

J O E S I X P A C K

***CITY BOY,
COUNTRY
GIRL***

A Tales of Transformation Story



2006 Paperback Edition

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CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL

My husband Richard Weinstein and I lived on the upper west side, where we had a nice brownstone we had been sub-leasing for a couple of years now. He was an investment banker, and I had my work at the radio station to keep me busy. Public radio, of course. I was twenty-four, and I had promised myself that it wouldn't be more than a year until I was ready to start a family. At least, by that time I would have accrued enough time for a few weeks of pregnancy leave, and we'd be well-off enough that I could hire a quality nanny. But even then, I had my doubts about that timetable. There was a very real possibility I was going to have to re-prioritize my whole lifestyle agenda.

Richard was also twenty-four. We both graduated college early, mostly because of our heavy prep-school credits, and partially because neither of us were comfortable in that adolescent setting of a university. I had grown up in Brookline, Mass. And he in Waterbury. So, although we lived in totally different worlds, we still had fallen in love.

We met at the Hartsfield, Atlanta airport while our flights were being delayed. We talked for what seemed like hours. In fact, it was hours, if I remember correctly. Those incompetent idiots at the gate counter couldn't get a plane out of there to save their lives.

As it turned out, Richard and I saw the world in much the same terms. We both saw life as the domain of predators. A shark tank, for lack of a better metaphor. If you weren't in on the kill, you were the one being killed. We were very practical people.

So we exchanged numbers, and we'd text each other from time to time. One night, I found myself screwed over into attending a formal function, and I needed a date. Richard seemed like just the sort of man I could use – not threatening, only slightly intimidating, and a fine prospect with a good future and wonderful table manners.

And it sort of grew from there. After we had been exchanging favors by being each other's date at company gatherings and other formalities, it seemed like we were more than compatible. Plus, after we were married, getting the brownstone was much easier. Our combined contacts and referrals almost made it too easy. We had the lease signed just hours after we returned from our working honeymoon. And we got a prime location for parking as well.

No, it wasn't in a very upscale neighborhood, but I have no doubt that we were well on our way.

It was just after the holidays when we got a letter from one of Richard's relatives. I was busy writing the thank-you notes for the Hanukah gifts, and crossing off names from the gift list, when I found it in the mail. It was from Boregard, Oklahoma. My goodness. *Really*. Richard had relatives in Oklahoma. How *colorful*.

I gave the letter to Richard, who read it with a great deal of concern. "I have bad news, Janice. My Aunt isn't doing very well." He said, after reading the message.

"Oh, that's... how sad for her." I said to him.

"She lives by herself. After my parents passed away, I'm the only family she has left." He said. "And I think she's the only family I have left as well."

I didn't immediately see the reason for concern. "And this affects me how?"

Richard's face was dead serious. "I made some promises..." He ran his fingers through his slicked-back hair. "I said I'd come if she ever needed help."

"You can *not* be serious." I said. "Just because she can't get out of bed, she expects you to completely put your life on hold for her? That's just selfish."

"When my mother was on her death bed, I made this promise to her. That if her sister ever needed my help, I'd be there."

"She can't hold you to that!" I told him. "That would never stand up in a court of law!"

Richard sat back in his chair, thinking. "I suppose you're right." He said. He got up out of his chair and removed his blazer. He loosened his red tie and walked over to the mantle, examining a picture of his mother. "But there are some things which go beyond legalities."

"They'll never give you that promotion if you just up and leave the firm." I reminded him.

"I don't think it would be more than a week or two. I've been working there without complaint for almost two years. I should be able to spend a little bit of that credibility."

"So you're actually going to go." I asked.



"I'll book a flight and leave tomorrow," Richard replied.

"Well, I think it's ridiculous. But I won't stop you." And besides, having Richard out of the area meant I could play the field. "Bring me back a souvenir. Maybe a butter churn or a banjo."

"Thanks for understanding, darling," Richard said, pecking me on the cheek. "Now I've got to get on the phone with my assistant to book the trip."



Richard and I traded messages for the next few days. I was worried that the house would feel empty without him, but I found ways to pass the time. I hadn't had a chance to go to the clubs for what seemed like years. The things they can do now with drugs are amazing. Even the smallest little hit will send you into ecstasy for hours. It was delightful.

But even after a week, I had yet to get a call from Richard. I had previously assumed he was busy doing whatever it was that he was doing, but now he was just being impolite. Finally, eight days after he had taken his flight out, he bothered to call. Eight days. Honestly.

"She's not quite an invalid, but she needs a lot of attention," Richard reported.

"I have your emails and your phone messages for you. Would you like me to forward them to you?" I said.

"I've had the town doctor out to look at her every day, and he tells me that he doesn't really know when she'll be ready to get back on her feet."

I was impatient with him. I didn't call for



updates on Aunt Daisy or whatever her name was. "Do you want your messages or not?" I asked.

"Janice, I can't deal with that now. I have to look after her."

"How much time could that possibly take? Surely you can just use a cell and your laptop..."

"Honey, thank you very much, but seriously, I have all I can handle, keeping the house and attending to my Aunt."

I just knew that his messages were much more important than he thought they were. His clients were not going to be ignored for long. "You're going to have to make some call backs soon, Richard. There are a lot of very important people..."

"And I promise I'll get back to them." He said, interrupting me rudely. "But for right now, my Aunt needs my help."

"So when do I tell people you'll be back home, honey?" I asked, making sure he knew I was not pleased with his attitude.

"Tell them I'll be home when my Aunt is out of danger." He replied, his tone less than cheerful.



It was two weeks later that Richard finally called again. Yes, I know I could have called him, but what would that have proven?

"It's two steps forward, one step back. She's really trying, but there's only so much progress one can expect."

"What does the old bag have, anyway?" I asked.

"Her name is Evelyn. My Aunt Evelyn. And she's only about fifty." He paused for a moment, probably trying to make me feel bad. "She has emphysema, complicated with pneumonia. It's very serious."

"Whatever." I said. "Your boss called yesterday, and wanted to know why they haven't heard from you in three weeks. What exactly do I tell him?"

"You can tell Pete that I have to take care of this house by myself, which means I do the cleaning, the cooking and washing. I have to pick up groceries, I have to pick up the doctor in town and I have to do everything else to keep this place from falling into disrepair. You can tell him that."

"You're honestly doing the cooking?" I asked. "I can't believe you just don't hire someone for that."

"There's no servants or maids around here, Janice. You have to do things here yourself. That's the way it is outside the city."

"It sounds *wonderful*." I had had quite enough of this. "Why don't you just tell your aunt you have a *life* you need to attend to, and you need to come back to New York. Promise her you'll return in a week or something. Tell her anything. *I don't care*. Just get back to work before something serious happens!"

"I know you mean well, Janice, but I can't do that. First of all, Aunt Evelyn is on medication, and isn't very lucid most of the time. Second, I have no intention of leaving this poor woman to fend for herself – and possibly die – just so I can return some insignificant phone messages."

"Insignificant!? That's not the Richard Weinstein I married! You know as well as I that if you show any weakness or lapse in focus, there won't be a job to return to!"

"That's still not as important as my Aunt's life." He said.

"Don't be so dramatic, Richard."

"I am n... Aaa... not being..." He coughed, after his voice had cracked in the middle of the word 'not.' "I am not being dramatic." His voice cracked again in the word 'dramatic.'

"Well, I certainly hope that emphysema isn't catching." I said. "Your voice sounds horrible."

"I'm fine. And emphysema isn't something you can catch." Richard was still trying to clear his throat. "I think it's just a minor infection. Just a cold. The doctor is giving me some stuff for it."

"Tell him to double it, because it obviously isn't getting the job done. Is he an accredited physician? What's his specialty? Did you get a referral?"

"I'll call you later, Janice." He said. I didn't know what had gotten into him. He was usually so much more practical than this.



It was late February before I heard from him again. I had already contacted a lawyer about divorce proceedings. I wasn't going to give Richard many more chances.

"She's showing some real improvement." He said to me. Obviously, he knew that I wanted him back home. He needed to give me good news. But I was suspicious he was just telling me what I wanted to hear. "She's able to walk around and her breathing is becoming less labored."

"Well, she seems to be doing better. I can't say the same for you. The firm has put you on indefinite leave." I told him. I expected anger from Richard.

"They did what they had to do." Was what I got.

"Maybe you don't understand me, Richard. You don't have a job anymore."

"If looking after family is going to get me fired, then as far as I'm concerned, those guys at work can go... They can go... Soak their head."

"Soak their head!?" I yelled into the phone. "Soak their head!? You just lost a job that paid you over a quarter of a million dollars a year, and all you can say is 'soak their head!?'"

"What do you want me to say, Janice? There's nothing I can do about it."

"Of *course* there are things you can do about it, Richard!" I told him. "You could simply..." I stopped myself from having the same argument with him again. "I just want you to tell me when you're coming home. It's that simple. I need you to set a date. Tell me what day you'll return."

He paused for a long, tense minute. "I... Just can't do that, Janice."

"For God sakes, Richard! How do you expect me to make it through without you? Forget about being there for your Aunt, what about being there for *me!*?"

"For you?"

"I can't do everything myself! I need to get money from the bank! I need your paycheck! I need you to make contacts through your network of clients! *You just can't do this to me!*"

"Please. I know it's been tough on you, and I'll smooth everything over when I get back. But I'm so close to getting Aunt Evelyn able to take care of herself. It won't be long. I can't leave now."

Fine. Frankly, I was *this* close to giving up on him. But he knew so many people that made for great contacts. It made my job as a radio segment producer so easy. And his membership at the downtown club was in his name. It would take me years to get that membership on my own. I couldn't just walk out on him.

"You sound like you've caught something." I said, trying to take the conversation back from the edge. "It sounds like a really bad cold."

"A cold?" He replied. "Yeah, I guess it's a cold. So you don't mind if I stay here until Aunt Evelyn is up and about?"

"I mind. I mind a lot, Richard. You're putting me in a very awkward position. I'm not your secretary, and I don't like making excuses for you." I said. "And frankly, this is pushing our marriage right to the limit. Right to the limit – do you *understand* me!?"

"Yes, I know, Janice. And I'm sorry. Truly sorry." It sounded like he was really trying to sound remorseful. Maybe trying too hard, if you know what I mean.

I was getting tired of making these calls and getting the same answer. I was just going to have to let him come home on his own. If he didn't want to come back, then I knew where I stood. "Richard, it's up to you. You need to find your priorities. Okay?"

"I know, Janice. This is hard on all of us. And I'll find some way to make it up to you."

Now we were talking. I could use a new car. Maybe redecorate the living room? Oh, I had such plans to make. "So, how bad is your cold?" I asked.

"Cold? Well, I don't know what it is, really. I sometime feel a little sick, and my voice is funny sounding, and I was in bed for a few days, but... I don't really think I'd call it a cold. More like a flu, but not really."

"You were in bed? For how long?"

"About three days. I had a really bad fever. I dropped a few pounds."

"Well, you could always stand to lose a little weight. If it's not a cold, what does that country doctor of yours call it?"

"He said it was just some sort of infection. He gave me some pills. And a couple of shots. It helps with the swelling."

"What swelling?"

"Oh, I've puffed up in few places. Especially my chest."

"Sounds like an allergic reaction. Are you allergic to anything?"

"Not that I know of. Listen, Janice I have to go now. Aunt Evelyn is calling me."

I sighed into the phone, making sure he could hear the displeasure in my voice. "Next time I talk to you, I want you to tell me when you're coming back."

"I understand." He said.



Well, around that time I got the promotion I had been waiting for, no thanks to Richard. I had been given my own program to produce, the morning drive-time news show. Oh, I had such good ideas. So far, it had been your typical NPR-type show. A little news, some interviews and then lame jazz in between. Well, I was really going to turn it upside-down. Who says you can't put celeb-

city gossip on public radio? Maybe bring a little Howard Stern to the public airwaves.

I called up Richard to tell him the news. And maybe to rub his nose in it a little bit. Who needs a well-connected husband to succeed?



“Hello?” The voice on the other end answered. I didn’t recognize it.

Well, I thought maybe they had visitors. It was too young a voice for Aunt Evelyn. “Is my husband Richard there?” I asked.

“Janice?” The voice answered. “It’s me.”

I was dumbfounded. “Richard!? Is that you!?”

“Oh. My voice. It’s been a little strange lately.” He said. “It’s that flu I have.”

“So you do have the flu.”

“Oh, yes. The doctor told me I have a flu. So I’ve been in bed for the past week. But the doctor tells me I’m getting better.”

“Are you all right!? Do you need me to send a qualified physician? I can have you airlifted and sent to the nearest medical center right away!”

“It’s okay, Janice.” He replied. “I’m in good hands with Doctor Crumbpacker.”

“Crumbpacker? You can’t be serious. I’m calling the med-evac people right now.”

“No, really, Janice. I’m doing fine. Doctor Crumbpacker is very good. And he’s on top of everything. My weight loss is finally stopping and...”

I interrupted him. “How much weight have you lost?”

"I'm scared to check." He said. "Last I weighed myself three days ago, I was down to 137."

"You've got to be nothing but skin and bones!"

"I'm fine. I still have a lot of fat in a few places. My chest and my lower body look fine. And the doctor tells me my strength will probably come back."

"Richard, you're truly scaring me. This sounds like some sort of chamber of horrors."

"It's not as bad as it sounds. I can walk around in short trips, and Aunt Evelyn is taking care of me."

"She... *She's* taking care of... *You!*?"

"As soon as the doctor told me to rest, Aunt Evelyn was able to look after me. I guess it's that country spirit of pitching in when someone needs help."

"Is she fully recovered? That sounds suspicious."

"She's only up for a few hours a day, but she's definitely improving. I think having someone to care for has given her something to focus on. Maybe it's crazy, but I think me being in bed has helped her recovery."

"Well, that's something, at least." This whole episode was making me very nervous. I always get suspicious when a bunch of coincidences come together. Maybe that's the journalist in me, but I really didn't like the way this was shaping up. "About you, Richard. Is there anything you're not telling me? Please don't hold anything back. I really don't think this is the time to be keeping any secrets."

"Well, I'm feeling better every day. And the medication keeps me in a good mood."

"Medication?"

"I'm taking a lot of pills and getting a lot of shots. That's why I know the doctor is so good."

"What kind of medication is it, Richard?"

"I asked Aunt Evelyn, but she told me I didn't need to worry about it."

"And you trust her?"

"Of course I do. She's been like a mother to me since I got here."

I just couldn't seem to get Richard to break through. He didn't seem even *lightly* suspicious of what was happening. Shots, weight loss, forced bed rest, a suddenly mobile invalid. This wasn't right. And Richard wasn't seeing it.

"Promise me you'll stay in bed and take it easy, darling."

"I will."

"And just see if you can try and get a few more answers about what's happening to you."

He paused. "Okay. I'll give it a try."

"I love you." I said.

"I love you too, Janice."

As soon as I hung up, I booked my flight for Oklahoma.



The flight from New York went into DFW. From there, I took an express flight to Oklahoma City. The only transportation from Oklahoma City to Boregard was by bus. Yes, by bus. Normally, I'd just get a limo for the day, but the trip was eight hours out to Boregard. I hap my laptop with me for the trip, and I caught up on my budget planning for the quarter. But just two hours out of the bus depot, the cell phone stopped working. No signal.

Fabulous. Now I was truly on my own. The battery on the computer gave out a while later, and I was left with nothing but the window to provide me entertainment.

I don't know if you've ever been out to Oklahoma – and I pray to God you have better sense that that – but it's flat. So amazingly flat. Miles and miles of flat.

I never even imagined you could have so much space in this country with nothing in it. No trees, no houses, no people. Just a road. Once and a while you could see a tractor. Yes, a tractor! I had never seen one before. I'm not even sure what they do. But, they were there, driving aimlessly through fields of dirt. Maybe I was just here in the off season. Maybe it was a bad year for growing things. But for all I could tell, there was nothing but miles and miles of dirt stretching out for as far as I could see.

What a truly miserable place to live.

The bus stopped at something a lot like a restaurant, with vending machines that dispensed plastic-wrapped sandwiches. Barbaric. I had to drink out of an *aluminum can*.



Dreadful.

A few hours later, a few houses appeared on the horizon, and a gas station. The bus pulled up, and the driver announced that we had arrived in Boregard. I lugged my carry-on bag with me, and stepped outside into dusty wind. The bus closed the door and was on its way. And I was by myself in the middle of nowhere.

The roller wheels on my bag were useless in the rough baked dirt, and I had to drag it along into the gas station.



“Kin I help you, Ma’am?” The gawky man behind the counter said. The patch on his oil-stained shirt said “Jeter” on it. I kid you not.

“Well, Jeter, I was wondering if you could call me a cab.” I asked.

He looked at me like I was from another planet. I guess he had never seen a woman dressed as nicely as I was, in my business suit. “You’re not from ’round here, is you?” He said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just here to see my husband. Maybe you can call me that cab, if that’s not too much time out of your busy schedule?”

“Well, we ain’t got no taxi cabs here in Boregard.” He said, adjusting his baseball cap. “Who’s it you come here to see?”

I had to translate the accent and the verbage before I responded. “My husband Richard. He’s visiting his Aunt.” I got the envelope out of my pocket to check the name. It was the envelope this Aunt Evelyn had sent Richard which started this whole mess. “Evelyn Johnson.”

“Oh, the Johnson place where old maid Johnson lives.”

“If that’s where Evelyn Johnson lives.”

“We just all call her Evie around here.” He said. He pulled up a sign that read “Closed” and placed it on the desk. He grabbed some keys off a pegboard and headed by me, out the front door. “But if you’re lookin’ to get out there, I can take you.”

“What will it cost me?” I asked.

He looked at me confused. "Cost you?" He asked. "I jus' need to go pick up some fan belts from my pal Raymond out past there. I'll drop you off on the way."

"What's in it for you?" I asked.

By that time, he was revving the engine in a rusted tow truck. "Git in if you're a-comin'."



I was let off at the beginning of a long dirt road, which this Jeter person assured me would end at Evelyn Johnsons's house. "I can drive you all the way, if you needs me to," he offered. I assured him I was quite capable of doing this for myself. It must have been three miles, but he turned out to be right.

Damn heels nearly killed me.

The house was a surprisingly large Victorian-style, aging badly. The place was probably white originally, but now had collected dirt, blown into the slats of wood siding by the winds which never seemed to let up around here. The house appeared caked with dirt.

I knocked on the door after struggling up the creaking old stairs with my bag. A woman answered the door. "Yes?" She said, a little scared. Then she gave a disconcerting smile. "Land sakes, you must be Janice!"

"Yes. And you are?"

She hugged me warmly. "I'm your Aunt Evelyn!" She said. "Ritchie didn't say you were coming, or else I'd have prepared a room for you."

"I'm not staying," I said, "and Richard didn't know I was coming, either."

"Well, you sure do know how to surprise someone. I saw you coming down the road, and I was worried you were lost or a car had broken down."

"Where's Richard?" I asked.

"He'll be so glad to see you. He's up in bed, resting. Did he tell you he's had an awful time with the flu."

"He mentioned it." I took a skeptical look at Aunt Evelyn. She seemed to be as alert and healthy as any woman her age. It was hard to believe she had been sick at all.

I mean, it was *really* hard to believe.

"Can I see him?" I asked.

"Oh!" She said, embarrassed. "Where are my manners? Why don't you leave your bag here, and we'll go upstairs and see him. The dear should be done with his evening nap by now."

I followed her up the stairs, and noticed how briskly she was moving. Some kind of miracle recovery, don't you think?

It was a huge house, with far too many rooms just for one woman to use. The was kind of a folksy charm to the place. If this house had a little work, some paint and some decent landscaping, you might get some resale value out of it.

Except that we were out in the middle of nowhere.

Come to think of it, we were out even further than that. Even the people who lived in the middle of nowhere hadn't even heard of Boregard.

"Ritchie has had an awful time of it the past two weeks. He's just been so difficult." Aunt Eveleyn said.

"Yes, it must have been hard to take care of him while he was sick."

"Well, yes, it was a trial, but that's not what I'm talking about, dear. It's his ornery disposition that's been a problem."

I didn't believe she had actually just used the word 'ornery.' "He's been difficult?"

"I suppose you know, being his wife and all, but Richard can be downright stubborn sometimes."

Like when he's trying to take care of some old bat in Dumbfuck, Oklahoma?

"Yes, he certainly can be that way at times." And frankly, I didn't like it. "I hope he hasn't been too much to handle."

"Oh, he was fidgety and fussy when Doctor Crumbpacker ordered him to get some bed rest, believe me." Her cross face then brightened. "But once he knew I was in charge, he eventually succumbed. Now he trusts me to make his decisions for him."

Yeah, he was like that when we first met. But after a while, he stopped trying to pretend he was in charge. I knew what was best for both of us. He could still be the boss at work, but I told him what to do at home. And we liked it that way. And he was perfectly fine with it – until he got that letter at least. I thought I had whipped all the backbone out of him.

Aunt Evelyn knocked gently on the third door she came to. "Ritchie dear, are you awake? Oh, I have such a surprise for you!" She opened the door and peeked through the crack. "Oh he's still sleeping. Give me a minute to wake him." She then entered the dark room and shut the door behind her.

I really didn't have time for this. That bus was due to come back through here soon, so I could get back to New York and run the production meeting on Monday. So, I needed to make my connections to get to the airport by midnight. I only had an hour or two. I needed to get his signature on a small pile of documents, get his PIN number for the debit card and the bank accounts. After all, I had bills to pay.

The door creaked open again, and the lights were on. I strained to see if I could see Richard, but Aunt Evelyn was blocking me. "Here's the surprise I promised you, dearest." She teased.

The door eased open and I could see Richard, and he could see me. And I could see that my husband, my strong, virile husband was laying in an old-fashioned canopied bed, dressed in a ruffled, cotton nightgown.



He raised his hands to his mouth in shock. “Janice!” He yelped.

“Hello... Um, Richard.” I said. The sight of him had taken my breath away. Not only was he dressed in women’s clothing, but he was resting with layer and layer of fluffy pillows and quilts.. His hair had grown a little, hanging from the back of his head. And his body, neck and arms looked bony thin. If I hadn’t been told that it was my husband, I might not have recognized him.

“Don’t look at me!” He cried. Childishly, he flung the covers over his head so I couldn’t see him.

Aunt Evelyn was angry. “Ritchie!” She yelled. “Don’t be a nuisance! Janice has traveled all the way from New York City to see you, and you will behave!”

The covers stayed up.

“Ritchie! *I said behave!*” Aunt Evelyn commanded.

And slowly, the covers dropped, but Richard turned his face away, so he didn’t have to look at me. “I don’t want to talk to her.” He said.