

ALL THAT'S WAITING TO BE REALIZED

Jeremy sat at the bar of a country roadhouse with a beer and a plate of wings in front of him and wondered what he was doing here, stranded, miles from home, an angry wife waiting for him and a full day's work ahead of him tomorrow.

At least he hoped his wife was waiting for him. They'd had a fight, a bad one, and it ended with her slamming the bedroom door, and him slamming the front door and heading out in the car with a low tank of gas and an uncharged phone. And what had they fought about? Their daughter. No other subject could rile up their differences like Amber could. Nineteen-year-old, gloriously self-assured Amber had left home three months earlier on a road trip when she was supposed to be going back to college for her sophomore year. "Don't *worry* so much," she told them. "I'll be *back*. I'm just taking some time off." And Jeremy wasn't worried. He'd done the same thing at her age, and while he'd had some bumps in the road, hadn't he'd turned out fine in the end? But his wife saw things differently. "You always indulge her! It's not *safe* out there! This isn't 1997, Jeremy!" She'd said worse, too, going on about his lack of responsibility and backbone, and so had he, about her inflexibility and her doomsday viewpoint. Lately their arguments had taken a turn for the personal and become hurtful, and each one took longer to get over.

And so he'd driven away without checking the gas tank or his phone battery, and by the time he realized he was nearly out of gas he was out in the country, with miles of open road between small towns that all shuttered their gas stations at night, with no charge cord in his car, and himself suddenly exhausted. Foolish of him. He'd pulled in at the bar hoping maybe they'd have charge cords for sale, or let him plug in his phone, or siphon some gas from a customer's car. Maybe he'd know what to do after a drink and something to eat.

It was a slow night, and the bartender chatted with him while he ate. She reminded him of Amber —tattoos, short dyed hair, black eye make-up, lots of piercings, and something about her face, how she used her mouth when she spoke, and the slant of her eyes. Jeremy learned that she was the oldest of four kids, three of them her half-siblings by the same mom and a different dad. She didn't know anything about her biological father. Her parents split up before she was born, and no one ever mentioned him. She was four when her mom married her stepdad. She remembered their wedding. She wore a fancy dress and stood with them in front of everyone as they exchanged their vows because, as her stepdad said, he was marrying her, too, and he would soon be her real father. He was a good dad, and her family was close.

“God, listen to me go on,” she said. “You know, I don't usually talk about myself like this. But you seem nice. You remind me of my dad.” She wiped the bar with a white towel.

“I have a daughter about your age,” Jeremy told her. “You remind me of her.”

Just then a commotion burst out behind him. Jeremy turned and saw two men in a standoff. One of them held a knife. The other appeared unarmed. They crouched tensely, their neck muscles taut, jaws clenched. Other patrons were shouting at them to knock it off. Before Jeremy could fully process what he was seeing, the apparently unarmed man stepped back, pulled a gun from somewhere and fired it. The knife-wielding man went down. Some of the bystanders rushed the gunman and more shots thundered. The noise was tremendous.

From his barstool Jeremy watched in motionless horror. But three or four other customers pinned the gunman to the floor and were pummeling him into unconsciousness. Two more tended the wounded man. Someone called 911. And behind Jeremy, someone was moaning. Jeremy turned

towards the bar. The bartender was on the floor, writhing in pain, with blood where it shouldn't be on her clothes, the white towel, the floor.

He rode with her in the ambulance. She was conscious and frightened, and she gripped his hand. The hospital staff quickly took her back to treat her and left Jeremy in the waiting area. He couldn't answer any questions for the intake nurse. He kept asking, "Will she be all right?" but they said he'd have to wait, they were treating her now, and was he family?

After a while, a distraught woman ran in to the waiting area. She was talking on her phone and pacing agitatedly. "I'm at the hospital now.... No.... I haven't seen her yet.... I don't know!" She hung up the phone and sat down across from him. Jeremy felt a shock wave pass through him. The woman looked exactly like his first wife.

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Like his daughter twenty-five years later, Jeremy left college after his first year and hit the road with no idea where he was going or how long he'd be gone. Eventually, he stumbled onto a folk gathering out in the middle of nowhere. A conservative city boy, he was fascinated by the hundreds of partially clothed, mostly long-haired people in the woods putting up tents and teepees, cooking in cast-iron pots over open fires, playing music, smoking weed, and in a few instances, having sex right out in the open. A young woman invited him to join her and her friends. They shared their food and their gear with him and didn't want anything in return. The festival lasted a week, and when it was over, she got in his car with him. When it came time for him to go home, they stopped in Las Vegas on the way back and got married.

Jeremy's parents were horrified. He was on track to get a profession, marry well, and settle down into a life much like theirs. Chloe was eighteen, straight out of high school with no life plan and

no prospects. Her family was no more pleased by the marriage than his. But Jeremy and Chloe were in love. They didn't care what their parents thought, and they were too young to have any foresight that they ever would.

They lived in married student housing and Chloe got a job at a coffee stand. Jeremy's studies kept him late at school most nights. Chloe became first lonely, and then angry. This was not the life she'd signed on for. About a year into it, they went to an all-day rock concert and got separated in the crowd dancing in front of the stage. Chloe got stoned with some strangers and fell asleep under the stands. When she woke up, the concert was over and she couldn't remember where they'd parked. Jeremy also got stoned, and went to sleep it off in their car. He woke up when he heard everyone leaving. He looked for her, but he couldn't find her anywhere. Then he remembered seeing her dancing with a man earlier in the day. Jeremy and Chloe had begun arguing recently, and it crossed his mind that maybe she went home with this other guy. So he went back to their apartment to wait for her. She still wasn't home the next day, and a worried Jeremy called Chloe's mother. Chloe was on her way home, her mother said, and wanted nothing to do with him. He called the next day and the next, but Chloe wouldn't speak to him. Finally, one of her brothers showed up at their apartment to collect her things. He said that Chloe came back home because he, Jeremy, had left her at the concert, and she didn't want to see or hear from him ever again. Jeremy tried to explain, both to the brother and to Chloe's mother, but no one was having any of it. And that was the end of that.

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If this woman really was Chloe, she hadn't changed very much. She was a little heavier and her hair was a different color, but the face was the same. He could see tattoos on her arms, and on her right forearm was one he recognized. She had it done in Las Vegas when they got married on their road trip

so long ago: two acorns on single stem, with an oak leaf curling around them both. She designed it herself, laughingly calling them a couple of nuts for getting married when they didn't even have to.

She didn't seem to recognize him at all, but then, she was distracted, and Jeremy knew that he himself looked pretty different now. He was almost bald, he'd gained quite a bit of weight, and he wore glasses now that he didn't need back in the 90s. Of course she didn't know him.

The doctor came in, beckoned to her, and spoke to her in low tones that Jeremy couldn't make out. She dropped her face into her hands and exclaimed, "Oh, thank God, thank God!" So Jeremy knew at least that the bartender was still alive. Then the doctor left. She sat down again, and sent him a look both relieved and stunned. "It's my daughter," she said. "She was shot at work. She just came out of surgery. She's going to be okay." Her chin wobbled and her voice choked, and she began to cry.

That chin-wobble and the crying clinched it. He remembered so clearly how Chloe cried when they fought. Jeremy wasn't an instinctively comforting person—he couldn't naturally understand when to come in close, and when to stay distant. He wondered, should he sit with her and try to comfort her? Should he tell her who he was? Before he could decide, Chloe dug in her purse for a tissue, wiped her eyes and blew her nose, and cleared her throat. She said, "Sorry, I'm just so relieved. She's only twenty-three."

Twenty-three? He did the math quickly in his head. Twenty-three years ago was roughly the time he and Chloe split up. Or was it twenty-four? Something monumental was trying to dawn on him, but his mind was busy pushing it away. Then Chloe stood up and said, "I'm going to wait for her in her room. I want to be there when they bring her in. I hope whoever you're here for is okay, too." She picked up her purse and disappeared down the hall, leaving him stuck between all that had happened and all that was waiting to be realized.