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PINE RIDGE BY JENN BLAIR

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Ray didn't mind the drive because she was that pretty. She was young and had long auburn hair she always wore pulled up and her hips were full and he didn't think anybody had grabbed them yet, because she wasn't that kind of girl and because her father was so strict. Just a father to deal with but that was no lucky deal. The father had bulgy eye lids, puffed out, two croaking frog's throats. One of his eyes was a different shape than the other or maybe it was the skin around the eye that somehow was pulled and pinched different. The girl's mother must have been a beauty.

--You again. The father said, a yellow dish towel in his hand. He should have sounded more happy to get some business. Pine Ridge was way up Chinook Pass, the middle of nowhere really there in the mountains and it was between seasons. The summer crowds hadn't come yet, still too cold and too much snow this year. Good for the crops in Yakima and the lower valley but that meant less to do up here, in a place where the water from the sink fell cold, the blankets on the bed cold, and even the toilet seat was freezing. When Ray came here the first time it was just a fluke, on a trip with his friend Charlie. He and Charlie had gone to college together and they kept more or less in touch. Ray would have let the friendship go but Charlie kept hounding him to do things. Charlie had gotten married to a girl with no upper lip and thin arms, Ray couldn't stand to look at them, toothpicks dangling from her body, could you hug her without them snapping, not that he wanted to try. Charlie sold insurance and talked and talked. That's how Ray knew he painted his house blue because that was the color of a rattle his wife had a child and how he got fifteen percent off the new siding and spent all last summer building a tool shed with his father in law. Ray didn't care to visit them and he didn't want to listen to the same Glen Miller record that Charlie always put on, with a wink, as if it were some kind of special memory from way back when. Ray had moved to Pasco after college but sometimes his job at the auto dealership brought him up to the Yakima office. That's when he'd meet Charlie for lunch, lunch was better. Somewhere down on First, or Poochie's hot dog stand, though sometimes Charlie would insist he come for dinner which was usually overcooked meat of some sort accompanied by applesauce.

--Homemade, she makes it herself. She and her sister. Charlie beamed at his wife.

Ray glanced at the glistening pile, the patches of rough.

--We leave the skin on. It's better for you that way, the thin woman said, as if she was used to doubters.

--Huh.

--Yes, she's thrifty. So was her mother. What was that she made honey? Used to?

--Mock pecan pie. With oatmeal.

--Yes, Charlie said, shaking his head back and forth. Her father didn't even know it. Tasted so good he didn't know there weren't any nuts in there for years.

After they ate, Ray would have to hold the baby if there was a child at the baby stage, and then he'd hand it back before it started squalling and get the hell out of there. Kids made him nervous. It was like if they started crying they were saying something was wrong with you, whether you were a saint or going to heaven or not. No one else could tell but they were smart. Somehow they still could. Charlie talked too much and about too little. But on their way back from fishing at Rimrock one day, Charlie made one right move. He'd suggested they eat dinner there at Pine Ridge, a place that appeared to Ray to be of no account at first. Small and log cabin-like, the place looked like it belonged on a bottle of syrup with a wisp of smoke out the chimney. There was a wad of white grey gum lodged in the mat on the stoop and the windows were covered with curtains that didn't match, some yellow paisleys and some dark green. But that was good, it hid what was inside. It made Ray feel special. That he knew what was there and not everyone did. Like an out of the way fishing hole or a hunting spot.

--What can I get you? The girl's father said. He folded the towel in half, then again, then pointed to a table. Ray sat and took off his hat. He had come up here enough to know that the girl was the one who usually did the serving. Well that was the way it should be. Looking at the father didn't put you in the mood for eating or anything else.

--What's the special today?

The man jerked his head over to the direction of the blackboard on the wall and slightly grunted, indicating that if Ray hadn't taken the trouble to read it that was his own fault.

Let him lose his eyes now, straining over to see it.

--Ham and cheese, I think. And a soda.

--A soda.

--Yes.

--What kind.

--Grape. If you have it.

The man nodded and walked away. Ray fingered some salt granules left on the table and looked out at the river. It was moving fast, carrying glacier melt.

The man came back.

--There's no ham. He sounded almost triumphant.

--Then give me just the cheese. A grilled cheese sandwich.

Ray didn't know what to do after watching the river so he just stared around the room, the horse tack up on the wall, the photograph in the wooden frame of a grinning eleven or twelve year old with a large trout, something anybody passing through would see and smile at, small boy and big fish, everyone loved that kind of story. Soon, the father came back, setting the plate down with a thud, so that the orange slice almost jumped off onto the table. Ray shifted the orange away from the rim.

--Sorry, the man said. He stood back and wiped his hands.

--My daughter does that. She thinks it adds something. What, I don't remember.

Ray nodded. He thought the man would go away but the man kept standing there like he had something important to say.

--I just said 'my daughter.' Remember her?

Ray took a bite of the sandwich, one right out of the middle and started chewing, keeping his eyes looking straight forward. But the man wasn't leaving.

--You mean the younger girl who works here? I've seen her. He tried to sound nonchalant.

The man lowered his voice--Yeah, I know you've seen her. He leaned in. You sat here all afternoon and evening a few weeks ago. You remember that? Making moon eyes at her, taking up my table space.

--There was barely anybody here.

--Not the point.

--I paid. I always do.

--It's not about money. I need some things more than money. Like not worrying. So if you so much as step out of line one time, his voice was still low, hands on the table. Just when he was about to deliver his final lines, the door opened, the red yarn and jingle bells strung on it happily chiming as two older ladies and an older man came in chatting. As the door shut again, he stood back up.

--Just don't.

After Ray finished his sandwich, he got up and left. She hadn't seen her at all. She probably wasn't here this afternoon. He decided to rent a cabin down the road a mile. He had done that twice now. He did that when he didn't want to drive all the way back, didn't want to leave yet. This girl was worth it, she was different. He needed to speak to her, let her see what kind of person he was. Charlie said he was always the slick one, the one with the ladies on each arm back at parties back in high school, and maybe at one time he had been. But charm, like anything got old. Now his once famed thick black hair was sliding off his head, receding back further and further so that his scalp had two inroads leading to where they would soon show. His face still looked young though, and he was only a few pounds overweight, but it was spread evenly throughout his body, a trick he'd picked up from his mother's side.

The man who was in the office was sitting down on the job, reading some dusty book. The pages looked yellow even brown. He was old though, and it wasn't busy. So there was no problem with that, him sitting down. The man wore a brown argyle sweater with sleeves too long, folded up in ridiculous rolls and grey pants. He was what people might call an old timer. Grey hair in loose tufts on the top of his pate, a mountain covered in cloud, a few nose hairs threatening to escape.

--Just you? The man didn't look up, reaching for the clipboard.

--Yes.

--Too soon for most fishing.

--Not too soon to relax is it? They haven't put a season on that I don't think.

--No, the man shook his head, punching some keys on his register. You're right about that.

--How much do I owe you? Ray got out his wallet.

--Twenty six, fifty.

--Here you go. Ray gave him a twenty and ten and waited for his change.

The man took the money, gave him his change, then rustled around under the counter until he procured a key on a small carved totem pole.

--You've been here before haven't you?

Ray shook his head, like he had an identical twin, and couldn't remember how to keep track of him. The man probably had a lousy memory, so he was probably safe.

All the same--

--Yeah I guess I have. Once or twice.

He went back down the road in the evening. For dinner. But not before changing into a different shirt, a white one with a collar. He'd never worn it before, mainly because he didn't own an iron. His sister had lent him one, but she'd taken it when she moved. Her only brother and he wasn't worth a spare iron apparently. When Ray put the shirt on he could see the lines where it had been folded back over on itself, the arms kept in check. He tried to smooth them out with his hands, but made a poor job of it. He finally let it go, tucking it into his black slacks, notching his belt into the worn notch, the leather around it stressed. He stood in front of the mirror bolted to the wall, more steel than anything, so that it only reflected back vague lines. A new soup can would have afforded more clarity. He wasn't so much combing his hair as guessing. When he arrived at the restaurant, the place had three cars out front. Good. People. Enough that the father couldn't make a scene. Maybe he was taking the night off. He stepped inside the door, already anticipating the jangle

He only had to wait one minute until, there she was. White apron, navy skirt, purple shirt with short sleeves, smooth skin at her neck, her arms.

--Hello there.

--Hi. He tried not to stare.

--You're here again, huh?

--Yeah. Just driving through. To visit my cousin.

He should have thought of something better. She led him to a table with a questioning look and he squinted at it for a minute, like he had to check the salt and pepper shakers or something, make sure they were full enough, make sure the plastic flowers were fresh enough.

--Yeah this is fine.

He sat down and she placed a menu before him.

--What can I bring you? Are you here alone or is your cousin coming? She was honestly asking, pushing away a strand of her hair that had fallen over her ear. He wanted to help her put it back into place, take the band out and brush it, see how far it went down her pale back, how far it fell. He looked at the menu.

--What do you suggest?

--The meatloaf is good. It's served with asparagus, local. Well, not local here of course, but local meaning Washington. And mashed potatoes with chives and bacon.

--Are they local too?

--What?

--The potatoes.

--Because, he tapped the menu, if they're from Idaho, I won't eat a bite.

--You won't--her mouth had opened into an O and then it froze. She bit her lip and shook her head.

--I see. I've got a jokester on my hands. She smiled.

--Yeah, yeah. He pretended to hang his head in shame. Sorry. The meatloaf would be good.

--Anything else? The way she was writing it down so carefully killed him. Like she really would forget.

--Just a water. And a beer.

She nodded and left and he watched her til she disappeared into the back, then looked around the room. The people around him were chatting loudly. One table seemed to be celebrating an anniversary.

--I'd do it all over again! Except for forty one, that fall, a man in a sweater vest said, wiping his forehead with a napkin.

--What? screeched the woman in a blue dress and pearls who sat beside him.

--When you were pregnant with Clem? Honey you weren't doing so well.

--I wasn't, her voice rose, anxious to share her own maladies--I just woke up and cried. Went over to the table and cried. Had to hurry up and cry so I could cry some more.

--Well I was worth it, a man with big sideburns and an open shirt decided, patting his mother's arm. Everyone was saying insulting things but everyone laughed while they said them. Maybe that was the difference between a good family and a bad one.

Ray was surprised when another woman, a stout woman who would barely even look at him brought his food. He barely acknowledged her.

--Anything else? she asked.

--No.

Had the girl done this to him on purpose? He forced himself to take a bite.

A few minutes later, she reappeared.

--I'm sorry I left you. Is everything okay?

--Yeah, yeah--he waved a hand over his plate--but where were you?

It seemed like she didn't want to tell him. She started to say something then paused:

--I just needed to step out for a moment. But I'm back now.

--So you have everything you need?--she asked again.

--Well--he pointed at his foil encrusted potato--I could use some butter. If you have some.

--Oh I forgot that. Sorry. Yes, sure thing.

--It's not that kind that's frozen still is it? He called after her.

--What?

--I can't ever spread that stuff.

--I'll try and find some that's not.

--Thanks.

He was going to call out something, but he couldn't think what. He kept eating his meatloaf. One bite brought a sharp spur of something, something gritty and bonelike, which he spit into his napkin without looking at. Normally he would have been upset, but he wasn't about to complain. A moment

later, she came back with a ball of butter in a light blue dish, so pale it seemed white.

--Here you go.

--Thanks. He moved the dish to the head of his plate.

--So what do you do for fun around here? Anything?

--There's plenty to do, if you like being outdoors.

--Which you do?

--Yes--she looked at his glass.

--Would you like another drink?

He nodded. As he kept eating, he noticed there was couple in the corner, holding hands over the table, like each other's company was a treat. He wished the girl would come out here and sit with him like that. She worked too hard. Her feet must be killing her.

She brought back the beer.

--Thanks.

After she set it down, he took it and slugged it back. After a few minutes, the anniversary party slowly got up as they groaned about how full their stomachs were. After they left, Ray noticed one lady must have left her sweater on the back of the chair. He got up and grabbed the pink sweater and went out the door, hurrying over to one of the cars.

The man who was the son rolled down the window, and Ray held out the sweater.

--Thanks so much, the man said, grabbing it. There seemed to be some commotion in the backseat.

--Wait just a sec.

The man turned around for a minute, listened to the message, then turned back to Ray.

--My aunt says thank you so much. She just bought that at the Bon last week.

--Sure thing. He turned to go.

--Oh wait, sorry about this, but--the man trailed off. He contorted his body around to the backseat again again, then stuck his hand out the window.

--She wants you to have this. He dropped two shiny quarters into Ray's palm.

--I don't need that.

--I know. But she's set in her ways, the man said, already starting the engine.

--Thanks. Tell her thanks, then. Ray waved in the general direction of the backseat, since he couldn't make out more than blobby shapes. Then he went back inside to his table and sat down. He placed one quarter on top of the other. He wished she could have seen that. Him doing the favor. But she was nowhere to be seen. He tipped his bottle to one angle and then another.

--Anything else?

He looked up at her.

--One more beer, I guess.

--You've had plenty.

--Don't worry about me. I'm staying right up the road.

--You are? He couldn't see the look on her face, if it was glad or not. He nodded.

--I see.

--Maybe you could take a break. Have a drink with me? If so, then it'd be my last. I swear it would.

--Thank you, but I can't. I have to keep working.

He looked around the room. The couple who'd been chatting it up were just getting their coats and standing up, the man helping her with the arms so carefully it was a joke.

When she returned with the beer, he tried again.

--Sit down. I don't think you'll get any more customers.

--Thanks but I can't. There's dishes, and sweeping. A lot left to do.

--Fine, fine.

--And we close in twenty five minutes.

--Alright, then. This is my last drink. He tapped the bottle, then shook it. But I think I will stay until the door closes.

--It's already closed. The door I mean. We aren't serving any more customers tonight. She tucked a strand of hair back from her face and bit her lip. She sounded very serious.

--Yeah, well you know what I mean. You're not closed yet.

--Right. She turned on her heel.

--Hey.

--What.

--If you don't sit for a while, your tip'll be terrible.

--Is that so?

--Yes. I think so.

He paused and she paused, as if they were both considering the weight of what he'd just said, what impact it might have. Her lip wobbled. Was she going to cry?

--I guess I'll have to go without, then. She finally said. She walked over to the table the anniversary party had sat up and bent over to pick up a dropped napkin, then walked into the kitchen without looking back.

He was sad. He was all these things but she wouldn't know it because he'd been harsh and he ruined it. He was angry. Fists were forming in his hands. He stood up, and took a step forward, intending to follow her into the back, to tell her not to treat him like that. But what if her father was back there, lurking with a gun or a shovel. No thanks. He stood up and crumpled his napkin, throwing it down in his seat. He opened his wallet. He only had a ten. She wasn't getting that. He folded his wallet close, then muttered under his breath, and threw the ten down on the table. He scooped up his quarters, then went up the road to the Woodshed to have another drink.

--How are you this evening?--the burly man behind the counter asked, rubbing his hairy neck with the back of his big hand. Ray didn't even look at him. He stared at the American flag pin fastened to

the man's suspenders and nodded.

--What can I get you?

--Just a--how about a Rainier.

--Coming up.

As the man turned around to open up the refrigerator, Ray looked around. The place was empty, save for three people playing pool in the corner. One man in a green flannel shirt was waving the cue everywhere, pointing to the lights above like he was going to shoot them one by one--pow-pow-pow. Ray stood up like he was going somewhere and started examining the pictures on the walls, pausing in front of one that was a photograph in a frame. It seemed stage--a whole bunch of men sitting on one side of the table, like that painting. They all had on robes. Ray stared not quite sure what to make of it.

--My uncle--came a voice.

Ray turned around to see the proprietor behind the counter, pointing at the picture.

--The one in the middle, that's my Uncle.

Ray turned around and looked again. A young man with pale skin, in an oversized blue robe.

--He was Jesus which I always thought was a hell of a good joke--the proprietor added, setting down Ray's bottle on the counter.

--Is that a real beard on him?

The man shrugged.

--Maybe, maybe not. I don't even remember.

Ray glanced one last time. It looked like someone had cut the paws off a piece of road kill and attached it to the guy's chin, more or less. He sat down, finished his beer in a few long gulps, wiped his mouth.

--Want another?, the bartender asked, scooping up the bottle in his huge paw.

--Nah. No thanks, cousin of Christ. Or whatever the hell it is you are.

The bartender nodded, and Ray went back to his car and drove straight to his room.

*

Early the next morning, Ray sat outside his small red cabin watching patches of color move slowly across the tree trunks. He could see his breath, even in the morning sunlight. He was wearing a pair of orange gloves someone must have left in the cabin during hunting season. When he put his hand in the right one he'd found a tissue wadded up in there. He pulled it out, but it didn't seem used. It didn't bother him. The old man walked by, his brown sweater almost hid under a thick grey overcoat and hunting cap with tufted wool lined flaps. He looked at Ray and smiled.

--It's sure cold, but if you're brave or you keep moving it's alright out here.

Ray nodded.

--Mind if I join you for a spell?

Ray pulled up the other chair for the old man and brushed a cobweb off it.

--Thanks.

--Where you from again? If you don't mind me asking.

--Tri-Cities. Pasco. Though I just moved to Kennewick.

--What do you do?

--I sell cars.

--What kind?

--Chevy mostly.

--I see. I almost got a Chevy once. Ended up with a Ford.

Ray nodded, like it didn't matter, all cars being the same.

They sat for another moment.

--Is that where your family's from?

--Where?

--The Tri-Cities.

--No. They're from Portland. Originally. Now they're all over the place.

--Where are your parents?

What was this? Twenty questions. Ray scratched his neck.

--My mom is in Prosser. I don't know where my dad is.

The man put his hands in his pockets--Sorry to hear that.

--Don't be.

--Well, I won't then.

They sat there quietly for a few more minutes. The old man looked like was going to say something, but he didn't, not right away. He just took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed them together, blew into them then stuffed them back in the pockets.

--You ever hear of Laban? Man in the Bible?

--I haven't read that thing in years. Guess I got too smart for it.

--Yeah, the man shook his head, nonplussed. A lot of people do. A lot of people do. He looked back out at the river.

--Laban, he began after a few minutes of silence, was this man who had two daughters. The younger one was pretty and the older one wasn't. It doesn't say much why the one wasn't so attractive. Maybe just a lifetime of living in the shadow done it to her. But at any rate, this drifter came through and he wanted the younger girl so bad he could taste his own longing in the cold well water he drank down. He agreed to work for her seven years but he loved her so much it was like a day to him. Just twenty four little hours.

Ray shook his head.

--She couldn't have been worth that. Not even if she was a looker. Seven years.

--But she was worth it, they say. So he finally gets married and everyone's celebrating and then the

next morning he looks over and he doesn't see Rachel. He sees the other one. Lea is there beside him. Laban tricked him into taking the wrong woman into his bed. He had to work seven more years for Rachel.

--So what's your point?â€ Ray asked, tapping his knee with his gloved fingers, --besides the fact Laban was a weasly son of a bitch.

--The man looked back out at the river and finally shook his head. I guess I don't have one. He stood up and put the chair back against the wall.

--I was only thinking I guess that he was a decent man. At least compared to Ed Connelly, my son in law. And she's my granddaughter. Hope you enjoy the rest of your stay. Before Ray could say anything, the man was gone.

--I sure the hell will, Ray said, after he left, picking up a rock and throwing it against a small Cottonwood tree. He looked out at the river awhile, watching for a twig, a leaf, a branch, something to move along, interrupt the picture. Maybe some elk would come down. An elk family. He took a flask he had hid in the front pocket of his corduroy jacket and took a drink. He had planned on going back one more time, for one more meal, but he didn't. He just sat in his room all afternoon staring at the wall, drinking. He thought about being moss or lichen or whatever it was, being that green. He thought about being a squirrel, hiding up in the tops of the trees and dropping things on people's heads. He thought about the time he was about three and his sister slammed the car door shut on his thumb, how the nail bent back and the skin turned red. How that was the clearest memory he had, and the first, as if he needed to be kicked in the balls to even know he had them. He thought about Shorty Jones, how the milk would shoot out of his nose in the cafeteria, how he'd gone on and on about spending the night in a cave with his grandfather one summer, like they'd crawled back into it so far they'd seen the Christ child in there. He thought about the way her apron had come untied that first time he'd seen her when he was there with Charlie, the strings just hanging there helpless. He thought about the way he'd wanted to pull her close to him and breathe softly in her ear then tie the string into a bow and step away. Without speaking a word. He'd do it and it would be the right thing to do. What was so wrong with that. It didn't come from a dark place in him, that was the thing. It came from a good place, a place he hadn't even known was there. Shit. He had already paid for this room, good money and he wasn't going to leave it yet. He glanced at some pine cones glued to a piece of wood. Maybe the old man's wife, the girl's grandmother had made that and thought it was so great. Maybe she had helped her grandmother make it, when she was a little girl. Maybe she had gathered the pinecones and put them in a paper sack. He picked it up off the table and tried to blow away the dust. He set it back down and put his head under the pillow.

When he woke again, it was dark. He packed everything into his car and put the key under the mat in front. The light was on and there was a drop box for the key, but he didn't want to go back inside. He got in his car and turned on the engine. There were barely any other cars out at this time of night he guessed. He guessed could make it back in good time, at least after he got to Naches and to the freeway. Seven years. What did it taste like, the man's voice on the radio telling about the cloud covering tomorrow, a family's collision with a deer over on White Pass near Packwood, the bitter still moving down his throat, spreading warmth into his chest then going, even as its roots stayed and spread out and took up space. He shook his head, then stepped on the gas pedal so hard the speedometer needle almost jumped in alarm. Seven God damn years

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