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Opportunity Calls

They each raised a shot with sorrow on their minds. It was a habit they shared, this visceral reaction to heartache.

“Into your mouth and over the tongue, makes the world a lot more fun,” Peter said. They clinked the little glasses together and returned them to the bar top, as empty as the wooden chairs and leather booths behind them. He sucked a sticky droplet off his thumb. Sugar and licorice coated his mouth. “That’s one thing that’ll never disappoint me.”

Sophia, standing opposite him, wet a cloth in the sink beside the ice well. She wiped the liqueur bottle and returned it to the back shelf. “So, your date was a smash, I take it?”

“Ha. Yeah, right.” Peter slumped back in his chair.

“Was it worse than the girl with the booger dangling from her nose? Remind me why you didn’t tell her about it?”

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“You’re so awkward sometimes.”

"It was our first date. I thought she would wipe it with a napkin," he said. "Thankfully, it didn't fall in her food."

"Is that why you didn't call her back? We all get boogers, Petey."

"I didn't call her back because we didn't click. She wants to listen to Bruno Mars and shop for handbags. I want to listen to Dire Straits and go kayaking."

"Are you gonna call this new girl? What's her name?"

"Trisha? Absolutely not. I'd take Betty Booger over her anytime."

"Why?" she asked. "What happened?"

"Well, the first few dates were fine. I felt like we really connected. So, we decided to do something fun and go skating. But when I picked her up, she said she wasn't in the mood for skating. I asked her what she wanted to do, and she suggested we go to Shooters and play pool." He put his hands on the bar and leaned forward. "Turns out she didn't even know how to play pool."

Little freckles near the bridge of Sophia's nose scrunched together. "So why did she suggest it?"

"Man, I don't know."

"That's weird." She placed lemons in a row on a cutting board and used a kitchen knife to slice them into wheels. "Okay, but what happened when you got to Shooters?"

"We had some drinks, then I showed her how to rack the balls and how to hold the cue."

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“Please tell me you didn’t hold her from behind like in those lame movies?”

“No. I didn’t,” he said. “But someone else did.”

“What?” She slapped the knife onto the cutting board. “Who?”

“Let me finish the story,” he said. “We didn’t play pool for long because neither of us was having much fun. Plus, some douchebags wanted the table. So, we sat down and had more drinks. Well, she barely spoke a word to me after that. I don’t know if I did something wrong, but nothing I said could get her to talk.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Well, I went to get us more drinks at the bar. Then I saw Tony. You remember him? My friend from university.”

She put the lemon wheels in a garnish tray and cleared off the top of the bar. “The short guy with glasses?”

“Yeah. So, we chatted for a bit, and when I turned back around, one of those d-bags who took the pool table from us had his arms all over her.”

“Oh my god. What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?”

“I went to the bathroom, and when I got out, she was sitting down again. So, I just pretended like I didn’t see it happen.”

“You didn’t say anything?”

He brushed his palms against his stubbly cheeks and sighed.
“I didn’t know what to say.”

“You should’ve said *something*.” Her eyes widened. “Wait. Did she know them? Is that why she wanted to go to Shooters?”

Peter shrugged.

“She must know them,” she said.

“I dunno.”

“Hmm. Okay, what happened after that?”

“Well, I wanted to leave, so I offered her a ride home.”

“And?”

He shook his head. “She said she wanted to stay and play pool.”

“Sorry, Petey.” Sophia reached over and rubbed his arm. “But you know what? If she can’t see that you’re a great guy, then it’s her loss. You’ll find someone better. Trust me.”

“Not in this city. I’ve looked everywhere.” He tilted his head back and stared at the dangling light fixtures above them.
“Thunder Bay women are either crazy or boring.”

“Whoa.” She tossed the wet cloth at his face. “Are you saying I’m crazy?”

“Maybe.” He smirked and threw the cloth back at her. It missed and landed on a stack of glass tumblers instead. “Anyway, I’m not talking about you. I’m talking about the single ladies in this town.”

“I feel single sometimes.” Sophia twisted her blonde hair into a bun. Golden studs glimmered from her earlobes.

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She looked good with her hair up, Peter thought. She always looked good. He caught himself staring, then sat up straight and spoke quickly. "You're not single."

"I said I *feel* single."

"Why? What happened this time?"

"Oh, it's the same ol' story." She sighed. "Stan left me at the bar while he schmoozed with some dudes he knows. I can't even tell you who they were because he never introduced me. He makes me feel invisible sometimes."

"I thought you said things were good?"

"They were. I think. I dunno." She picked up the cloth and slowly folded it next to the faucet.

"Well, at least you're only lonely sometimes." He grinned in her direction.

She shook her head and walked down the empty aisle of the long room. Framed prints of Lake Superior and Sleeping Giant Provincial Park crowded the walls under colourful banners that read *Terry Fox Run*, and in between, snow fell outside large windows. She unlocked the front door and flicked on the open sign. Her voice echoed from across the restaurant. "There's someone out there for you, Petey, and she's gonna appear when you least expect it."

"Yeah, but I'm tired of waiting," he said. *I'm tired of clinging on to this hope that the next girl is gonna be the one, and I'm tired of feeling disappointed when she's not.* He reached for a

cardboard coaster and twirled it on the bar. It wobbled for a few seconds, then fell flat.

A young couple walked in and sat at a booth for two. An old sepia photo of a log cabin and a lake sat inside the frame above their table. Sophia brought them menus, then returned behind the bar and poured two glasses of Coke. "Are you coming to brunch Sunday?"

"No, I can't. I promised my mom I'd help her move some stuff."

"Aw." A subtle smile peeked out from the corner of her mouth. "That's very sweet of you."

"I guess." He twirled the coaster again. It spun much longer this time.

A large man with a trucker's hat perched on his head sauntered in and sat next to Peter. He slid a newspaper out of his camo jacket and opened it, covering a wide portion of the bar.

"You want the usual, Big Al?" Sophia asked.

"Sure, Soph."

She opened a bottle of lager and placed it at the edge of the newspaper. "You want food too?"

"Fries. Extra gravy." Big Al's eyes remained focused on the small black lettering in front of him.

Cold air swooped in from the front of the restaurant, followed by velvety voices and high-pitched giggles. Sophia placed the Cokes on a tray, then hurried away. Peter spun the coaster

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again but failed to stop it before it crashed into the big man's newspaper.

"How's the job hunt?"

Peter sighed. "It's shit, man. I've applied all over the country but only had one interview. And I still haven't heard back from them."

"Hmm." Big Al hacked a thunderous cough. "That *is* shit."

Sophia came out of the kitchen and set a plate of fries and gravy in front of Al. "What if we do something Tuesday, Petey? I just checked the schedule, and we both have the night off."

"Sounds good to me."

A group of scruffy men wearing reflective vests hurried in through the front door. They left a trail of dirt and snow on the tiled floor. Sophia moved toward them with a handful of menus.

Peter continued spinning the coaster, but it toppled out of reach and dropped to the floor. He put his hands on the bar and sat motionless. The night at Shooters played over and over in his head. *What did I do wrong?*

"Mmm. Best spuds in town," said Big Al with a load of fries crammed in his mouth. He chewed with loud annoying smacks until he finally washed it down with some beer. Then he slurped the gravy off his fingers.

Peter winced and turned away. The young couple at the table for two held hands as they drank their Cokes, exchanging broad smiles between sips. He wondered how they met.

Images of other happy couples he knew bloated his mind. His friends Sam and Robyn were inseparable, constantly embracing. It was clear to everyone that they were meant to be. There was also Dave and Kendra. They danced every chance they could find. Even when there was no music, they would twirl and sway together. Peter yearned for the warmth of a feminine touch.

Suddenly, Sophia placed her hand on his sleeve. "Petey, I need your help. Do you mind starting early? Four more tables just sat down."

He stood up and pulled the coaster off the floor, then entered the kitchen. Whiffs of grilled bacon tickled his nose. He waved to the line cooks behind the stainless steel fixtures and entered the manager's office. Hung on a hook was his black polo shirt with the Connie's Bar & Grill emblem. As he began to undress, his phone rang.

"Hi, Peter, this is Anne with Pivotal Engineering. We've reviewed your application, and we're happy to say that we like what we see."

His head became light as air, and, for a moment, he forgot that he was half-naked.