

A Pie for the Road

I didn't meet my father until I was seventeen. After years of asking—sometimes downright begging—my mother finally agreed to set it up. I was to meet him at his restaurant on Hertel Avenue at 1:30 p.m. But as the time got closer, Mom was reluctant to let me go. First, she said it was the snow. We were visiting my grandmother in Buffalo for Christmas, which seemed like a long way from Fairfax, Virginia, where we lived, and the streets of North Buffalo were covered in an ever-thickening blanket of fresh powder.

Then, she assumed I didn't know where the place was. "I'll just show you how to get there," she said, a wet dishrag dangling from her freckled hand.

"I already know." I'd walked by a million times after Nana, my grandmother, told me the place was my father's. The four-leafed clover on the Joe's sign and the falling-down awning out front had turned up in my dreams on many occasions. And during visits to Buffalo in the summertime, I'd cruised by on my skateboard to watch people on the patio, downing pitchers of beer and plates of apple pie. I knew exactly where Joe's was. And I knew I could walk there alone.

Mom put our lunch dishes in the kitchen sink, shoved plates, pizza crust, chicken wing bones and all into a messy teetering stack. Her red hair lit up the window and the falling snow outside behind her. I was glad I didn't inherit her red hair, and always kind of figured I looked more like my father. "Sam," she said, seriously. "It's not really a place for kids."

"Really?" Nana huffed from the dining room table, where she sat knitting some kind of sweater or sock. "You didn't think so seventeen years ago!" She folded her freckled hands in and out of sticks and wool, careful to keep her project from the greasy pizza boxes still open next to her. My Nana wasn't your typical old lady.

Sure, she was a knitter and baked cookies and everything, but she had a way of speaking the truth that irked Mom—and a lot of other people, too.

“Someone should go with you,” Mom said. “It doesn’t have to be me.”

Mom’s husband, Boon, coughed. Lurking in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, he read a newspaper while standing, too tall to settle anywhere comfortably in the house Mom grew up in. I could tell Boon felt like an outsider there. First off, he was black and everyone in Mom’s family was stark white, with freckles and red hair. Second, he stood seven feet tall and ducked to get through doorways and under light fixtures.

“It’s two seconds away,” I said. “I’m just gonna walk.”

“You’re not walking in this weather,” Mom said.

Boon folded the *Buffalo News* with his chapped hands, a picture of Barack Obama under his thumb. “I’ll drive him,” he said.

Mom leaned her hip into the kitchen sink. She pulled a barrette from her pocket and swept her hair up. A missed chunk hung next to her cheek making her look more like a little girl than a grown woman. “It’s my business, Boon.”

“You mean *your* illegitimate child?” I piped in.

Nana laughed heartily.

“This is our family,” Boon corrected. He’d always been straight up about that: that I was his son just as much as Jay and Chris, my half brothers, were. Much as he said it, I didn’t really buy it. Blood is blood.

When we left, Mom stood in the doorway, the clump of hair still out of place, her hands jittery and restless. “Don’t expect anything, Sweetie,” she said as I passed by her. “He’s just a man.”

Snow fell and melted on the windshield of Boon’s Chevy van—*Shaggy*, as my brothers and I called it because of the shag carpet Boon installed to make the van more “cozy.” He had the heat up real high, too. He was always blaring the heat in that damn van, even

on a 50-degree day in Virginia. As we skidded along in the snow, Boon held the wheel tight. I could tell he was doing his best not to slide off the road into a snow bank or a parked car, but he wouldn't admit it. I prayed my father wouldn't see me pull up in that shit-tank, prayed he and Boon wouldn't meet. I wanted to keep my real father to myself, wanted to talk with him father-to-son without anyone else around. Not that I had anything specific to discuss—I just wanted it to be us.

Boon started on about Obama. It was his thing lately. Our first black president. He was going to change the world, in Boon's mind. More jobs, health care for everyone, an end to the war. I didn't buy it.

"He isn't gonna change anything. He's just a politician, like the rest of 'em," I said as we drove down Hertel. Shopkeepers heaved snow over their shoulders and sprinkled salt on the walkways in front of their businesses. Smoking butts hung from their mouths. It looked like they'd been dangling that way for a hundred years. Everything appeared old fashioned in Nana's neighborhood, from the fifties maybe. Words on signs had that weird bowling alley font and they were missing letters here and there. And most of these places were just as sketchy on the inside as they were on the outside. The guy at the music store, for example, had a parrot sitting by the register uttering curse words at the customers. Not to mention the fact that there was a huge yellow stain on the wall by the hip-hop section. I was certain my father's place wouldn't be like this inside, certain he was different from these men and their ancient cigarettes.

"What do you know about politics," Boon said, swerving the van away from a runaway garbage can. "You're too busy breaking the law to care about who's making it."

"Whatever." I'd been charged with credit card fraud earlier that fall. At the time, I was working for New Age Creations in the mall, where they had one of those old-fashioned credit card machines, the kind you slide with the carbon copies. Anyway, I copied down numbers and used them to buy porn on the internet—the good stuff, totally unedited. Gordon, head of Mall Security, was the one who

busted me. The funny thing is, it took weeks. These dumb asses were getting ripped off and didn't even know it, while I was enjoying pretty hot sex. In the end, I got off okay because I was still a minor. But I got fired. And I had to face Mom and Boon.

"Don't know what's wrong with you guys today," Boon said.

"What's wrong," I said, "is the heat's up too high. You can't think in this freaking van." I watched for the Joe's sign, for the four-leafed clover and the falling awning, pushed Nana's voice out of my head. *That man*, she'd muttered under her breath one day as we walked home from Parkside Pharmacy, *ought to be home with his family*. How'd she know he had a family anyway? Mom probably dumped him and left him here in Buffalo alone. He'd probably been waiting for us for years. Waiting for a second chance.

"Brain's working just fine, Sam." Boon shook his head back and forth slowly, concealing a smile. "Always has." For a big black guy, Boon wasn't as intimidating as you'd think. Even when I got busted at the mall, he didn't really raise his voice. He just stood still in his plaid bathrobe at the kitchen counter and said, over and over again, *There are rules, Sam. Rules*. He said it frankly and without much option for debate. I knew Boon didn't have the easiest upbringing back in Ohio, that his dad left them, and that he and his sisters and his mom had to sleep in one room. But still, what did he know about my life?

Boon and Mom met in the US Army at the Pohakuloa Training Area on the Big Island in Hawai'i. I was five months old. After Mom got pregnant at 17, Nana figured the Army was the only way to straighten her out. Grampa, who died before I was born, was supposed to have been some big World War II hero. And so the Army stood for noble things in my Nana's eyes. Mom met Boon there and got married three years later. They were both retired from the Army now, and had their opinions about the wars we were in and the economy and all the jobs being sent to China. I was sure my father didn't have time to worry about that crap, sure that owning his own business kept him pretty tied up.

In the lot next to my father's restaurant, Boon jammed Shaggy into park. "Don't be too long in there. You got snow to shovel."

I squinted up at the sky still dropping thick flakes of white. "Yeah, yeah."

"Figured you didn't want company in there," he said. "So I'll just be around if you need me."

"I won't need you," I said and closed the heavy, squeaking door.

He lunged over to unroll the window. "Least zip your coat, Sam," he called. "It's goddamn cold."

I trudged up the small path to the restaurant's entrance. As I stood looking in the window, Shaggy rumbled away behind me. On the other side of the glass, the place looked more like a bar than a restaurant. It was dark and smoky in there. Two guys with big guts leaned into the pool table, lining up shots. The bartender smoked a cigarette under the TV set; the Bills game on the screen made his face blue. A woman in a tight shirt carried food and drinks to people at tables and booths opposite the bar, pulling her shirt down just where the crack in her tits was. The neon sign zapped and buzzed *Joe's* next to my cheek, and I could feel my socks soaking up the wet snow through the new tear in my winter boots. I wondered which one was him.

Mom never spoke about my father, and she certainly had no pictures of him, but when she looked at me from time to time—moving her head around my face at different angles, her freckled nose scrunched—I could tell she was searching for him. They had to have been in love at some point. I figured the nostalgia made her too sad to discuss it. When she talked about her childhood she told us about growing up with five sisters and three brothers. She told us about being the youngest and how she felt like she had a million parents and then suddenly they were all gone, married, in college, moved out of the house. Sometimes I wished I had more than Chris and Jay. They were good as far as brothers go, but they were three and four years younger than me, and still playing with Transformers sometimes and thinking girls had cooties. They didn't really

understand much about life yet. Plus they didn't look like me. They looked like Boon.

When I finally opened the door, it squealed like some sort of dying animal, and everyone turned to look. The man at the bar turned too, and unlike the others, who were just curious, he was freaked. I mean really freaked. His face was scared, almost like he saw a ghost. That's when I knew he was my father.

He set his cigarette down into the plastic tray, the whole time looking at me, and walked out from behind the bar. "You must be Sam," he said, his arms spreading open a little.

I realized I sure as hell didn't get his hair. It was curly and dark brown with some gray mixed in—nothing like my straight dirty blonde. But his eyes were blue. Bright blue with thick lashes, and I could see even though it was dark in there that they were just like mine.

"You made it." He was jumpy and excited. Shorter than I'd expected and thicker too, but good looking in a muscular sort of way.

I went to shake his hand and realized he was going for a hug. We clashed into a kind of half hug, half handshake and then backed away from each other quickly.

"Come on in," he said, motioning me toward the bar. "We're watching the game."

I walked over to the wooden bar and sat on a sticky stool. The place smelled like smoke, stale beer and apple pie. My father moved to his spot behind the beer taps, smiling, hugging his chest with hairy arms. "Man oh man," he said, looking at me a while. He had big, straight teeth and a dimple. He picked up his smoke, heavy with ash, took a long drag and blew the smoke out with force. "We're winning."

I felt the urge to cough or sneeze or something with the smoke in my face, but swallowed it. My father lowered his head. "What?"

You don't like the Bills or something?" He flicked the butt with his thumb to ash, and I could have sworn his hand was shaking.

"My favorite team," I told him, even though I didn't watch football.

"Thata boy." He punched my shoulder and grabbed a glass from somewhere under the bar. He filled it with root beer and slid it to me.

"Thanks." I looked up at the windows above the pool table, beaming white light into the dark smoke-filled restaurant—or bar. Whatever it was. I thought briefly about Boon, driving around listening to NPR, avoiding Nana's house and Mom's previous life. I took a big swig of my root beer, glad I was inside Joe's. It was the best root beer I'd ever tasted. Much better than the stuff they sell in plastic bottles at the Harris Teeter near our house in Fairfax.

When my father finished his smoke, he stuffed it out in the ashtray proudly. "They tell me no smoking in bars anymore. Against the law. Screw that. They can come and drag me out with a butt in my hand. Don't the cops have enough to worry about?" He looked at me. "But don't *you* think about starting this nasty habit!" he joked. "Patty," he yelled. "Get over here. Want you to meet someone."

Out of the kitchen came the chick in the low-cut shirt. I could smell her perfume from a mile away. She leaned up onto the bar.

My father opened his arms. "Sam, this is Patty. Patty, Sam."

I shook her outstretched hand—red fingernails, gold rings, the whole deal. And she leaned forward and winked so I got a good look at her tits. They were pretty much bulging out of her white frilly shirt—two bronze mountains with a gold cross dangling between them. "You sure are handsome," she said, tilting her head so the hoops in her ears brushed across her shoulder and cheek. "Bet you got a million girls callin' you!"

My face brightened with embarrassment, while I tried to play it cool by looking down at my busted boots on the brass footrest. I really hated it when old people brought up girls and dating and shit. It always threw me off.

“How ’bout some pie?” My father asked. “You like apple pie?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Joe makes the best,” Patty said. “He’s famous for it.”

“Get him a big piece.” My father smacked Patty on the ass. “Lotsa whipped cream.” My father and I leaned toward each other to get a better view as Patty’s hips swayed. He winked at me and then looked back up at the game. “We win this one and it could mean playoffs.” He clapped his thick hands together. “Come on boys!”

I took another swig of my root beer, feeling good, feeling like everything was going better than I thought. We were hanging out, checking out chicks together, watching football. This is what fathers and sons did together, right?

“So what year are you in school?” he asked, reaching for a glass.

“Junior.”

“Making good grades like your mother did?” He pulled the lever on one of the beer taps and filled up his glass.

I shrugged. “Do all right.”

“Yeah, that’s about where I was at your age,” he said, laughing. Then he looked at me for what seemed like a long time and opened his mouth like he was gonna say something. But instead he looked back up at the game. “I’m thinking about getting one of those flat screens, a big one right over there. Whole town’ll be knocking on my door to watch the Bills, Sabres, eat apple pie, drink a little Labatts Blue.”

I agreed that it would be cool.

One of the fat guys at the pool table flipped the channel on the TV to the news. Something about how the economy was in the toilet and the unemployment rate was growing over 7 percent. My father turned his head in disgust. “What the fuck, Ronny. Put the goddamned game back on or get outta here.”

Ronny wobbled back to the television and reached his pool stick up to flip the channel back. “Times are tough, Joe. Gotta keep up with the news.”

“This is my bar, Ronny. We watch what I want,” my father huffed. “Besides, you think watchin’ that crap makes a bit of difference? Can’t do a thing about it. Just the way of the world, man.” The Bills were back on the screen. My father looked up again, satisfied. Still staring at the TV he asked, “So how’s Mary Kate?”

I wasn’t used to hearing Mom’s name full out like that, so I hesitated at first. “Good, I guess. She’s finishing up her degree and working on Capitol Hill.”

He smiled to himself and glanced somewhere over my head. The glare from the TV set lit up his face and I could see then that he had way more wrinkles than I thought. Way more than Mom or Boon had. He actually looked more like a grandfather than a father. I always wondered what went on between Mom and him. I know they never got married. But who could get married when they were seventeen anyway?

“She was good in school, wasn’t she?” he asked. “Straight A’s as I recall.”

“Don’t know,” I said. Mom didn’t talk much about the past. She was always saying, *Shoulda, coulda, woulda. I don’t care what’s already passed. Let’s talk about right now.* I took a few more sips of my root beer and my eyes wandered to my father’s wrinkled hands resting on the bar. I noticed a gold band around his left finger. The way it sat nudged between the skin of his fingers, I got the feeling he’d been wearing it a long time. Then, I got the feeling for the first time that he might have had a whole other life without me or Mom or even Patty.

The door squealed again, and two girls not much older than me walked in, giggling in their tight jeans and t-shirts that seemed too cool for a Buffalo winter. One had braces on her teeth and the other one, the prettier one, had red hair and blue eye shadow above her eyes. They glided by the bar and smiled at my father, who was lighting another smoke. “Hey Joe,” the one with the eye shadow sang, putting a thin hand up to wave. Light from the TV caught her hair and I could see that it was the same shade of red as Mom’s. I

don't see very many people with copper hair like that, so I noticed it instantly.

My father's face brightened when they walked in. "Girls," he said. "What a surprise." He grabbed a plastic pitcher from the shelf and set it under the tap, smiling and whistling at the flowing beer.

Patty returned from the kitchen with my steaming pie. She set it in front of me with a fork and a napkin.

"The trick with apple pie," my father said, raising the hand with his cigarette and wedding ring, "is a lot of butter. You don't have butter, you don't have crisp. And apple pie without crisp is like Christmas without snow. You know what I mean? Or like Christmas without the presents."

I nodded along politely, half listening, half watching the girls who were fitting themselves into a booth opposite the bar. The redhead wore a black scoop-neck shirt. She stuck out her chest when she talked to her friend across the table. I tried to imagine what her tits looked like under that shirt. Not as big as Patty's, but I was sure they were as milky white as the skin on her arms. She got up and walked to the jukebox. I swore I could feel the blood rush down to my groin just thinking about the patch of hair between her legs rubbing the crotch of her jeans. She dug a hand into her back pocket for some quarters, dropped them into the machine. Before long, Radiohead was playing that song *Nude*. I had the same disc at home and I wanted to tell the girl she had good taste, but Patty was yelling something behind me.

Patty and my father were at the end of the bar in some kind of argument. Patty leaned forward, her face bright red and her arms stiff at her sides, and my father had both hands up. The vibe changed when the girls walked into the bar. I knew they shouldn't have been there because they weren't old enough. Technically, I shouldn't have been there either because I wasn't 21. My father just kept waving Patty off with the smoke in his hand, telling her she was paranoid. The pitcher of beer he had put under the tap was filling up quickly, but I didn't know how to turn it off. I tried twisting the thing like a faucet, but it wouldn't budge. Patty said something about

the cops and underage drinking and “all these rules, Joe, you can’t just go and break every one of ’em. These kids don’t know nothing. You forget *you’re* the adult here.” She stormed back to the kitchen.

My father jogged back to the overflowing beer. “Goddamn.” He jammed the tap up. “Didn’t you see this?”

I didn’t know what to say, because yeah, I saw it, but how the hell did I know how to turn a tap off? “Sorry,” I said, feeling like a real jackass. I looked to see if the redhead was watching. But she was busy jamming out in her booth to the music: *Don’t get any big ideas. They’re not gonna happen.*

My father snatched a rag from the sink and wiped the platform and the pitcher. “It’s all right, kid. How would you know anyway, right?” He laughed, took a swig of his own beer behind the bar and then carried the full pitcher to the redhead’s booth. He sat down next to the redhead, scooting up close, and poured two beers. If Boon could have seen this! He would’ve had me out of there so fast. Talk about breaking rules! I wondered if the redhead’s mother knew she was smoking and drinking in a bar. I liked that my father was a rule breaker. I figured maybe that was where I got it from.

I sat alone eating pie and waiting to be invited to the booth with the girls. I could almost smell the redhead’s vanilla skin as I swallowed a mouth full of whipped cream. The more I thought about her, the stiffer I got. Talk about embarrassing. I let the hot apples melt on my tongue. Just had to get my mind on something else. Anything but sex. It happened to me at school sometimes, but this girl was hotter than any chick back in Virginia. And even when I closed my eyes to imagine the old-school tricks I was learning on my board, like the disco finger flip and street plant, I could see her hair, her white skin, her tits. I moved around on the stool, tucked my boner up behind the elastic on my boxers, and ate more pie. More hot apples and melting cream.

I thought about going over to the booth. I figured my father wouldn’t care. I was sure that’s why he was over there in the first place, trying to hook me up. In my mind right then, he was pretty radical. More than I even thought before I met him. I saw his pack

of Marlboro Reds next to the rag he used to clean the spilled beer. I slipped a smoke out of the box and played with it between my fingers. I'd tried one or two with my friend Scotty, but coughed my brains out. Maybe I'd try again. Boon would never know because I would just explain that everyone was smoking in there. To my surprise, I noticed my father lighting the redhead a cigarette. His wrinkled hand looked foreign up next to her creamy cheeks. I turned my head toward the TV to pretend like I was watching the game, but all I could see was the reflection of the lighter's fierce orange flame cutting through the darkness. Just as I brought the cigarette in my hand to my lips, I could see his wedding ring again. This time, it was moving up and down the redhead's thigh. I turned from the television, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me. But they weren't. His old fingers spread over her jeans like a stain. They slipped, wedding ring and all, between her legs, under the table to where I couldn't see—my father's hand where my own mind had just been. I spit the unlit butt from my lips. My boner seemed to lurch into my gut like a sucker punch. *Now that you feel it you don't.* The music railed my chest.

I swallowed the last bit of pie, but the sugar and the cinnamon and the butter made me sick. My whole body seemed to go limp, and I thought about running to the bathroom to puke. I searched for something to look at, something other than the reflection in the TV. Something other than my empty pie plate, my busted boot, my own stupid hands sitting on the edge of the bar. I caught a glimpse of Patty, hanging by the kitchen, standing next to plates of hot roast beef and pie. She had her own cigarette now and was sucking it down in defeat. *He's just a man.* I heard my mother's words.

The redhead laughed and threw her head back, a trail of red hair followed, and I could see it all then—my mother, 16, in clothes too cold for Buffalo, Joe serving beer and warmth in a place far away from reality. Far away from rules. I saw it clear as day and I wished I hadn't.

I looked at my phone in my pocket. There was a text message from Boon: Ready?

I wanted to get the hell out of Joe's bar, hop on my skateboard and ride, feel wind, feel like I didn't weigh anything at all. Like I didn't even exist.

I typed back: yes.

Patty stuffed her butt out on one of the plates of hot food and then organized a tray of meals to deliver to her customers. Back to work. My father laughed at something and slapped his hand on the table.

Boon: Meet me at Quality Mkt.

I got up from my stool. I knew it would be rude to just up and leave, but I didn't know what would come from my mouth if I said goodbye to Joe. Walking toward the door, I could feel my wet sock squishing inside my boot. I passed the men who weren't playing pool anymore, who were holding small plates of apple pie up close to their fat scratchy faces, devouring it like dogs. Did anyone even know it was almost 2009? That it was illegal to smoke in bars and give beer to teenage girls?

"Sam," my father called from behind me.

I turned to face him. The jukebox had finished *Nude* and was moving on to *Pour Some Sugar on Me*.

"Taking off so soon? I was just gonna introduce you to my friends here." He raised his thick eyebrows, hopeful.

"I gotta go," I told him. "Nice to meet you and everything."

Joe nodded and then looked around like he was trying to think of something. "How 'bout a pie for the road?"

Before I could say no, he jogged back to the kitchen and brought one out. The steam rose between us. "Still pretty hot, so be careful," he said.

I jerked my head so strands of my dirty blonde hair hung over my eyes. I didn't want to look at him, or his wedding ring, or his wrinkles. I was glad I didn't look much like him, glad I got Mom's pale skin and her freckles, too.

He handed the pie over. “Something to remember me by.” A wink, a cigarette dangling from his mouth like the old men I’d seen shoveling on Hertel before getting there. The same for a hundred years or more.

Outside the snow had turned gray and sloppy. I walked fast, one hand holding pie, the other stuffed in my pocket. Quality Market was just three blocks from Joe’s. I’d been there before for milk or butter or whatever Nana needed at the last minute. I could see Shaggy parked crooked in the lot by Hertel Avenue. Boon. On a mission for Mom I was sure. I found him in the dairy aisle with two cartons of eggs in his hands. Organic and then the cheap ones. He was probably weighing his options: pleasing Mom or saving a couple bucks. I already knew he’d go with the organic ones. For Mom.

When he saw me, the wrinkles on his dark forehead looked soft, and for the first time in a while, I felt kind of like hugging him.

“Your mother’s making quiche for dinner,” he said.

“Oh.”

“She needed eggs.” He shrugged and put the cheap eggs back on the shelf. “Let’s go shovel some snow.”

In the van, Boon drove with Mom’s eggs in his lap. I don’t know if he did it on purpose so they wouldn’t break or if he was just in a rush and didn’t think to put them on the floor or in the back. Joe’s pie was between us on the shag carpet, still hot. I could see the sugary apples oozing from the crust. It made sense that everyone loved Joe’s pies, like Patty said. They were out of this world sweet. Not like anything you ever tasted. But I felt ashamed to even have it on the floor of Boon’s van, ashamed like I was about the dirty websites I paid for with stolen credit cards. So I leaned forward, picked it up and put it on my lap. Boon turned the radio off, but didn’t say anything. He was probably waiting for me to say something or at least offering the opportunity. Instead I rolled down the window. The engine growled as we drove through slush. The smell of cinnamon and butter made the pie in my stomach curdle like old milk.

“Everything go okay at the bar?” Boon called the place what it was. A *bar*. A place where people got drunk and sealed off the rest of the world. He wouldn’t say *with your father, with your dad, with Joe*. He wouldn’t speak his name. It was just: *the bar*.

“Yep.” I let the cold winter air push the smoke from my hair and jacket.

Boon didn’t turn up the heat or tell me to close the window. He just kept driving, two hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, organic eggs on his thighs.

We stopped at a red light a few blocks from Joe’s and sat with the sound of the engine and the cars around us, smelling wet snow and exhaust. As we pulled away, I lifted the pie over my shoulder like a football. Then chucked the thing with all I had out the window. It wobbled through the air, spinning until it landed face first on the side of the road. Hot yellowy mush on dirty snow. It sat near a sidewalk in front of a playground. Spoiled before having a chance. I hoped Joe would see it on his way home, on the way back to his real kids and his wife.

“No good, eh?” Boon said.

“Naw. It was disgusting.”

Boon nodded like the whole thing was totally normal, like throwing a perfectly good pie out the window happened every day. He knew me well enough to know things hadn’t gone well. And he also understood that I didn’t want to talk about it. I rolled up the window and let the heat of his van wash over me. I let it steam through my numb toes and fingers. Let it wrap around my skin until it released sweat and smoke and the innocence of sweet apple cinnamon from my pores.

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