



A guy pleads guilty to vehicular homicide and he gets a year in jail. It's not exactly the outcome anyone expected, but it's worth celebrating regardless. We have to celebrate because goddammit we need to get on with our lives. My sister starts college in a week and my parents are supposed to be going on another vacation at the end of the month, and being away from all of my painting supplies is driving me crazy.

So what better place to celebrate than Applebee's?

Johnny's family and my family meet after the sentencing on Monday afternoon. We take a large table in the center of the non-smoking section and the first thing I see out of the corner of my eye is a sheriff sitting in one of the booths next to the bar. It's a solitary booth right next to the door leading to the kitchen, surrounded by knickknacks and Americana shit from people's garages.

I remember speaking to him in the hospital on the night of the accident.

'So what are you doing in the city now?' Johnny's mom asks me.

I turn away from the sheriff. 'What? In the city? Oh, not much. Slaving away at Starbucks, doing some painting.'

'I thought you hated painting,' Johnny says.

I shrug. 'Eh. I hate watercolor, but I always loved oils. I just could never afford enough to paint an entire painting.'

'What are you having?' the waitress asks.

I glance at the drink selection. 'MGD.'

Johnny laughs. 'It's one o'clock!'

'Matt and Mark and coming here later,' I tell him. 'They've probably already started drinking.'

'Sounds like a fun night.'

'Join us,' I say, but the lines under his eyes and pale sunken complexion are enough of an answer.

'Nah,' he says, running a hand through his curly brown hair. It puffs out somewhat. 'I need some sleep.'

And you finally can, I want to say. I can already feel the tension gone from this table. Everyone looks better now that this chapter is closed. If I could paint this scene, right now, I would wash the entire paper in cool blues, the color of the sky on a cloudless day that makes you want to sit back and close your eyes.

And then I see him, walking in through the front door with his mother and his girlfriend and their baby and his father and even his goddamned grandmother (I'm sure she's nice but fuck her anyway). He's wearing that same goddamned blue-and-white sweater and jeans, a funny thing to wear to a goddamned sentencing. I try not to stare at them as they follow the waitress to the smoking section on the other end of the restaurant.

The scene is awash in red. Boiling, uncomfortable heat.

Johnny follows my gaze. 'Huh,' he says, seemingly nonplussed by the entire situation. 'Go figure.'

'I guess it was a win for him, too,' I say. 'And what better place to celebrate than Applebee's?'

My sister and my mother spot him and don't say a word. But they keep talking, and occasionally they smile and when the food comes, everyone has their appetites. When we hear their table start laughing, my father makes a joke about everything that can happen over the course of 365 days in jail and we laugh even harder, just to give a collective 'fuck you' to the other table.

'This place still get hopping at night?' I ask Johnny.

He picks a few of the smaller waffle fries from his plate and then shoves it in my direction. 'Sure, sure. For happy hour, definitely. Then you gotta go down to Water Street when it gets dark.'

I squeeze half a bottle of ketchup over the fries and use my fingers to fish each one out of the red pond. 'Good,' I say between mouthfuls. 'I haven't had a night out since I started working mornings almost six months ago.'

Johnny shakes his head, smiling. 'Been that long already, huh.'

I nod. 'Yeah.'

Funny, it just wouldn't be a party without the judge, would it? I see him standing by the door, looking around the non-smoking section, waving off a waitress. His eyes pass over mine and the rest of the people sitting at our table, as if he doesn't recognize any of us. He spots someone behind us and walks over. He's an old man, probably in his late fifties, and he walks with a cane (I didn't see that in the courtroom, where he hid his condition under loose black slacks that cling lightly to his thin legs).

Without the robe, it's almost as if his power is gone. I watch him walk over to where his friend is sitting—another older man only much heavier around the waist and wearing a thick mustache—and I almost feel pity for him, as if he may know just how weak he looks without all of the ceremonial garb reserved for justices. But my respect for him lingers. Because I could hear in his words to the court just how much he deliberated on his decision, and I know he won't hesitate to throw that rat bastard in prison if he fucks up just once during his six years of probation.

That rat bastard. My anger isn't gone, only subsided. I want to run away from this, but I know I can't just yet. Running isn't an option anymore.

'We're getting going,' Johnny says. 'Thanks for coming, man.'

I grab his hand and give it a hard shake. It's softened considerably. I remember a time when he was lifting two-fifty easy and his hand would envelope mine and put pressure on every bone. Now it's soft, the calluses at the base of his fingers gone.

'I'll be back,' I say. 'After I find my niche.'

He laughs. 'Good luck.'

My family leaves with his, and I promise to stop by before I head back to the city. I walk over to the bar area and sit at the bar, nursing a fresh beer and watching the Cubs game on TV. Fucking cubs. Fucking rat bastard. Fucking Bartman or whoever it was that cost the Cubbies the playoffs that one year.

None of them leave, none of the prophets who have gathered here in this house. Not the sheriff or the judge or the rat bastard. They all wait, as if they're expecting me to make the next move. The rat bastard's kid cries in his fat trailer trash of a girlfriend's arms. I glance in her direction, my eyes sweeping casually over her fingers. Of course they're not married—what would be the point? The guy's a murderer and the kid must be a mistake because goddamn that girl is ugly, even by Midwestern standards.

I feel a heavy hand on my back. I turn, slowly, half-expecting it to be the judge or maybe the rat bastard himself, but it turns out to be Matt. Mark is standing behind him, smoking half a cigarette and grinning a big stupid grin.

'Let's get a table,' Matt says.

I smile. All the prophets.

We sit down and order fresh beers. We're all grinning ear to ear, just like the first time we managed to swipe a Playboy from one of the gas stations in town when we were kids who didn't know how much work sex really was.

'I owe you an apology,' I start out.

Matt looks up from his beer. I don't remember him ever wearing his glasses out to the bar, but he is today. It makes his nose look even fatter than it already is. 'What for?'

I shrug. 'For leaving you guys. For getting the hell out of town and not coming back for five months and never even telling you why.'

'You know what I hate about this bar?' Mark asks. He looks around from the other end of the table. 'The booths are too high. You can't stare at chicks unless you fucking stand up. That and the family atmosphere, I suppose.'

I glance over my shoulder at the back of my booth, then out the window where a group of college people is walking around in the rain. The girls are hurrying from bar to bar with their jackets over their heads. The guys for the most part walk more nonchalantly, letting their t-shirts soak through with warm summer rainwater.

I turn back to Mark and Matt, who are both sitting on the other side of the booth. 'I'm trying to apologize to you here. I'm sorry I just skipped out of town without saying anything.'

'Friends don't need to apologize,' Mark says. Matt nods his head in agreement. 'All that matters tonight is this.' He points his finger at each of us. 'This right here.'

'Staring at chicks,' I say, smiling.

Matt raises his half-empty glass. 'Drinking beers.'

'And making fun of assholes,' Mark finishes.

We all cheers with our glasses and take a long sip. It's the best-tasting beer in the world, the kind that hits your tongue after two weeks of sobriety and forces the glass to stay between your lips for a moment too long so a fluid milliliter trickles down your chin. It makes me forget all about why I left this town in the first place. Why I packed up what I could and ran away from all my problems.

These guys, they make me forget about all of it. They wash the painting in a cool blue.

'Look at her,' Mark says, pointing with his eyes to the other side of the cramped bar. There are only a few other groups of people out so early, mostly social groups on pub crawls and leftovers from happy hour like ourselves. The girl in particular is standing with a group of friends, but I know she's the one Mark is talking about because she has a tight jean miniskirt on and a loose-fitting black tank top.

Matt groans. 'Boy, I'd like to let her give the old meat whistle a blow.'

I laugh through another drink. 'Jesus Christ, I've missed your profanity.'

'Yeah, I doubt there's a lot of fuckers like me out there in the big city,' he says.

'There aren't a lot of fuckers like you anywhere,' Mark says, smiling. 'Except in San Francisco.'

What beer is this? Three. I feel tired; I know it's just the alcohol taking effect, but that doesn't alleviate the feeling any. Mark doesn't notice and so he goes and gets another round of beers, waiting at the busier end of the bar so he can stare at the attractive blonde bartender. Most of the families have cleared out now, accepting Applebee's role as chief purveyor of college happy hour specials.

Matt takes a drink, nodding in my direction. 'It's good to see you again, man. It's not the same here without you.'

I look into his eyes. They look darker than I remember. 'I've missed you guys. I don't miss this goddamn town, but I miss you two.'

'We'll drive up to the city sometime,' he says. 'Just to get lit up for an entire weekend and wreak some havoc before we get too old.'

Mark sits back down with three fresh glasses of MGD. 'What are you talking about, fuckwad?'

Matt slides over with a groan. 'I said we're gonna go up to the city for a weekend, you asshole.'

'Mmm-hmmm. Yup,' Matt says between sips.

'That would be great,' I say. 'I would definitely ask off from work for the entire weekend to do it.'

'You still working at Starbucks?' Mark asks.

'I'll always work at Starbucks.' I pause and take a sip. 'I can't sell a painting to save my life.'

Mark shrugs. 'Could be worse. You could be a math major with absolutely no idea what to do with his fucking degree.'

We all laugh. Hard. It's the most I've laughed in some time, so I don't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes and I don't try to stifle it. Let it play out. The beer is probably helping, thinning my blood and weakening my immune system so that jokes I had grown used to are all of the sudden funny again. It's almost as if everything is new again; the novelty is back, in its own way, even though everything feels familiar.

Matt stops laughing first. He looks over my shoulder, toward the front door, frowning. 'Maybe we should check out another bar.'

'Why?' I ask. 'This was our hangout. I don't want to go to that fucking dance club—I hated that place.'

Matt's eyes are moving. Slowly. I follow their path and watch one very special girl walk up to the bar with four other people—two girls and two guys. She has short blonde hair and a thin nose, and pale skin the color of recycled printing paper. I feel my heart drop, then skip a beat, then stop entirely for a fraction of a second before resuming a more frantic pace. My chest feels heavy and tight, and all I can do is wait for the pins and needles in my arms.

'For what it's worth, we haven't talked to her,' Mark says.

I turn away and take another long sip of my beer. 'It's in the past.' It's one of the reasons I had to leave, but I can't admit it out loud. 'I thought she would be gone by now.'

They both shrug. 'Well, she got into a grad school, right?' Mark asks. I nod. 'Then she's probably already back from her first semester. Those grad classes are all fucked up like that.'

'That's all right,' I say. 'I figured I'd run into her again eventually.' No I didn't. I didn't plan on coming back to this town so quickly. And when I did, I wasn't planning on running into anyone I knew other than family. Wait until everyone's graduated and moved on, don't open any old wounds, and about a thousand other clichés.

Mark shakes his head. 'You fell hard for her.'

'Didn't mean to,' I say. Yes, I did, because I thought there was a chance. And then to break it off so quickly just because of a couple hundred miles of distance, something so easy to fix, goddamn I'm starting to get drunk. At least I'm not saying all of this out loud.

'You are,' Matt says. They're both looking at me.

Mark gives me a hardy slap on the arm, like he always does when he's not sure how to act. 'It's cool, man.'

I think he says something more, but the music has been turned up and I'm already starting to get buzzed from the beer. 'Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy' comes on and Matt signals that it's time to move to the back of the bar where the speakers can't reach as well. We walk through the rapidly growing crowd of college students and take refuge next to the empty pool table.

'Go get some quarters,' Matt tells Mark.

'Fuck,' Mark says before reaching in his pocket for a dollar bill and walking back toward the bar.

What is it I was running from, exactly? I can't think all that straight under the influence of alcohol. Seeing my friends after being away ... being out with them and doing something other than painting ... I can't remember why I left. I look to tomorrow ... what would we be doing tomorrow if I was still here? ... we'd get up and drink, and repeat the process all over again, and then go back to school and work and wait until the next weekend ... never ending.

'How's your sister doing now?' Matt asks, lighting up a cigarette between his teeth. He offers one to me.

'No thanks, man. She's doing a lot better. Enough to go back to school, at least, and that's good enough for now.'

Matt nods. 'I hope that fucker burns. Everyone around here heard about the car accident, about how he was stoned and whatnot. The guy's got a target on his chest, that's for sure. If he breaks his parole, everyone'll know.'

Thinking about the accident makes my eyes water, so I look away and pretend to admire one of the girls standing by the back door. 'Yeah.'

'Let's pick numbers so we can all play at once,' Mark says when he gets back with a handful of quarters.

'Yeah,' Matt says. 'You can have the lowest numbers because you're lowest on the social totem pole.'

We both have a good laugh at Mark's expense. For his part, he stops racking the balls a moment to glare at both of us from under his dark bushy eyebrows. I miss the back-and-forth insults more than anything else. The way we could torment each other's self-esteem for a laugh and twenty seconds later not even think about it again. The way Matt and Mark could act like brothers in every aspect and yet look nothing alike. They fit together so well that I almost feel out of place being here—I always did, in a way, never having spent as much time with them when we were all starting college.

'Drink that fucking beer,' Mark instructs, pointing to me after he sets the rack down. 'You're coming home with us tonight.'

We play the first round of pool before grabbing another beer. I can't really focus on the white ball all that well, but I try my best and still manage to sink a few balls when they're close enough to a pocket. Mark and Matt take turns grabbing the beers, because they know my ex is still in the bar and they can tell I'm trying not to look in her direction even though the crowd has gotten pretty thick around the booths and tables. The long room has gotten smokier and hotter from all the body heat emanating from the half-naked bodies of young women.

After the second pool game, Mark is at the bar getting another three beers and requesting 'Some goddamned Metallica' to the bartender. Matt and I go through the back doors into the beer garden to get some fresh air. Outside, it's warm and comfortable, less stuffy than in the crowded bar. All I can think is I used to do this twice, sometimes three times a week, every single week. Drinking, going out to the bars, pissing away money, lather, rinse, repeat. I don't miss it anymore, no matter how much fun I'm having, because the reason I'm having fun is that I don't do this every weekend anymore. The dizziness I'm feeling now has become unique.

Mark comes back out with three fresh glasses, handing one to each of us. 'They're gonna play some Metallica. They can't *not* after the bitching session I gave the bartender.'

I can't believe I'm still standing. I feel dizzy, even after sitting down and focusing intently on the burning candle in the middle of the table. All I need to do is relax the muscles in my eyes by the slightest amount and instantly there are two flames instead of one, dancing around the jar like stars around Wile E. Coyote's head after he's been hit with a mallet.

'I gotta piss,' I mumble, stumbling to my feet. I walk back inside and stop in front of the door to the men's room when I make eye contact with her. She immediately begins walking toward me.

This is why I left. This was always the reason, even when I said it wasn't, even when I tried to convince myself that there was more to it. This notion that I wanted to start over, that I wanted to try and go back to school and get my degree and find a job in a big city where I could settle down—it's all been a lie. It has to be, because all I can think about when I look at Mandy is all the nights we spent in each other's arms, each moment of each day flashing now like a slide show with Metallica as the background music.

'Hi,' she says.

I nod, opening my mouth, then closing it again. I open it once more and squeeze out the remaining air in my lungs. 'Hi.'

She hugs me and then stays close. 'It's good to see you again.'

I look anywhere but at her eyes. 'I thought you'd be gone by now.'

She shrugs. 'School fell through. At least for a semester. Bills, you know?'

What a waste. The time we could have spent together if only she hadn't been so sure she was leaving. Could we still be together? Maybe. Would I be as happy, still, after so many months, or would the novelty have eventually worn off? Did she make me happy, or simply act as a Band-Aid for the depression I was feeling being stuck in this dead end town?

'Where are you living now?' she asks.

'North of here,' I mumble. For some reason, I don't want to give her an exact address. I don't want the chance to be a part of her life again, even with the alcohol fucking with my emotions.

'Oh,' she says, looking away. 'Well, maybe you should look me up next time you decide to visit. We could get some coffee.'

I look into her eyes and wait for her to do the same. God, she has such beautiful eyes. Blue. A cool, soothing blue. 'Why didn't you ever try talking to me after we broke up? I don't understand ... I don't get how you could spend so much time with someone else and then just stop talking to them altogether.'

She lays one soft hand on my face. Over her shoulder, I can see one of the guys she came with drop a glare in my direction. 'I missed you, all right? I really did. I missed spending time with you, but I just felt like we were on different paths, you know?'

I nod, looking away. I don't know if that's really what she means or not—it's almost as if she has to talk in riddles and clichés, like she doesn't know how else to explain what she's feeling in her heart. I empathize with that—where, exactly, would I be without my sketchpad?

She's not the reason I left. She's a part of the reason, no more. I brush her hand away, even though my heart is beating against my chest and my eyes are hot and just feeling her soft skin again is enough to make my entire back go numb. 'It was nice to see you again,' I say quietly, under the loud music, but I know she can read my lips well enough.

I walk/stumble back outside. Matt and Mark are half passed-out already, leaning hard on each other and ogling one of the girls in the open beer garden at the bar across the alley.

'Let's go home,' I say.

Matt helps Mark stand up. Mark mumbles something about both of us being assholes, but doesn't complain when we let him lean hard on our shoulders. We leave the bar and take the familiar route back to the old apartment. Everything is exactly as I remember it, even the smell of old noodles coming from the miniature kitchen with the sticky linoleum floors. I crash on the soft couch and before I can shut my eyes, I see Matt fall over onto the love seat. Mark drops like a sack of bricks on the old recliner and leans back so it reclines with a series of gatling-gun cranks.

'I miss you guys,' I say. 'I'm sorry I left.'

Matt groans and rolls over on the love seat. The room is too dark to make out his features, only that he's glancing in my direction. 'No you're not, man. You had to get out of here. Once we graduate, we're leaving, too. We all got to, eventually.'

Mark shifts on the recliner and licks his lips, mumbling something on his breath.

'What?'

'I said this town is a fucking black hole,' he says. 'And as soon as I see a chance to leave, I'm fucking taking it.'

Matt snaps his fingers a few times in agreement, unable to talk for a moment as he swallows hard. 'I'll dump this town the first chance I get, but you'll always be my boys.'

'No matter where we are,' Mark says in a slurred voice. 'The three amigos, always. Fuck everything else.'

I can barely stay awake. I want to because I know I'll be leaving soon. I've made my peace with this town. The pull is gone, and the world behind my eyelids is a cool blue.