

## The Barber

It ended on an icy night. A single gunshot. An angry kid. The right place for the right reasons, just an unlucky split-second in the expanse of time.

Michael's life didn't end. In theory, he should be grateful for that. But his career, all of those carefully laid plans—they shattered alongside his tibia bone. When he declined the desk job and finally gave up the badge, he was an ancient thirty-three with a leg cobbled together from titanium.

Now at the peak of May, he sat alone in a pick-up truck on Main Street in small town America, live oaks rippling with green and baskets next to shop windows spilling with white flowers. A child and grandfather sat on a wrought iron bench swapping ice cream cones.

Michael waited, two hands gripped on the steering wheel, window rolled up despite the broken air conditioner and the Louisiana heat.

Ten minutes later, he stepped out onto the sidewalk. In front of him sat a wide bay window with a red door next to it, and next to the door a rotating barber's pole with its helix of red, white, and blue stripes. Stenciled lettering on the window read—*Leon's Place. Walk-ins Welcome. Any Style You Like.*

Michael took a breath and pushed through the door. A bell jangled overhead. His senses absorbed the room in an instant—six empty barber chairs, counters and mirrors running along the right side of the room. A ceiling fan spinning lazily, stirring the model airplane hanging next to it. Black and white diamond-print flooring rubbed dull through the decades. It smelled like shaving cream and shampoo and something vaguely sweet, like the popcorn shop next door.

Leon's held to its old-fashioned charm in a world with breathtakingly little charm.

An old man with a broom swept hair from under the counter. "Help you?" he asked. There was a stoop to his shoulders, as if he'd spent most of his life cutting hair in a room with a very low ceiling.

"I need a cut."

"Well, you came to the right place. Have a seat. Everyone else is out to lunch. I drew the short stick." The crinkles around his mouth deepened as he smiled. "You got a name?"

"Michael."

"I'm Leon."

"Nice to meet you."

The old man's eyes were the muddy color of Lake Charles after a storm. He unfurled a black barber cape, placed a neck strip, and snapped the cape closed, all in one smooth motion like a magician performing a card trick. "What'll it be? Clean up that high and tight?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"You serve?"

"Former Chicago PD, actually."

"Shoot, son. You sound like you grew up around the corner, not Chicagoland."

"I moved back recently."

"That a fact? Well, Louisiana welcomes you home."

They made small talk as Leon got to work and other barbers drifted in from lunch. They talked hurricane season and crawfish boils and then like two nomads recognizing each other from a distance, their conversation slipped into jazz music.

"I'm a Charlie Parker kind of guy," Leon said. "Can't beat the improv of the Bird."

"True, but Miles Davis made it accessible."

"You got sweet taste. I heard Miles live back in '64. *That* was a good year, personally speaking. Year I met Daisy, my wife."

Michael resisted the desire to nod as Leon a straight razor down the back of his neck. "How long you married?"

"Forty years. She was the best part of my life besides our two boys. They're wild though."

"I know something about that."

Leon's hands slowed, his eyes finding Michael's in the mirror. "That's tough. You the father or the kid?"

"Punk kid. I gave my dad plenty of grief. Too much." He swallowed but the emotion in his throat suddenly felt like an entire crawfish trying to crawl back up. "I cared more about running with my buddies than sticking with school. One thing led to another thing..." He gestured vaguely, still unsure where he went wrong. Where life took the first turn that would ultimately lead him here. "We haven't seen each other in ten or so years. Some phone calls. That's it."

"Sorry to hear that." The moment passed, Leon's hands returning to their work with a dexterity that defied the age spots on his skin. "We all done it. Your son'll do it to you someday."

Michael smiled, even though he no longer believed in that child, the one that was going to bring reason and meaning back into his life. That dream had died when Whitney left, months before the gunshot.

Leon knew every fact worth knowing about jazz music and he could rattle them off like baseball trivia—dates of album releases, musician rivalry, the evolving style from traditional to swing to cool jazz. He was still at it when it was time to pay the bill.

“John Coltrane released *Blue Train* in 1958 when I was twelve years old. First time I heard somebody marry bebop and blues.” He gave a low whistle. “That album changed my life. Fifteen for a haircut,” he said in one unbroken breath.

Michael handed over a twenty and a ten. “Keep the change,” he said.

Leon hesitated, hands hovering over the cash box. “What’s that?” he asked.

“I said keep the change.”

“All right, yeah, sure. Uh, this is twenty and a ten and so if I...” He shoved the bills into the cash box, then picked up a five, put it back. “15 dollars and uh...you gave me how much?”

“You keep fifteen.”

“Oh, of course. Losing my marbles.” Leon chuckled, a rusty sound only a former smoker could make. He took out a ten and five, looking relieved. “See you in four weeks. ‘Til then, check out Kamasi Washington. Newer guy but his saxophone sings. Think you’ll like his stuff.”

“I will, thanks.”

Michael had forgotten how oppressive June could be—a cloying, sweaty heat, like he was being smothered by a wet blanket. Outside the barber shop, the white flowers had shriveled. Live oaks hung listlessly as if praying for a breeze.

“Hey, Leon!” Michael said when it was his turn in the chair. “I listened to Kamasi Washington. You were right. He’s got Coltrane’s magic in him.”

“Well, hey, you,” the old man said, no light of recognition in his eyes. “What’ll it be today?”

Michael missed only a beat. Sucked in a breath and started swimming. “High and tight and a shave, please.”

“You got it.”

The small talk was slower today. Michael had planned to dive back into a language he hadn’t spoken in years—Bill Evans and Ella Fitzgerald, rhythm and blues—but instead he sat there swallowing disappointment he had no reason to feel.

“You grow up ‘round here?” Leon asked.

“Went to high school in Mossville.”

“That so! Me, too. Different year, of course.” Leon winked.

“Heard you like jazz.”

Leon nodded and smiled but didn’t offer any details, eyes looking but not connecting. He finished up the cut and laid a hot towel across Michael’s neck. Once the skin was loose, he removed the towel and dabbed warm shaving cream across Michael’s skin as if he were practicing a holy ritual, spice and cleanness filling the air like incense. Leon brought the straight razor down as he must’ve done a thousand times before, slow and precise, until it wasn’t. Michael felt the prick of the blade, the trickle of blood down his neck.

“Oh!” Leon exclaimed. “Oh, I can’t believe...I’ve never...” He groped for a clean towel, knocking a spray bottle onto the floor.

"It's all right," Michael said.

"No, it's not." Tears bloomed in the old man's eyes, hands trembling as he pressed the clean towel to the cut. "It's not all right."

"You okay, Leon?" another barber asked.

The towel came away. Michael saw the stain of blood and though he knew it was just a scratch, couldn't stop his hands from going cold and clammy. His stomach sick.

"I...I...cut him!" Leon's voice lurched into a shout, lip suddenly wobbling.

"It's really okay," Michael heard himself say. His ears were ringing. It was the blood. He could taste it, sharp and metallic, like it was bubbling up from his throat. "It happens."

"Don't say that," Leon urged. He wiped a hand over his mouth, as distraught as if he'd hit Michael in a crosswalk rather than nick him with a razor.

"Why don't you take a break, Leon?" the younger barber asked, glancing at Michael with a frown. "I'll take over."

June boiled until July shrilled. Michael intended to return sooner and check on the old man. Make sure he wasn't torn up about a harmless mistake. A few times Michael drove to the shop and sat outside with the windows up, heart drumming away like a runaway melody, but he could never get his hands off the steering wheel.

Leon wouldn't remember anyway.

*Why you always run?* Whitney had asked him, the night before she packed the car.

*I'm not running! You're the one leaving!*

And she'd just looked at him, like she felt so sorry for him she could cry, and that made him furious—angry and bereft in a way he couldn't articulate.

It was nearly August when he pushed through the door again. In the waiting chairs by the window, a kid with long, floppy hair glowered while his mother sat next to him reading *Southern Living*. At the first chair, the young barber named Hugh trimmed an old man's flat top.

"I'll be right with you," he said.

"Is Leon available?"

Hugh glanced over his shoulder where Leon swept discarded hair and whistled tunelessly. He dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Leon's retired. I'll be right with you." Then louder, "We had his retirement bash two weeks ago. Told him it's time to give the younger guys a chance to prove themselves."

He laughed, eyes leaping up into Michael's face as if trying to communicate that he should laugh, too. Michael could barely get out the chuckle.

"No bother. I'll just drop this off." Michael held up a vinyl record as if that explained everything, suddenly embarrassed. He walked to Leon.

The old man squinted up at him, shoulders heavier than they'd been in May but eyes the same Lake Charles brown. "Well, hi, son," he said.

Michael cleared his throat. "Just wanted to give you this. Coltrane. My favorite album."

The light came on, flickering and faint but burning, nevertheless. "Hey, thanks."

Michael took a step back, knowing there were more words but unable to say them. "Thank you," he responded stupidly, only partly knowing what he meant. He hoped his eyes were saying what his mouth couldn't. He hoped the old man understood.

It was evening when he came again. Nearly closing time, the September light hazy and gentle, air as soft as silk. The shop was empty except for a middle-aged barber with a handlebar mustache and a young man in army fatigues.

“Evening,” the barber said. “You’re my last walk-in for the day.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m not here for a cut.”

The barber stared at him expectantly, no doubt impatient to close shop and put his feet up after a long day with small talk and scissors.

“Is Leon here?”

The barber’s face softened. “Sorry, son. Leon passed. Just a couple nights ago. We’re all torn up about it.”

Michael nodded. Couldn’t speak.

“Service is Friday at the Baptist church next door.”

“Got it.” He started to turn.

“You’re his kid, aren’t you?”

Michael froze, gaze on the window, eyes tracing the stenciled letters—*Leon’s Place*.

“How’d you know?”

“I recognized your picture.”

“Picture?”

“Yeah, he kept you on his mirror for years. Long as I knew him. You were a teenager in it but I can tell. You got your pop’s eyes.”

Michael nodded at him, forcing a smile. “Guess so.”



“The picture fell off maybe a year ago. We looked but couldn’t find it. Your pops was torn up at first but you know how he was, getting forgetful. Eventually he didn’t even know what he’d lost. To him you were still a kid in high school.”

The emotion was unbearable. Michael’s eyes searched the room, every detail familiar and painful and somehow beloved. He wondered when that’d changed. When the anger had turned into grief. “Good. That’s good.”

“I found the photo recently, actually. It got swept underneath one of the counters. You want it?”

The barber was pulling it out of a drawer before Michael could respond. He held it out.

Tenth grade jazz club. Michael in black tux with his trumpet. Leon’s arm around his son’s shoulders, his smiler bigger and brighter than camera pixels could capture. The right place, for the right reasons. A beautiful second in the expanse of time.

“Thanks,” Michael said.