

You Remember?

11:00 A.M.

Brandon rolls in right at opening, not one minute before. His head is pounding, but on Sunday, with a double in front of him, twelve grueling hours inside the bar, his only chance of survival is the six extra strength liqui-gel Aspirin he swallowed before leaving his apartment.

Rubbing his temples, Brandon starts to worry. Shit better start kicking in soon.

Fuck me, he thinks. Why did I drink so much last night?

If he had an answer for that recurring question Brandon figures he could resolve much more pressing concerns (rent, junior college, finding a girlfriend). But for now, drearily recounting how many shots he downed before blacking out, Brandon focuses on the present. He has to get the bar open.

Unlocking the dead bolt and shouldering open the heavy steel door, Brandon is confronted by the smell of stale beer. Last night was a big one, and although the bar always smelled, the reek of dried Natural Light and second-hand smoke makes Brandon wretch.

Where in the hell was that Aspirin?

11:15

Fifteen minutes after opening, before he has even filled the bar sinks, working instead on removing sticky residue from the wooden veneer of the bar, the door opens and Brandon is joined by the first of his Sunday company.

“Morning Dave. Natty Light?”

Dave doesn't answer. Brandon didn't have to ask. He pops the cap off the brown bottle and places the beer on a Nascar napkin in front of Dave.

Although only eleven, Dave struggles with his posture, his head hanging even with his shoulders, the lights behind him casting deep shadows into the U-shaped pit of the bar.

Dave takes a long swig and nods at Brandon, the only thanks he'll get.

Five minutes after Dave comes Becky. And then Steve. And then Dianne. June is running late but Brandon doesn't worry. Five years working at the VFW and June has never missed a Sunday appointment.

Steve grabs a seat next to Dave, neither men acknowledging their thirty years of friendship. Dave grants Steve a gruff mumble, a windfall in Dave speak, and Steve tips his beer in acknowledgement, their language coded but to the most seasoned of drinkers.

Becky wracks a game of pool while Dianne grabs a seat on the far side of the bar. All four patrons wear light colored jean jackets, marked by mysterious stains and random cigarette burns.

Dave's jacket has a Vietnam Veterans patch on the left shoulder, frayed and peeling back as the glue's hold has softened over the years. Steve has a motorcycle

logo on the back of his, *The Vipers*, some club to whom he never belonged. Becky has a pack of Virginia Slims, 100 length, tucked into her rolled up sleeve.

They wear their uniforms well. Matching colors. The home team of the VFW.

Well hell, Brandon wonders, if they're the home team does that make me coach? A poor one if that's the case. Brandon knows his regular's favorite drinks, but beyond that casual memory his familiarity falls away.

Although Brandon has been there with each one of them for birthdays' and anniversary's, Super Bowls and state championships, nights filled with Alabama Slammers and stories of how things used to be, he has no clue how old his regulars are. They look ancient, wrinkle lines marking their faces, lines that run like topographical maps of mountains no one bothered to name.

Brandon wonders how much of that wear is a condition of circumstance, the weight of life versus the time of being. Surely by now each one of them had earned the right to appear so worn, but Brandon wonders at how great a cost.

Placing a Screwdriver in front of Dianne, Brandon wishes her good morning as she presses her lips against the soft gummy flesh where her bottom row of teeth used to be. Dianne doesn't need the drink. She needs a lobotomy and a comfy chair to finish her days in long before she needs another drink, but who in the hell was he to judge.

"Did you close last night Brandon?" Diane slurs in her lazy, toothless tone.

"Ronny told me things got crazy. Police got called and everything".

Brandon shakes his head no and tells Dianne he had the night off. He did spend his evening inside the bar, but after dipping below the surface of the booze he lost track of time and had no idea when he'd driven home.

After cracking the rack on the pool table, a poor shot that barely breaks the balls, Becky chimes in.

"God damn it Dianne, you know why they got crazy last night. With CJ and Frankie and June all showing up at the same time. You know how they get this time of year. Lucky things weren't worse all factors considering."

Becky takes another shot, leaning in close and feigning expertise. When the cue ball splits into the corner pocket she curses and chalks her stick, pointing it at Dianne.

"You best keep your mouth shut about last night once June gets here if you know what's good for you. She don't need none of us bringing up that mess."

Becky might have been full of shit ninety-nine percent of the time, but as Brandon poured scouring water into the first of his three bar sinks, he knew she was right.

Ryan Lopez. That was why he'd gotten so drunk last night. It was why things had gotten so crazy.

Ryan was why June was running late.

1:00 P.M.

When June finally arrives her expectant crowd has grown. Randy and Chewy and Yvette are all here, and although they've joined the VFW crowd later than their early bird counterparts, they're doing their best to catch up.

For his part, Dave is well on his way to blacking out and saying something racist. Brandon hands him another Natty Light and tries to make out what he mumbles under his breath. It's now only a matter of time.

Dianne sits down across from Dave and Steve, reclaiming her place after losing in one of the worst games of pool Brandon ever saw. Deep into her fourth screwdriver, she looks like her eyes might roll back in her head if she takes but one drink more.

When the heavy steel door bangs shut, lighting bolts of pain shoot through Brandon's temples. Normally he would've said something, shouting at the offender for slamming the door, but he doesn't get angry.

June, poor woman, can't be bothered for slamming doors today.

"Howdy June," Brandon treads lightly, "How you feeling?"

June tries to smile and hoarsely whispers that she is doing ok but Brandon knows better.

At the VFW, Brandon takes pride in his many roles. Depending on the day, on the bottle, his job requires many hats. He is part bartender, part janitor, part referee, and full time shrink. And although he dips into his own medicine cabinet far too often, he knows what June needs.

Brandon fills the prescription and hands June the Seven and Seven, on the house he says, as she stands by the door surveying the room. Foul medicine, but it's the only cure he knows.

Not quite sure what June is looking at, Brandon joins her in scanning the room. The longer he has spent inside the bar the more he's been able to piece things

together. An alcoholic's Rubik Cube, looking around at the neon beer signs and framed soldier's uniforms Brandon has reconstructed most of what happened.

Most of what he remembers wasn't pretty. The night started out normal enough, but by the time it was over there had been shouting matches, at least one fist fight, and enough crying to last him for good. At one point the police even showed up, knowing all the participants by name, trying their best to keep from throwing anyone in jail.

At the center of it had been June. Now, with her mid-afternoon arrival, Brandon feared what lay ahead.

June still hasn't moved, standing by the door like she might choose to leave and spend her Sunday somewhere other than the VFW. But she doesn't turn, unable to put behind her the tragedies that keep her coming back.

Despite her efforts to hide how she feels, June looks rough. Even still, in the half-light of the dying bar Brandon can see the beautiful woman who once lit up a room. Her black hair, straight as nails, hangs nearly to her waist. Her soft, brown eyes, reddened from crying and smoke and Jim Beam, her eyes are still deep enough to make any man stop and wonder.

Who were you, Brandon often thinks? What happened to make you so sad? What kept you from getting out?

June grabs a seat by herself at the far end of the bar. The regulars give her wide berth until the medicine settles in.

And then Brandon remembers, just like he remembered what happened the night before.

Ryan. Ryan was what made June so sad.

3:00

Dave is gone. Ten minutes before his memorable (predictable) departure, after chugging two Natty Lights in rapid succession he looks up at Chewy with liquored malice. Dave, not liking what he sees, yells something at Chewy and anyone else listening about wetbacks, niggers, and “Fucking Obama”, slamming down a twenty, his exact tab, on the bar when finished. His exit is marked by the steel door banging shut for the second time that afternoon.

Chewy breaks the tension by flipping off the door and laughing.

“Son of a bitch, everyone here knows wetback is my middle name. If he wants to hurt my feelings he’s going to have to try harder than that.”

Chewy goes back to his game of pool as everyone chuckles at his self-deprecating jab. Chewy is the only member of the Sunday gang who still works, running a handy man business around town patching roofs and snaking toilets and raking leaves. In the winter he shovels sidewalks. On more than one occasion he has done work for the VFW.

For Chewy, being a wetback meant having a job, earning an income instead of leeching off someone else. Whether it was an elderly mother’s social security account or a girlfriend’s disability check, most of the regulars at the VFW had secured income that didn’t require physical labor.

But not Chewy. For him, having a job meant honor. It meant not relying on anyone but himself, but considering the crowd, shit, the whole damn town, that distinction meant a lot less than it used to.

Dianne has moved from her spot at the bar and taken up residence on a table near the restroom. Her head is down, stringy, grey hair, and although Brandon can't see her eyes he knows she's sleeping. If Carly his manager was working she'd kick Dianne out if she couldn't stay awake, but for now Brandon doesn't have the heart.

Behind him, a more interesting conversation demands his attention.

Becky is long over pool, finished flirting with the men who have seen her naked and taken their ride, men who have chosen to graze elsewhere. With no other distractions Becky has chosen to break her own advice and chat with June.

"June baby, how you doing this afternoon? I heard last night was rough. Can't say I blame anyone. This time of year brings back bad memories for us all. I just want you to know that if you ever need anything you know you can come to me."

Becky belches when she finishes her barroom oath. She places a hand around June's shoulder, patting her back softly as she gulps her beer. June doesn't speak. She doesn't look over. She just sits and shakes her head and drinks her beer.

5:30

After patching together the details of the night before, the ones he forgot in his haze of Jim Beam and Budweiser, Brandon has become nervous. CJ and Frankie haven't returned, but there were nearly seven hours left until Brandon closed down.

With his hangover behind him, Brandon pours himself a drink as he continues to manage the room. With nothing better to do until closing he watches his heard with weary eyes.

Several other regulars have made their way to and from the bar. Kimmy and her girlfriend Charlene have joined the Sunday milieu, sitting side-by-side drinking red beers and chasing Grey Dog whiskey straight up.

Chewy's wife Cassandra has stopped by with homemade burritos, green chile and Mexican chorizo. Chewy, always the consummate businessman, has sold a half-a-dozen burritos to the hungry patrons, Brandon included.

Chewy gives a burrito to June at no cost.

Becky has driven Dianne home, a relief in Brandon's mind, returning twenty minutes later reeking of cheap weed and cigarettes. Brandon should've said something to her about driving, but on that field he had no room to talk.

All of the regulars, more empathetic after each drink, have stopped by to check in on June. Like doctors making their rounds, each member of the VFW family has thoughts on how to handle grief, how best June can focus on the future.

For his part Brandon has said little to June other than asking if she would like another. But several times, while polishing bottles or restocking the cooler, he has caught her eye. June looks at him and Brandon knows, feels it in his gut, that she wouldn't mind a word.

He knew Ryan better than any of the others. He knew her son before he died.

6:17

Bored by the chatter of flies, Brandon turns on the stereo after no one shows interest in feeding the jukebox quarters. Settling on classic rock, he nervously eyes the door and wonders if Frankie and CJ will appear.

The daylong hangover after such a rough night should've been enough to keep them away, but memory seemed selective in influencing decisions. Memory wouldn't let them forget, but memory wouldn't let them go.

Remembering long before his hazy night prior, back before he'd become a fixture at the VFW, Brandon looked back at where he'd come from as he washed chipped pint glasses in the lukewarm water. He looked back at where he'd been when Ryan died.

Brandon remembered that weekend eight years past so clearly. It had been eight years since Ryan passed away. Eight years to the weekend. Eight years to the day. After so much time Brandon wouldn't have been able to remember the exact anniversary if it hadn't fallen on such a predictable date, but every year graduation weekend came and went.

For Brandon, graduation weekend stood as a passage of time, the distance between what could've been and what turned out to be. But for June and Frankie and anyone else who remembered Ryan, it stood as a memorial to so much more.

As the town died and people moved elsewhere the graduating classes at the high school grew smaller and smaller. Eight years prior there had been fifty-four kids in Brandon's class, but this year's crop, the reason for the bar's busy weekend, saw only twenty-two students walk across an empty stage.

Remembering his own Saturday morning in May, sweating bullets inside the packed gymnasium, the same one he'd grown up playing youth basketball in, Brandon remembered how it felt being overshadowed by cheers for another. Ryan

Lopez, June and Frankie's Lopez's only child, had been the big fish that day. He was the star, the bright spot of hope that kept everyone believing.

Earlier that year Ryan had led them all, Brandon included, to a baseball state championship. In the flash of newspaper bulbs and trophy celebrations he'd made everyone forget, if only for a moment, those things that kept them down.

Ryan wasn't the smartest kid. Michelle Montoya took that honor, graduating valedictorian with a 4.165 GPA and her own chance of getting out, but Ryan had gotten the grades he needed. Paired with his ace pitching skills he'd been offered a scholarship to play baseball at Oklahoma State.

After the short graduation ceremony that day passed by in a blur. The VFW, still ran by Carly, still manned by the same drunks who paid the bills, was filled to capacity as one party after another came and went.

Brandon remembered his time at the VFW, how graduates were passed secret beers in white Styrofoam cups. Knowing drunks, experts on the ways of the world, slipped them shots and told them how much lay in store.

One piece of advice they didn't hand out, however, was about not over doing it. By ten that night Brandon had puked his guts out in the alley behind the bar. But although many fell classmates followed a similar path, Ryan had taken a different route. Ryan hadn't partaken in any of the daytime drinking. A town celebrity, he had responsibilities, commitments to honor as he made his way across town.

In a rolling caravan June and Frankie had led the way from party to party as Ryan and his cousin CJ followed in tow. With Frankie driving June and CJ driving Ryan, the plan was set to ensure Ryan had a DD if necessary.

If only Ryan had stuck to the plan, wondered Brandon, then perhaps June wouldn't be manning her usual post the bar, far too deep in the cups.

Much later that evening, around the same time Brandon was emptying his stomach behind the VFW, Ryan had finally taken a drink. Earlier that week Frankie had driven all the way to Pueblo to buy a bottle of oak aged tequila. After the responsibilities had been handled and June had gone to bed he'd given the bottle to his son as a graduation present, telling him how much he loved him, telling him to have fun.

The rest of what happened that night was told and retold, recounted at first with tears and stuttered retellings and then later with the air of judgment that comes from people with nothing better to do than bask in the downfall of those who stood taller.

What was known, however, was that at some point Ryan decided to drive. CJ, a fuck up by twenty-one, already had two DUI's and a string of arrests under his belt. Ryan must have sounded like the voice of reason when he told his cousin he would drive. It must have sounded like the right thing to do.

Sometime around midnight, for no reason other than the half bottle of Tequila, Ryan lost control of the car and crashed into a drainage ditch outside of town. Although he'd only been going thirty miles an hour the car flipped and Ryan was pinned between the steering wheel and his seat.

Unharmful, CJ had been able to wriggle free. Before he had a chance to make a plan, the smoking engine caught fire with Ryan trapped inside.

After frantically calling 911 CJ tried to free his cousin. He smashed the driver's window with a kick that broke his foot in three places, sliced his arms on the shattered glass, and ripped at the seatbelt until the car was wrapped in flames.

When the sheriff arrived CJ was still half in/half out of the smoldering vehicle. It took three officers to pry him from the fireball, the smell of burning flesh far stronger than the black tinted smoke.

By the time the fire department arrived there was nothing to do. The cops had to handcuff CJ to the ambulance gurney, screaming to be released, the crispy flesh of his forearms oozing pus as paramedics tried to save his life.

That next day, waking from an unfamiliar hangover, Brandon remembered checking his phone and seeing sixteen missed messages. Many said different things, but the intent of each text was the same.

Ryan Lopez was dead.

One week later the funeral came and went. In a season where new graduates should've been celebrating and making plans for life after high school was a time filled with mourning. The realization that even the best of them was not free from life came far too early for the class of 2007.

The funeral was closed casket. Brandon heard from Cody Wilson that the only thing left of Ryan was his skeleton and his state champion's ring. Not wanting to believe such a nightmare, as he passed the casket and said how sorry he was to June and Frankie Brandon pictured the kid he'd grown up with, the kid who'd found a way to get out.

After a brief investigation CJ was cleared of any wrongdoings. There had been a short-lived search into who'd purchased the tequila, but when no one spoke up the police allowed the family to return to the grieving process.

One month later June filed for divorce. With Ryan gone, she gave up and placed blame on the only person she could. June knew Frankie had given the bottle to Ryan. She didn't turn him over to the cops, but she would damn sure take what he'd done to the grave.

Brandon looked at June as he finished washing the glasses. Her eyes were bloodshot, never recovered from the night before. She was no longer looking at Brandon, instead staring out at a place only she could see.

Looking away after he could take no more, Brandon watched his people wind down the night. Chewy made his rounds before leaving, saying goodbye to the Sunday crowd and paying his tab. As Chewy dug for cash in his stained Dickey's Brandon took a long sip from his drink as he looked at the door.

June hadn't moved in some time, and although she was drunk enough to call it a night, Brandon feared she was holding on.

If Frankie was coming by, June was damn sure not going to miss it.

9:00

With only two hours left until closing, Brandon starts to hope that Frankie and CJ were no-shows.

He was so close.

Frankie and CJ don't bust into the bar. Instead they are quiet and respectful as they close the steel door behind them.

The bar is empty as it has been all day. After Chewy left Steve and Becky followed in short order. Randy drove Yvette home, and now only Kimmy, Charlene, and June remain.

Kimmy and Charlene are busy playing pool, rubbing up on each other with schoolgirl giggles each time they pass at the table. They pause their game when the new company arrives. Even they know what this means.

June doesn't move when Frankie appears. She only looks up and stares as he and CJ grab a seat at the bar.

"Evening CJ, Frankie. What can I get you?"

Brandon wishes there was someone else inside the bar. Although he doesn't believe things will become violent, with no back up he is careful with every word.

Frankie orders a Bud and CJ asks for Beam. When he drops off the drinks Brandon can smell alcohol on both men's breath. Their appearance, however, is much worse than their smell.

After the divorce Frankie fell apart. Before the tragedy he'd been foreman for the town's utility company, but he was fired two months after June left. Moving in with his mother, he'd spent the last eight years slowly killing himself by bottle.

CJ wore his scars more visibly. After the fire he'd lost his right arm up to the elbow and three fingers on his left hand save his thumb and ring finger. Scars wrapped all the way to his face, tightening his skin and making him look like he was constantly startled to see you.

“What happened to you last night Brandon,” CJ probes as his remaining two fingers guide the whiskey to his mouth. “You dipped out before things got good. What, you worried you can’t hang no more?”

Brandon tells CJ he doesn’t remember much, just having one shot too many before calling it a night. CJ nods as he places the drink back on the bar but Brandon suspects he doesn’t like the answer.

Although the pool table is littered with balls Kimmy comes up and asks for her tab. When CJ tells her how fine she looks she nods but doesn’t respond. CJ stares at her like a mad dog, but after she pays he lets her leave in peace. Grabbing Charlene, they are gone without a second glance.

Breathing in the tension of the room, Brandon wishes there was something he could do. If there was a panic button, hell, even a fire alarm, he would’ve yanked it and thanked god for the chance to flee. But he was stuck. He was going to have to see things through.

After only five minutes Frankie and CJ finish their drinks. They ask for another round but Brandon wonders if he should cut them off. CJ looks like he hasn’t slept for days, skinny and mean with his shoulders pulled back, his chest puffed out.

Frankie doesn’t look mean, but he doesn’t look right either. He looks so tired, so beaten down, that Brandon wonders what it is that keeps him going.

When the glass mirror behind the bar explodes into a million pieces Brandon jumps and screams. Expecting nearly anything behind him, all Brandon sees is June and the empty stretch of bar where her drink had been.

“You had to come back in here, didn’t you? You couldn’t stay at your mother’s and finish the job? Well, fuck you Frankie. Let’s end this if we have to.”

June slurs her words, swaying from side to side as she stares at her ex. Her eyes are wet and glassy but she doesn’t break her stare.

“This is my place”, June says slapping her hand on the bar, “Mine. You coming in here, what did you expect?”

Brandon starts to clear his throat, stepping up to the front of the bar pit so he is between Frankie and June, but before he can speak CJ cuts him off.

“You don’t own this place June. Frankie can do whatever he goddamn likes. You think you are the only one who can remember Ryan. You think you are the only one with that right?”

CJ slams his second drink and holds both arms in the air. He turns slowly, parading his disfigurement. June feels Ryan’s death, but CJ shows her how he lives it everyday.

Finding his courage, Brandon finally butts in.

“Damn it June, you know you’re going to have to pay for that mirror. I’m closing up so why don’t you three get out of here. I’ll buy your tabs, just leave and let me alone.”

Brandon places his hands on his hips, but when he looks back at forth at Frankie and June he knows they aren’t finished.

“You drinking beer, Frankie? Why don’t you drink tequila? If you liked it enough to give to your son you should have some in his memory.”

Frankie hasn't done much other than stare at the bar in front of him. As he stands up Brandon expects the worse, but when he see's tears in Frankie's eyes Brandon breaks at the pain he witnesses.

"I'll be gone soon enough June, but before I'm done I want you to remember something."

Frankie speaks like he is delivering a eulogy, slow and deliberate, words meant for those gone and those soon to follow. His voice is clear, filling the room as he looks at his wife.

"You remember that year we drove to Santa Fe for Christmas. When Ryan was eleven? We bought him a new pair of baseball shoes? Do you remember that trip?"

June, surprised to have memory thrown in her direction, stutters with no response.

"We took Ryan skiing, first time any of us had ever gone. Later that evening we sat around the fire and Ryan told us how it was the best day of his life. Do you remember that June, because I do?"

"You know I gave Ryan that bottle. I gave it to him because I loved him and because I wanted him to have some fun. I remember that decision everyday of my life, from the moment I wake up to the moment I drink myself to sleep, but what haunts me most is the days before. Those days that didn't go wrong, those are the one's I can't forget."

CJ has walked to the door, struggling with his one arm to get it open. Once he does he motions at Frankie, telling him he's had enough, telling him it's time.

Frankie doesn't move, waiting for June's response before he can let go.

"I remember that day Frankie," June says through tears of her own, "but I remember Ryan's last day more. You say you remember, but I pray you always do. I hope you never forget your son because I can't. I've tried, but I just can't."

"You remember that Frankie, what you've done to me. You remember."

11:00 P.M.

Pulling with force, Brandon is able to wedge the steel door shut behind him.

It didn't take long to close down. Frankie left with CJ, unable to tell June how to move on. When she'd left her driver's license as insurance for the mirror June followed soon after.

Brandon feels exhaustion creep over him as he steps into the night air. The six drinks he had during his shift haven't left him drunk, only tired and worn out.

At least I have the day off tomorrow, Brandon thinks as he looks up at the stars. I couldn't handle another one of those.

Leaving the VFW, Brandon forgets about the Natty Lights and inflated egos, the dirty bar sinks and cracked urinals. It will all be waiting, but Brandon is glad to be free.

Maybe tomorrow I can look for another job. Maybe I can call the college and see about registering. Maybe. We'll see what tomorrow brings.

Brandon starts his car and leaves.

The End