

*This Yesterday is Blue, Dear*

The bar was opened from three o'clock in the afternoon, and every day it had the same two men sitting at it. Harry was the taller of the two, but his posture was hunched and he looked cramped. He was out of shape and his cheeks were flushed from exertion, even though he'd been sat down for a while.

Sam sat next to Harry, drinking beer. There was an empty shot glass alongside his mug. He was small and slender and clearly dyed his hair; the unnatural darkness of it washed out his complexion and made him look slightly jaundiced. He jiggled his leg against the bar stool from time to time. Occasionally, he stood up and walked over to look at the display cases along the back wall, or to read the listings on the elderly jukebox. When he sat, he stared straight ahead. He might have been looking at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

Piedmont - Peedie - sat on the floor at the end of the bar with his leash coiled beneath him. There were tangles of dead leaves and string and even a cigarette butt stuck to his yellow-grey coat. Peedie was old and his hips were wobbly, but he could out-terrier most terriers and certainly he could outrun the man who came with him on walks. He was also the only dog that was allowed in the bar. The bigger brutes had to wait outside.

Harry had been there for half an hour and hadn't yet removed his raincoat. The smell of damp clothing and new plastic hung in the air. He finished his first mug of beer and pushed it away. Glanced at Sam. 'I found a day.' Harry said.

‘Yeah?’ Sam said. ‘Where?’

‘On the road. It isn't a recycled one, either. It's new. Well. New-ish. Hasn't been used, I mean.’

Sam's eyes were bright. ‘What road?’

‘There's no more. I looked.’ Harry had spent a while making sure, too. He'd dropped Peedie's leash and almost got down on his hands and knees, but did not find another. When he'd gone to stand, his back spasmed and the muscles above his hips clenched painfully. He hadn't even managed to get Peedie's leash and the little guy had dragged half the park behind him for the second part of the walk, but the small yellowy-white dog had not seemed to mind. Now, he was playing 'find the peanut', snuffling around along the bar for discarded and forgotten nuts and bits of pretzel.

The two men were quiet for a while. Sam said, ‘So what are you going to do with it?’

‘I don't know yet,’ Harry said. He glanced sidelong at Sam. ‘I might go fishing at the reservoir.’

‘You fish?’

‘No. I mean a little, maybe. I can if I want, is all.’

‘Right.’

‘Couple years ago’, Harry said, ‘my wife had a few days saved up. Worked to earn them, you know how you do, and then she put them up on the closet shelf and they just sat up there and got dusty and then died. She was always saving days. She said we should wait until we had a whole bunch and then use them, but we never did.’

‘Marsha, right?’

‘Margie.’ Harry said.

‘Right. You divorced her?’

‘Yeah.’ He hadn’t. She had left him, but he didn’t ever say that. ‘She never knew what to do with her days.’

They laughed, and eventually Sam gestured to the bartender and held up two fingers. The bartender came over to replace their drinks, setting each bottle on a napkin in front of the men. Sam waited until the bartender went away and then he said, ‘I know what I’d do.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I’d probably go visit my kid.’

Harry thought that Sam’s kid lived in Michigan somewhere. One of the long Indian names that he wasn’t going to try. He grunted. Went for the laugh: ‘Well, I’m not going to visit your kid if that’s what you’re hinting at.’

Sam didn’t laugh; he shrugged and sipped his beer. ‘Naw.’

‘It’s got a chip, I think,’ Harry said.

‘Does it?’

Harry reached in his coat pocket and carefully took out a few things; a folded, clean handkerchief with a lump in the middle. He unfolded the cotton carefully and held it out. A foggy marble rested in the centre of his cupped hand. He looked at the swirled gray and blue pattern on it, turned it. Held the day up, still pinched in the handkerchief, but the bar light wasn’t good. He frowned. ‘Looks like it, right?’

Sam leaned over and peered at the day but was very carefully not to touch it. ‘Some kind of flaw?’

‘I dunno. I don't think it's a flaw, I think it's part of the fog or mist or something. Maybe it's a misty day.’

‘You can't go out in a day like that.’ Sam relaxed his shoulders and leaned back. Picked up his bottle.

‘Are you kidding? I love a day like that. Along the lakeshore, mist over the water? I start early, right before dawn, and I'm in the middle of the water, like an island, can't even see the shore. And nobody can see me.’

‘See you fishing.’

‘Hell, I might just sit out there in the boat.’

They were quiet and after a moment, Harry covered the marble over and gently replaced it in his pocket.

‘What if it's not misty after all? You can't tell it will be.’ Sam sounded sulky.

‘I go hunting,’ Harry said.

‘Now, you hunt?’

‘I might do. I could take Peedie. He likes to hunt.’

Both men avoided looking at Peedie, who was busily chewing his toenails with surprising volume.

‘I never see the dogs having fun with that. Just the people,’ Sam said.

‘You kidding? Dogs love a good hunt like they love a good run. They're more honest about it than anybody. Tongues out, running around. Just chasing a ball around, they get into it.’ Harry drank some beer. ‘More honest than anyone,’ he said again.

‘How you figure?’

‘You can tell, that's all.’ Harry shifted on his barstool. His hip cracked. He'd gained a bit of weight in the past year and his trousers were uncomfortable. The fold in the plastic of his raincoat came loose and water dripped off him. ‘They don't pretend to be happy. They don't tell you everything's okay, and then leave. You know? They don't just up and leave you.’

‘You just like 'em because they are always there. Glad to see you even if you've just come back from the bar or whatever,’ said Sam.

‘It's not just that.’

‘Isn't it?’

Harry looked tired. ‘I don't know. Maybe.’ He turned the beer mug in his hand and saw the thin line where the glass was molded. The flash or whatever it was called. That irritated him, being able to see that. It wasn't classy at all. Maybe next time, he'd drink straight from the bottle. He picked his bottle up, admiring the smoothness and colour of it. He held it up to the light and looked through the green, seeing the way it warped everything around him, like he was underwater. Half-remembered lyrics of a Bobby Darin song came to mind, something about a lover on golden sands.

He was a bit drunk and he waved to the bartender, who had been ignoring him because Harry never tipped. Peedie rose from his place under the pool table and wandered over, thinking the wave was for him. He'd found a puddle of something under the table and his tail was wet and hung off the back of him as if a child had pinned it on. It looked off-center somehow. Harry leaned over and picked a leaf from Peedie's coat. ‘Peedie,’ he said, loud enough, ‘go fetch the barman. Get that lazy guy over here, doing his job.’

Peedie looked up at Harry with unblinking, pale eyes. His generous eyebrows twitched and quivered into a furrow of concern, and he whined a little. Then it was nose to the warped wooden floor, tracking back to the pool table and contemplating who-knows-what concerning the table legs.

Eventually the bartender came over and replaced the beers, once more setting the bottles on the napkins. Didn't offer a mug.

This time, Harry sipped the cool beer straight from the bottle. It reminded him of carrying bottles of beer out to the lake in the cooler, the way he did with his father when they went fishing together out there on the misty lake. He didn't really appreciate it when he was young, only eight or so, and he sometimes hated his father for waking him up so early on a Saturday. Now, it was too late to like it; his father had been dead for thirty years. A long time to be dead.

Harry felt the day pressing into his hip, the bad one. He said, 'I spose I could go out and see Margie.'

'What good would that do?' Sam said.

Harry ignored him. 'She's out visiting her mother. I thought maybe I'd get along with my mother-in-law, even you know, the old jokes. But I never did. That woman was awful. She had a neck like a tortoise. She liked poking her snout into our business. Telling Margie I was a loser, saying who else she shoulda married.' He sipped his beer. 'It got worse. She was always tearing at us. She wouldn't sink us in one hit.'

Harry fell silent, remembering. The woman had dentures after some kind of cancer treatment had made her teeth fall out. That didn't sound right, but that was the story. He'd never really thought about it, but she was sick and old and Margie had to go visiting all

the time. He remembered the way that the old lady's teeth didn't fit and they clobbered together like two planks of wood. It was loud. Family picnics, weddings, whatever. She'd be there chewing and it sounded like horse hooves. You couldn't understand anything the old woman said, but you just knew she was spitting and hissing about something or other. An image of Margie, wiping her mother's bristling chin, came to him and he shook his head. She'd been a caring sort of person.

He pushed his empty bottle away. 'Yeah. Maybe I'll go see Margie.'

'Yeah.'

'Maybe she was right. I don't know, maybe she was wrong. Not everybody's right or wrong all the time, that's all I'm saying.'

'You keep talking like this, you should have another beer. Or get me one.'

'Well, I'm not just going to sit here all day.'

'Do what you want,' said Sam. 'See if I care.' He waited, looked sidelong at Harry. He seemed to be waiting for something. Then, sounding disappointed, he said, 'Well. I've got a busy day tomorrow as it is.'

'It wasn't going to be tomorrow.' Harry bit his lip. He hadn't decided that until just then.

'Okay, so when?'

'I don't know. Maybe I'll just keep it in my pocket. Maybe just think about it for a while. I've got all the time I need. I want to think about it. Plan it.'

He'd never had a day that was as good as he thought it would be. He wouldn't look at Sam. He said, 'Not tomorrow, but soon. Going to use it soon. It'll probably be a good

day. Maybe. Who knows? Nobody.’ He reached for his bottle and found it empty, set it back down.

‘Not me,’ Sam said.

“Not me, either.” Harry sighed. ‘That’s the whole trick of it,’ he said. ‘That’s how they get you.’

THE END