

A Poor Man's Peace

His name was Larry. He was once a simple man, as simple as they came. He had a wife, a home, and two kids. Their names were Isabelle and Henry. They grew up, graduated, and then had kids of their own. Larry was a good man. He had served his country as a sailor in the United States Navy for twenty-eight years before retiring at the venerable age of forty-seven. When he was asked why he finally retired after several years of devotion to the armed forces, he uttered only one word back, "Sandra". She was, in few words, his equal, his absolution.

She was, simply put, his everything.

She was also his oblivion.

Sandra had breathed life into him. Imagine an artist with a blank canvas, nothing distinguishable or notable about it, then all of a sudden, as they pick up their paintbrush without hesitation, they begin to gently move the brush over the rough surface. Not much time passes when they have produced the most beautiful, breathtaking work of art, vibrant with color. Sandra was his paintbrush. She had brought color to his life, as well as purpose. It was her existence that made his meaningful, at least that is what he used to tell people, back when he could, back when he was able.

Federal Way, Washington 1981

It was our second night at our first apartment together and we had gotten nothing done. Boxes were scattered all around covering the nice oak hardwood floors; one of the reasons we had chosen this place over the two-bedroom apartment on the other side of the city. I was sitting on the couch that I had taken from my parent's basement. One of the only furnishings that we had

managed to bring in so far, excluding the torchiere floor lamp in the corner of the room, which was still without a bulb, and the medium sized ottoman abandoned in the middle of the room. Sandra was hovering over the stove, stirring something savory. Her ebony mane was for once tied back in a loose bun; a few escaped curls were brushing against the back of her neck. She was wearing her favorite apron that I had given her for Christmas that read "Sandra's Kitchen Seasoned with Love". I had given her the apron along with a key to our new apartment. We weren't supposed to know if our application for the apartment had been accepted for at least a few weeks, but instead it arrived in the mail with a key within just a few days. Every time she wears that apron I'm reminded of the new life we were so excited to start together. Sandra's torn herself away from the stovetop and is now rummaging through the boxes. Her hands begin to shake as they always do when she's nervous.

"What is it Sandra? What's the matter" I ask her.

"I can't find them. They're nowhere. We must've forgotten them. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid" she says, still frantically searching.

I can tell that she's on the verge of tears. Her shoulders are sagging the way they often do right before she starts to cry.

"Come here honey. It's gonna be okay now, what is it you're looking for?" I envelop her into my arms murmuring gently into her ear.

"The plates! My mother's plates! They're nowhere. I've looked in all of the boxes and I can't find them anywhere. We must've somehow left them, and now someone else is probably

using them,” she cries while she throws herself down on the couch and puts her head in her hands.

Sandra’s mother passed away from cancer when she was a senior in high school. She had given Sandra her most prized possessions, her Polish pottery plates. Beautifully and colorfully adorned, they needed to be treated gently and with care.

“Sandra. Look at me, sweetie. Look at what I have,” I say to her gently, as though she’s a wounded wild dog. I get down on my knees in front of her so I’m at her level, and push her chin very slowly up so her eyes are meeting mine.

“Hun, I had already put them away in one of the cabinets. They were the first thing I unpacked. I didn’t want to risk them getting broken in the boxes when we rummaged around.”

She says nothing. She just pats her eyes dry and kisses me tenderly on the cheek.

“You know me,” she whispers, and I nod.

I do know Sandra, perhaps better than anyone. She’s my soulmate. My better half. I love her for all she is. All her quirks and oddities. Sandra often got upset quickly over things that other people normally wouldn’t get as upset over. She worries and overthinks about things she doesn’t need to. She gets easily upset at little hiccups in the road. Sandra thinks she suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety, which perhaps she does, but never once has it changed how I see or feel about her.

Sandra is Sandra.

She is my everything.

He used to say that before Sandra he was only a soldier on a warpath, fighting enemies who had no face, no distinctive features, no given name. He fought and he served because it made him feel as though he belonged somewhere. Then Larry discovered permanent residence, permanent peace with Sandra. That peace became his burden when he lost her to cancer after thirty- six years of marriage. She put up a good long fight, Sandra did. After seven years of fighting, the cancer won. Although Larry had plenty of time to say his goodbyes, he never properly did. Whenever Sandra began that morose conversation, he always turned to her and said, “Not today, sweetheart, not today.”

When Sandra died, the light within Larry went out. A part of him, a very essential part, went with her. He was struck with such an intense wave of grief that he lost some of his sanity. It stripped away from him, people said, slowly and surely, gaining momentum as the time went on. Larry was once a logical man, an ordinary man. He had been the basketball coach for the boys’ Keene High School team, and had been a good coach. The towns-people knew him well for his strong ability to coach, to encourage and instill a newfound seed of hope in his players. Larry had been known to take on students who had no real skill set in playing but had a strong passion for the game, and loved it, nonetheless. He searched for those players and insisted they join the team regardless of not being the best because he believed that everyone should be able to actively participate in something they’re passionate about. He encouraged them to not let fear get in their way.

Larry had been an active member of the community. If people hadn’t known his name before, they did after Sandra was diagnosed. He got involved with fundraiser after fundraiser, chairing and co-chairing most. He raised money for others who had also been diagnosed with

this fearful disease. He raised money for people impacted by Hurricane Katrina down in Louisiana and Florida. He volunteered every year for the annual Clarence DeMar Half Marathon whose proceeds benefited the Keene Elm City Rotary's efforts and projects that strengthened the development and social connection of children, young adults and families in the local community. Needless to say, Larry had become a busy man after Sandra's diagnosis. Some would say that he donated his time and energy towards other disasters to evade his own disaster that had become an unavoidable part of his everyday life. Some would say it's because he never got to properly say goodbye, and because of the guilt that he pushed off this goodbye, that he became the man he is today.

I see Larry almost every day, dressed to impress. I usually pass him on Main St. on my way to work. Today he's wearing a long, flowing, tawny colored A-line skirt that reveals muscled legs, covered in a thick layer of dark hair which have been bronzed by the fervent sun. Today he also has breasts, the type of breasts you would see scrolling through the adult channels on your TV. His breasts are well on display in the tight white t-shirt that he has chosen to wear. His dangly sky blue, chandelier earrings accent the sapphire irises of his eyes, completing his outfit.

This is Larry, now.

Some days he'll be wearing a fur parka over what seems to be his favorite sweater dress, which is the color of a blood moon, almost orange, but not quite, tinged with a deep red. Other days, he'll be wearing a pair of flare jeans, once a dark blue now faded to a pale hue.

There are only a few days of the year that Larry throws everyone a curveball and wears the clothes that he used to always wear before Sandra passed. No one knows why he decides to wear these clothes when he does, perhaps he doesn't even realize it himself. Perhaps he just wakes up, his head and conscience clearer than the day before, his guilt temporarily ebbed away. I imagine that his guilt over not being able to say a proper goodbye is much like that of the ocean, consistent, like the lull of the tides, which occurs every morning and night.

I live in a tiny studio apartment located in historic downtown Keene that overlooks Margaritas and a bus stop that's almost always crowded with people. The noise of them incessantly waiting, drifts up to my second story window, arousing me from my sleep. I always spend the first few minutes of my day turning on my electric kettle, choosing the tea that's going to provide me with enough energy to get me through my morning, and listening to the conversations between the people on the street below. One of the first faces I became familiar with here in Keene was Larry's.

If it was nice out, you could always expect to find him outside. Wherever the sun shone the strongest is where Larry would be. He craves the sun as much as a child craves attention. There are two spots in Keene that Larry especially loves to be. One is directly outside Prime Roast, a coffee house hub for the local community. He always sits in the bright red painted Adirondack chair that's outside by the entrance, with his legs crossed at the ankles, showcasing a variety of heels, always brightly colored, belonging to his deceased wife.

He always orders the same drink, a medium hot Butterbeer, a specialty drink that features strong flavors of white chocolate, butterscotch, and caramel. His wife's favorite. He sips her

usual order in her clothes in the spot she used to always sit in. The second spot where Larry is commonly seen and content to spend his time is right outside the Toadstool Bookshop, a hidden “*Enchanting Selections of Wonderful Books*” gem. He sits on top of the picnic table out front, delicately swinging his long tan legs, dressed in sheer nylons. Larry always has to place his hands palm side down on either side of him as he sits on the table, hoisting himself a couple of feet in the air, in order to swing his feet side to side without them dragging in the grass.

I pass him on my way to work at nine in the morning, sitting there on the table with a copy of the Keene Sentinel in his hand, eyes poring over the pages, entirely engrossed by the contents within. I passed him again, hours later, in the afternoon on my way back home from work. He would still be sitting in the same spot as before with the same issue of the Keene Sentinel in his hand, still vigorously reading, as though searching for something unseen between the lines.

These also happen to be my two favorite spots in Keene. Before moving to Keene, I would spend most of my time in Prime Roast, although I always ordered the specialty latte, the Fast White Banana. I’d often spend a few hours there poring over the pages of the new true crime novel I had just bought from the Toadstool Bookshop. Little did I know then that I was going to become well acquainted with one of the most interesting, complex, gentle and affable men in Keene.

Larry exudes kindness. Quite frankly, it oozes from him. He was kind to me from the moment I first met him. He always begins an interaction with a compliment.

“Your skin looks absolutely radiant today!”

“Your eyes are the color of honey”

“You have one of the most beautiful smiles I’ve ever seen”

“Your teeth are so white, it’s blinding!”

Larry knows how to make people smile. He never repeats any compliments. It is always something new. Even when people ignore him and brush him off, Larry’s feelings aren’t hurt. He takes it all in stride, and says hello to the next person who walks by without a moment’s hesitation. I would sit opposite him outside Prime Roast in the bright yellow painted lawn chair, listening to him as he compliments people who pass by, as they went on with their day. He lived in this uninterrupted cycle.

I don’t think Larry has any sense of time. It seems to me as though Sandra’s death created not only heartbreak, but something deeper. His psyche hasn’t been the same since then. A very important part of him left when Sandra did. He spends many hours sitting outside at Prime Roast, constantly complimenting people and wishing people a good day, as though the time means nothing.

I’ve always appreciated people who are unusual. By this, I mean people who aren’t afraid to be different. Sometimes these people don’t even realize they’re different. They’re simply existing and being entirely authentic to themselves. These people are unguarded. They’re never on the defensive because they’re so comfortable with who they are that they don’t need to explain themselves to anyone else. I never gawk at them but I do find myself drawn to them. I’m intrigued by them and find myself watching them as though I’m watching a movie, scene by

scene, unfold in front of me. I never do it in a judging manner. I admire these people and often find myself wanting to be more like them.

This is the reason Larry caught my eye when I first saw him, dressed from head to toe in women's clothing, smiling as though he was having the best day of his life. He strode by me like he was on a very important mission in his four inch black strappy heels adorned with sequins. The first time I saw Larry I thought he was a very confident transvestite. He didn't falter at all with each step as if he had had years of practice walking in those heels. I knew that if it had been me in those heels then I would've fallen many, many times. But not Larry.

It was shocking to learn that Larry was wearing the clothes of his dead wife, Sandra. I was especially shocked by this since he had seemed so completely comfortable and confident with himself that I automatically jumped to the assumption that he must be a transvestite. Larry never acknowledged that it was her clothes he was wearing. He didn't act as though this may be unusual for him. Larry seemed to be unaware of the change in himself. Many people assumed that he had gone crazy with grief since it was soon after Sandra's death that he had begun to dress more and more in her clothes. Only on the rare occasion would he wear clothes that he used to wear from before Sandra passed. Since Larry never spoke of Sandra's death with anyone and never mentioned why he was wearing her clothes, people continued to believe that he had gone crazy and that his sanity had been stripped away from him.

I thought this too at first. However, after watching Larry for nearly two years I began to see him differently. I started to understand him the best I could. I don't think he was aware that he was wearing his dead wife's clothes. I'm not even sure that he was fully aware of himself, by

any means. I believe that after Sandra's death Larry created a world in which Sandra could still be a part of. He wore her clothes as a means of being close to her. He literally put himself in her shoes, or at least replicas of them. I believe that Larry missed Sandra so much that he did what he could to cope with her death. He wore her clothes while living his life so Sandra could also live on. Eventually though Larry began to believe so desperately in this life that he had created for them, that he had begun to lose his hold on the life he had before. The life in which he was normal and simple.

Although he was no longer a simple man I believe that Larry had finally found peace. He was at peace with himself and he was at peace with his life. He was always smiling and cheering people up.

His name is Larry.