

The Lake at Paynes Prairie

Pete was paying attention to his driving. At least he was telling himself to. His thoughts kept drifting, but the route to Judy's was familiar enough that he could do it on autopilot. Left turn out of his condo on the outskirts of Gainesville, south on 441 down through Paynes Prairie to Micanopy. On a low-traffic day it was pleasant, a sort of charming road trip through what was left of old Florida.

He wished he could sink into the landscape along the road. It wasn't a prairie in the dry western sense, but more a marsh of endless yellow-green grasses punctuated by scrub palmetto, stands of cypress dripping with Spanish moss, a palm tree gangling alone here and there. Just past the cypress trees, the lake reflected the sun. Something about the horizontality of it drew you in. Pete imagined napping on one of the cool benches along the trails.

He rolled down his window to catch the spring air. A passing whiff of orange blossoms stirred up a childhood memory of his father taking the family on a Sunday drive through strawberry farms and orange groves, windows wide open, his mother complaining of her hair getting irreparably mussed.

His mind snapped back to the reason he was on his way to Micanopy now. Judy and Meg's father had died last night. He felt he should help, although he wasn't sure how. He started to reach for his cell phone to call Judy, but stopped as he remembered it wasn't there. He'd left it on the breezeway table in her house a couple of days before. It was unlike him to forget his phone, but after the argument that day, Judy had shown him the door before he remembered to check his pockets.

There was a land line at work, so he hadn't rushed back to retrieve the cell phone. Curious how refreshing the last two evenings had been—no texts from his fellow UF faculty or undergrads asking for a recalculation of their grades, no late-night calls from Judy or Meg. That was the real blessing, because it gave him a little time to think. It wasn't until this morning that Meg had reached him at the university to tell him about her dad.

A semi was coming up on his tail. He shifted over to the right-hand lane and watched it in the rear-view mirror until it barreled past on his left. *Why the hell isn't that asshole on I-75?*

The road quiet again, Pete's thoughts settled back on Judy. Ironic that he felt compelled to be there for her now, just when he had resolved to let the relationship go. After their fight over Meg, he'd been mentally rehearsing the breakup dialogue. The old man dying was the last thing he needed. Now he faced the sting of consoling both sisters while dodging whatever bitter stones Judy would sling his way. It was his own stupidity. He should have had the guts to make a clean break with her, especially before messing with Meg.

The thought of Meg was like a mild electric current. The last few weeks with her had been intoxicating. She had cultivated a kind of been-there-done-that veneer, but this hint of girlishness peeked through. *Knowing innocence*. He smiled at his own oxymoronic concoction of Meg's mystique. Apparently his background as a Logic instructor at UF didn't keep him from holding opposite ideas in his head.

He'd thought he was in love with Judy. They had hit it off literally over the water cooler outside his office on campus. But after she quit her assistantship to take care of her father, her crackly wit gave way to a kind of sardonic brittleness. Pete didn't blame her, but still, being the target of it was getting old.

The gravel driveway crunched and spit little stones as Pete pulled up to Judy's farmhouse. He heard the *sproing* of the front screen door and saw Meg coming out. She had her taffy blonde hair up in a disheveled bun, and no makeup. He thought, not without a twinge of guilt, that she looked even more appealing this way. He got out of his car and started toward the house, but she motioned with her hand *No, stay there*.

"Hey, Pete," she said in a tone he couldn't quite read. Not exactly sadness. Anxiety?

"Hi." He hugged her when she got to the car. She turned her face from his kiss.

"Judy." She whispered, glancing toward an open window.

"Oh," he shook his head, "Yeah. Sorry. And I'm sorry about your dad."

"Thanks. Here, let's go over to the tree where it's shady."

The farmhouse was shaded by live oaks with outstretched, gnarled limbs and trunks so thick, Pete thought they must have been 150 years old. Several large branches overhung the roof to the point that they could turn deadly in the wake of a serious hurricane. He had mentioned this to Judy once or twice, but she'd brushed him off. She would never limb them, she said, because it would disturb the nature of the whole forest. The limbs were where they should be.

Pete leaned against the tree trunk, avoiding a line of tiny ants—termites?—he saw climbing to some purpose only they knew.

“So why are we talking out here? Is Judy still so angry she doesn't want to see me?”

“Well, right now things are...up in the air. The ambulance came at 1:00 this morning, and of course they did their evaluation, and all that. Then they took him to the funeral home. There was talk of the coroner's, but I think that's worked out, God willing. He wanted to be cremated.”

He noticed she was paler than she had been a minute ago. “Are you okay?”

Meg crumbled in his arms, her legs turned to dry twigs. “I'm sorry, Pete.” She pulled away. Her eyes were reddened but dry, as though she had no tears left. “I'm just tired. Got light-headed for a second.”

“Why don't we go inside. You need some rest, and I should say something to Judy.”

“She's so upset right now, Pete. Really, it might not be a good idea. Wait a day and give her a call.”

A red-winged blackbird in the neighboring oak tree sounded its trilling note.

“Oh, that reminds me, here's your cell phone.” She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out the phone. “The battery's way down. The phone seemed to be unlocked the whole time. I picked it up once and tried to lock it, but I couldn't figure out how, so I just left it.”

Her hand was shaking. He closed his hand over hers as he took the phone. “Okay. I'll charge it up in the car. Listen...Meg? I have to talk to you about something.”

“What?”

“I was planning to break up with Judy. This...with your dad...it's not the best time. I'm still going to, but I need to know—”

“Don't say anymore, Pete.”

“Meg, I know it’s unfair saddling you with this right now, but the woman I can’t get out of my mind is *you*. Once we’re through this.”

“Pete, I never wanted to hurt Judy. I still don’t, although now...”

“Now?”

“Oh, with all that’s happened...I’m not sure how I feel toward her. And I may need to take a hard look at my own life.”

“Do you think it could include me? We can take it slow.”

“If things work out...”

“Things have a *way* of working out.”

A flicker of sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting feathery shadows of her eyelashes onto her cheeks. He brushed a soft kiss across her lips, hoping she would sense the promise in it.

“I’ll head back now, but I’m calling tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She paused. “And Pete? Sorry you took all this time out of your day.”

“Don’t be. I would only have been seeing students in my office to explain why they got a *C-minus*. Now I can be a good boy and go catch up on grading term papers.” He smiled, hugged her one more time, and got back into the car.

Pete had just gotten onto 441 North when he noticed something flashing on his cell phone screen. He stopped for gas and looked at the phone. It was the photo app icon. He opened it to see a “storage full” symbol. Odd, since he’d bought this phone only two months ago. How could the storage be full? And he wasn’t sure why the phone had stayed unlocked at Judy’s, either.

Damn smartphones. Oh well, I’ll figure it out when I get home. He started the car, plugged the phone into the USB port in the console, and pulled back onto the highway. He was about a third of the way to Gainesville when the phone slid off the console and came loose from the cord. When he replugged it, it generated a ping he hadn’t heard before. The screen now said *New Video* inside a little square balloon.

Did Judy and Meg use my phone to make a video? That didn't make any sense. He swished the *New Video* balloon and it opened. He couldn't see anything on the screen, but he could hear background sound. Then some muffled talking.

He turned the phone's volume to max. Still no video showing up, but the audio got clearer. He heard Meg's southern contralto say something like *not right, Jude*.

Then Judy's light drawl came through loud and clear.

"We've been through this, Meg."

"But Daddy—"

"Daddy's 87, and tired. He said so himself. You heard."

"Yes, but Jude, I feel like we're playing God. We—"

"Oh, so now you're the moral backbone of this family? After you fuck *my* boyfriend and then come crying to me on your knees to ease your guilty conscience?"

Pete almost cut off an SUV in the left lane without seeing him. The loud honk of the horn startled him into awareness of the traffic. *Jesus, I'd better pull over or get myself killed*. He switched off the phone.

He was approaching the entrance road to the Paynes Prairie State Preserve, so he turned and drove up the road to the gate, paid the \$6 to get in, and found a parking spot. A raised boardwalk snaked through the grassy swamp to the lake. He walked a short way until he found a bench shaded by a canopy of thick cypress. The park was quiet this afternoon. Just some blue herons and egrets wading for food at the water's edge. The occasional shriek of a limpkin broke the languid silence.

He turned his cell phone over in his hand. The video recorder must have gotten turned on by accident. Meg might have hit it when she was trying to lock the phone. And lying on a side table in the breezeway, it would pick up sound from almost anywhere in the house.

He turned it on again. Meg's voice. He was seized by a brief urge to drive back to her, but he tamped it down and kept listening.

“That’s not fair, Jude. I really am sorry—”

“You really are, aren’t you. You move back down here to help with Daddy after I take care of him for two fucking *years*, and then you help yourself to Pete.”

“Taking care of Daddy was your choice, Judy. All those years—what he did to Mama—why should I give up my life for him? And besides, I was working. It wasn’t easy just to pull up roots in Savannah and come back here.”

“Oh, of course, your all-important career as an interior designer. How many times has everybody heard about that one mention you got in *Southern Living*? Meanwhile—”

“Meanwhile *you* sacrifice everything—including Pete—to wipe the ass of an abusive old man whose liver finally waves a white flag to the daily six-pack and bourbon habit. So now, what, you expect a medal of sainthood?”

“What do you know about sacrifice? Mama sacrificed everything *she* had, which sure as hell wasn’t much, so you could go to Savannah. Did you ever even thank her before she died? And you all but ignored me whenever I asked for help with Daddy. Rare as that was.”

“Maybe people wouldn’t ignore you if you didn’t drive them away first.”

“Oh. So I drove Pete away too, is that it?”

“I don’t know, Judy. The change in you, it’s not good since—”

“Since I don’t have a life anymore. Thank you for pointing that out.”

“Look...I said I was sorry. What more do I have to do?”

“For one thing—no, actually two things. No more playing with Pete. After this is over he’ll come back. With Daddy out of the picture everything will be different.”

“Judy—”

“No, let me finish. The second thing you have to do...you just have to stay with me on this. You know he’ll be in a better place.”

Some footsteps and rustling noises. Then Judy’s voice. “Just checked on him. He’s out. Breathing sort of rattly, but still regular...Goddamn. It’s almost midnight. I gave him the pills three hours ago.”

“He’s tough, Jude. Maybe it wasn’t enough.”

“He had his after-dinner shots of Jim Beam, right?”

“Yes. I poured heavy. I figured he might as well enjoy his booze at this point.”

“Jesus, fifty Valium plus half of a fifth ought to do *something*.”

“Fifty? Of those 10 milligram ones? I didn’t know you stockpiled that much. Are you sure he got them all down?”

“Yeah...smashed ‘em up and mixed it with his Metamucil. So at least he’ll be shitting regularly in hell.”

“God, Judy.”

There was a long pause.

“He’s not showing any signs of giving up, Meg. We have to go to Plan B.”

“Plan B?”

“You know. We discussed it...if the pills didn’t work. We’re going to have to help this along.”

“Jude, no, I can’t! Maybe he’s just not ready to go. Listen, I’ll take care of him—feed him, bathe him...you go on a vacation with Pete, whatever you want.”

“I’m done with empty promises.” Judy’s voice softened. “But Meggie? You *can* take care of him now. Here. Look, it’s even got one of Mama’s hand-embroidered pillowcases.”

“You want *me* to do this? Oh God, what would Mama...Jude, no, please.”

Pete shut off the video and stared at the lake. The sun was lower in the sky, sparkling off wavelets that formed whenever something approached in the water just below. It might be a fish or a turtle, or a gator that, if it surfaced, would jar the otherwise bucolic scene. But whatever lurked beneath, nothing broke the horizon. A scattering of water strider bugs landed on the lake and miraculously walked on it. Two squirrels skittered a spiral path up a tree. Life went on here as it always did.

He stretched and took a deep breath, noticing he’d been holding his breath listening to the recording. He switched the phone back on.

“Look, Meg, think of it as payback for the last two years. It’s only fair now that you should do your part. It’ll be okay. He’s got COPD, liver disease and heart problems. People his age *have* heart attacks or strokes. All the time.”

“I know,” Meg was sobbing.”

“Now you remember the plan. I’ll make the call, and when the ambulance gets here, I’ll do the talking. He went to sleep as usual. When I checked on him he looked blue, and I couldn’t wake him up.”

“Judy...”

“You will not go off script here. This is our lives, Meggie. We’re both in this. Swear to me. After...you can cry all you want. Maybe I will too.”

“All right, I swear,” Meg choked, “but please, Jude. Don’t make me do this alone. And Mama’s nice pillowcase...”

“Christ. If Mama was here, she’d probably be the one putting that pillowcase *on* there. Now come on. Here, just put it over his face and hold down your side. Tight.”

“Dear Jesus, forgive us—”

“Cut the prayers. Jesus isn’t listening.”

After another couple of minutes of only garbled sounds, Pete turned off the video. He didn’t need to hear any more. He knew the ambulance had come and taken the old man to the funeral home. They probably asked the cursory questions. The body would be on its way to the crematorium by now.

He pondered calling Judy or Meg. Or maybe he should just go straight to the police.

After a few minutes he decided to call Meg.

“Hey, Pete.”

“Hey...I just heard this video on my phone.”

“Okay...”

“Yeah. Looks like it was recorded accidentally. You told me you picked up the phone to—”

“Pete? It wasn’t by accident. Last night...when we...I switched it on and left the phone on the table. Judy has no idea.” Her voice wavered. “Did you listen to the whole thing?”

“Pretty much. Have you heard this, Meg?”

“No. I wasn’t even sure it recorded. I just hit the video button and then turned it back off later. Did it—”

“Oh, it did. Everything you and Judy said. So...you two had this all planned...and then you suddenly decided to record your conversation?”

“I...” She started to cry. “Pete, I saw your phone there, and...I guess it was a last-ditch effort to make this horrible thing right somehow.”

“Make this *right*? Jesus, Meg. I get that you’re dealing with more guilt than I ever imagined. But...when you handed me this phone, did you even give a thought to what you were handing me?”

“I’m so, so sorry...Judy’s coming, I have to hang up now.”

Pete stayed there on the bench for a long time. He felt the air grow heavier. The late afternoon breezes would keep the mosquitoes from their evening feeding frenzy for only another hour or so. The water was so still now, it looked like a mirror. He was reminded of one of those mirages on the road that vanished as you approached.

But the lake wasn’t a mirage. The closer you got the more real it was. It would splash and ripple up the reflections of the trees if you tossed a pebble into it. It was said there was a spring at the deepest part, where the cold ground water bubbled up. If you didn’t know the spring was there you would never suspect it, with the surface so glassy smooth.

Pete was still holding the cell phone in his right hand. He stood and walked the wood-slatted path along the water’s edge. For the first time he noticed there really was no edge at all—just a gradual transition from moist earth to water. He followed the boardwalk through mossy groves to its end. He looked to his right, then to the left and behind. His only curious company was a Great Blue Heron perched on a cypress knee. When the bird looked away, Pete threw the phone as far as he could into the lake at Paynes Prairie.

