

The Lake at Paynes Prairie

Meg looked out the window. The shade from the old oaks was shifting toward the house. Getting late. She was supposed to meet Pete at 3:30, and Judy wasn't home yet.

The bedside clock blipped 3:00. "Time for your meds, Daddy." She helped him sit up so he could swallow the tablets. One to ease his breathing, one to slow down the disintegration of his liver, one to speed up his bowels. Fifty-odd years of two packs a day washed down with a fifth had taken their toll. He could barely get out of bed, thanks to the sloshing fluid in his belly and the oxygen concentrator tethered to his nose.

"Listen," she said, "I'm running out for an errand. Judy should be home in fifteen or twenty minutes. You gonna be okay for that long?"

He muttered what sounded like a string of profanities. He rarely made sense these days, but still, it was better than the abuse he used to inflict on her mother. Ever forgiving, on her last day on Earth she'd made her daughters promise to look after their father. Meg still grieved for her, but it helped to know Mama was finally free.

She checked her purse for her keys and Pete's cell phone. Both there. When she got out on U.S. 441 she called Judy. "Hey, you almost home? I'm going out for a little bit...to the drug store for Daddy's water pills."

"The drug store, seriously?" Judy's voice was tinged with irritation. "This must be pharmaceuticals day. No, I'm just leaving Gainesville. Derrick couldn't get away 'til 2:30. Fine, go wherever the hell you want. Just make sure you're home tonight."

Meg fought an urge to head straight up to Savannah. Was it only six weeks ago she had come back to Micanopy? In the airy rooms of the old Florida cracker house she'd breathed a few sighs of nostalgia, but that was gone, swallowed like everything else by the abyss of her father's needs.

Driving toward Paynes Prairie she was jittery, like she'd had a lot of caffeine. Pete would pick up on it too. No way could she bring herself to tell him what was on her mind. She was too confused. Giving his phone back was the closest she could get to a decision today. After that, well, let the chips fall.

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Pete was reaching for his cell phone all day even though he knew it wasn't there. When Meg called his lab to say she'd found it beneath the seat of her car, he had suggested they meet this afternoon at Paynes Prairie. He would share his favorite place with her, and she could return the phone. Win-win.

He wanted to get the Bio 201 midterms graded before leaving. Sitting at his desk behind a stack of papers, he was regretting making the students hand-write them in class. But it foiled the cheats who were using AI.

He got through exactly three of them before his mind drifted. He was back in 2007, the night he'd met Meg. He had literally bumped into her in the rathskeller on the UF campus. She was waiting tables and spilled a pitcher all over him. After the initial shock of cold beer down his shirt, he noticed her soft gray eyes and flushed cheeks.

She wore her chestnut hair long, cascading down her back. He'd nursed one Heineken until midnight when her shift ended.

Meg was Class of '09, a graphic arts undergrad, Pete a PhD candidate in biology. He loved her mercurial spirit and the way she saw art everywhere, and she seemed to get his love of nature.

He'd been on the verge of proposing to her when she hit him with the news she was moving to Savannah. The College of Art and Design had accepted her application for a transfer. She hadn't mentioned it to him before, she said, because she never thought she'd get in.

It was only four hours away, they assured each other.

Four hours became fifteen years.

Pete thumbed through the exam papers. *I should delegate this to a grad student. Hell, I'm a tenured professor.* A reward for his research on the ecology of Florida wetlands.

Immersed in the work, for years he'd sidestepped a social life. Until Meg's older sister got a job in his department. Judy was always popping in to say hello, and the relationship just sort of happened. Her sharp wit was fun at first. Then she quit to care for her father, and it turned bitter.

Pete didn't really blame her, but being a target got old. He'd put off breaking up with her because he didn't want to cause her more pain.

But now that Meg was back, the game had changed.

He stared at the next exam paper. His thoughts jumped again, this time to last month when he'd been gassing up his Prius, and a red Jeep Grand Cherokee pulled up

to the next pump. *Another damn gas guzzler*, he'd thought, until he saw the driver's chestnut hair. In less than three weeks he was hooked. Again.

He gathered up the exams, stuffed them into a folder and scrawled on it *Please grade by Thursday-P*. He dropped the folder in Eddie's inbox. A mediocre grad student, Eddie never complained. Pete jogged down the three flights to the parking lot. He was parked in a far corner in the one spot that got shade all day. It always meant washing bird shit off the car, but he loved to snag that space.

He hummed as he drove south on 441 toward Paynes Prairie State Preserve. It wasn't a prairie in the usual sense, but a marsh of endless yellow-green grasses punctuated by scrub palmetto, stands of cypress trees dripping with Spanish moss, cabbage palms gangling here and there. Pete had been going there since he was a kid. There was a calm horizontality that had always drawn him. It was a big part of the reason he'd become a biologist.

He pulled onto the road leading into the preserve. The hundred-acre lake glistened through the cypress. He parked and waited for Meg. He felt like a teenager, half giddy, half guilty. Guilty because he knew it wasn't fair to Judy. The last thing he wanted was to be a third of a love triangle. But he couldn't get Meg out of his mind.

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Meg arrived five minutes later and saw the silver Prius next to the boardwalk. Pete was standing a few yards away. He was wearing a blue *University of Florida* polo shirt and khakis. His thinning reddish hair was tied into a short ponytail. From a

distance he could be mistaken for one of his students, but close up, his sunburnt face looked the 45 it was.

He waved her over and gave her a deep kiss. Something in her chest fluttered—excitement or anxiety, maybe both.

They followed the boardwalk to a bench at the edge of the lake. She sat cross-legged next to him. An egret was wading through the shallows, stalking a fish. Meg held her breath as the bird froze, made a swift jab and snagged it first try.

“Impressive,” she said, her eyes on the slim white neck that undulated with its descending meal. “Snowy Egret?”

“Right,” he smiled, pleased that she knew the species.

They sat for a few minutes talking about nothing in particular. She didn’t seem quite herself.

“Meg, what’s on your mind? Pops getting to you?”

“Pete, um...” *keep it safe*, “...about Judy.”

He didn’t especially want this conversation. He looked out at the water, the reflected sun blinding him to her face.

“I love being with you,” she said, “but with Daddy in the shape he’s in—”

“You think Judy can’t handle this? Us, I mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe *I* can’t handle it.” Meg slapped hard at a mosquito on her thigh. When she raised her hand, the insect carcass lay smashed in a small splatter of blood. “Ugh. Shouldn’t have worn shorts to a swamp.”

He laughed. “Swamp? Been to the Everglades? Come on, let’s walk along the lake, they won’t bite if we keep moving.”

“Okay,” she said, “so...”

He knew what she would say—she didn’t want to hurt Judy. Taking care of the old man was stressful enough without Pete driving a wedge between them.

He knew that. He just didn’t want to hear it from her.

“I *want* us to be together, Pete. It’s just—”

“Is it bad that I love it when you say my name?”

“Oh, quit. You’re not making this any easier.”

“Sorry,” he said. “So, what’s *this*? Are you trying to throw me back to Judy? Because right now she might eat me alive.”

“She is pretty mad. Sweet Jesus, when she found out I was with you Friday night, I thought she was gonna kick me out of the house then and there. But I feel bad for her. I’ve been back six weeks, and she’s had Daddy for a fucking *year*. I had no idea how hard it was, Pete. She’s close to a breaking point.”

Meg nearly blurted out just how close, but instead welled up with tears.

“Honestly, I deserve all her crap. I put a goddamn interior design job in Savannah before the people I loved. And Mama...I promised...”

He kissed a tear off her face. “Meg, stop blaming yourself. You don’t owe your dad your *life*. Judy made her own choices. And I’m the one being unfair. I promise I’ll talk to her. Come on, let’s walk some more.”

Meg found a spiral shell on the walkway and picked it up. “Looks like this guy was somebody’s lunch.” She tossed it into the lake, where it splashed in twenty feet away.

“We need to work on your throwing arm,” Pete smiled. “That shell was from a *Pomacea*. Apple snail. A hungry limpkin probably got it.”

“Limpkin?”

“Yeah, you know, those big brown-spotted birds with the long beaks? They love apple snails. In fact, I’m about to publish a paper on that very subject.”

“Really? I’d love to read it.”

“You want to?” His face lit up. “These snails are an invasive species. We studied them to see if we should try to curb the local population. Turns out the limpkins are eating so many of them, we don’t have to do anything. Now if the gators eat too many *limpkins*...”

“Whoa,” she said, “now it’s getting complicated.”

He smiled. “The ecosystem is a delicate thing. But this time it balanced out.”

She touched her shorts pocket. “Oh, your phone!” She handed it to him. “The reason we’re here, and I almost forget to give it back.”

“Right now I’m kind of glad I left it in your car. By the way, thanks for checking the texts. I’d be up shit creek if I missed that one from the dean.”

“No problem. And now I know your passcode.” She half smiled.

He looked at the phone. “Hmm, 4:30. Better start back to Gainesville. I have that 6:00 class to teach.”

“I know you have to get back. I’m just happy I got to see you.”

“Want to come sit in? Bio 213, Beginning Botany. We’re covering mosses this evening. Like this one.” He brushed his hand across a velvety green mat on a cypress trunk.

“Mosses. I’d love that.” She gave him a light kiss. “But I have to be home tonight, I promised Judy.”

When they reached the cars, Pete asked if she would call later.

She nodded yes and got into the Jeep. He followed her to the exit, where she turned south and he, north.

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On the drive home Meg couldn’t stop her mind racing, until she wondered if she was losing it.

Pete had the phone back. Done deal.

This evening would be the worst of her life, except maybe the night Mama died.

Her stomach flip-flopped when she pictured Pete listening to the video. Or just audio, really, since his phone was in her pocket last night when she recorded it.

Everything rode on *when* he listened to it.

Meg could lose everyone she loved. Judy would kill her, or want to, and Pete would never forgive her. Ironic that Daddy might end up the only person left in her life.

She got home to see Judy sitting on the porch swing. She pulled the car up the driveway. The crackling gravel and the creak of the swing were like old friends. The sun was low in the sky, the oaks’ sprawling limbs keeping the house cool. Funny how things could seem so normal.

“So did you pick up the water pills?” said Judy.

Meg had no reply.

“Forget it, we both know that was a lie. Come on, it’s time. I got out the bottle of Jim Beam. You fix him a nice generous pour. I’ll mix in the fentanyl. They dissolve instantly, by the way, I tested one.”

Meg felt like throwing up. “Judy...I was almost hoping you didn’t get that fentanyl today. I don’t know if—”

“You’re not backing out now, Meggie. We talked about this again last night, let’s not rehash that whole conversation.”

Meg nodded. What Judy didn’t know was, the whole conversation still existed.

“Jude...I’m still scared they’ll detect—”

“I told you, they *won’t*. I had a nice visit with Derrick today at the coroner’s office. We talked about Daddy, how we wouldn’t want to subject him to any more... indignities after he passed. *Judy, don’t worry, he said. When the time comes we’ll respect your wishes.*”

“And you’re sure you can trust him?”

“You know he still has a thing for me. He *got* me the fentanyl, for god’s sake. He is not gonna go running a post.” She rose and held open the door.

Meg didn’t want to go in the house. “You go on, I’ll be right there. I just want to sit here a second.”

Judy shrugged and went inside, the screen door springing shut behind her.

Meg sat on the porch half-willing Pete to call right now. She had no idea what she’d say to him, but maybe it would somehow change what was about to happen.

She looked at the Jeep. What if she got in right now and just drove? But what difference would that make? Did it absolve her if she left Judy to hand Daddy the

glass? Maybe he would ask what the occasion was. More likely he would just knock it back, no questions asked. She wondered how long it would take.

She got up and went inside.

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Pete was watching *The Daily Show* and snacking on a late dinner after his class. He was a little concerned that Meg hadn't called. Her mood was strange this afternoon. He looked at his phone and noticed the battery was down to nothing. *Crap, no wonder.* He plugged it in thinking he would give her a call tomorrow.

He woke the next morning to the hooting of a Barred Owl outside his window. He covered his head with a pillow, but the *hoot-hoot-hoo-hoooo* kept up.

Six o'clock. The morning light was filtering its way through a light fog when he went out to grab his daily *Sun*. He looked around for the owl but didn't see it. *Flew off to taunt another sleeping victim, no doubt.* He stopped to enjoy the quiet for a minute before going back into his townhouse to read the *Sun* with some coffee. No classes today, so no reason to rush. The paper had an ad for a new gift shop called *Artsy Phartsy*. Meg would love that place. He thought he would stop by there today, maybe pick up something for her.

He decided to go for a run at the par course. It was five miles down the road, but it was free of texting drivers. On the way out he picked up his phone. Still showing zero juice. *Damn.* He replugged and jiggled the cord, but nothing.

He had another cord in the car, problem solved for now. He got in and connected the phone. He was about four miles out when the phone slid and came loose. When he reconnected it, it pinged and said *Untitled Video*.

Who'd have made a video on his phone? Meg? He opened it. Nothing on the screen, but he could hear muffled talking. He heard a halting voice 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 84 and tired. He said so himself. You heard."

"Yes, but Jude, I feel like we're playing God. And Mama--"

"Oh, so now you're the righteous one here? You finally come back to help...you promised Mama...so while you're at it you fuck my boyfriend. Then you come crying to me to ease your conscience."

Pete almost swerved in front of a pickup truck in the left lane until the loud honk stopped him. He had driven right past the par course. He saw a sign brightly painted with a cartoonish face and the words *Artsy Phartsy*. The gift shop. He parked and stopped the video. He stared at the phone. Did Meg accidentally hit the video recorder after she checked his texts?

Just delete it.

But it was on his phone.

He hit *play*. A garbled couple of seconds, then Meg's voice:

"I know we said Daddy would be in a better place, but—"

"How could he be in a worse place than he is now? Half the time he doesn't even know who's wiping his ass. Too bad turning off the O2 didn't do it, but the fentanyl will."

Pete sat in the car, staring at the face on the sign. It stared back with hideous whimsy.

Were they really planning to do this?

Meg's mood yesterday. And what was it she said? Something about promising Judy she would be home last night.

Judy must be desperate. He tried her phone, then Meg's, but got voicemails. He sent texts. No reply.

He pulled out on the highway toward Micanopy.

On the way he tried Meg's phone again.

"Pete?" Judy's voice. "Why are you calling at this hour? Doesn't look like my sister tried to call you."

"Judy, where's Meg? What's going on with..." He couldn't bring up the recording. Not yet at least. Maybe never.

"Going on? Nothing. Just...it's a bad time. Daddy passed away last night. She's in there crying."

Pete felt sweat breaking on his forehead. “I’m sorry. Do you need me to come down and help?”

“No. Meg and I, we need some time. She doesn’t want to talk right now.”

“Okay. Listen, I–”

“Gotta go, my phone’s ringing now. She’ll call you when she can.”

Pete drove the next three miles on autopilot. A dull ache in his head seemed to crawl down to constrict his heart. He was about to make a U-turn, but noticed he was almost to Paynes Prairie. He drove a little farther and turned in toward the preserve.

He parked by the boardwalk and walked to the shaded bench he and Meg had shared. He sat looking out at the lake. The water was so still today it looked like a mirage on a heated road, an mirror that vanished as you got closer.

This whole morning felt unreal.

But the lake wasn’t a mirage. The closer you got, the more real it was. Pete knew there was a spring at the deepest part where the cold ground water bubbled up. Today no one would suspect that spring was there, with the surface so glassy smooth.

A fleet of dragonflies, their wings shot through with morning sunlight, zigzagged over the water. A *chit-chit* came from two squirrels skittering a spiral path up a tree. Life went on here as it always did.

He thought of Meg, sitting right here just yesterday. He’d had no clue about her real state of mind. Now it was too late. But what was it too late *for*? The old man was off their hands. Wasn’t that what she wanted?

Unless the recording wasn’t an accident.

What *had* she wanted? For Pete to confront her, stop the madness, save her from herself? Or maybe she was just handing over the goods, tossing him her fate as blithely as she tossed away his affections fifteen years ago.

He still had feelings for both of them. For Judy it was mostly sadness. But Meg...she'd plainly shown him who she was, and like an idiot he had fallen in love with her all over again.

What was he supposed to feel now?

She'd changed the game. Again.

Pete's eye caught something moving behind him. An apple snail about the size of the one Meg picked up was inching its way over the back of the bench.

"Eluded the limpkins, did you?" Pete wished the little creature good luck. He got up and followed the boardwalk through a dense thicket to its end.

He took the phone out of his pocket and turned it over in his hand. A missed call from his mother. A text from Eddie about the midterms.

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 aimed for the center of the lake and threw the phone as far as he could.