

On the first day of summer school Pete Vlahos walked into his classroom at 8:03, irked by his own lateness but knowing from experience that Remedial English students tended not to be sticklers for punctuality. As it turned out there was only one student in class, a husky Hispanic boy with a wispy mustache wedged into a student desk in the back row.

“You’re late,” said the boy when Pete walked in.

“Yeah, by like a minute. Where’s everybody else?”

“There’s nobody else, just me. They said I could either take the class online or come here for it.”

“So why don’t you do it online.”

“My mom won’t pay for it. It’s free if I come to school.”

Pete shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

“Carlos.”

“I don’t think this is gonna work, Carlos, but here’s the textbook. Why don’t you read the first story and then we can talk about it. ‘Thank You, M’am,’ by Langston Hughes.”

The kid shrugged.

“You can’t make me.”

“Excuse me?”

“If I show up for six weeks, you’ve got to pass me. You can’t fail me in summer school.”

“You sound pretty sure of that.”

“It ain’t my first time.”

Pete nodded.

“It ain’t my first time, either, Mr. Carlos. You sit there and do whatever it is that you do. I’m gonna read the paper.”

“Whatever,” Carlos said, and went back to his phone.

As much as he hated to admit it, Pete knew the kid was right. At one point over twelve hundred teenage boys had packed the halls of St. Pulaski High School for Boys, loud and ripe and explosive, shouldering each other into lockers on their way to classes they didn’t want to attend to learn things they didn’t want to know. Friday night football games brought thousands of fans, with fathers and uncles and alumni, all glowing from a couple of pops, lining the chain link fence next to the visitors’ entrance. They growled at the opposing team from a place deep in their guts, calling teenagers pussies and cocksuckers and telling them just what kind of beating they could expect that night. Anyone opposing fans who complained got jolly-stomped behind the concession stand, and anyone who went to the cops working security got laughed off school grounds by a brother, cousin, uncle or drinking buddy of one of the stompers. It was one hell of a home field advantage, and it was one hell of a time to be a St. Pulaski Mustang. But that was a long time ago, and it felt like even longer. Pedophile priests were exposed, the middle class started shrinking, and people stopped going to church. Catholic schools all over Chicago’s South Side were closing; St. Pulaski was lucky to even be open.

Pete knew all of these things when he walked into the principal’s office, so he wasn’t at all surprised when Brother Toole gave him a rueful smile and an exaggerated shrug. *Times are tough*, he told Pete. *We can’t afford to lose this kid to a public school. Plus, his mom helps out when we do the Friday fish fry during Lent. Do what you can to make it work, will you, Matthew?* It was the “Matthew” that did it. Matthew was Pete’s confirmation name and Brother Toole knew it. It was kind of a dirty trick but the overall cause was a good one, so how could Pete say no? *Sure*, he told Brother Toole. *I’ll help the kid out.* He never got around to asking what he would be paid for this one-man summer school class, but he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

# # #

Pete had chosen a support group in the cozy, old money suburb of Hinsdale because he knew the chances of running into one of his South Side friends were pretty much zero. Most of them didn’t acknowledge life north of 87th Street or west of Cicero Avenue, and the few who had heard of Hinsdale had heard of it in an abstract, theoretical way, the way they had heard of democratic socialism or 5G networks. It wasn’t that Pete was ashamed of his drinking problem, exactly, but he knew that his friends would not understand it. If he told them he drank too much and wanted to stop, they would say something like, “Can’t hold your liquor, huh?” in a way that they could later defend as kidding but in the moment, as they said it, was clearly not kidding at all. Pete couldn’t help but think of Brendan Hayes, one hell of a softball player and definitely “one of the guys” until he decided to get sober. Gradually, like asbestos seeping into a classroom at a school built during the 1950’s, Brendan became a smaller and smaller

part of the drinking group, then a smaller and smaller part of the softball group, until finally he was not a part of any group at all.

The counselor in charge of the rehab group was Debbie, a middle-aged mother of two with an ample bosom and a slew of low-cut blouses that Pete did not believe were worn on a whim. The topic of discussion was the task of acquiring an AA sponsor. The soccer mom sitting next to Pete had a sponsor who she talked to every day; in fact, the two had gone purse shopping last week. The electrician from Local 134 had a sponsor, and the two men talked nearly every day as well.

“Jack, how about you?” Debbie asked a third member of the group, tugging the sides of a half-sweater towards her cleavage.

“I’ve got to be honest, I don’t have a sponsor. I’m not really into the whole AA thing.”

Debbie frowned.

“You know, it’s the best program around for helping people to get sober.”

“I don’t know. I just read an article online, I think it was the Atlantic or something. They said there was a study that ranked rehab programs, and AA wasn’t even in the top 20.”

Debbie frowned again and shook her head.

“That’s ridiculous. AA is the oldest rehab program in the world. They’ve helped over 2 million people.”

“How do you know how many people they’ve helped if it’s supposed to be anonymous?”

“Jack, you can either make facetious arguments, or you can try to get better.”

“Ahhhh. I don’t know,” he muttered. The group was quiet for a minute before Debbie turned toward Pete.

“Pete? How about you? Have you found a sponsor yet?”

Pete was silent, thinking about Jack’s comments.

“Pete?”

“Oh. Yeah, I’ve got a sponsor. I got him a week ago.”

Debbie raised her eyebrows.

“Really. How come we’re just now hearing about him?”

Pete shrugged.

“I guess I forgot. Busy week with summer school starting. I met my sponsor at a meeting, and we’re supposed to get coffee tomorrow morning.”

# # #

On the second day of summer school Pete arrived at 7:45. Maybe if he got there early, he and Carlos could actually have a productive class. He never got a chance to find out; Carlos was sitting in the back row once again when Pete arrived.

“You’re late,” Carlos said.

Pete double-checked his watch.

“Late my ass. Class starts at 8:00.”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to get here before your students. Isn’t that like a rule?”

“What the hell do you know about rules? Besides, if you’re going to sit there playing on your phone, who cares what time I get here?”

“No, I’m gonna work today. I swear.” Carlos held up his hand like he was taking some kind of oath and gave a grin that looked more like a smirk than a promise.

“If you’re lying, I swear to God you’re going to get the back of my hand. You got no idea how things used to be.”

“You can’t hit me. It’s against the law.”

“Whatever. Here’s the story I told you about yesterday. ‘Thank You, M’am’ by Langston Hughes. You ever read it before?”

Carlos shook his head.

“Okay, then read it and answer the questions at the end of the story. After that we can talk about it.”

“Okay, boss.” Carlos gave Pete the thumbs up sign.

Back at his desk, Pete sat down at his computer and Googled the Atlantic article that Jack had mentioned the other night. The introduction was a mildly interesting anecdote about a drinker who couldn’t get sober through AA. Next came the difference between AA’s published rate of success (75%) and an estimate from a Harvard Medical School researcher (8 to 10%). And the problem with the AA belief that one had to hit “rock bottom” before getting help. The article’s author compared this strategy to withholding insulin until a patient went into a diabetic coma, or refusing to prescribe an antidepressant until a client had already attempted suicide. *What the hell is “rock bottom,” anyway?* Pete wondered. *Seems like the only “rock bottom” is when you die.*

When Pete looked up, Carlos was standing at his desk.

“Yeah?”

“Here’s my assignment,” Carlos said, handing Pete his sheet of questions. There were no answers to those questions, but the sheet itself was now bordered with crude drawings of penises. Not a lot of variety, other than size and directional pointing.

“You think you’re the first high school boy to draw a bunch of dicks on his homework? Not even close, bud.”

Carlos feigned innocence.

“What do you mean? Does that mean I got the answers wrong?” He couldn’t actually hold it in anymore, snorting out laughter.

“Get out of here,” Pete said, jerking his head towards the door. “Class is over.”

“So, is there any homework for tomorrow?” Carlos was on a roll now, unable to control his snort-laugh.

“Get out of here,” Pete repeated. “We’ll figure tomorrow out tomorrow.”

# # #

“I can’t believe you didn’t stick up for me the other night,” Debbie said to Pete.

The two of them were lying in bed at Pete’s condo.

“What, about the AA thing? How Jack thinks it’s a scam?”

“Yes.”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have supported me. You could have supported AA.”

“What if I don’t totally believe in AA?”

“Jesus, please don’t tell me one of *those* people. How can you be against AA because of the religious part? You teach at a Catholic school, for fuck’s sake!”

“You think I don’t have any problems with some of the stuff that goes on at my school?”

“I don’t even want to hear about this.”

“When we say a Hail Mary at the beginning of every class, do you really think my students are thinking about ‘blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus?’”

“Probably not.”

“Definitely not. They’re thinking about who farted and about what color bra the hot math teacher is wearing that day.”

“Is that the kids, or is that you?”

Pete frowned in the dark.

“My point is, when they say The Lord’s Prayer at the end of an AA meeting, do you really think everyone’s thinking about forgiveness? Or sobriety?”

Debbie shook her head.

“Look. Teenage boys are hard-ons with legs. AA has helped over 2 million people get sober. The two things are totally different, end of story.”

It wasn't the end of the story for Pete, and it wasn't just the praying that bothered him. Mostly it was the giving up of control. He was on board with Step 1 as a starting point: “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.” But eventually, Pete believed, it was okay to assume some degree of



control. Not just okay, but necessary. He remembered saying as much to an AA member who visited their Hinsdale group about a month ago.

“Tell me something,” the AA guy responded. “How did you get here tonight?”

“I drove my car.”

“No. You didn’t do anything. *God* got you here tonight. And if you can’t accept that, then you’ll never be sober.”

Pete laughed in spite of himself. *Jesus*, he thought. *This guy wouldn’t last long on the South Side.*

“Are you ready to stop arguing and go to sleep?” Debbie asked. Pete had almost forgotten she was still there.

“Yeah.”

There was probably more arguing to be done down the road, but Pete knew that there were times it was better to say nothing, even if you knew you were right. Sometimes *especially* if you knew you were right.

# # #

For the third straight day, Carlos was sitting in the same seat when Pete walked into his classroom.

“You still here?” Pete said.

“What does it look like?”

“Look. I get that you don’t want to be here. Summer school sucks. But you can’t just sit there and play on your phone. You’ve gotta do some work.”

“That’s B.S. You’re not gonna flunk me. The school wouldn’t let you.”

“You think the school gives a shit whether I pass you or flunk you? I’ve been here since the 80’s. I got more seniority than the principal.”

“I heard you’re here because you’re a drunk. You got fired from a public school for DUI and came here because you don’t need a license for a Catholic school.”

Pete took a deep breath.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Everybody says it.”

“Well, everybody’s full of shit. If you’re not gonna read the story, then I’m gonna read it to you. Like you’re a little kid who can’t do it for himself.”

“Whatever.” Carlos pulled out his phone and started scrolling down the screen with his thumbs.

Pete picked up a copy of the textbook, walked over to Carlos, and sat in a student desk.

“‘Thank You, M’am,’ by Langston Hughes,” he started. “‘She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails.’”

Carlos took out his phone and pulled up a funny YouTube video. Pete continued reading, slightly louder now.

“‘It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder.’”

Carlos turned up the volume on his video; Pete read even louder.

“‘It was about eleven o’clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse.’”

Carlos turned up the volume again, this time giving a little chuckle. Pete stopped reading, grabbed the phone, and fired it toward the floor, where it smashed, shards of plastic and glass scattering in all different directions.

“Holy shit!” Carlos yelled. “You broke my phone!” He stood up quickly, and Pete stood up quickly as well. For a moment, the two stood and looked at one another.

“Your ass is fired, man,” Carlos said, walking past Pete and out of the classroom. “You broke my goddamn phone.”

# # #

“You know you’re going to have to make amends to him,” Debbie said in bed.

“Really. That’s what I have to do?”

“Yeah, that’s what the studies show. People who follow the steps have the best chance to get sober and stay sober. That’s why it’s the best program out there.”

“‘Studies?’ How the hell can they do studies on a group that’s based on anonymity? Seriously. Show me one of these studies.”

“Is that what you want? You want me to come to bed with research studies? I thought you liked my boobs.”

“Of course I like your boobs. But this bullshit about AA being the best program out there, how can you say that? How can anybody say that?”

“For God’s sake, it’s been around since 1935.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. If you’re having brain surgery tomorrow, do you want the doctor using techniques from the 1930’s?”

“That’s ridiculous. AA isn’t the same today as it was back then.”

“It’s pretty damn close.”

“I don’t like you when you’re like this.”

“Like what? Like thinking for myself?”

“Oh, stop being so dramatic. How much thinking does it take to drag your ass out of the bars on Western Avenue and drive up to the ‘burbs for a support group?”

Pete was stung by her transparency. Debbie saw him as a blue collar hack who couldn’t get sober on his own and probably never would. And on some level it was this stereotype she’d been having sex with ever since the first night they hopped into bed together.

“Do you think anyone in our rehab group knows about us?” he asked. He felt her body tense up before she answered.

“Jesus, don’t even joke about that.”

“I’m not joking. It’s a legitimate question.”

“Do you want me to get fired? And lose my license?”

“No, I don’t want either of those things.”

“Then shut the fuck up.”

And with that she crawled out of bed and walked to the bathroom, her naked backside looking flabbier and more lopsided than Pete remembered.

# # #

The next morning, finally, Carlos wasn’t in class when Pete arrived. Which was fine. Hopefully the kid was quitting, and Pete would be free of this bullshit summer school teaching assignment. He sat down at his desk and took out the Sun Times. The Bears

were going to training camp without a halfway decent quarterback and a local alderman was under investigation for taking kickbacks. Things were finally getting back to normal. Pete stayed in his classroom until 11:30, just in case Carlos showed up. When that didn't happen, he strolled down to Brother Toole's office, his teaching satchel slung over his shoulder.

“My guy Carlos wasn't here today,” he said. “Did we get a call from his family or anything?”

Brother Toole's face was as ashen as Pete had ever seen it.

“You better sit down for this,” he said.

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Half an hour later, Pete sat across a well worn desk from Father Mark, the pastor at St. Linus for the last 25 years. At one point he had been a pitcher at St. Pulaski with one hell of a curveball. After his senior year he was drafted by the Cardinals, and the story was that one time he had struck out Sammy Sosa in a minor league game. Later in the season he blew out his arm and came home to St. Linus.

“Carlos was your student, huh?” Father Mark asked. “That's gotta be tough.”

Pete snorted.

“He was barely my student. I threw him out of class on the third day of summer school. Broke his cell phone. Jesus, the kid must've hated me.”

“I highly doubt that.”

Pete pulled out a small bottle of Knob Creek, unscrewed the top, and took a swig. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tipped the bottle toward Father

Mark, who nodded. It surprised Pete that Father Mark didn't ask him about his sobriety. Maybe he didn't know.

“Father, you can talk about forgiveness from now until the cows come home, and you can quote me all the bullshit Bible verses you want, no offense. But that doesn't change the fact that Carlos Munoz hated my guts, and now he's dead.”

Father Mark took a swig from the bottle and set it back down on the desk.

“You can feel as guilty as you want, and it's not going to bring Carlos back. Plus, I can pretty much guarantee that you had very little to do with it. You knew the kid for three days.”

Pete nodded, and neither man said anything for a moment.

“So, do you think there were any warning signs?” Pete asked. “Like, could we have seen it coming?”

Father Mark took another sip.

“You know what? All these years, I don't think I've ever seen a case where people said, ‘Yeah, I saw it coming.’ Maybe a couple people here and there say that, but they're pretty much full of crap. For the people who go through with it, the ones who actually take their own life ... I don't think you ever see it coming. Seems to me the ones that show warning signs are the ones we catch. They're the ones who deal with it and go on to live regular lives.”

Father Mark took a final nip and slid the bottle across the desk to Pete.

“Whatever that means these days.”

“Amen, Father.”

“I know it’s a cliché, Pete, but one day at a time, right?”

At this, Pete lifted his head.

“You still going to meetings?”

Pete nodded.

“Thatta boy.”

Father Mark stood up and started to walk out of the office, clapping Pete once on the shoulder as he walked by.

“I’ve got to go talk to the parents. Stay as long as you want, but lock up when you leave, okay?”

Pete nodded again without speaking. In the silence that followed, a thought popped into his head: *Jesus, I wish I was there the day he struck out that steroid prick Sosa.*

## #

The visitation for Carlos was held three days later. Part of Pete did not want to be there, but another part of him did. The compromise he made was sitting in his car outside St. Linus, sipping from the same flask he had brought to Father Mark’s office.

Apparently Carlos had jumped off the fourth level of the Holy Cross Hospital parking garage on 95th Street, not even a 10-minute drive from St. Pulaski. A local passerby had found his body and called the cops, who said he was dead when they got to the hospital. Probably he was dead when they found him. In his rational mind, Pete knew that he probably wasn’t responsible for Carlos’s suicide, but that was one of those things that was easier to believe when it happened to someone else. When it happened

to you, it became a little bit harder to process. And since it hardly ever happened to you, basically never happened to most people, you really didn’t know what the hell to do when it did.

When Pete walked into the church, there was a Hispanic family standing near the closed casket. A mother with four children under the age of 12 all dressed up in formal wear, plus what looked like an older sister. Slowly, Pete made his way to the front of the room.

“Mrs. Munoz?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m Pete Vlahos from St. Pulaski. Carlos’s summer school teacher. I heard ...”

Pete struggled for the right phrasing, “ ... I heard that Carlos had an accident.”

At the mention of her son’s name, Mrs. Munoz’s eyes got big and watery. Almost immediately she reached up, wrapped her arms around Pete’s neck and buried her head on his chest, crying. Pete did not expect this and did not know what to do.

“Mr. Peter, thank you for being a friend to Carlos,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“For all the school year, Carlos say he would take your English class this summer. He did not like his other English teacher. He was happy to be your student.”

Pete took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“Did he tell you that I broke his cell phone the other day?”

She collapsed again onto his chest.



“Yes,” she said into his chest, her voice muffled. “He felt so bad about that, Mr. Peter. He never want to make you mad. It is one thing I want you to know. He never want to make you mad. You know?”

“Yes,” Pete said quietly. “Of course.” Mrs. Munoz’s head dropped onto Pete’s chest for a third time, and now the crying turned into sobbing, her rounded shoulders shaking against Pete’s entire body. And so he stood in the front of the casket of one of his former students, hugging that student’s sobbing mother, her tears dampening his suit a little bit more with every body-wracking sob. And none of that changed the fact that Carlos was dead, and that he would always be dead.

# # #

“So, it’s time for check-in,” Debbie said. “Pete, why don’t you start?”

Pete cleared his throat.

“One of my students committed suicide last week. It was horrible. I mean, obviously.”

There was murmuring of “I’m sorry’s” among the group.

“Did it make you want to drink?” the soccer mom asked.

“Yeah, I guess it did. I had some Knob Creek the day I found out, plus some more on the day of the visitation.”

Heads nodded all around the group.

“Pete, what kind of support will you need to get through this crisis?” Debbie asked.

“I suppose I could go to AA.”

Debbie nodded.

“I think that’s a great idea. But what about something outside of AA? Outside of our meetings.”

“Well, having sex with you isn’t working.”

The group fell silent, and Debbie’s face lost all color.

“I suppose we shouldn’t have been fucking in the first place. You know, the whole therapist-client thing.”

Debbie’s face grew dark.

“You fucker,” she hissed. “You fucking asshole.”

“Yeah,” Pete said. “I know.”

The rest of the group froze in their chairs, some upright, some slouched, some cross-legged. At that moment Debbie and Pete could have been the only two people in the room, though it seemed unlikely that either of them would be there for very much longer.

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