



*A modern
twist on Jane
Austen's classic
romance.*

Persuasion

a latter-day tale

REBECCA H. JAMISON

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate floral corner pieces. Inside the frame, the word "Persuasion" is written in a large, elegant, cursive font. Below it, the subtitle "a latter-day tale" is written in a smaller, simpler cursive font. The background of the frame features a subtle floral pattern.

Persuasion
a latter-day tale

REBECCA H. JAMISON

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Summary: When Anne broke off her engagement years ago, she thought she'd never see Neil Wentworth again. But when Neil's brother buys the house she grew up in, it seems fate has other plans.

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How much should I ask for the chocolate fondue fountain? Five dollars? Twenty? I haven't got a clue. This is my first garage sale, and I have to admit, I'm nervous. It's true—I'm not much of a salesperson. When I was nine, I sold a box of Girl Scout cookies to an old lady down the street. She said they were too expensive and would only pay half the price. I paid the other half out of my allowance. That's how my career in sales started. And that's how it ended.

I'm trying to convince myself that garage sales are different. People actually want to come to garage sales. Why else would they be up at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning? I write \$15 on the sticker and place the fondue fountain on the table beside the pasta machine. I set up the artificial Christmas tree, and I'm about to arrange Dad's collection of old sunglasses on a card table when I hear my older sister, Liz, opening the garage door.

Liz is one of those women who counts calories (she has an app on her cell phone), exercises at least an hour a day, and keeps a weekly appointment at the beauty salon. With her carefully highlighted hair and slim figure, she looks as if she's my younger sister. But she's actually eighteen months older. That's right—she's about to turn thirty. Liz walks over to the Christmas tree, touches a branch with a French-manicured finger, then sighs. "Oh, Anne, do we have to sell the Christmas tree?"

"There's another one, you know. We haven't used this one for years."

Liz steps back with her hands on her hips and looks at the top of the tree. "Oh, you're right. This is the old one... Poor Dad. I can't believe he has to

move. Couldn't we do something to help him?"

I take my eyes off Dad's sunglasses to look at Liz. Couldn't we do something to help him? I thought I was helping. "Maybe the garage sale will make enough to pay down a credit card bill." I don't say what I'm thinking—that maybe she could help me with the garage sale, or, better yet, get a job. She's capable of working. She's just never had to. Dad doesn't seem to mind that Liz hasn't moved out of the house. He also thinks it's funny when people mistake him and Liz for husband and wife. That's because, although Dad is pushing sixty, he takes pride in looking to be around thirty-nine years old.

Liz stares at me, a look of horror on her face. "I thought we agreed that we would call it an estate sale. 'Garage sale' sounds so tacky."

"We can call it an estate sale if you want. It just makes it sound like Dad's dead."

"So, you'll change the signs and everything? I'd hate to have a bunch of garage sale people coming to our house."

I'm about to say that I've already put up all the signs when Dad joins us. He's a tall man who still has a full head of blond hair. His few gray hairs blend in so well that they give him a slightly sun-bleached glow. He stands looking at a rack of his old designer clothes, smiling and shaking his head, apparently amused that such clothing was ever in style. Then he turns and smiles like he did once when he brought a puppy home for us. "Greg Shepherd just called. Should be here any minute. He's already found someone who wants to look at the house."

Liz moans. "But we don't even have a sign up yet."

"Greg said that with a house like ours in a neighborhood like ours, we shouldn't be surprised to have people interested already. Real estate is doing well all over northern Virginia, but especially here in McLean. And June is a good month for selling."

I'm going to miss this old, redbrick colonial with its big, wide front porch. I love the slippery, old, creaky floorboards and the tall staircase that's perfect for sliding down. I'll miss the way the sun streams in through the tall windows in the living room, lighting up Dad's dark leather furniture and oriental rugs; the crystal ceiling lamps that sparkle in the bedrooms; the pink bathtub where I

took all my childhood baths and the cabbage rose wallpaper that lines the bathroom walls. Most of all, I'm going to miss the yard with all its overgrown azaleas and boxwoods. As a child, I spent long hours there, walking along the mossy pathways, learning the names of the trees—oak, hickory, maple, dogwood, redbud—and watching birds playing in the birdbath.

Dad walks over to the side of the garage where I've stacked his old golf clubs, ski equipment, tennis racquets, and exercise gadgets. He picks up a racquet and swings. "You know, Liz, I think it's going to be great to start over. With a smaller place, I can afford a few luxuries, maybe a better car. It'll be a better social climate for you too."

Liz giggles. "We'll need to find a place with lots of doctors and lawyers."

The truth is that my father is so far in debt that even if he sells the house for the asking price, he will barely pay off the home equity loans he's taken out. Plus, he'll still have eight credit cards to pay off and two car loans. Although he is an accountant, Dad is always a little too optimistic about his financial situation. Maybe it's because he's used to dealing with the larger debts involved in running businesses. Whatever it is, I'm not about to remind him of how bad his situation really is. That would be too shameful, too embarrassing for both of us. It's hard enough that he has to move out of the home where he's lived ever since the year I was born.

"If we get what we're asking for the house," Dad is saying, "we might be able to afford a nice condominium. There are some new ones down in Fredericksburg right beside a golf course."

Liz fumbles with some of her old jewelry that's lying out on a card table. "Daddy, we couldn't possibly move to Fredericksburg. That's so far away."

"I don't see that it matters, Liz. I'm about to reach retirement age, and you're flexible." He clears his throat and holds up one of the old skis. "Anne, I don't think you're asking enough for these. I must have paid \$300 for this set. And that was just a few years ago."

Knowing we couldn't get more than twenty-five dollars for them, I'm glad our conversation is cut short by Greg Shepherd's arrival. Greg Shepherd is a short, stocky man who, if dressed up properly, would make a perfect Santa Claus. He's an old friend of Dad's—they've known each other since Liz and I joined the Church. Actually, he's our home teacher, which doesn't matter a bit

to Dad—he doesn't have strong feelings about religion one way or another. He pretty much left it up to Mom to freak out over us joining The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even though Mom allowed us to join, she still thinks it's a cult. I guess I probably would too if I hadn't read the Book of Mormon and listened to the missionaries. Living without the gospel was like driving in the rain without windshield wipers. When I learned about the gospel, things cleared up for me.

I know, joining the Church isn't really a normal way for a teenage girl to rebel. And what teen wants to join a church whose teachings include abstinence from alcohol and sex? It sometimes amazes me that Liz and I ever even wanted to visit the church. But Liz had a huge crush on a Mormon boy, so when one of our girlfriends invited us to an activity, she was all about going to church.

At first, we went for the boys and the activities, then we started to see that those kids had something we didn't. For the most part, they were happier, they had a sort of inner confidence, and they actually knew what they believed. For me, who had never really known what to believe, that was enticing.

When our friends invited us over to hear the missionaries, I'll admit I was scared, but I shouldn't have been. I learned I had a purpose for being on earth. And I came to know God as someone who loves me. When I kneeled down to pray about getting baptized, joy wrapped around me, and I knew I wanted to follow Jesus Christ.

I've tried to explain it all to Dad, but he doesn't seem to care. What matters to Dad is that his home teacher, Greg, is one of the most successful real estate agents in the county. Greg waves to us as he walks up the driveway toward the garage and calls out, "I forgot to tell you, Walter, I think you might actually be acquainted with this couple who's coming to look at the house. The man used to go to your country club. His name's Wentworth."

Am I hearing right? Did he say Wentworth? I dive down behind the table beside me and pretend to arrange a box of Liz's old paperback novels as my face grows red—and it isn't from the pictures on the covers of all those historical romances.

Greg puts a finger to his lips—another Santa Claus move. "That's funny. I just talked to him on the phone, and I can't seem to remember his first name.

A tall man—red-haired. He’s one of the doctors up at the hospital.” This at least is a relief—it’s his brother, not him. I let out my breath slowly.

Dad shakes his head.

After an awkward silence, I interrupt, “You mean Jack Wentworth. He was the pool manager a few years ago.”

Dad slaps his thigh. “That’s why I couldn’t remember him. I was thinking he was one of the members.”

Liz shrugs. “I don’t remember him either.” I’m relieved to hear her say it. That, at least, will spare me a tiny bit of embarrassment.

Greg enthusiastically rubs his hands together. “So, when can I show them the house?”

I put the box of books up on the table and sort through them. I’m not really sorting anything, though, except the feelings that are coursing through me. The one overwhelming feeling is that I don’t want to see Jack. I’m sure he’ll remember me, and I don’t want to stir up unpleasant feelings. Just hearing the name “Wentworth” mentioned again is enough to make me want to hide like a shy cat.

Conveniently, Dad decides to show the house tonight instead of in the morning when I’m running the garage sale. While they’re showing the house, I’ll be relaxing in my apartment with a book. To make sure of this, I decide to finish setting up for the garage sale in the morning. If some of the items don’t get priced, so be it. I’ve heard that people prefer to haggle at garage sales anyway.

Once Greg leaves, I say good-bye and head for my car. But even as I’m walking out of the house, I’m thinking that in a month or two, he could be walking on this same pavement.

My mind is so preoccupied that I get to my apartment complex with hardly any idea of how I arrived here. I live on the fifth floor of a seven-story building. It’s a modern complex with new, beige carpets in the hallways and two elevators that never stall—the perfect choice for single professionals. Yes, it’s expensive—everything in northern Virginia is expensive—but I make up for it by driving an old car, a car that embarrasses my father. I also skimp a little on my retirement savings.

My roommate, Marcy, is standing at the stove in the kitchen when I walk into the apartment. She's wearing a big white apron and has her hair up in a high ponytail.

Marcy is the only African-American woman in the singles ward. She is also, by far, the tallest woman in the ward and a divorcee, but that doesn't hold her back at all. She has plenty of dates. It helps that she's a great cook. Guys like that, even if she is a vegetarian.

Marcy has, in fact, pretty much taken over the kitchen, which she's decorated in her own retro style. The curtains, pot holders, flowerpots, and dishes are all shades of yellow and orange. Glossy-leafed succulent plants grow in pots along the tops of the cabinets. She claims the warm colors help her relax after working long hours as a congressional aide.

Marcy calls out to me as soon as I step in the door. "I'm making eggplant Parmesan. Do you want some?"

I put my purse down on the kitchen table. "No thanks. I'm having a chocolate day." I open the freezer.

"What's wrong?"

I dig to the back of the freezer for the emergency pint of Ben & Jerry's Brownie Batter ice cream. "Did I ever tell you about Neil Wentworth?"

"I don't remember. Do you work with him or something?"

"No, I knew him eight years ago when I was in college. We were engaged for a day or so."

Marcy looks at me with her mouth wide open. If I wasn't so nervous about the whole thing, I'd feel triumphant—there isn't much that gets past Marcy. She shakes her wooden spoon at me. "You didn't ever tell me you were engaged. What happened?"

I stick a spoon—a silver-plated one Marcy got for a wedding present—in the ice cream. "I got scared. My mom and dad both disapproved. They said we were too young. That we would turn out divorced like they did. I was worried that I didn't know how to be a good enough wife. He was right off his mission. He wanted to be a police officer. I didn't want to be a police officer's wife. It's so dangerous, and I would have always been worrying. I thought I couldn't handle it. I thought it would be better for him if I didn't marry him. Back

then, I was so insecure about everything. Maybe it was because of my parents' divorce." I take a bite of ice cream.

Marcy opens the oven door. "So, did you see him?"

"His brother is going to come look at Dad's house tonight." I push the ice cream away from myself. "I really need to go on a diet."

"You do not need to go on a diet. You look great." Marcy puts a casserole dish in the oven, dries off her hands, and comes to sit down across from me at the table. I feel like I'm talking to my mom. Not my real mom, but the mom I wish I had. "So you're worried you'll see this guy. Do you want to see him?"

I lean back and comb my hands through my hair. "I don't know. I was really in love with him. We were so comfortable together. I've never felt that way about anyone else. Do you remember when I was dating Charlie? I couldn't get excited about him. I mean, we had fun together, but it was like something was missing."

"I remember how relieved you were when you finally broke up with him... I still can't believe he married your sister... So is this Neil guy still single?"

"I haven't seen him since the day we broke up. It was the same day I went back to college, and he moved up to Maryland. All I've heard is that he's up in Baltimore, and he's a police officer."

Marcy reaches for her laptop at the other end of the table. "Well, there's one way to find out."

"You're not going to Google him."

"You gave me enough information. If my search doesn't work out, I have a friend up in Baltimore." Marcy is one of those people who seems to have connections in every city on the East Coast.

I'm too nervous to sit at the table while Marcy searches. "I think I'll take a bubble bath." Grabbing the ice cream, I head for the bathroom. I always thought it was too late to find him again. He's probably happily married with two or three children. Eight years is a long time. It's certainly long enough for Neil to forget all about me.

I shut the door and turn on the water. The noise of the water rushing out of the bathtub faucet slows my thoughts. I pour in half a container of vanilla scented bath salts. (The directions said to use a tablespoon; but what the heck,

they're supposed to be relaxing.) Why am I so worried about Neil? What are the chances I'll ever see him again? If I do see him, he'll probably introduce me to his cute, little wife—and that will be the end of it. No matter what, my journal from 2002 is going to stay unopened under my bed.

Sinking my body down into the hot water, I feel my sore muscles begin to relax—my feet, legs, back, arms, neck, head. Guys like Neil always get married. It's too late. There's nothing to worry about—nothing at all to worry about, nothing, nothing. I'm repeating it to myself like a mantra when Marcy knocks at the door. “Still single,” she calls.

Thursday, May 9, 2002

I think I'm dating someone—it's hard to tell because he's never really said the word "date." He hasn't kissed me either. So I guess I should say we're just friends (but I'm crossing my fingers.) His name is Neil, and he just got back from his mission. (He went to England.) Last Sunday, he asked me to a fireside. Since then, we've eaten lunch together every day, but maybe that's because it's only a mile to walk from his work (the country club) to mine (the library.) The wonderful thing about him is that he understands me, no matter what I talk about. He can be really insightful about spiritual things and still understanding about the problems I have with my family.

Speaking of my family, Mom has a new boyfriend. She brought him over to our house last night. He's an antique dealer. He went all over the house, looking for something valuable, the way they do on television. He said he couldn't find anything more than twenty years old, as if that was a very bad thing. I think Dad was jealous, but he tried not to show it.

It's 9:30 a.m. and I've already sold almost all of Dad's furniture, the Christmas tree, and half the exercise equipment. I can't believe how successful this sale is. People have been coming and going since we started at 8:00 a.m. I'm inside the garage, talking to a man about the lawn mower when I see Neil getting out of a car with his brother. He could have just as well been stepping off the page of an L.L. Bean catalog. He looks the same as I remember him—the dark hair, strong shoulders, confident smile. The police work has obviously

kept him in top condition. His clothes fit him perfectly. His brother, Jack, must have brought him to help inspect the house. While Jack points to the roof, Neil stands with his hands on his hips and nods. He's wearing dark glasses.

It's as if I'm frozen. The lawn mower man offers fifteen dollars. I say that will be fine, forgetting that I promised Dad to sell it for at least fifty. I take the money, stick it in my fanny pack, and pull the baseball cap further down on my head. Neil has to remember this is my house. He'll expect to see me.

I wish I'd spent a little more time dressing this morning. I should have guessed this would happen. The worst thing is there's nowhere to hide. Being the only family member in the garage, I'm stuck. If I'd known they were coming, if Dad had only told me, I could have worn something other than baggy sweatpants and a T-shirt covered with paint stains. And makeup—did I even put any makeup on before I left the apartment? I didn't curl my hair either. I have the type of hair that always has to be curled. Hairdressers call it wavy, which for me means some of my hair is straight and some is curly—you can never tell how it will look in the morning.

A woman carrying a pasta machine, some video tapes, and a curling iron hands me a twenty. It takes longer than usual to calculate the change. The whole time I'm wondering if Neil has noticed me. While I'm fumbling for a five-dollar-bill in my fanny pack, I'm surrounded by several other people wanting to buy things. I see Dad talking to Jack in the driveway. Neil is staring down at the boxwood bushes, his hands still on his hips.

We stood next to those boxwoods the first time he kissed me. The bushes have a way of reminding me of it with their deep, woody scent. Neil and I rode our bikes and had a picnic at the park. By the time we'd gotten back, he was in a hurry to get to work. We were both sweaty, me especially. He wrapped his arms around me and gave me a kiss that melted away every unhappy thought lurking in my body. Then he said good-bye and headed off to work. I remember standing there, unable to move, feeling as if my spine had turned to Jell-O.

I wish I could feel a little of that peacefulness now. My hands are shaking as I fumble with money. I hope Dad isn't being too rude. It doesn't seem that he's recognized Neil at all. He's only looking at Jack. It's now inevitable. I'm going

to have to say something to Neil. I don't want him to feel rejected all over again. On the other hand, I'm glad to be so busy with the garage sale that I don't have to go out and greet him right now. I wonder what I should say. Well, at least it will be over soon.

Within a few minutes, Neil, Jack, and Dad disappear to the other side of the house. The crowd of customers is thinning out, so I run inside to put some of the money from my hip pack in a change box. While I'm at it, I run into the bathroom for a second to borrow a little blush and mascara from Liz. But I can't find any of Liz's makeup. She must have already packed it. When I return to the garage, my sister Mary is pushing her double stroller around the boxes and tables. Mary has the softened body of a woman who's borne two children and is now a few weeks into her third pregnancy. Her hair is brown, like mine, and permed. She's wearing jeans and a loose, pink T-shirt. Her features are smaller and more delicate than mine. I used to be a little jealous about that.

I maneuver around the shoppers to greet her. "Hi, Mary, am I ever glad to see you. We've been so busy. I haven't had a moment to myself."

Mary looks around. "Where's Liz?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know. She's probably around back at the pool. She told me she's trying to save money by tanning outside instead of at the salons. I thought she was going to help with—"

"I've gotta run to the store," Mary interrupts. "We're out of milk and there's nothing to eat for breakfast. My morning sickness is out of control. I can't face taking the kids to the store. They're always so hard to shop with, and I'm really not feeling well today. I can see you're busy, so I'm gonna see if Liz will watch them." She parks the stroller at the back of the garage and pulls the squirming boys out. "Make sure no one runs off with the stroller." I open the door to the house while Mary drags the kids through.

To be honest, I'm a little worried about Liz watching the boys beside the pool. I don't want to make a 911 call on top of everything else that's happening. But I shouldn't have worried. Not five minutes after Mary leaves, Liz drags the boys back out to the garage. She puts one hand on a hip and points to the boys with the other. "I can't watch these kids. They won't do anything I say. You've got to tell Mary to take some sort of discipline class. You're the only one who can give her advice."

By this time, there isn't much left in the garage and fewer people are getting out of their cars to look at the merchandise. The boys, an eighteen-month-old and a three-year-old, are climbing on the one remaining sofa. I've pulled them off at least ten times. I'm pulling them off again when Jack and Neil walk into the garage. Neil's face is the same: smooth and tanned with clear blue eyes that are so disarming. All the angles are just right: the straight nose, the determined chin, and the intelligent brow. He could have been a politician. Except for that little piece of hair that sticks up at the crown of his head, he could go on television right now. Back when we were dating, I took the trouble to carry gel in my purse to plaster down that piece of hair.

Jack looks at Neil, who looks at me. Because I can't seem to say anything, Neil has to be the first to speak. "Hi, Anne. It's nice to see you." He reaches his hand out to shake mine. But I'm holding the toddler who is now kicking and screaming.

I try to smile. I remember hearing somewhere that a smile is the most important accessory. That's good because it's all I've got. "Oh, hi, Neil. It's good to see you too." The toddler continues to scream.

Neil cocks his head and looks at the little boy in my arms. He isn't going bald at all. His hair is still dark and thick on top. "Do you need some help?"

I can hardly believe that he is still so handsome, and I'd forgotten how his voice is so gentle and deep. "Oh, no, I'm fine."

He puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. "So, are these yours?"

I smile. "Yeah." Then I realize he's asking about the children. I guess he hasn't been Googling my name lately. "I mean, they're mine, but they're not mine. I mean, they're my sister's kids. They're my nephews. I'm watching them for her."

There's a long pause. I'm trying to think of something to say. Should I ask about his job or his family? Maybe I should offer him a drink or something to eat. A man who has been testing out the exercise cycle comes toward us. Neil steps back. "Well, I guess you're busy. Nice seeing you again." He turns and walks over to where Jack is staring at a small crack in the garage floor. The two of them look around the garage for a while, then walk back outside. They're heading toward their car as Mary comes in.

I'm helping the man to get the exercise cycle out of the garage and telling myself that the worst is over. I saw him. We spoke. Now I have nothing to worry about. We can treat each other as old friends. I'm telling myself that it's ridiculous to feel things so deeply after eight years. It's been almost a third of my life. So much has happened. So much has changed.

But all the logic in my brain can't change my feelings. Eight years might as well have been eight days. I still love him.

When I'm finished helping with the cycle, Mary's words jolt me from my thoughts. "Do you know those men, Anne?" She nods toward Jack and Neil, who are just driving off. Since she stayed with our grandparents during the summer Neil and I dated, she doesn't know much about our relationship.

"Yes, we were friends when we were younger. The red-haired one is thinking of buying the house... Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that the dark-haired one was saying something about how much you'd changed and how he hardly recognized you." Mary's never been tactful. I'm usually prepared for it, but this time it stings.

I look down at the floor. "Hardly recognized me!" The words echo in my mind. I'm mortified. But it's true. I've changed, and he hasn't. I would have recognized him anywhere. I've been noticing this for the past half hour, and I can't deny it. The years that have worn me out like some faded old T-shirt—those same years have given him a more manly, open look. I saw the same Neil Wentworth.

"Hardly recognized me!" The more I think it, the less agitated I feel. I might even be thankful for Mary's eavesdropping. Sure, I'm disappointed, but better to be disappointed sooner than later. Yes, I still love him, but I can't have him. At least now I don't have to wait anxiously to know his feelings for me. Maybe this is my chance to really start over—to finally get over him and get on with my life.

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