

PLENTY OF WATER OUT THERE

Carl was in the garage flattening the welds on the new planter he'd made, so he couldn't hear Sarah, his wife, calling his name in the doorway. He had earmuffs on, the angle grinder was hissing, sparks everywhere. Sarah tapped him on the shoulder and told him that his Aunt Jen was on the phone, and that she sounded upset. Carl knew it had something to do with his Uncle Pete. Uncle Pete had a bad fall last winter and broke his jaw, and things got worse after that. The last he'd heard, Uncle Pete was having issues with his heart and was back in the hospital.

Carl wiped the sweat and dust off his forehead and took the call in the kitchen.

"Aunt Jen?"

"Oh, honey," she paused and took a deep breath, "your uncle passed away last night."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, honey."

"I prayed for him last night. Prayed for you, too."

"He's with God. He's with God now. He's in heaven."

"Mhm."

"Oh, we lost him."

"Do you need help with anything? Are you making arrangements?"

"Oh, honey, we're okay. Your father's here now, and we're working it all out."

“Alright.”

“The funeral is going to be here. At our church here. It’s going to be on Thursday—is that Thursday? God, I—” She pulled the phone away and said something Carl could barely hear. He heard a man respond, his dad, and she came back to the phone.

“Yes, Thursday, honey.”

“I’ll fly out tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ll make it.”

“Of course.”

“Carl, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Well, it’s just so hard making these calls. Would you mind? Could you tell your brother? Could you tell Dean?”

“I can tell him.”

“Thank you, honey.”

“All right. Love you.”

“Love you, sweetie. Love you, honey.”

When Carl hung up the phone Sarah was standing in the kitchen doorway with her arms crossed.

“He’s dead,” Carl said.

“How’s she doing?” his wife said.

“She sounded all right,” Carl said, rubbing his temples, “she wants me to tell Dean.”

Carl flew into Vegas from North Carolina the next day, and Dean drove up from Ventura. Dean picked up Carl from Harry Reid, and the two of them drove out to Henderson, which was about a forty-five minute drive. Both men left their families behind, making up excuses for their absence. Uncle Pete was family, but the two brothers hardly saw him or Aunt Jen. It'd been five Thanksgivings ago since they were all together, and before that who knows.

On the drive Carl and Dean caught each other up on their lives. They spoke about their wives and Dean talked about his kids, and how they all need to get together more. They talked about their businesses and the weather, and how Dean was fed up living in California. Mostly though, they talked about sports. Dean had become a Panthers fan since his move. Carl remained a diehard Rams fan.

“Want to hit the strip after dinner?” Dean said.

Carl shook his head. “You go ahead.”

“Remember? When was that? How old were we?”

“Ronnie’s thing?”

“Yeah.”

“I lost a thousand dollars that trip,” Carl said.

“I remember.”

“And that was a thousand dollars twenty years ago.”

“I know.”

“Sarah was pissed. We’d only been married a year.”

“That’s half of what she knows.”

Dean parked the car in the Motel 6 parking lot, and the two men walked into the office. A young couple was checking in ahead of them.

“She brought it up.” Carl said.

“What? Before you left?” Dean said.

“No kidding.”

“About the thousand dollars?”

“Yeah.”

Dean laughed, “Forever ago.”

The young couple got checked in, then Carl and Dean got checked in. They took their bags and made their way to their room on the second floor.

“Why didn’t she call me herself you think?”

“Who?”

“Aunt J.”

“Just said it was hard making the calls.”

“Mm.”

“They got an ice machine, look.”

The family that could make it all got together at Aunt Jen’s for an early dinner the night before the funeral. A lot of them, mostly the old-timers, said nice things about Uncle Pete during the dinner. The old-timers knew him best. Some told stories about when Uncle Pete was a young boy. Like how when he was twelve he’d caught a lure in his grandfather’s ear while they were

fishing at Lake Mead, and how he'd 'caught a good whoopin' for that one'. Or how he broke his leg in a car accident in Saigon, and was sent back to the states halfway through his first tour. As different people told their stories about Uncle Pete, Carl and Dean stayed quiet.

After dinner everyone split into different camps, occupying different parts of the house. Some of the men went to the garage, while the women were split between the living room and the kitchen. Carl and Dean found themselves in the backyard, which was really just a big patch of dirt surrounded by a chain link fence. They smoked cigarettes and drank beer.

When Carl and Dean drank together things got looser, and they liked to argue. In the backyard they debated world affairs and politics. Dean liked the president and Carl didn't, so they argued about all that. These topics got tiresome so they began arguing about who'd win in a wrestling match between them. They called each other names and mentioned how out of shape the other one was. Dean was an all-state wrestler in High School but Carl, who played football, and was older, could still sometimes beat him. That was all back then.

After some heavy jawing, Carl pushed Dean and Dean pushed Carl back and he dropped his cigarette in the dirt. Then Carl got Dean's head wrapped up, but he got out of it just as quick. Their father and a few family friends opened the sliding glass door for a smoke. The two brothers stopped roughhousing.

"Cut it out you two," their father said.

"Sorry, Dad," Dean said.

"How you doin', Dad?" Carl said.

"All my brothers are dead," their father lit a cigarette, and his voice went shaky, "When I go you two have to look out for each other."

Their father began to cry, which surprised Dean and Carl. They'd only seen him cry once before, when their mother died.

"Don't you worry about that." Carl said.

"Yeah, look at you," Dean patted his father's stomach, "look at him."

"He's gonna live forever."

Their father wiped his tears away with his thick, cracked fingers. The men all stood there in the dirt, smoking cigarettes. It was cloudy and the air was getting thick.

Carl and Dean kissed their Aunt Jen goodbye before leaving. They told her they loved her, and she asked them if they were okay to drive, and they said they were. She knew they weren't but didn't say anything. She couldn't stop them from driving even if she wanted to. Didn't want to make a scene, anyways. They were grown men.

There was a dive bar near the Motel 6, and the two brothers decided to go there for more drinks. Carl opted to drive. He was the more sober of the two, but not by much. The bar had tangled Christmas lights hung up all around, and old and new pictures of people drunk and smiling, and there was a baseball game on. The bartender smiled at them when they walked in. She was cute and young, and she could tell they'd been drinking but she served them anyway. She was a little drunk, too. They sat there at the bar and watched the baseball game, which was close and heading into the eighth.

The brothers watched the bartender, too. They watched her bend over to get something out of a fridge and they'd look at her and at each other and smirk. They asked her questions about

the bar and what there was to do in town, and if she was from Henderson herself. She said she wasn't, but that she'd been here for a few years. They asked her what time she was off. It was raining outside by now. Coming down hard.

Carl and Dean drank more beer and Dean ordered shots for himself and the bartender, and she drank them. Carl could already feel tomorrow's headache, and stuck to beer. As they drank they chatted with some of the regulars. One of them—a younger man sitting alone who they later figured may have been sweet on the bartender—made a remark that irked Dean. Didn't help he was halfway blacked out by then. They couldn't remember exactly what the young man said, but it got Dean heated. There was a back and forth and eventually Dean got up, then Carl stood up too and got in Dean's way. Dean tried to move around Carl, but Carl got in the way again, and then Dean pushed Carl like he had in their aunt's backyard. Carl pushed back, and pretty soon they were both down on the tiles, rolling. They knocked over a few chairs, and a table. A couple times they'd both get to their feet to square up, and just as soon tumble back to the floor. The bartender was shouting for them to leave, screaming really. Said she was going to call the cops. As they wrestled, the brothers laughed.

After a couple minutes of this the two men were spent and they both stood up and shook hands, and Dean hobbled to the bar and asked the bartender for a glass of water. She told him that it was raining outside, and that there was plenty of water out there. So Carl and Dean stumbled out of the bar into the rain, and started back to the Motel 6. Carl's shirt was ripped, and Dean was bleeding from his forearm. He'd hit one of those chairs pretty good.

"I'm not going to the funeral tomorrow," Dean said.

"What?"

Dean stopped to light a cigarette but the lighter wouldn't take in the rain.