

Night Visit

Standing on the curb outside baggage claim at LAX, I shifted the weight of my overnight bag on my shoulder, looking for my brother, Peter. His white Toyota nosed its way through the congested airport traffic, and there he was! Blond and blue, eyes bright and twinkling as usual, skin clear, his handsome face crossed with only the smallest lines betraying the fact that he was at the tail end of his forties. We hugged and laughed, smiling into one another's eyes. Parting, I slipped my bag to the pavement, we grasped hands and jumped in a small circle as we did when we were children. He, still, eternally boyish. As for me, well, I've always been loathe to give up my "Peter Pan complex". He's my Peter, and I one of his lost boys, even if I am his older sister. Or maybe I'm his Wendy-bird: forever pre-pubescent innocents, I followed him, and we ran away from Florida to California, our Never-land.

My sister's eyes, anxious but furtive, searched for signs of failing. Peter had been living with AIDS for such a long time now. Thankfully, as usual, I found myself relieved by his apparent glowing health. While I'd grabbed the brass ring, blue chip law firm, partner, fancy schmancy - since shortly after graduating from law school himself, Peter has been on disability. I feel it's incumbent upon me to share the wealth and, while appreciating the help, I know he could care less about the money. He holds a not so secret disdain for my career choice. Had he pursued his legal career, he might have become a law librarian, or at most a back room intellectual grinding out brilliant legal briefs for senior partners to argue in court. A contemplative soul, he enjoys stimulating conversation, but avoids overt conflict. We are, in that manner, polar opposites. Not that I'm argumentative, in general, but I'm seldom afraid to step up to the plate for something I believe in, or for someone who's paying me to represent them.

Arriving at Pete's apartment in the mid-Wilshire district, I temporarily stowed my bags behind the open french doors leading to the dining room. His one bedroom apartment is a vintage 30's building that he, thanks to L.A.'s rent control, has managed to afford ever since moving to L.A. in 1977. Then, the neighborhood was lovely. I still have a letter he wrote to me while I was in Miami with a drawing of himself, in bell bottoms and flowing hair, sitting on a hill next to his apartment building with the Ambassador hotel on Wilshire rising in the background. That hill has long gone to faceless eighties style-apartments, and the neighborhood has become a Korean ghetto. Nonetheless, the shining wood floors and curved archways of the period building nicely complement Peter's shabby-chic modern furnishings.

In that letter, the one with the drawing, he told me that he was lonely. Not long afterwards, I joined him in L.A. - Anita Bryant refugees, we would later explain when Angelenos asked us why we moved from Miami. In Los Angeles, we had escaped the oppressive Southern Baptist mentality in Florida that had forced us to look for our own in dingy bars, dark parks and alleys. Though we couldn't have said so at the time, we yearned to breathe free and live as full human beings.

Unfortunately for Peter and for me, AIDS had reared its hideous head and put an end to our joyful pursuit of freedom. Peter had been diagnosed in his first year of law school, and by graduation had had several bouts of pneumonia, near death allergic reactions to antibiotics, bone marrow loss from AZT, and the resulting anemia. But, by the grace of god, or whatever miraculous medical intervention, the cocktails began to work and Peter keeps on keeping on.

While I'd stayed close for years, finally, assured that he was really okay, I accepted a transfer to

the San Francisco office of my firm. It meant a partnership for me: the penultimate brass ring. So it was, that I left my soul-mate, my beloved Petey and moved to the city on the bay. But, I come back all the time, it's just a half hour on a U.S. Air commuter jet. We know the secret back roads to the airport, frequented by cabbies and flight attendants. And the all too familiar journey over La Brea Boulevard with the oil rigs incongruously pumping on black hills, backlit by the lights of L.A.: in the darkened car this is now our time to catch up, to laugh, to reach out and touch the back of the hand, to reassure one another we are still here, together. The daring duo, the handsome, sexy, gay, sister and brother lawyers. The Bodifords. Watch out.

We decided to go for Chinese. We had a favorite spot in the Los Feliz area by Griffith Park. After dinner, we weren't ready to go home to Pete's small apartment in the ghetto on Normandie, and as we often did, we rode around admiring the lovely old Hollywood houses built in the twenties, thirties and forties for the burgeoning motion picture industry. One house in particular held a fascination for me as I had considered moving in there with my parents and Peter, long ago, when Peter had first been diagnosed. There was a big house, with a carriage house attached. I'd thought that I and my parents would live in the house and Peter could have the carriage house. We'd band together to watch over our precious boy. But, Peter was having none of it. He was secure in his bungalow in the ghetto. His independence, you know. My Pan.

I pointed the house out to him. He pulled the car over by the driveway and cut the engine. I reminded him of my grand "save Petey" plan. I'd thought by now the time worn house along with its old carriage house might have been replaced by a more profitable townhouse row, or a several story condo building. We approved of the gracefully aging buildings, and sat at the curb reflecting on the years since we'd felt that desperate panic that an AIDS diagnosis brought on in those perilous times.

The old buildings looked deserted. Peter said, "Lets take a look" and stepped out of the car. I followed. We stood at the edge of a gravel drive that ran along the edge of a privacy fence, its white paint peeling with age and separating the front house from the carriage house. Peter's loafers crunched on the gravel as he took a few steps down the drive to get a better look.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "You're trespassing."

"You've turned into a fuddy-duddy, I'm just looking." He took a few more steps. The gravel announced his every move. "I see a light, there's someone in there watching t.v."

"So, you've turned into a peeping tom while I've been chasing the American Dream?"

"Lighten up." Peter turned back and began to walk toward me down the drive. Lit by the bright yellow L.A. crime-prevention street light, his shadow loomed against the old fence. A shot rang out in the night and a hole as big as my fist appeared in the fence.

"Jesus!" We bolted to the car at the curb, I reached it first, having never left the sidewalk and jumped into the driver's side. Pete threw himself into the passenger seat, the door barely closed, he urged, "Hit the gas!"

I peeled away from the curb and we burst into gales of laughter. We laughed until we cried, and even after the nervous laughter subsided, we grinned until our cheeks hurt. Like common criminals we were fascinated by the scene of our crime. We circled back around only to find a couple of squad cars in the drive, their red and blues flashing.

"I think we should stop and surrender." I soberly said. Peter's grin faded, "Why?"

" Someone could've seen us stopped there. We sat for a while talking when we thought the place

was deserted. Better to come clean than be hunted down."

I pulled the car over and leaving Peter in the car, approached a woman cop, one of several and the least intimidating. "May I speak with you?" I said in my best professional voice.

"What's up?" she replied. "Well, I think I have some information for you regarding what happened here." She motioned for me to sit on the curb, and she joined me.

I told her I'd been there with my brother and we were just looking, maybe guilty of trespassing, but no criminal intent. We were reminiscing about the past. We thought the buildings were deserted.

"Where's your brother, now?" She asked.

I looked around, suddenly confused, the door to the Toyota was open on the driver's side. The passenger seat was empty.

I awoke with a start. Glanced at the clock, 7:30 a.m. The handyman was coming at 9:00. The morning light sifted through the blinds and by habit, I slipped into my house shoes. Peter had been gone for, how long now? June 3rd, 1991 to June 3rd, 2016. Almost 25 years. Long before the life-prolonging chemical cocktails, during the Republican administrations that never said the word, AIDS.

Upon my return to South Florida in 1992 and since then, my work as a gay rights activist has been my Pan's memorial, my revenge and my salvation. More next time on your legal rights, your equal rights and lack thereof!

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