

## Consolation Prize

Jack listens to his father cough through the wall separating their rooms. It's a deep smoker's cough, a little bit of phlegm rattling. He shivers. He doesn't want to consider his father's death.

Jack was back in Pittsburgh to check on his father, driving up from Charleston with a week vacation. They'd gone to see the Pirates play twice, though neither of them were truly baseball fans. Still, sitting in the uncomfortable seats, eating stadium hot dogs and drinking beer with his dad, he recalled the Penguins games at the Igloo his father took him to several times a year when he was a kid. He'd put on the ice blue and black jersey that his parents had given him for Christmas and come out of his room. His father would have a cigarette in his mouth, keys in hand.

He loved hockey. His father was French Canadian—Quebecois—and played hockey as a youth. He'd become a Penguins fan for every game they went to unless the Montreal Canadiens played. His father would tell stories about seeing Maurice Richard play as they ate popcorn and hotdogs and stood with the rest of the crowd each breakaway and shot-on-goal.

That was, he realizes now, nearly twenty years ago. His father seemed so invulnerable then. Then: his mother's car accident. Then: his father's layoff from Mellon Bank. Then: his own journey from Pittsburgh to Penn State to Charleston. His father, meanwhile, had started working retail, and now manages the day shift at a Home Depot.

His father coughs again. He can tell his father is in the bathroom now. Jack could always tell in that old house where his parents were. As a kid it

allowed him to sneak downstairs to watch television after his parents were asleep. As a teen, he listened to their locations so he knew how to sneak around his folks. He stares at the ceiling—just a large expanse of white that seems to glow in the shade-drawn dark. Outside, birds are whistling. Tomorrow he has to drive back home. He curses softly to himself. His mother loved those birds.

He's still having a difficult time accepting that his mother has left her dad. Jack's father seems okay with it. "I was expecting it," he'd said on the phone when Jack called him after his mother had called from Beth's house. "I know she's at you sister's. We haven't kissed or talked or done anything fun in years—since you kids moved out. It's not that we were unhappy. We just weren't happy. It's better now. I'm okay." He said it in that tone of voice he used when he talked about practicing ice skating as a youth: cold winter mornings, outside, stick handling. Stoic.

Despite his father's claims that "Everything's all right," Jack had asked for a week's emergency leave, got it as his vacation time, and drove up to his room with the fixtures of his youth still in it: The pictures of him in his hockey gear when he played in peewee leagues and high school, the trophies, the shoe box with condoms ready for action. The posters of old rock stars and girls had come down along with the wall paper. The room's soft white now. But the furniture remains the same.

The door opens and his father's head appears. "What are you doing today while I'm at work?"

"I dunno."

"Will you be here when I get back?"

“Yeah. It’s my last night in town.”

“Okay. There’s breakfast stuff downstairs, and...”

“Dad, I lived here most of my life. I know the kitchen and where you keep things.”

His father nods. Then the door shuts.

Jack stretches his arms into the airspace above him and then rubs his temples. He stays in bed like that till he hears his father’s car come to life outside, and he knows his father’s gone to work. Then he stands up and walks in his boxers to the bathroom at the end of the hall. He looks himself in the mirror, rubs his left hand through his thick hair and says, “Man oh man, could you fuck things up anymore in this house then they already were?” He rests his head upon the glass of the medicine cabinet mirror for a few seconds. The phone rings. “Goddamn!”

He hurries down the stairs and gets the phone just as the answering machine picks up. “Hello?”

He hears his father’s voice, the new answering machine message: You’ve reached the home of Pierre LeCroix and I’m not at home . . . . Jack stops the message. “Hello,” he says again.

“You sound as breathless as you did last night.” It’s a woman’s voice. Sylvia’s. He’s known her voice for years though he hadn’t seen her since the summer before college’s senior year ten years ago. But there she’d been in the bar last night.

Shit, he thinks to himself.

Sylvia had been a high school flame, one of several girls Jack had dated in his junior and senior year. He was no Cassanova– not then and surely not

now-, but he and Sylvia brought out a wildness in each other. When he saw her at the bar last night, her long brown hair no longer feathered, but soft and wavy with a few highlights streaked through it, he almost didn't recognize her, though she still had that small nose, those deep-set, impossibly blue eyes. And the same voice. The same taste in drinks.

He'd been sleeping in the bed he had shared with her often- the two of them rutting like animals after school or else quietly sliding together after a date while his parents slept. He had been thinking of her each night before he went to sleep, and sometimes she'd visited him in his dreams the way she had early on in his college days.

Last night she had been sitting at the bar with a girlfriend, a Kool menthol in her right hand, and she asked the bartender loudly and at the moment the jukebox switched songs, for another "Captain and Diet Coke." Jack was sitting at the bar and around the corner from her. They were twelve feet apart. He waved cautiously, "Sylvia?"

"Jack?!"

Seeing an ex can be difficult, particularly the type who turned sexual hunger into cravings. There was a rush of blood and adrenalin that Jack recognized as they stood and hugged, she jumping up and down against him, her breasts, larger than he remembered, rubbing his chest. She was a bit softer all over, and small crow's feet reached out from her eyes.

"What," she asked, "are you doing here? My god, how long have you been in town? What have you been doing?"

“My dad,” he said. “My mother left him. I’m. . . uh. . . helping him figure out how to move on.” Really though he was trying to figure out how to move on himself. “I’m an accountant. Boring.” He shrugged. “What about you?” She was still standing close to him. Her perfume, Obsession by Calvin Klein, mixed with the smell of her minty cigarette.

“An accountant. How practical.” She laughed, her head throwing back slightly. “I’m working for- you’ll love this- the LaSalle Academy! I work with freaking kids. Jesus! I probably corrupt them.”

“You’re not a teacher.”

She laughed a bold singing bird laugh. “Nah. I coordinate community events for them. We brought the kids for a day with the Penguins. I thought of you the entire time. Didn’t you love the Penguin?”

“Yeah, I took you to a game once.”

“I remember. We saw them play the Flyers. They lost. Four-two.” Afterward they had gone back to her house and made love as her parents watched television; she didn’t mention that. He looked at her hand- there was no wedding band, no engagement ring. “C’mon,” she said. “Let me introduce you to Beth.”

Beth was an old college friend, a chiropractor now. The three of them drank and talked and later shared a basket of hot wings. The two women bemoaned guys, till Sylvia finally said, “I’ve dated lots of guys- college guys, union guys, writers, stock brokers. I still haven’t met any guy who was like you.” She stared directly into his eyes, stared at them until he flinched. “And I liked you.”

Jack didn't know what to say. He had always enjoyed Sylvia's brashness. Still his hands sweated slightly and he wiped them on a paper napkin. "Thanks."

She stared at him intently. Then looked away.

"It's been a long time, Sylvia. I don't even know if I'm like me anymore."

"What's it been? Almost ten years. And who have you been doing in that time?"

Jack counted his ex-girlfriends. He had a fiancé. He didn't mention her. She was another accountant; she worked with H. & R. Block. She had been upset that he had gone to his father's and hadn't invited her along. Upset that he was wasting a week of his vacation time— what could be their vacation time— on such a trip. She'd be upset, he knew, to hear he was at a table in a local bar between two attractive women, one of whom was an ex-lover. Though the last time they spoke, Pam had said to have a good time.

Jack ordered another Rolling Rock and tried to remember when the last time he had had a good time was. Not since before he had met Pam. She was sweet. They had a lot in common. She was stable. She talked about wedding plans and IRAs and tax codes and clients. She planned vacations to the minute. She counted calories. She was the human equivalent of a baseball game: warm, relaxing, dull. He tipped back the fresh green bottle. She was not Sylvia.

The night had ended with Sylvia and he kissing outside his car, her hand under his shirt, her short nails scratching playfully across his belly and chest, and his left hand cupping her right breast, the lacy material of bra the only thing between his thumb and her nipple. They had kissed and kissed like that until a police car drove by and honked twice. They grinned sheepishly. "Just burning

off some of the alcohol before we drive, officer!" Sylvia had called. "Shh-," Jack said, and the two of them started laughing.

The police officers drove off and the two of them sat on the hood of his car, laughing. "Still wild, " he said to her.

"You're not," she whispered back. "That's so sad."

"Jack," she says into his ear. Despite the phone he can practically feel her breath. "Let's go for coffee. It's a beautiful morning."

"Sylvia, God...."

"Jack, come on. We didn't get a chance to talk about old times last night, I mean it would have bored Beth to tears. But there were good times."

"No doubt. It's just..."

"Remember that bakery in Squirrel Hill-Cushman's? They now have the greatest coffee to go with the sweet stuff. Come on."

What can he do. He agrees. While in the shower he hears his cell phone ringing, and then, when it's done, he listens as his father's house line rings. He knows it's Pam. He washes his hair with more vigor trying to shut out the sound. When he's dressed, he sets his cell phone first on vibrate and then on silent.

He blinks in the June sunlight. His mother's garden shows the lack of her daily care, but despite the shabbiness of dead heads among the snapdragons and impatiens. It makes him smile that she planted the garden even though she knew she would leave. A parting gift. A consolation prize. He thinks of Pam. He thinks of coffee with Sylvia. He doesn't feel guilty.

She is sitting at an outside table. She has a paper cup and a white bakery bag, and she waves when she sees him walking from the parking space. She is, even from a half a block away, so Sylvia-present in her body, excited to be “here” on a Friday morning, happy to see an old friend. She stands and hugs him. He is both happy and disappointed when she doesn’t seem to expect a kiss. Her hair smells of shampoo.

When he returns with a cinnamon roll and a cup of coffee, she has her legs stretched out in front of her. She wears sandals and he looks at her feet, at the painted toenails, for a few seconds.

“So your parents are splitting up.”

He nods. He rips his cinnamon roll apart, peeling it in layers and bringing a piece to his mouth.

“How is Pierre holding up?”

“That’s the thing, Sylvia, they’re both fine with it. Mom is with Marie right now. She is happy to be with the grand baby. And my father just says he’s fine. That the spark was long gone.” He fakes a shudder. “Hard to think about my parents ever having a spark.”

Sylvia laughs again. And he smiles. “Yeah. My mother and step dad split about five years ago. It was hard being so close. I could see it happening, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. Maybe you would have noticed if you had lived closer. You should consider yourself lucky.” She pulls the pack of cigarettes from her purse, lights one. If she notices his frown, she doesn’t acknowledge it.

“I never think of my parents as being happy, Syl. I mean, they’re my parents but we rarely were a family. I just thought they stayed together by some rule of inertia.”

“God. I hope not. Is that why you stay in a relationship? Inertia?”

He shrugs. He peels another layer of cinnamon roll. They say nothing for a while until she breaks the silence. “So tell me what’s been going on? It’s been so long. You’re an accountant? How the hell did you become an accountant? Last I remember, you were a French major and a business minor.”

He tries to explain the choice. He talks about the simplicity of numbers—how factual they are, how precise. He talks about practicality. He talks about his father and mother telling him to be able to provide. He talks about not knowing what to do with a French degree.

“You used to talk in French to me,” she says. “It was so sexy. It was so romantic.”

“We were 17. It was supposed to be romantic.”

“What does that mean? We’re in our thirties. Are you saying that life isn’t supposed to be romantic? That is so fucking sad.”

“I haven’t thought about romance in a long time.”

“You just don’t have the right person then. With the right person you can’t help but be romantic. I mean, look around us.”

He looks. An older man walks his dog across the street. Two joggers approach. Cars do what cars do. No one sits at the other table. In the window of the bakery he sees himself and Sylvia, both in dark glasses, both smiling. It’s like a scene from a movie, he thinks. Something with John Cusack and Jennifer Aniston if the two of them at the table were more attractive, more fictional. He looks at her again. “What?”

“What happened to you?”

“Why are we focused on me? Where is your great romance?” He pointed a bit of pastry in her direction, and she took his hand and bit into the sweet roll.

She swallowed and took a sip of her coffee. “It’s all around me.”

“You know what I mean.”

She paused, and looked him straight in the eye. “At least, have been looking for him.”

In his car driving to the store, he calls Pam. “Where have you been?” she asks. “I’ve been calling all morning.”

It’s true. She had called three more times since his shower. He hasn’t listened to the messages. “Sorry. It’s just hard being here. There’s a lot going on.” He doesn’t know what else to say at first, and then adds, “Do you believe my mother planted her garden before she left.”

“That’s just so like your mother.” At first he believes this is a compliment, but at second thought he decides it isn’t. He wants to ask her about it, but she is already talking: “Well, there’s a lot going on here, too. Some of us aren’t on vacation.”

“This doesn’t seem like a vacation.”

“Well, when we’ve spoken, you’ve said your dad is fine. Your mom is fine. No one has died. No one was even hurt by this.”

What about me, he thinks. “Just because they say they’re fine-.”

“I know that, Jack. But the question is am I fine. Have you even thought to ask?”

“Pam, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. But I don’t think we are. I think that are avoiding me, avoiding us, in some way.”

He stops at a red light. He nods his head.

“So you’ve been sitting there in your old home, and I really think you like being a son, in some ways. I think you like having your father taking care of you. I don’t want a child, Jack. I want a man.”

“I’m the one who’s been doing the care-taking here, Pam.”

“I don’t know, Jack. It doesn’t take an accountant to add it up. And when I do some cost analysis of our relationship. I’m seeing diminishing returns.”

He steps on the accelerator. He doesn’t know what to say. He tells her this.

“That’s part of the problem,” she says. “Think about it.”

Pierre looks at his son across the table. He points a French fry at Jack. “Okay, what’s going on in that head of yours?” It’s an expression Pierre had used often with his son, particularly years ago. “You’ve been in a weird state since you got up this morning. And Jack, this isn’t really doing much to uplift my spirits on your last night in town.” He winks.

Jack smiles a bit, bites into his burger. It’s juicy and rich, and he remembers, briefly, how much he likes to savor a good hamburger. “Just too much time thinking, dad.”

“I know that. You’ve always been a brooder. The question is what are you thinking about?”

“Ever feel like you made a wrong turn in your life, dad?”

“Is this about Pam? She’s a nice woman, pretty-”

“I can say the same things about my mother.”

“Touché. But you didn’t let me finish my sentence. I was going to say ‘but often that’s not enough.’”

“Yeah, but there’s more to it than that.”

“There always is, Jack. There always is.”

They eat in silence for a bit. The couple behind Pierre is laughing. Jack watches them over his father’s shoulder. They are older than him, younger than his father. The woman is smiling broadly. She isn’t pretty—she wears too much make up and her hair is unflattering—, but her face is happy, and that is very attractive. Jack doesn’t remember the last time he felt that uninhibited with Pam. With his parents. Then he remembers coffee earlier.

He stammers a bit, thinking in French for the first time in a long time.

“Papa, je pense que je vais stopper mon travail.”

Pierre looks across at him. “Accounting was never for you,” he says.

“Vous voulez parler français.”<sup>1</sup>

“Oui.”

They both laugh a bit. Jack feels his cheeks relax. “You used to talk French to me whenever you didn’t want your mom to know what you were up to.”

“You, too.”

They laugh again.

“So what will you do? Teach?”

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<sup>1</sup> Dad, I am thinking of quitting my job.

You want to speak French?

“There are worse things to do.”

“Que diriez-vous de Pam ?”<sup>2</sup>

Jack shrugs. “I don’t want to get a divorce when I’m 57 and sit with my son in a mediocre restaurant thinking how did I let this happen to him. How did I let him make the same mistakes I made.”

“Good plan.” They are both laughing when the waiter comes and refills both of their glasses of water. “You want to fill me in?”

“There’s nothing to fill you in about. I’m not unhappy. I’m just not happy.”

His father laughs. His father laughs and begins coughing. He coughs and coughs for a second, reaches for his glass and drinks from it.

“Can I ask you something, Dad?”

“Anything.”

“How would you feel if I moved back to Pittsburgh?”

“When the Habs come to town, we’ll go see them play the Pens.”

He doesn’t call Pam when he gets back to his father’s house. For awhile Jack just looks at his mother’s garden in the waning light. Then he steps from the porch, walks over to the garden, and pulls weeds from among the flowers. When there’s a small pyramid of weeds on the grass beside him, he then clips some of the dead heads from the stems, popping them off between his finger tip and thumb. It feels good to take care of something frivolous, something pretty.

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<sup>2</sup> What about Pam?

Inside again, he gets a cup of coffee from the kitchen. His father still makes his coffee strong, and Jack remembers how many quiet arguments—she would call them disagreements—he has had with Pam about the coffee. He likes the thick flavor in his mouth. He looks in on his father who sits in his chair, watching the Pirates on television. Pittsburgh is winning, which seems rare these days. Jack grabs his cell phone from its charger and goes to his room. He calls Sylvia.

Her phone rings four times before the voice mail kicks in. “This is Sylvia. I’m probably having too much fun at the moment to answer your call, but leave a message and I’ll call you back. Promise.”

The message beeps. He remembers what he used to say to her in high school, it’s a phrase his Father had taught him, a phrase for which there was no real English translation—though loosely it might mean “I want to walk around aimlessly with you.” It isn’t about the walking or the aimlessness. It is about the you. He speaks into the phone: “Je voudrais flaner avec toi.”

He hangs up. He goes back to the living room. He sits on the couch near his dad. He watches the game, waits for the phone to ring. His bags are packed. He knows he’ll be back.