.

Only yesterday she told me how her guitar teacher had praised her natural talent, maybe she'd have a go at playing in pubs while she was in England. She said she would send a telegram immediately if she happened to stumble across a pair of plastic lips.