

# **Copious**

**1950 words**

**ted.gross@comcast.net**

Pete was driving cross country and he was close, a Red Roof Inn in Elmore, Ohio, 24 miles east of Toledo, Sandusky County.

You forgot how you could shoot through states quick back here. A big day tomorrow--the rest of Ohio, corner of Pennsylvania, the meat of New York, crossing the Hudson River below Albany--then into Western Mass, through the Berkshires and bringing it on home to Boston.

It was 11 hours but Pete remembered a bad experience once with rush hour traffic in the Boston corridor, which seemed to extend about 200 miles, so he played it safe and left at 2 in the morning, and rolled up early afternoon at his sister Bonnie's.

After the formalities he said, "Have I aged much since that time in Vermont?"

"To be honest," Bonnie said, "I don't have a clear image of what you looked like then."

Pete said, "This wasn't the worst drive, actually. What always blows my mind is just how much of the country is farms . . . What about work and stuff, how is it?"

"I'm on the computer," she said. "Grant writing, some management consulting, the occasional freelance project. It's good, because I can work around Bert."

"That *is* good, because whenever I hear someone say *management consulting* I have no idea what they're talking about. But hey, that's my problem."

Bonnie looked at her watch. "Before you get comfortable I have to pick up Bert. You want to come?"

"Do you think . . . he'll have any idea who I am?"

"He didn't this morning, but I filled him in."

"Ah."

Bonnie had the middle floor in a squared-off three family house that Pete remembered they called a triple-decker back here. It felt like a working class neighborhood, but there were some fancy cars parked on the street, though Bonnie's was a beat-up Corolla.

"What do you pay for your place?" he said.

"Twenty-three hundred a month. Why?"

"I don't know, you could do a lot better in Phoenix. Floyd's neighborhood, you get a whole house for seventeen, eighteen. You can park in your driveway, and you don't need an ice scraper for the windshield."

She said, "I don't think I'm Phoenix material. Bert's not either."

"You don't know that. I'll talk to him and feel him out."

"Pete, don't be confusing him, okay?"

"You know what? At his age, you can turn everything upside down and he's fine."

"Well his dad moved to Florida. So that part's not fine."

Pete said, "No. That wouldn't be."

They waited outside in a lineup with the other parents, everyone idling, Pete thinking turn off the damn engines and relax. It was clearly a private school, but he hoped Bonnie wouldn't get into the curriculum with him, and whether it was a charter, Waldorf, alternative or other.

Bert was coming. He was a smiling kid with curly hair that came down in his eyes. He was shorter than

most of the others and had on a backpack that looked way too big.

Pete got out of the car with Bonnie, and without saying anything Bert came up to him and hugged him around the waist, and for a moment Pete felt his throat tighten. "Hey man," he said. "You're not supposed to know me."

"You're my uncle," Bert said. "Are you staying over at our house tonight?"

"I'd like to. If you can handle me being on the couch."

Bert said, "Hey, I'll sleep on the couch. You go in *my* room."

Pete said, "No, I'm not kicking you out of your room. But can you show it to me? See what we got going *on* in there?"

"Yeah!" Bert said.

Bonnie said since it was a special occasion why not go for ice cream, and they went to a place in Harvard Square that was full of college kids putting away big sundaes. Bert dug into his for the first few bites and then started to struggle, and Pete finished it off for him.

"That's good, you'll never be a fat guy," Pete said.

"I'm small though," Bert said. "I'm a shrimp."

Pete said, "Maybe now, but I was noticing something. You got big feet."

"He does," Bonnie said.

Pete said, "I'm telling you, you're going to be tall."

"Well my *dad's* pretty tall," Bert said. Pete was picturing Wayne, and he wasn't huge, maybe 5'10 but so what.

"There was a kid in my school," Pete said. "Joey Figg. He towered over everyone until about sixth grade. In eighth grade when we graduated, he was the shortest one in the class."

"Wow," Bert said.

"Another guy, Andy Hokapp, little back-up point guard on the freshmen team in high school? His junior year, he was dunking the ball. He grew like a foot. He had real big feet when he was young, just like you."

"Man!" Bert said.

"Just don't dunk on me though," Pete said. "When you come out to San Francisco."

Bonnie stared at him. Bert slid over and put his head on Pete's shoulder, and there didn't seem to be any rush to go anywhere.

\*\*\*

Bonnie told Bert to go in his room and take care of his homework, and she and Pete sat at the dining room table drinking red wine. Pete said, "So what's the story with Wayne?"

"He met someone, she's from down there, and he moved in with her. About a year now. He's in a stepdad situation."

"Ah, Jeez."

"Not sure if I ever told you, but Wayne was married once before me. He has a couple of teenage kids of his own."

"Christ."

"It's a mess. The sad thing is, he has a good heart. I see a lot of that in Bert . . . How about you Petie?"

He said, "Well I don't want to jinx myself, but I feel like I've got something picking up steam in the right direction."

"Someone you could actually settle down with?"

"A few wildcards that need to pan out, but yeah, not inconceivable."

"I'm happy for you," she said. "And what about Floyd?"

"Nah, that'll never happen."

Bert came into the dining room. "That was a little quick," Bonnie said. "You sure?"

"*Pretty* sure," Bert said. "Can't I play some hockey with Uncle Pete?"

Pete said, "Bert, I have to draw the line at hockey."

"He has a table-top game," Bonnie said. "He's pretty into it."

The hockey set was in the center of Bert's room, on a low stand with two dedicated chairs. One team was the Boston Bruins and the other was the Chicago Blackhawks. Bert had given every player a name right off the NHL rosters, and he announced the action as they played. He kept getting the puck to his center forward, who would ram it into the net before Pete could find the handle for his goalie.

"Two things this proves," Pete said, after he lost 10-1. "First, mechanical games are much better than

electronic ones. *Second*, if you don't grow enough to dunk, you can always make it as a play-by-play man. You're amazing."

"Can we go again?" Bert said.

"We can. In fact we can keep going until your mom drags me out of here."

Bert called into the other room, "Mom, me and Uncle Pete are busy. Please don't bother us."

"And even if she drags me out of here," Pete said, "I might sneak back in."

\*\*\*

They had breakfast together, and on the way to school Pete told Bert he was leaving today and Bert started crying.

"You know what?" Pete said. "You're the best nine-year old I've ever met in my life. It's not even close."

"Are you coming back?" Bert said.

"Either that, or what I'm hoping, you can come out and see *me*. Soon."

"Yeah! Mom, *can* we?"

"We'll talk about it," Bonnie said. "Right now you have to say goodbye, or you'll be late."



"Bye, Uncle Pete," Bert said, and he ran over to a friend who was being dropped off, and Pete was relieved to see them joking around as they disappeared into the school.

"It's a defense mechanism," Bonnie said. "That's how he says good-bye to his dad . . . Petie, you okay?"

Pete didn't say anything.

Bonnie said, "Well this visit, it's been good for *all* of us. Clearly."

After a minute Pete said, "Okay I'm going to lay this out there. One of those *life's too short* ones . . . Can you and Bert move to San Francisco?"

"Pete, you have to be real. How would we undertake something of that magnitude?"

He said, "*How?* . . . You got what, a month, month-and-a-half left of school? Then you pack two suitcases, you get on the fucking *plane*, and I meet you at the other end. *That's* how you do it."

"Well you are certainly animated. I didn't see this coming."

"Neither did I. But sometimes, you just have to *do* shit."

"Okay, don't talk about it any further. I won't ignore what you've said, and we have to leave it at that right now."

"You and Bert, you can have my apartment. I've got a place to stay."

"Petie, what the hell did I just tell you?"

"I'm just saying."

\*\*\*

He had to see about something in Virginia, which was the purpose of the trip, and it took a week and it sure felt good to be back on the open road.

He decided to drop it down to Highway 40 on the return, not quite the deep south but something different.

One observation, as he rolled through Arkansas, Oklahoma and now north Texas: The portions were bigger in the truck stops than off Highway 80, and the food was better.

At a gas station near Amarillo he called Bonnie.

"How's the little man?" Pete said.

"He's fine," Bonnie said.

"But what?"

"I talked to him about coming out and visiting. We might."

"Wow . . . that's great *news*. But for how long?"

"I thought a week would be about right. Then maybe go see Floyd too."

"Jeeminy Christmas, a week? Just *stay*."

"No Petie, that's not going to work."

"You know what? At least stay for the summer. Develop a little routine, get a bead on the city. There's day camps up the wazoo that Bert will love. On the weekends I'll take him bodysurfing at Stinson Beach."

"He's not that great a swimmer."

"God *damn* it . . . Now why is *that*?"

"He's just never taken to it very well."

"Okay, *forget* the camps. We'll get him lessons every day, and at night I'll take him to the Family Swim and help him."

"I feel like you're overpowering me here."

"That's because you need to be overpowered . . . I love you though."

"Love you too," Bonnie said.

Friday he had lunch at a Coco's in Barstow, and he sat at the counter and watched the short-order chefs work. He remembered a family trip to the Grand Canyon once where they also stopped in Barstow, not at a restaurant but a drive-in, and everyone got slushes.

He remembered it because something went wrong with the slush machine and they all came out funny, and his dad would bring it up over the years and embellish the story.

Pete was never real close to his dad, but he could picture him on those road trips, getting out of the car whistling, his shirt stuck to his back, and telling everyone to order whatever they wanted, that the price didn't matter.

Pete missed him now.