

The Thing About Home

The Denny's was the first place Pete found open in about 50 miles and his brain and energy were running on empty. It was 11:30 p.m. He went inside and sat and sipped a cup of coffee and looked at the blank darkness of the night out the window. He needed sleep but he needed more the completion of everything. To be done with the drive.

The waitress had curly auburn hair and big eyes. She refilled his coffee and it steamed from the surface, a black lava pool. "Passing through?"

"Something like that."

She nodded and smiled as if they now shared a secret. "Figured. I know just about everyone around here and I've never seen you."

Pete forced a smile and a shrug. "Now you can cross that off your bucket list."

She laughed. "So do you just drift around, see the sights, that kind of thing?"

"I used to live here, actually."

"Oh, well - welcome back!"

He smelled the coffee's boldness. "Thanks. I grew up here."

"Just couldn't stay away, huh?" Her cheeriness was incongruous with the late hour, and also with the absence of anyone else acting that way.

"I'm really just here for two reasons."

"Oh?"

"One's a funeral. Other is, I need to settle a score, so to speak."

"Ooh. Mysterious."

“Yeah.” He looked out the window at the two cars still straggling on the street at this hour of night. They moved slow, like they were caught in molasses. “It’s been so damn long since I’ve been back, though.”

“I love it here, myself. It’s a nice little town.”

Pete chuckled a little. “Yeah, sorry, but I always kinda hated it here.”

She frowned and her eyes looked sad. “Well, that’s just too bad.”

Pete asked if he could get some food. She had a pen and paper out and he ordered an egg and bagel and drank more coffee and it felt like he was all just coffee now, like he was only coffee and nothing else existed in him, not even blood.

#

The morning came. Light through the motel curtains. He got dressed. He didn’t remember taking any clothes off the night before, but he was bare-chested, covered in cold sweat. The room was small and the boxy air conditioner made too much noise, interrupting his sleep.

He stepped out and sniffed the air, rife with truck exhaust. His mouth had a weird stale taste to it. A homeless man wearing a red beanie cap with days-old beard stubble eyed him with a hollow gaze from the gas station across the street. Pete just got in his car and drove to the cemetery.

The granite headstones looked shriveled in the sun and everyone was sweating in their black clothes. Pete stood at the back. There was a priest with sad eyes and a deep voice making some kind of speech and there was a woman looking back at him with knowing eyes, and it took a moment for him to recognize her, though he couldn’t remember her name right away. In a hushed tone, she said, “I didn’t think you’d make it.”

“Yeah, I was a bit late leaving.”

“I’ll say.”

The priest at the front was saying how the whole town had loved Lara and how she was now in the arms of God, in eternal grace, or some such thing. The whole thing went on as planned and Pete got up and said a few words that he couldn't remember later, as if he'd entered a fugue state, as if the words had vanished into the aether and had been removed from everyone's memories. There were some other speakers, but he didn't really register any of them. It was all just words that seemed to leave as quick as they came.

After it was all done, the woman with the knowing eyes approached. He remembered her name. Her name was Ariana, and they'd been classmates from middle school to the end of high school. She was a little shorter than him with dark hair, and her eyes looked older than the rest of her. "How're you holding up?"

"Uh, OK, I guess. It's all slightly surreal."

"I know. I mean... it's... well, you know." She looked just slightly down. She rubbed her arm with her opposite hand.

"She was... yeah. She was something." Pete looked at the sky, a bright blue, with just bare streaks of white clouds like fingernail marks.

Ariana looked like she was going to cry but instead she just leaned in and hugged him, pressing herself into him and they held each other. Then they separated. "A bunch of us are all going down to the bar later. We're gonna do, like, a sort of private, less official thing for her there."

He knew where she was talking about and nodded. "OK, then."

She was turning to go.

"Hey, is Jericho going to be there?"

She turned and had an apprehensive look. "Yeah, I think so."

#

He spent the rest of the afternoon driving around town. The lake was full of ducks and algae-fuzz over the edges. There were a handful of joggers in bright neon colors making their way along the lake. If things were anything like how they had been, there were empty, crumpled beer and soda cans hidden in the folds of the tall grass and by the sewer grates.

There were more upscale things in town now, a SoulCycle, a fancy looking vegan restaurant, and even the exteriors of the older buildings seeming too smooth, cleaned until they'd been robbed of something. There were new condominiums shining facing the various lakes and bodies of water, which also shone. It felt like the whole place had been painted over.

Back in school it had been all parties and endless nights with illicitly-gotten liquor and beer. He remembered Lara as being always in the middle of a crowd, rotating between everyone, making sure they were comfortable. It had taken a while to win her over and she had played it coy at first, close to the chest. But that last summer before he took off for college had been burned in his memory. A thing of legends, now. At the time, he had never felt more alive. Thinking of her in bed was painful now, the memory like a radiant glow getting brighter and brighter. He wondered what she had thought of the gentrification and modernization of this whole place. He could picture her hating it, scoffing at the fakes who came in and made it something different.

Then he thought: no. She probably took it in stride. Laughed at it but embraced it anyway.

He thought she was better than him. He kept driving and couldn't think of anything to do. He felt a vague queasiness and nausea, wanted to eat but also didn't want to.

#

At the bar, the walls and floor were the comforting old mahogany shade that made you feel like you'd found a pleasant kind of cave to hide away from the world. The bar was a long L-shape that took up a lot of the side of the place. There were small circular tables and stools lined in jagged patterns

along the front, and there was a little circle of a stage where sometimes bar bands or karaoke or stand-up did their things. He found Ariana there along with some others he recognized. There was John who now worked as the town's main accountant and Lindsay who managed another bar across town. The bartender was Rocky, who had run the place since Pete was in high school and he and his friends were getting in on fake IDs. Rocky's skin was leathery and dry and his voice was like a gust of hard desert wind, coming with gravel and debris. He had the bored, resigned look about him like nothing ever surprised him anymore.

They all spoke in hushed tones. They remembered Lara as she had been in her public facing roles - the planner, the socialite, always with a smile or a joke, able to start conversations and light up dark days. Pete didn't know what to say.

Some more people joined them. One of them was Amber, who'd been a friend of Lara's. She hugged Pete and some of the others and got a drink. She said she didn't think there'd be anyone else like Lara on the Earth.

Pete said, "Well, she wasn't perfect."

Nobody said anything. Nobody seemed to be looking in quite the same direction.

Pete sighed and was leaning against the bar. "I just want to remember her as a human being. Like, not this... saint, or whatever it is. She'd want the same thing."

Nobody was really extending him an olive branch here.

"Like she could be flaky on plans. She got moody at times, got in her head. She would've been the first to say it."

Ariana looked uncomfortable and scratched her arm. "I guess, yeah. I guess I can see it."

Pete felt a fiery churning in his throat that seemed to linger between there and his gut like a wandering ghost. He felt like he existed in some whole other reality from these people.

The door opened. In walked Jericho, with his lanky form and hair that always seemed to be too shaggy. He had a lost look about him. He got a whiskey drink and settled in with the group. He talked

in a voice a little too fast, too shaky, about how Lara and he had taken that trip to Mexico one time. He said she'd gone ahead of him on a hike and he couldn't see her, and that he had run so fast and so hard with the expectation that there was something climactic to be done, something to be accomplished, and she'd just been examining some flowers and shrubbery. And she'd had that look she always got. You know the one, Jericho said, like she was just pranking the world, her own private funhouse.

They talked some more and the group split off to various other parts of the bar. The music played and they drank more. The drunkenness set in like a heavy fog. Amber and John danced slow in the middle of the room and there was something familiar about it, something that spoke to a history between them that Pete was a stranger to in the years since he'd last been back. Then Ariana was joining in. They were slow dancing in a circle, not touching, eyes closed or half-closed, their bodies moving as if in touch with something beyond themselves, something in the core of the human experience stretching back to when consciousness was first formed.

#

The outside was muggy, flies around the flickering yellow light hanging by the backdoor as the sun's final rays of dim orange sank into the black. Jericho was smoking a cigarette a few feet away and facing the river behind the bar. Pete stood there and felt very conscious of his hands and his whole body. He realized he hadn't eaten all day. His stomach groaned and he felt hollow and jittery.

Jericho turned. His face was sallow than Pete remembered. He hadn't shaved in a while.

"Hey, man. You OK?"

"I mean, under the circumstances, I could be better."

Jericho smiled but there was nothing humorous in it. "Yeah, sure."

"Been a long time since I've been back here."

“Hell yeah, it has.” Jericho smoked and the smoke made contours against the backdrop of the river. “But it grows on you. The quiet.”

“Maybe I’ll stay a while.” Pete didn’t know why he said this. It was just words. More fodder for the endless mill of time.

“Hell, do what you want. I been thinking I need to beat feet. Follow your lead.”

Jericho moved into the light a little more, and it looked like he’d been crying. The cigarette was a reddish fleck against the fuzzy indigo night around them. Pete felt like saying something to break the silence. But the only thing he came up with was, “So you were with her for a long time, huh?”

Jericho looked up and was surprised, his expression like Pete had just asked him about his preferred sexual kinks. “I mean, yeah, we’d been together for the last few years.”

“Yeah. And you were supposed to be with her that night, right?”

Jericho looked maybe a little guilty, or maybe it was something else entirely that Pete couldn’t identify. “Hey, man...”

Pete sucked in his breath, tried to look big. “No, I want to know. I need to hear it from you.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“I don’t, huh?”

“No, man. Not even a little.” Jericho threw his cigarette on the ground and he balled his fists, clenching and unclenching.

“Enlighten me, then.”

Jericho scoffed. “Man, you haven’t changed. Always were a pretentious ass. How was it when you dumped her and ran off to the big fuckin’ city? Felt good?”

Pete threw out his fist and he punched Jericho in the face, sending him reeling. Jericho righted his posture and shot a punch, too, and it caught Pete’s ear, the pain blossoming like a flower there. They grappled for a bit. Jericho, taller, longer-armed, had him on the ground, was choking him. Jericho’s hands were around Pete’s neck and his eyes were wide and hateful. There was a commotion that

sounded far away. They were pulling Jericho off him. Jericho panted hard. Pete felt a rush of cold air on his neck. The world blinked in and out of focus and someone was helping him to his feet. Amber. Her hair was in her face and her eyes were wide. They all stood in a circle and nobody said anything.

“Guys,” Ariana finally managed, standing sort of in the middle of them all like a human wedge. “What the fuck?”

Jericho, red-faced, blood trickling down from his lip, jabbed an aggressive index finger at Pete. “This fuckin’ guy, he thinks he can just come here from goddamn Manhattan, tower in the fuckin’ sky, and judge us?”

Pete rubbed his palms against his neck, feeling the bruise. It felt tender. His ear burned, too. The night air was like a balm. He brushed his hair out of his face. They were all looking at him like they didn’t recognize him and he wondered for a second if his face had somehow changed, irrevocably, inexplicably. If there was some metamorphosis.

But he forced himself to speak, and his voice sounded odd and hoarse. “I’m still in touch with a friend here. I hear things.”

“Things?” Ariana squinted at him.

“Things. I heard Jericho and Lara weren’t doing well, that they’d been seen fighting, had some big... blow-up, down at the park.”

“Fuckin’... do people ever mind their goddamn business anymore?” Jericho said.

“And I heard about how, well, how she passed.”

“Jesus.” Jericho paced on the ground, breaking away from the others with his shoulders hunched.

Pete breathed hard and felt like there was something in his chest. He couldn’t stop the words from coming. “I heard about how you and her went to that guy. How you said you’d be there with her when she did the shit.”

“Man, fuck you,” Jericho spat, moving hard and fast but not making a move to strike. He pulled back at the last second. “You don’t know what you’re on about.”

“I know she was alone at the end. That was public fuckin’ record. Right there on her Twitter.”

At this Jericho pulled back and the mood shifted, inexplicable, like some shock summer storm. Pete could barely see him. It looked as if he was crying, but the light was thin.

Ariana stepped in between him and Jericho, palms up towards both of them. “Just keep your hands off each other, OK?”

Jericho, wiping his eyes, stepped back into the dim yellow fly-ridden light. “You never answered me before. What gives you the right to judge? Like, you specifically?”

Their eyes on Pete were like beacons. He excused himself, walked out on legs like noodles.

#

Mack’s Corner was always the old man bar. Pete asked Micah to meet him there. They had always found that they could breathe easy and relax there. It was the same as usual with its hard wood walls and the patio area with the mulch ground and picnic tables and plastic torches lighting everything in odd shades of dim orange and blue.

Micah, skinny and long-haired with wiry black sandals and knobby knees, was already waiting with a Sidecar. Pete just got a beer. It was a long ride back to the motel.

“So you really came,” Micah said.

“After everything you told me, hell, I guess I had to.” He sat down.

Micah sipped his drink. “Yeah. I was wondering if those texts were too much. I do have a flair for the dramatic.”

“You’re nosy as shit, too.” Pete rubbed his ear; it felt like raw meat but it didn’t hurt the same anymore.

Micah laughed. “Yeah, guilty as charged. But this is the new kind of journalism. I see and hear stuff and I report it. I’m just doing my duty.”

“You cared about her, too.”

“I did. Almost got her back in middle school, I recall.”

“Ah, she thought you were like a brother.”

“Fuck off.”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. That’s what she told me.”

“Sure, sure.”

They drank. There was an old couple of ladies coming in and they sat at the bar. They spoke with a kind of agility, an electric, caffeinated energy about them.

“So you confronted him, huh?”

Pete sighed and rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah. It was... ah, it’s all dumb. It ain’t gonna change shit.”

“Still, though.” Micah leaned back in his chair, his long legs flexing.

“Yeah - fuck that guy.”

“He was always the worst, even back in high school. The fucking guy just always tried too hard. Drama queen, too.”

They drank some more. Micah finished his and went and got a beer. He sat back down.

Pete was looking at the sky. “It’s a hell of a thing, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“The opioids. The whole of it with her.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I try not to think of all that.” Micah was looking at something in the distance.

“That’s fair.”

Micah drank some more and some of the beer spilled, sliding down the glass, dripping and making irregular damp circles on the wood table surface.

“I can’t believe I fucking spent 25 years in this town.” Pete got up and stretched and all his muscles felt like they were new things, foals in the field, breathing their first breaths.

Micah shrugged. “I only moved an hour north. Shit happens.”

“Don’t people ever get tired of it all, the same shit every day?” The beer was slightly warm but it had a buzz to it, and his whole form started to feel like it was on the precipice of a seizure, in a pleasant way, like he could just let go.

“Maybe. I guess they just deal.”

“I think I thought it’d all be different. Like I’d come back and it would be justified.”

“Justified.” Micah crossed and uncrossed his legs. He had the look about him that had always been there, the slight cockiness.

“Yeah, you know. Like I’d suddenly have an epiphany like it was so cool to be back in town, or that I learned something that put it all in context, what happened to Lara, and why I left the way I did. But none of that happened. Fuck, I don’t know.”

“Lot to expect, from a chunk of land and buildings.”

Pete had to laugh and he drank some more, tried to drink faster. “Yeah, I know.”

There were more people on the patio now, a middle aged couple, dancing slow, drunk, the guy slapping the woman’s ass. A younger couple came out and sat polite in the far end and they had a kind of acute skittishness, about them, a feeling that they knew they were out of place there and that whatever drunkenness might ensue would be alien and unappealing and that they might have to run in a hurry. Pete got the idea they thought that everyone but them was part of some sort of degenerate class. But they’d paid for the drinks. So it was what it was.

Micah was looking at him. “Man, all shit aside, you can’t beat yourself up over past shit forever.”

“Thanks. It’s just that coming back here, I realized maybe I was just attaching all this fuckin’ importance to this place when I didn’t have to. Like I can stay or I can go and it’s nothing about me as a

person. The town's not imposing anything on me. It's just a place. It'll be here if I croak right now. It'll be here if I leave and come back in five years, or fifteen, or twenty five."

Micah laughed, a sound that was low and calming like a dense rainfall. "Not a bad way to see it."

They got some more drinks. The night was late and it was getting chilly, but the air felt nice. The people had all settled into their groups.