

"Pete"

1.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," she said. "The article just made it seem like there was more going on than that." She wasn't looking at him anymore.

"You think because the guy made a video about something bad going on in the world, he has some sort of immunity from doing stupid shit," he said. "What do you think would happen if I did something like that?"

"Okay," Janey rolled her eyes.

Mark left it there.

They had been driving for almost two hundred miles through west Texas, making their way towards Arizona and eventually, California. The summer heat was radiating through the windows and even though the air conditioner was at full blast, the car was a furnace.

Moving had been a difficult decision for them, but there had been too much fighting and too much bad luck at home for them to stay any longer. The cat running away had been the last push. They never let little Benni out, but one morning their front door had been wide open and he had been gone. Complaining to the management office had been useless, as they insisted that no one in maintenance had opened the door, "are you sure you

didn't forget to close it ma'am?" Whatever happened, Benni did not return.

"Can we stop?" Janey said.

"Ya, okay."

They pulled over at the next Shell station. Mark parked at the pump; Janey hopped out and walked into the mart.

Outside, Mark wiped his forehead with the back of his arm and felt his vision swim. In the desert, the afternoon sun pressed on you like a hot iron plate. Your vision blurred, your skin cooked. In a Texas summer, the sun was seeking you out. He followed Janey into the mart to escape.

The door chimed as he walked in, and he gasped. Central air. Mark closed his eyes and took a second to enjoy it.

"What can I do for you?" The attendant said with a grin.

"Twenty on two," Mark said.

"Sure," the attendant dragged the twenty dollar bill across the counter. "Is there anything else I can get for you buddy?" Janey walked up with a couple bottles of water and a bag of potato chips.

"I'll meet you at the car," Mark said to her and pulled a handful of dollar bills out of his pocket.

"Is there anything else I can get for you buddy?"

Janey took the money out of Mark's hand.

"You have a good one!" the attendant called out when Mark left.

Met again with punishing heat, Mark started pumping gas into his tank and whistled tunelessly, trying to distract himself.

"What you whistlin' there buddy?" Said a voice on the other side of the pump. It had the weak, wobbly tone of an old man. Mark thought the voice sounded innocuous enough, but he ignored the man.

"I said, what you whistlin' there boy?" The voice came again.

"Oh, nothing," Mark said. "Little of this, little of that."

A pause, then the voice came again.

"Heh heh, out in the desert a man has a hard time keeping track of this and that doesn't he? Doesn't know the tune stuck in his own head. Heh Heh," the old man went on. "I can't remember the last time I whistled a tune. Only happy people whistle, yes, can't whistle with a heart full of bad memories can you?"

Mark was in no mood for this kind of conversation.

"No, I guess not."

Mark put the pump back into its slot and turned to his car but stopped short; the old man was hunched in front of him. He was old, just crawled out of a cemetery old. His skin clung to

his bones, he hunched almost ninety degrees, his clothes were smudged brown with dust, and his black vest was holding onto his back by threads. And he smelled, in this heat he smelled like rotting trash. Mark noticed the black cowboy hat with a smiling skull holding the drawstring in its silver teeth.

"Like I said young man, the desert has way of turning your mind into mush." With the word "turning" he spat on Mark's shoes. Mark backed away, the smell of the old man overtaking him a little. "Each one of these old gas station's is like a little oasis, for men like you and me, looking for what we need." The old man seemed to pick up on the effect he was having because he stopped moving forward, looked down and smiled.

"Names Pete," he said and stuck out a boney hand. Mark grabbed the outstretched hand with his own and grasped it lightly, afraid it would disintegrate.

"Mark," he said.

"You should be careful Mark. Shadows of dead men, dangerous men, like this area for all of the passing out of towners, and looking at your wife there I'd guess y'all are from out of town."

"Well...sorta," he said and saw that Janey was coming back to the car with the food. Mark wanted to leave this old bag of bones as soon as possible.

The old man's face crinkled into an expression of honest desperation. His lower lip quivered and his eyes glistened.

"Have you seen my wife?" the old man said.

"Hey Janey. What you end up getting?" Mark said.

"Just regular stuff," Janey said and closed the door to the passenger seat.

Mark looked back to the old man.

"Sir, it was good to meet you," he turned to his car, and got in at the driver seat.

"Please?" Mark heard through the car door.

"That guy's weird as shit," Mark said.

"What guy?" She said.

"That old guy I was talking to next to the car."

"Oh, I didn't see him," she said as she opened a bag of chips. As Mark drove off, he heard the old man cry one more word, the word sent chills into Mark's gut.

"Wait!" Pete said.

2.

They drove uninterrupted for miles, crossing the uniform desert landscape with the sun watching over them. They talked, and Janey sometimes slept, but mostly they sat in silence as the orange world passed around them. When the sun set, they decided to find somewhere to sleep for the night.

"That looks good enough," Mark said as they came across a motel. "What you think?"

"Mmm, Sleepy Inn," she said. They parked the car in the small lot and grabbed a few bags out of the back seat.

"Janey, look at the sunset."

The sun was an orange fireball sitting in a blanket of cool frozen clouds.

"Purdy," she said.

The Sleepy Inn motel had a large bull's head hanging on the wall. A radio that looked to be about a hundred years old played distant country music, but there was no person to be seen; however, there was a bell.

Janey rang the bell.

"Janey, just wait a second," Mark said, but no one came forward.

Behind the desk there was a second smaller room, which had a chair with its back towards Mark and Janey. Two brown cowboy boots were propped up on either side of an old television.

Mark leaned over the front desk.

"Hello?" He said.

No response.

"Hello?" This time he half yelled and the figure in the chair jolted, the cowboy boots slapping to the ground. Mark and

Janey stepped back as the girl got up out of the chair and approached them from across the desk.

"Hi," she said, chewing her gum and grinning through smeared makeup.

"How y'all doin'?" She said.

Mark glanced at Janey and then looked back to the girl.

"We were looking to book a room for the night."

"Okay," she made a note on her clipboard. "You want the two double beds or a queen room?"

"Queen please."

"Sixty a night," she said.

It was small, but big enough to be comfortable. In the middle of the room the bed had a green-red blanket. Mark gave the painting of a cactus on the wall over the bed a good look, and then sniffed the air. The room smelled of old smoke.

"We should have asked for nonsmoking," Janey said.

Mark grunted.

"I'm gonna take a shower, I feel gross."

"Don't let me stop you," he said, taking off his shoes, and falling onto the bed. He flipped on the TV, and within minutes he was asleep.

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Mark dreamed of the old man from the gas station. The man was in the hotel room with him, standing at the end of the bed

while Mark watched TV. He told Mark to get going, to stop fooling around, to leave Janey, to run.

"Don't be stupid boy!" Said the old man.

"Get out while you can!"

Mark waved him away trying to watch the show. Mark wanted him gone, but Pete moved closer. His walk was a painful limp.

"Listen now! Trust me, I know!" The old man said. Mark could see the yellow skin, the drooping eyelids, the thin pale hair.

The old man moved closer still.

Mark could see, he could see the pale eyes devoid of all their color, the dark pupils reaching back to infinity, the eyelashes flecked with black globs of blood and sand. The man reached out to Mark. He reached out with a skeleton hand, the skin was green and rotting off the bone, a fingernail fell to the carpet.

Mark wanted to recoil but he couldn't, he couldn't move. He was frozen.

Pete smiled, and a hundred black teeth shone out of a cavernous mouth, his tongue a furry beast. Two gaping holes stood where his nose used to be. The man was laughing. A cackle like sticks rubbing together inside a cathedral. A laugh to put devils to sleep. He laughed and laughed and laughed.



Mark woke up drenched in sweat with his heart pounding in his throat. The phone was ringing. He grabbed the receiver and turned on the light.

"Yes, hello?"

"Hi there Mark, it's Marla, I was just callin' to see if y'all needed anything," She said.

"Oh...thanks, but no, thank you, no," he hung up and turned the light off.

Mark lay back down onto the bed and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his wife was starring at him.

"What was that?" She said.

"It was the front desk girl, she wanted to know if we needed anything," he said.

"Are you serious? It's one thirty,"

"Let's just go back to sleep."

She did not respond.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

They slept.

4.

The next morning, they showered and got dressed, packed up their things, and left room 1012. Outside, the fresh sun greeted them with new blinding light. The heat of the day had not

settled in yet, but it was warm. Janey put on her big sunglasses.

At the front desk, Marla sat in the back room, this time she noticed Mark walk in, so she stood up to greet him.

"Could we check out, please?" He said.

"Y'all enjoy y'all's stay?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well, see you next time." She said. "Oh! I'm so rude." Marla lit up. "Y'all hungry? Course you are."

"Ya," Mark nodded, "that would be good, thanks."

"If you keep going west on the road you came in on, about a mile, then turn left on Settlement Road; you should see a place on your left called *Reuben's Reuben*. They got the best food in town. You'll see it, there's a bunch of stuff over there. But," she lowered her voice, "if you want something really special, and you can wait a bit, you can go down the same way down the highway over to Marlston. Its only a little farther, and I think it's totally worth it."

"All right, thanks. You said left on Settlement Road, and 'Reuben's Reuben'? Shouldn't be too hard to remember."

"And you'll see Marlston right off the highway if y'all want that."

"Okay," Mark said. "Thanks again."

"Thank you," Janey said and then they left.

As they drove, the landscape was more of the same. They approached a small town on the left just as the sign for Settlement Road appeared.

"So, I say we go to the close place. Rueben's Rueben."

Janey didn't move to respond.

"I thought the farther place was supposed to be better."

Mark didn't speak for a minute. He didn't want to wait for food.

"I just think it would be better to eat early," he said.

"Whatever Mark, I'm fine either way," she turned to smile at him. The smile warmed him.

Mark took a left at the turn.

The sign was large and made of rotted, splintering wood. Black letters read "Grand Settlement." The town was empty, save for dusty stragglers and frowning cowboys puttering down the street. A number of cars were parked at a few local antique shops and one or two were at the old gas stations on the corner, but the only busy place in town was the recommended establishment.

Mark parked in front of Rueben's Rueben.

Inside the restaurant, there were red booths around the edges and big white countertops in the center. Several servers and chefs worked to deliver and take orders from the few customers at the bar.

"Sit anywhere you like," said a man cruising by with a plate of steaming eggs.

Mark and Janey found a booth towards the back of the room with a big window facing the main street of the town. There was an orderly place setting on the table and two oversized laminated menus with the words "Reuben's Rueben" in big cartoon letters. A bus boy in a black apron dropped off a couple of waters within minutes after they sat down.

"This looks pretty good actually," Mark said, grinning.

"Ya," she looked down at the menu, her sunglasses still on her face along with a firmly planted frown.

Mark grit his teeth and eyed his own menu. He hated that tone in her voice. It looked like it was going to be more of the same, he thought, absently rubbing his wedding band. It had been her idea to leave town.

The waitress was a tired lady who hid her age under a civilization of multicolored makeup. Her smile was plastered on.

"Well, hello there, my names Amy and I'll be your server today," she smiled. "What brings you to this part of Texas?"

"We're on our way to California," Mark said a bit too loud. "This spot comes highly recommended."

Her smile never strayed.

"Oh, this is the best place to eat that I can assure you! Ask anyone here where they go to get their favorite burger and

they'll tell ya. Rueben makes 'em the best! Rueben's the owner," she pointed towards the kitchen. "But he still loves to hang out in the kitchen flippin' burgers. We don't have a whole lotta out of towners stop in our little town but you bet when we do, we always make our mark on them. I'm gonna have to go over and tell the boss that we have some visitors," she said.

"Oh, that's okay, really," Mark tried to stop her but she had already walked away.

Janey took her sunglasses off and shot Mark a look that was clear enough. Mark chuckled as nervousness washed over him like a bucket of seawater and then took another look at the menu.

Janey was from an affluent town in Connecticut and had a specific view of southerners. She would crack jokes about the accent or argue about politics with any local that would hear her out, antagonizing them out of pure spite, or sport. Texas had been a hard place for her to find work because of this. She never quite accepted the life they chose. She had been the one who wanted to leave Texas.

"Mark," she said. "Mark, the locals are staring at us."

Mark picked his head up and stole a glance around the diner. They were staring at them. Not overtly, but it was there. The big Cletus looking fellow in the booth across the room was not hiding his distaste for them at all. He refused to break his

stare even while he shoveled eggs and hash browns into his mouth.

"I suppose you're right."

"It's creepy," she said. "Let's eat and get out of here, okay?"

"Sounds good," he faked a smile.

Mark and Janey kept their heads down trying to ignore the curious eyes poking at them. Eventually, A huge, dark man in a red apron smeared with grease stomped over. His dark hair was tied in a braid that went to his waist. Mark guessed he was Native American. His mouth was smiling but his eyes were not.

"How are you doing today?" Rueben said.

His voice was a shifting tree.

"Good, thanks," Janey said squirming in the booth.

"Can I get you a couple of cheeseburgers or do you guys want something a little more fancy?" He said with curt laugh.

Mark forced himself not to look at Janey.

"No, cheeseburgers would be great. That sounds great thank you."

Rueben's face contorted.

"Okay great," mimicking Mark. "You guys need anything, and I mean anything," with the word anything he slapped one oven mitt hand on the table. "You just ask for Rueben, okay?" he said and then walked away.

"Anything?" She said when Rueben was out of earshot.

"He's just trying to be friendly," he said.

"Mark."

"Keep your voice down, they're already looking at us." He said. Janey put her sunglasses back on and stared out the window.

Their burgers arrived hot with dripping cheese and they ate their meal in silence, trying to scarf it down without drawing any more attention. The patrons of the diner were still staring, but Mark and Janey chose to ignore them, the burgers were delicious and kept them busy anyway. By the end of the meal the table was covered in used napkins and Mark and Janey lay back with belt busting satisfaction.

Rueben came out again with the check and took their plates.

"Good huh?" He said.

"Oh ya, you aren't kidding around," Mark said.

Rueben's face was a mask.

"Take your time with the check," the big man left.

Mark grabbed the leather envelope and looked at his bill.

There was a note inside.

Scribbled in purple crayon:

*Get out now*

*- Pete*

It said.

5.

Mark put some money with the bill, folded the envelope closed, and jumped out of the booth, gesturing to Janey to do the same.

"Okay, okay," she said.

Mark dragged her out of the booth and then they both moved towards the exit. Rueben was there to greet them.

"See you next time, drive safe," he said and held the front door open for them.

Mark pulled Janey across the lot to their truck and opened the door for her. Before closing the door he took another look at his wife. She was slouching terribly in her seat and her mouth was open. Mark reached forward and pulled off her sunglasses. She reeled for a second and her eyes fluttered open, lazily trying to focus on Mark.

"I don't feel good," she said. Mark sat her up straight, closed the door and got into the truck on his side.

"Its okay baby, probably just too much food," he said and started the car.

Mark drove fast, skidding out of the parking lot and flinging up dirt all the way to the main highway. Back on the main road, Mark felt a little better. He was concerned about his wife but if she was asleep maybe that was fine.

Mark was starting to feel a little tired himself.



He looked over to the passenger seat to check on Janey. She was asleep. He poked her shoulder to make sure she was alive and she shifted to his touch, a globule of drool leaked out of her mouth.

Mark laughed aloud, relieved. She was just a little tired, but then he stifled his thoughts as he himself felt dizzy.

Mark grabbed the water out of the passenger seat cup holder and took a long sip of it, then splashed it on his face hoping it would wake him up. He then dropped the water bottle on his lap and cold water splashed on him. He cursed, and squirmed in his seat trying to avoid the spill, but it was already soaking into the crotch of his jeans, and the seat underneath. Mark grabbed the bottle and placed it into the cup holder with forced calm.

When Mark's eyes met the road again, time slowed as his brain processed what he saw. There was a figure in the direct line of his car.

Pete, Mark thought and spun the wheel hard, the world flooding with the sound of rubber fighting asphalt. Adrenaline and an angry rush of fear pulsed through Mark turning his world into a mess of feelings and helpless instincts as the car turned over on its side and flipped over and over in the desert road. Mark heard voices in his head and heard screaming and heard

screeching tires and heard twisting metal and heard shattering glass. But all he saw was black.

6.

Mark woke up to his leg screaming out in pain. He woke up in a dank hole of a place. He woke up in the dark. He was lying on a dirt floor, at least he hoped he was on the floor, the whole world was spinning. He coughed up dirt and tried to sit up, but instead felt blinding pain from his leg. He immediately lay back down.

Mark whimpered and closed his eyes.

"Janey?" He called out.

"Janey?" The room called back.

Mark shifted slowly, trying to gain a sitting position, he gritted his teeth against the sharp pain and tried to let his eyes adjust to the dark.

He was in a jail of some sort. A tiny cell adorned with dirt and piss and a door made of metal bars.

He looked down at his leg. No obvious break, but something was not right in there. He had broken his leg once as a kid playing red rover, and it had felt something like this, except that time he had woken up in a Hospital. He had thought *that* was terrifying. Mark thought about Janey being in his same position and shivered.

Dragging himself over to the bars of the door and using the bars, he pulled himself to his feet. He could see more now, a stair case leading to a door, and to his left and right more empty cells.

"Hello!"

"Anybody?"

No response.

He rattled the door hard and yelled out, but nothing responded except the echo of his cell.

Mark was starting to panic now, were they going to leave him here to die? He was going to move to California and start over. This was supposed to be a nice, relaxing trip to see a little bit of the desert. Now he was in a prison cell, broken leg, and Janey...

He rattled the door harder still.

"Let me out of here!"

"Janey!" this time the door slid open with a metal screech.

Mark almost fell over, but instead he grabbed the door and hobbled out of the cell over to the stairs. With a clumsy hop, he climbed the stairs to the door at the top.

Mark held his breath in front of the door and starred at the tarnished gold handle. He turned it.

The moon was out, and with it all the stars of the desert. The door had let him out in some back alley, behind a building.

He hobbled out into the main street, which was hardly more than a dirt road lit by faint streetlights. All the buildings were lined up besides one another without a hint of activity within. No lights or sounds, except the click and clack of Marks shoes on the pavement. The parking spaces that had been used by the townspeople the previous day were empty now, save for one spot.

Mark's truck was not nearly as damaged as he would have thought. The damage to the front was severe, the whole right side was crushed but the rest of the car looked fine besides some significant scrapes and denting. Inside the car was empty, no sign of Janey.

"Janey!" he screamed into the street. His voice rattled against the old wooden facades.

Mark walked over a blue wooden store called, "Reynold's General Store" and rattled the front door, yelling for someone to let him in. To Mark's deep surprise a light turned on inside the building, and a small woman with thick glasses opened the door to him.

"Sir its very late, is it important?" She said.

"I'm sorry, its just. I've, had a car crash and, I-I can't find my wife." The old woman looked at Mark thoroughly and then her face formed concern.

"Oh dear," she said. "Well, come in, I'm sure my husband can help."

She led him into the store which had everything from fishing lures and poles, to microwavable burritos and jerky, and on the counter in the poorly lit room was a rack of large knives for sale, each for nine ninety-nine. Mark followed the woman beyond all of this to a door in the back which she opened and led him into.

Inside the room an old man sat in a rocking chair, the room was small and close with the smoke from the man's pipe.

"Charlie, this man's had some, trouble on the road. He was lookin' for some help," the woman said. The man's face did not change and he continued to suck from the pipe, blowing rings of smoke against the wood panelling of the room. Silence gave the sounds of the pipe strange clarity.

"Everything all right son?" The man said after a bit.

Mark exploded, "Sir, I crashed my car up the road, and I woke up in...some jail. A prison! My wife's is gone! My wife, is gone, and there is nobody here!"

"Well, I'm here son," the man said patiently, "why don't you slow down. Now you say you woke in a prison?"

"Yes, and I can't find my wife. She was in the car when I crashed, her name is Janey."

The man paused for a while, and blew a few more smoke rings to saturate the room. As he rocked in the chair it let out tiny squeaks.

"Son, I'm sorry about your wife. Janey you said was her name?" The man moved to the far door.

"I'm sorry."

Mark's patience was a stretched rubber band, and his stomach was heaving.

"What?"

The man approached Mark and put a big hand on his neck. It was warm and coarse, but when the hand touched him, he felt his anxiety melt. He felt peace. He felt home for the moment.

"Mark, I'm sorry," he said. "Sometimes, there is only so much you can do. Even when its hard. Especially when its hard."

"You need to take what you have and leave this place."

"What do you mean leave! How can I? What about Janey?"

"I know."

"What is this?"

"There's the door son, listen to what I said, I'm sorry," The man pointed to the door on the other side of the room and stood up, shepherding Mark to the door.

"Let him have what he wants son," he said, and then pushed Mark through the open door.

Once Mark walked back outside, he was shocked to see that he was again on the main drag of the town in front of his truck. He looked back at the door he had just left to look for the man, but no one was there. The door he had exited was closed, and it

was not from "Reynolds General store," but from "Jaime's Antiques."

Mark ran across the street back to the general store and pounded on the windows and door in a panic.

"Hey! Let me in!" he yelled but this time nothing happened. Panting, he gave up and slunk away towards his car. Mark looked up at the empty desert sky and asked Janey what he was supposed to do.

She did not answer.

At that moment the street lamps flickered. Mark froze and looked up. Again the street lamps flickered and this time died, leaving the street and Mark in darkness.

He didn't move at first, he didn't believe the dark would last. The lights would come back on, he thought. But the lights did not come back on and Mark felt uneasy standing still. He could remember where his car was and he walked over to where he thought it was. As he walked he heard a sound. A long scratch. Then another, ten, fifteen feet away, the opposite direction of the car. A crackle, then a pause, then two quick crunches, uneven steps. Mark didn't think before he broke into a run, hobbling as he could. He turned around, but the dark was still empty to him, he yelled out at the sounds following him. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out a figure. The steps were coming

at even intervals now, a slow walk coming towards him. Then another sound came out of the night. Whistling.

Mark could see now what was following him. A broken old man with a heavy limp and a dark cowboy hat. In the dark Mark couldn't see the face, but he knew who it was by the smell.

"Pete, help me, please?"

Pete moved close to Mark. The moonlight shone off of the old man's ragged face. His skin was sloughing off and revealing bone over his cheekbone. Mark withdrew but he was against the car already.

"I told you Mark. Only happy men whistle." The whistling resumed into no tune in particular. Pete walked around the opposite side of the car to the passenger seat. The door opened, and Mark heard another set of footsteps. Pete whistled and Mark heard that the new footsteps were slow, and tentative, each step a choice and with no grace or symmetry.

"Janey?" Mark said and held out his arms to her, but she did not answer him. The old man was holding her up, as her legs were shattered and her neck was bent at an angle. Blood seeped down her face as she moved. She looked at Mark with sad longing but it was over soon, and she looked away.

"See you when I see you Mark," Pete said, and turned with Janey to walk down the road. In the moonlight, Mark could see Janey as she was, beautiful and whole. He saw her as she was



when they left their home, he remembered her at her home in Connecticut, smiling. He remembered her in his arms.

When the street lamps flickered on, both were gone, and Mark was alone in the empty town.

6.

Mark drove throughout the night looking for someone to help him find his wife. He came upon the next town and made it to the police department raving for help, trying to describe his situation on a night of no sleep and a hurt leg. They sent him to the hospital to fix his leg against all his raving and screaming.

When Mark regained his senses, he told the Marlston police his story, but they could not find the people in the town off of Settlement Road. The town off of Settlement Road had been a ghost town for years. They didn't find Marla, the employee of the Sleepy Inn motel either. Mark told them about the man he had seen, Pete was his name. Pete, the old man. He knows, he said. They told Mark that Pete was the founder of Grand Settlement, and had been dead for a fifty years.

"That can't be possible, I saw him. At a gas station. In the town, on the road! He talked to me."

The officer spoke to Mark in calm words.

"I know all about Pete," the man said. "He's got a story around here." Mark gaped at the man, waiting for him to start.

"Sit down Mr. Dunhill," Mark hadn't noticed he was standing. When he sat down, the officer stood up and began pacing behind his desk.

"When Pete started that town, he quickly got into trouble. He and his wife were involved with a local gang run by a big indian guy named Reuben. Owned a restaurant there too, actually." The officer walked over to the shelf and pulled a black and white photo off the a shelf. In the photo Mark could see the restaurant "Rueben's Rueben" and in front of it, Rueben himself standing next to two young men. One had a black cowboy hat and was smiling obscenely, the other had a pipe in his mouth.

"Who is that?" Mark pointed to the man with the pipe.

"That's James Reynolds. He was the first sheriff of the town." The man paused and took a breath.

"That indian there raped Pete's wife, and killed er' too. He was a real son of a bitch that man. But he got his too. Pete knew what happened, and although they say Reynolds tried to stop him, Pete lost his mind with his wife. Pete murdered Reuben with his bare hands, and when Reynolds tried to bring him in, Pete, with his confused and angry mind, fought back, and killed poor Reynolds."

The officer paused there, and stopped pacing.

"Pete put a gun to his head that same day, Mark. Like I said, not a happy story."

Mark was more terrified than before, and felt he had to find Janey more than ever. This place was terrible and she could be anywhere, finding the same horrors that Mark had.

"It's a sad story," the officer had said.

Mark never left west Texas. He stayed there, trying to track down the people he claimed stole his wife from him. He told anyone who would listen about the danger of the desert, and after a while, people knew his name.

As he became old and grey, he became somewhat of a legend with his tattered clothes and limp. A living specter of grief. He was lost with the idea of finding Janey, and was filled with the guilt of having lost her in the desert. He thought he could save her.

One day, Mark was at a gas station, puttering around as he did these days. He was empty of anything real, but still he fantasized about his younger days, the brighter days.

Mark heard whistling, and felt a tickle in his brain somewhere. He called out to the whistler.

"What you whistlin' there?" But no one responded. He was angry at this kind of disrespect, what kind of manners the youth have. You are supposed to respond when spoken to.

"I said what you whistlin' there boy?" He said it this time with a little fire in his voice.

"Oh, a little of this a little of that," the voice said.

Mark felt his old heart pulse and put a hand to his chest, his breaths became heavy. The brush of calm wind and the other desert sounds disappeared from his mind. He moved around the pump, desperate to see the man. The man was tall and strong with all the swagger of youth, but he had his back to Mark, so Mark moved to get closer. He had to see the man. Everything in him said so. Each step was an effort though, and the space between him and the young man seemed miles. His damned leg was slowing him down but it was more than that. A whole desert lay between him and the man.

Just then, a young woman came out of the convenient store and walked to the car. When Mark saw the woman's face his mouth went dry, and he could not speak, his eyes focused solely on her. He could feel nothing for the first time since he'd crashed his car. Light flooded his mind as a door opened.

Then, the whistling man grabbed Mark's old hand hard sending a wave of pain through his arm. Mark's heart did another flip. That black hat.

"Name's Pete!" the man said. His face, Mark thought. The face from the picture so many years ago. Mark could not respond.

"What's wrong old man?" Pete said. "You know, you should be careful out here, the desert has a way of turning a man's mind into mush."