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Immortality  
by Robert J. Sawyer  
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Science Fiction

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\_Baby, I'm only society's child\_  
\_When we're older, things may change\_  
\_But for now this is the way they must remain -- \_  
-- Janis Ian  
\* \* \* \*

Sixty years.  
Sweet Jesus, had it been that long?  
But of course it had. The year was now 2023, and then --  
Then it had been 1963.  
The year of the march on Washington.  
The year JFK had been assassinated.  
The year I --  
No, no, I didn't want to think about that. After all, I'm sure he  
never thinks about it ... or about me.

I'd been seventeen in 1963. And I'd thought of myself as ugly, an  
unpardonable sin for a young woman.

Now, though...

Now, I was seventy-seven. And I was no longer homely. Not that I'd had  
any work done, but there was no such thing as a homely -- or a beautiful --  
woman of seventy-seven, at least not one who had never had treatments. The  
only adjective people applied to an unmodified woman of seventy-seven was  
old.

My sixtieth high-school reunion.

For some, there would be a seventieth, and an eightieth, a ninetieth,  
and doubtless a mega-bash for the hundredth. For those who had money -- real  
money, the kind of money I'd once had at the height of my career -- there were  
pharmaceuticals and gene therapies and cloned organs and bodily implants, all  
granting the gift of synthetic youth, the gift of time.

I'd skipped the previous reunions, and I wasn't fool enough to think  
I'd be alive for the next one. This would be it, my one, my only, my last.  
Although I'd once, briefly, been rich, I didn't have the kind of money anymore  
that could buy literal immortality. I would have to be content knowing that my  
songs would exist after I was gone.

And yet, today's young people, children of the third millennium,  
couldn't relate to socially conscious lyrics written so long ago. Still, the  
recordings would exist, although...

Although if a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it,

does it make a sound? If a recording -- digitized, copied from medium to medium as technologies and standards endlessly change -- isn't listened to, does the song still exist? Does the pain it chronicled still continue?

I sighed.

Sixty years since high-school graduation.

Sixty years since all those swirling hormones and clashing emotions.

Sixty years since Devon.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't the high school I remembered. My Cedar Valley High had been a brown-and-red brick structure, two stories tall, with large fields to the east and north, and a tiny staff parking lot.

That building had long since been torn down -- asbestos in its walls, poor insulation, no fiber-optic infrastructure. The replacement, larger, beige, thermally efficient, bore the same name but that was its only resemblance. And the field to the east had become a parking lot, since every seventeen-year-old had his or her own car these days.

Things change.

Walls come down.

Time passes.

I went inside.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello," I said. "My name is..." and I spoke it, then spelled the last name -- the one I'd had back when I'd been a student here, the one that had been my stage name, the one that pre-dated my ex-husbands.

The man sitting behind the desk was in his late forties; other classes were celebrating their whole-decade anniversaries as well. I suspected he had no trouble guessing to which year each arrival belonged, but I supplied it anyway: "Class of Sixty-Three."

The man consulted a tablet computer. "Ah, yes," he said. "Come a long way, have we? Well, it's good to see you." A badge appeared, printed instantly and silently, bearing my name. He handed it to me, along with two drink tickets. "Your class is meeting in Gymnasium Four. It's down that corridor. Just follow everyone else."

\* \* \* \*

They'd done their best to capture the spirit of the era. There was a US flag with just fifty stars -- easy to recognize because of the staggered rows. And there were photos on the walls of Jack and Jackie Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, and a Mercury space capsule bobbing in the Pacific, and Sandy Koufax with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Someone had even dug up movie posters for the hits of that year, Dr. No and Cleopatra. Two video monitors were silently playing The Beverly Hillbillies and Bonanza. And "Easier Said Than Done" was coming softly out of the detachable speakers belonging to a portable stereo.

I looked around the large room at the dozens of people. I had no idea who most of them were -- not at a glance. They were just old folks, like me: wrinkled, with gray or white hair, some noticeably stooped, one using a walker.

But that man, over there...

There had only been one black person in my class. I hadn't seen Devon Smith in the sixty years since, but this had to be him. Back then, he'd had a full head of curly hair, buzzed short. Now, most of it was gone, and his face was deeply lined.

My heart was pounding harder than it had in years; indeed, I hadn't thought the old thing had that much life left in it.

Devon Smith.

We hadn't talked, not since that hot June evening in '63 when I'd told him I couldn't see him anymore. Our senior prom had only been a week away, but my parents had demanded I break up with him. They'd seen governor George Wallace on the news, personally blocking black students -- "coloreds," we called them back then -- from enrolling at the University of Alabama. Mom and

Dad said their edict was for my own safety, and I went along with it, doing what society wanted.

Truth be told, part of me was relieved. I'd grown tired of the stares, the whispered comments. I'd even overheard two of our teachers making jokes about us, despite all their posturing about the changing times during class.

Of course, those teachers must long since be dead. And as Devon looked my way, for a moment I envied them.

He had a glass of red wine in his hand, and he was wearing a dark gray suit. There was no sign of recognition on his face. Still, he came over. "Hello," he said. "I'm Devon Smith."

I was too flustered to speak, and, after a moment, he went on. "You're not wearing your nametag."

He was right; it was still in my hand, along with the drink chits. I thought about just turning and walking away. But no, no -- I couldn't do that. Not to him. Not again.

"Sorry," I said, and that one word embarrassed me further. I lifted my hand, opened my palm, showing the nametag held within.

He stared at it as though I'd shown him a crucifixion wound.

"It's you," he said, and his gaze came up to my face, his brown eyes wide.

"Hello, Devon," I said. I'd been a singer; I still had good breath control. My voice did not crack.

He was silent for a time, and then he lifted his shoulders, a small shrug, as if he'd decided not to make a big thing of it. "Hello," he replied. And then he added, presumably because politeness demanded it, "It's good to see you." But his words were flat.

"How have you been?" I asked.

He shrugged again, this time as if acknowledging the impossibility of my question. How has anyone been for six decades? How does one sum up the bulk of a lifetime in a few words?

"Fine," he said at last. "I've had..." But whatever it was he'd had remained unsaid. He looked away and took a sip of his wine. Finally, he spoke again. "I used to follow your career."

"It had its ups and downs," I said, trying to keep my tone light.

"That song..." he began, but didn't finish.

There was no need to specify which song. The one I'd written about him. The one I'd written about what I did to him. It was one of my few really big hits, but I'd never intended to grow rich off my -- off our -- pain.

"They still play it from time to time," I said.

Devon nodded. "I heard it on an oldies station last month."

Oldies. I shuddered.

"So, tell me," I said, "do you have kids?"

"Three," said Devon. "Two boys and a girl."

"And grandkids?"

"Eight," said Devon. "Ages two through ten."

"Immortality." I hadn't intended to say it out loud, but there it was, the word floating between us. Devon had his immortality through his genes. And, I suppose, he had a piece of mine, too, for every time someone listened to that song, he or she would wonder if it was autobiographical, and, if so, who the beautiful young black man in my past had been.

"Your wife?" I asked.

"She passed away five years ago." He was holding his wineglass in his left hand; he still wore a ring.

"I'm sorry."

"What about you?" asked Devon. "Any family?"

I shook my head. We were quiet a while. I was wondering what color his wife had been.

"A lot has changed in sixty years," I said, breaking the silence.

He looked over toward the entrance, perhaps hoping somebody else would arrive so he could beg off. "A lot," he agreed. "And yet..."

I nodded. And yet, there still hadn't been a black president or vice-president.

And yet, the standard of living of African-Americans was still lower than that of whites -- not only meaning a shorter natural life expectancy, but also that far fewer of them could afford the array of treatments available to the rich.

And yet, just last week, they'd picked the person who would be the first to set foot on Mars. \_Of course it was a man, I'd thought bitterly when the announcement was made. Perhaps Devon had greeted the news with equal dismay, thinking, \_Of course he's white.\_

Suddenly I heard my name being called. I turned around, and there was Madeline Green. She was easy to recognize; she'd clearly had all sorts of treatments. Her face was smooth, her hair the same reddish-brown I remembered from her genuine youth. How she'd recognized me, though, I didn't know. Perhaps she'd overheard me talking to Devon, and had identified me by my voice, or perhaps just the fact that I \_was\_ talking to Devon had been clue enough.

"Why, Madeline!" I said, forcing a smile. "How good to see you!" I turned to Devon. "You remember Devon Smith?"

"How could I forget?" said Madeline. He was proffering his hand, and, after a moment, she took it.

"Hello, Madeline," said Devon. "You look fabulous."

It had been what Madeline had wanted to hear, but I'd been too niggardly to offer up.

\_Niggardly.\_ A perfectly legitimate word -- from the Scandinavian for "stingy," if I remembered correctly. But also a word I never normally used, even in my thoughts. And yet it had come to mind just now, recalling, I supposed, what Madeline had called Devon behind his back all those years ago.

Devon lifted his wineglass. "I need a refill," he said.

The last time I'd looked, he'd still had half a glass; I wondered if he'd quickly drained it when he saw Madeline approaching, giving him a way to exit gracefully, although whether it was me or Madeline he wanted to escape, I couldn't say. In any event, Devon was now moving off, heading toward the cafeteria table that had been set up as a makeshift bar.

"I bought your albums," said Madeline, now squeezing my hand. "Of course, they were all on vinyl. I don't have a record player anymore."

"They're available on CD," I said. "And for download."

"Are they now?" replied Madeline, sounding surprised. I guess she thought of my songs as artifacts of the distant past.

And perhaps they were -- although, as I looked over at Devon's broad back, it sure didn't feel that way.

\* \* \* \*

\_"Welcome back, class of Nineteen Sixty-Three!"\_

We were all facing the podium, next to the table with the portable stereo. Behind the podium, of course, was Pinky Spenser -- although I doubt anyone had called him "Pinky" for half a century. He'd been student-council president, and editor of the school paper, and valedictorian, and on and on, so he was the natural MC for the evening. Still, I was glad to see that for all his early success, he, too, looked old.

There were now perhaps seventy-five people present, including twenty like Madeline who had been able to afford rejuvenation treatments. I'd had a chance to chat briefly with many of them. They'd all greeted me like an old friend, although I couldn't remember ever being invited to their parties or along on their group outings. But now, because I'd once been famous, they all wanted to say hello. They hadn't had the time of day for me back when we'd been teenagers, but doubtless, years later, had gone around saying to people, "You'll never guess who \_I\_ went to school with!"

\_"We have a bunch of prizes to give away,"\_ said Pinky, leaning into the mike, distorting his own voice; part of me wanted to show him how to use it properly. \_"First, for the person who has come the farthest..."\_

Pinky presented a half-dozen little trophies. I'd had awards enough in my life, and didn't expect to get one tonight -- nor did I. Neither did Devon.

"And now," said Pinky, "although it's not from 1963, I think you'll all agree that this is appropriate..."

He leaned over and put a new disk in the portable stereo. I could see it from here; it was a CD-ROM that someone had burned at home. Pinky pushed the play button, and...

And one of my songs started coming from the speakers. I recognized it by the second note, of course, but the others didn't until the recorded version of me started singing, and then Madeline Green clapped her hands together. "Oh, listen!" she said, turning toward me. "It's you!"

And it was -- from half a century ago, with my song that had become the anthem for a generation of ugly-ducking girls like me. How could Pinky possibly think I wanted to hear that now, here, at the place where all the heartbreak the song chronicled had been experienced?

Why the hell had I come back, anyway? I'd skipped even the fiftieth reunion; what had driven me to want to attend my sixtieth? Was it loneliness? No. I had friends enough.

Was it morbid curiosity? Wondering who of the old gang had survived?

But, no, that wasn't it, either. That wasn't why I'd come.

The song continued to play. I was doing my guitar solo now. No singing; just me, strumming away. But soon enough the words began again. It was my most famous song, the one I'm sure they'll mention in my obituary.

To my surprise, Madeline was singing along softly. She looked at me, as if expecting me to join in, but I just forced a smile and looked away.

The song played on. The chorus repeated.

This wasn't the same gymnasium, of course -- the one where my school dances had been held, the ones where I'd been a wallflower, waiting for even the boys I couldn't stand to ask me to dance. That gym had been bulldozed along with the rest of the old Cedar Valley High.

I looked around. Several people had gone back to their conversations while my music still played. Those who had won the little trophies were showing them off. But Devon, I saw, was listening intently, as if straining to make out the lyrics.

We hadn't dated long -- just until my parents found out he was black and insisted I break up with him. This wasn't the song I'd written about us, but, in a way, I suppose it was similar. Both of them, my two biggest hits, were about the pain of being dismissed because of the way you look. In this song, it was me -- homely, lonely. And in that other song...

I had been a white girl, and he'd been the only black -- not boy, you can't say boy -- anywhere near my age at our school. Devon had no choice: if he were going to date anyone from Cedar Valley, she would have had to be white.

Back then, few could tell that Devon was good-looking; all they saw was the color of his skin. But he had been fine. Handsome, well muscled, a dazzling smile. And yet he had chosen me.

I had wondered about that back then, and I still wondered about it now. I'd wondered if he'd thought appearances couldn't possibly matter to someone who looked like me.

The song stopped, and --

No.

No.

I had a repertoire of almost a hundred songs. If Pinky was going to pick a second one by me, what were the chances that it would be that song?

But it was. Of course it was

Devon didn't recognize it at first, but when he did, I saw him take a half-step backward, as if he'd been pushed by an invisible hand.

After a moment, though, he recovered. He looked around the gym and quickly found me. I turned away, only to see Madeline softly singing this one, too, la-la-ing over those lyrics she didn't remember.

A moment later, there was a hand on my shoulder. I turned. Devon was standing there, looking at me, his face a mask. "We have some unfinished business," he said, softly but firmly.

I swallowed. My eyes were stinging. "I am so sorry, Devon," I said. "It was the times. The era." I shrugged. "Society."

He looked at me for a while, then reached out and took my pale hand in his brown one. My heart began to pound. "We never got to do this back in '63," he said. He paused, perhaps wondering whether he wanted to go on. But, after a moment, he did, and there was no reluctance in his voice. "Would you like to dance?"

I looked around. Nobody else was dancing. Nobody had danced all evening. But I let him lead me out into the center of the gym.

And he held me in his arms.

And I held him.

And as we danced, I thought of the future that Devon's grandchildren would grow up in, a world I would never see, and, for the first time, I found myself hoping my songs wouldn't be immortal.

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