

Ghosts Of July

Her truck took the sharp turns of the mountain road with ease. Dust curled up from the tires and drifted through the open window of her father's '97 Chevy. The truck had been towed to her apartment in the city after he died last year. Driving it reminded her of him: fishing in Clear Lake, nights at the drive-in.

They were memories long since buried, as the past always is, but somehow always clawing its way back.

Her long red hair flew wild in the cold mountain air.

It was hard to believe she hadn't been home in ten years.

Her mother's house was a modest two-bedroom near downtown. The old ranch-style home of her childhood was long gone, sold off to some venture capitalists hoping to cash in on scenic resort development.

A wooden sign hung above the door that read "Everyone's Welcome Here", painted in one of those old-timey holiday card fonts.

As she stepped out of the truck, the front door swung open. A woman in her late sixties came hurrying out or moved as quickly as her knees would allow.

"Sara, you made it!" her mother called out. "Come on inside. I made us dinner!"

"Wow, that dinner was great. Much better than I remember your cooking to be," Sara joked as she put the dishes in the sink.

The kitchen was small. It was about the size of her apartment kitchen in the city, and much smaller than the one she grew up with.

This may not have been the home of her childhood, but the smells were there: her mother's perfume, the stink of old dogs.

She could see herself finding a cozy spot here to breathe for a couple of weeks before heading back. Every once in a while, she kept telling herself she needed this, that she wanted this.

Family wasn't something you just shrugged off and left behind, no matter how painful the past had been.

"When you get done there, go grab your stuff from the truck. I've got Alex's room made up for you. It's the second door on the right, past the bathroom," her mother said, motioning toward the hallway.

The gray in her mother's hair caught Sara off guard.

It was strange for both of them. Sara and her mother had never really imagined growing older.

They never thought they would feel the weight of age pressing on their shoulders.

The screen door slammed with the wind. Sara leaned against the side of the truck. The soft hiss of a soda exhaling cut through the rhythmic rustling of the hills just before she took a drink. Light from the setting sun reflected off her brown sunglasses, casting a warm glow in the dusk.

This was her hometown, a place she once knew so well. There used to be open fields for miles around, but not anymore. Fast food joints, convenience stores, vape shops, and liquor stores now shaped the landscape of her youth.

She tossed the can into the recycling bin after finishing the last of the backwash. As she reached over to grab her two duffle bags from the passenger seat, she heard her mother calling from inside the house, asking what was taking so long and if she needed help.

"No, Mom, I got it. Just taking it all in. It's been a long time," Sara called back, loud enough to be heard over the wind.

She picked up her things and headed back inside.

The posters on the walls were the same ones she remembered. The pin-ups the boys loved when she was growing up still lived here in Alex's room, untouched and frozen in time. The proportions of the room felt all wrong, but otherwise it was just like the old days. Sara moved her fingers down an old CD rack, pausing to savor the names of music she'd forgotten a lifetime ago. A stack of VHS tapes sat next to an old CRT television. It was the same TV she grew up with, the same one she and Alex used to watch Saturday morning cartoons on.

She reached over and grabbed the tape on top, the label reading July 4th. The rest of the label had been worn off, so the year wasn't immediately evident.

Hooking her finger under the top, she flipped the cover on the cassette and exposed the videotape inside.

Staring into the depths of the magnetic tape, she could see the home movie play out in real time inside her mind.

When she closed her eyelids, the movie came in at an even higher resolution.

Roman candles flew over the old windmill as firecrackers exploded like movie-butter popcorn in the driveway.

A hand crept under a burger on a charcoal grill and flipped it in a ballet of carnivorous virtue.

"Alex, food is ready. Come grab a plate," she heard her mother call out over the sound of her father's boombox, tuned to classic rock radio.

In that hot July sunset, she saw the door to the backyard open and her mother motioned to someone in the doorway as she drifted back to the present.

Sara closed the cover and set the tape back on the stack.

She didn't need to watch it. Her version would always be better.

"I tried to fix it just how he left it," her mother said, motioning around the room.

"These women he had on his walls look damn near church-like compared to what you see today."

She let out a chuckle, and Sara smiled.

"You okay?" her mother asked, a slight concern in her voice.

"Yeah. I'll be alright. I think I'm going to ride down the strip, see what's up with the old places."

"Well, make sure you take the house keys in case I'm not awake when you get back."
She pointed at the key rack as Sara got ready and headed out.

She rounded the corner on Main Street, passing the boarded-up remains of what used to be Hal's Hardware. Its guts spilled out of the abandoned loading dock, a raw wound in the quiet street. She and her dad came here every summer when it was time to set up the pool. She remembered how heavy the chlorine jugs felt when she was a kid. She wondered how they'd weigh now. Further down the strip, new shops had popped up where nothing had been before: a corporate coffee chain, a big-box retailer, a franchise bookstore. The mom-and-pop stores of her childhood were now just a footnote in the town's fading history. Just when it felt like she was lost in a foreign land, she spotted the familiar neon glow of Randy's Dive. Yeah, it was exactly as it sounded. She pulled the truck into a spot near the door and made her way inside.

She was pretty sure no one had smoked in there for at least a decade, but that stink of slow death seeped from every wall and crevice. A cough felt inevitable, but she held it in. On the stage, a guy about her age played a Don Henley cover of a song she'd heard on the radio a thousand times growing up. He was all alone, just him and his guitar, the spotlight lighting him up like a messianic figure.

After heading over to the bar, she sat down on a stool.

"What can I get you, little lady?" the barkeep asked, moving a towel over a wet spot on the bar in front of her.

"That looks good right there," Sara said, pointing to a beer on tap.

"Coming right up," the barkeep acknowledged, swinging around to fill an icy mug.

The beer tasted good. Fresh and cold. Not like the IPAs she was forced to drink back in the city. This was actually bearable. It reminded her of nights at the old lumber mill back in high school, nights spent doing things she was told never to do.

"That's all I've got for tonight. Thank you guys for listening." The guitar man stepped off the stage. Sara watched as he set his guitar in its case and thanked a couple near the back. Then he started toward the bar, and for a brief moment, their eyes met.

"Is anyone sitting here?" he asked, pointing to the stool next to her.

"No, there's not," Sara said, offering a small smile.

"Good stuff up there."

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "People like the classics. Brings them back to simpler times."

The barkeep slid a cold mug across the bar, and he took a drink. After setting it down, he turned to face her.

"My name's Mark."

His eyes held the kind of sadness that felt too vast to name, like an ocean pressing against paper-thin glass, just waiting to break and spill over. She'd never met him before, but somehow she knew this was a soul that had weathered many emotional storms.

"You play up here a lot? I've been gone for a long time. The town doesn't look the same as I remember it," Sara said, taking another drink.

"Nah, I'm only here for a couple more days. Then I'm back on the road," Mark replied. He paused for a moment, thinking to himself. "It's weird what you said, though, about it not looking the same. I've been through hundreds of towns now, and they all look the same to me. Seems like places used to look different, huh?"

He chuckled, though something in his tone lingered.

"You tour just playing covers, or do you have your own stuff too?" Sara asked, genuinely curious.

"Yeah, I've got some originals. People don't really want to hear those, though. They want the old stuff. The classics. But yeah, the originals are why I do this. Maybe I'll be a rockstar one day, maybe not. At least I'll know I tried, and I won't be staring down the barrel of old age with a lifetime of regrets and missed chances."

He smiled and took a drink.

"If I wasn't doing this, I'd probably be back home, barely making enough to eat, working some factory job, settling down with a girl I went to high school with. Out here, sometimes I don't eat at all, but the bars usually give me free beer. And every once in a while, I get to talk to interesting people."

Sara laughed, smiled a little wider, and took another sip.

The sunlight filtered through the white blinds beside the bed, warming the room with the glow of mid-morning. She turned to look at the clock. It was almost ten. She had slept the first part of the day away and had no regrets.

A business card rested on the nightstand.

"Mark Everley: I accept all paying gigs! Even bad paying ones!"
She couldn't help but smile.

She and Mark had talked until closing time. He told her about growing up in Ohio, getting expelled from university, and the winding, uncertain life he had carved out on the road. Sara didn't say much. She just listened, smiled, and pictured his life as a series of truck stop postcards.

She had enjoyed their time together more than she expected. And she found herself thinking she might go see him again tonight, if fate allowed. Maybe even catch more than the tail end of his set.

"Time to get out of bed. It's almost noon.", her mother yelled from the living room. "Hey, quit exaggerating. It's not that late.", Sara responded with a laugh. She slid off the side of the bed, and immediately began making up the baseball themed sheets and comforter. She stared at the diamonds on the dark blue bedspread for longer than she should have. A sinking feeling filled her whole chest. Some feelings can't be described in words. In the bathroom, she stared at herself in the mirror, wondering who this person is that she is now. She wondered how the world viewed her. The toothpaste tasted almost sugary as she brushed her teeth. It was something to kill some of the numbness of this exact moment. After she rinsed her mouth out she washed her face, she headed into the living room where her mother was sitting.

"No TV in here?" Sara asked with curiosity.

"Nah, I never bothered to upgrade, realized I didn't need it. I got my books, and if I wanna see a movie or something I'll go down to the Twin Theater," her mother responded, sounding strangely satisfied.

"I guess you still have that TV in Alex's room too if you ever had the urge," Sara spoke as if offering a solution.

Her mother sat up in her reclining chair a little bit and leaned forward. "To be honest, I never really go in there. Washing the bedding and putting it back on was actually the first time I'd been in there in a couple of years."

This took Sara by surprise. She couldn't imagine not stepping foot in one of her bedrooms for that amount of time.

"Are you doing anything today? Want me to take you to lunch? Maybe we can catch an afternoon show later on?" Sara asked her mother, just wanting to do something for her, something that might make her happy.

"Nah, I got some stuff for sandwiches here. I don't think there's anything I want to see at the show either." Her mother responded with a kind of quiet resignation.

Sara looked down at the floor. She could feel a pressure in the room. It was like a massive balloon filled with words unspoken. A heaviness hung over the living room, a subtle darkness. A curse that could never be undone.

"Well, I was thinking about going for a drive again. The place has certainly changed from how I remembered it," Sara noted.

"Well, please be careful out there. People drive like madmen these days. I guess they always did," her mother responded.

"You wanna come along? I'll clean out all the junk from my passenger seat," Sara asked, hoping with everything she had that she could get her mother out of the house for at least a little bit.

"No, it's okay. Go ahead. I'll make myself some lunch here, and I've got one of my mystery novels I need to get back to," she replied with a little smile.

It wasn't the smile of happiness.
It was the smile of lost hope.
Of years and years of letdowns and tragic mishaps.

It crushed Sara to see her mother like this.

Driving past the old high school, Sara thought about how little she'd known back then. What would she even say to that younger version of herself? That things would be okay? She wasn't sure she could say that. It wouldn't be true.
Those days felt sun-bleached now, dipped in a warm orange haze, like an old polaroid picture with all its fades and imperfections. A different life. A different girl.

She stopped by Ruby's for lunch, a little sandwich shop just down the street from the high school. She'd been here countless times as a teenager.

The checkerboard floor was still there, untouched by time. The tables sat in the same arrangement, like nothing had ever changed.

Walking in felt like stepping into a time machine. That was exactly why she came. It made her feel so much younger, like the past ten years had never happened.

Sara sat down at a table and noticed a familiar-looking waitress walking over.

"Hey, how are you doing today? Welcome to Ruby's. Our monthly sandwich is the pulled beef, made right here in-house, and I'd definitely recommend it," the waitress said, still looking down at her order notepad.

Sara looked up. "How are you doing, Madison?" she asked politely.

"Wow, it's been so long. I didn't even realize it was you. When did you get back into town?" Madison replied, finally meeting her eyes.

"I came in to see my mom. I'm only here for a couple days," Sara said. "I've been doing well. How about you? How are things these days?"

Madison looked toward the ceiling and replied wistfully, "You know. Just trying to make it. I had to take this after I got laid off from my real estate job. I guess we're just in a bad market right now for families buying homes. Plus, Dave's income isn't enough for us and the kids to live on alone."

"Dave?" Sara asked curiously.

"Yeah, Dave Simmons. I'm sure you remember him from high school. We've been married about six years now," Madison explained.

"Yeah, he always seemed like a great guy to me. Congratulations to you both," Sara said with a smile. "That sandwich you mentioned does sound good, though. Let me try that?"

"Sure thing. I'll get that right out to you, and I'll bring you a drink cup," Madison replied with a smile.

Sara could feel the tension between them. Madison didn't really know what to say, and Sara didn't want to reveal anything more.

As the waitress walked back to the kitchen, Sara wondered how things might have turned out if she had never left her hometown. If she had never seen anything beyond what she grew up with.

Would she have settled down with someone from high school? Had a couple of kids? Taken beach vacations in the summer and worked a job she hated until the day she took her last breath?

Would that have been a life fulfilled?

Would she have noticed the town changing little by little, or would she just wake up one day and realize it didn't look like it used to?

These are all questions that she would never know the answers to, and maybe she didn't want to know. Maybe ignorance is truly bliss.

Lunch was surprisingly good. Probably the best sandwich she'd had in a long time. Back in the city, most sandwich shops were corporate owned. The quality had been stripped away in favor of shareholder profits, and you could taste the absence. Places like this still existed across the country, but she knew they wouldn't for long. While waiting for her food, Sara had noticed how empty the restaurant was, especially striking at lunchtime. It was the kind of observation that would stay with her, even if she wished it wouldn't.

She left her payment on the table with a generous tip, waved goodbye to Madison, and said how happy she was to see her again. Then she headed out to the truck.

It was only mid-afternoon, but she figured she'd go ahead and stop by Randy's. She was hoping Mark might already be there, setting up for the night.

As she pulled into the gravel parking lot, she spotted Mark sitting on the bench out front. He wore old-school black sunglasses and a faded t-shirt that once bore a band logo, now nearly erased from too many washes.

He looked up and gave a small wave, signaling he'd noticed her.

"How are you doing today?" Mark asked as Sara settled beside him.

"I'm okay. I wanted to get here early so I wouldn't miss any of your music. Last night I only caught the covers. They were definitely good, but I wanted to hear some of your originals," Sara replied with a smile, the hot summer sun catching on her white teeth.

A gust of wind blew dust into Sara's eyes, and she slipped on her sunglasses. They sat quietly for a moment, listening to the sounds of the road and the low hum of music drifting from inside.

"So, where are you headed tomorrow?" Sara asked.

"Ah, somewhere down the road. Maybe two or three hours from here. Not a big town, probably something like this," Mark replied.

Sara clasped her hands and stared down at the concrete beneath the bench, its cracks spiraling out like veins worn thin by time. The paint on the bench flaked away easily as she ran her fingers across it.

"You ever wonder what any of this is for?" she asked quietly. "Why we keep going, even when it feels like things just keep getting worse?"

Mark sat in silence.

When he finally spoke, his voice held the kind of quiet resignation she knew all too well.

"I think we keep going because we have to," he said. "I used to think I was living for other people. Like they needed me. I'd get up every day just so they wouldn't worry, so they wouldn't be sad. But I never felt like I was actually adding anything to their lives. I was just... there. Background noise."

He rubbed his hands together slowly, staring ahead.

"They'd probably feel it if I was gone. But not for long. I think, deep down, most of us know we're forgettable. No one's going to remember us in fifty years."

He let out a sigh.

"I guess that's why I'm out here. Why I'm wasting my life on the road. I know it's all kind of pointless, but I still want to be remembered. Even if it's just by one person. I want to know I mattered to someone. Even if, in the end, that someone turns out to be me."

They talked more about their upbringings. Sara shared more than she had before, but not everything. No one ever shares everything.

They laughed over familiar memories, fell quiet over painful ones.

Eventually, they headed inside and had a couple of beers. Sara helped Mark set up his amp, and he showed her a few chords before the set.

It was her first time holding a guitar.

It felt good.

It felt right, in the moment she needed it most.

She grabbed a seat near the front as his set began.

He opened with the classics, the kind of dive bar anthems that got people in the drinking mood.

Songs that hit like a flood of memory, reminding you where you were the first time you heard them, and who you were with.

Then Mark shifted into a few of his own songs. They were quieter, more meditative, songs lived in, with pain etched into the walls of the houses built around them.

They reminded her of tunes she used to listen to on an old record player, the indie folk that shaped her formative years. She closed her eyes and saw herself back in her room, flipping through dog-eared magazines as the sounds crashed in waves from the small stage in front of her. It was a quiet kind of beautiful, the kind that destroys you from the inside with its sadness.

Mark finished his originals and returned to the classic rock fare. Sara had already told him she might head out before he was finished because she needed to go home and check on her mother. Mark had lost his own mother a couple of years ago, so he understood how much that bond means and what it feels like when it's gone. He had her number and promised to call if he ever passed through the city again. There was something about him, something rare and deeper than most of the men Sara had dated over the years. She hoped she'd hear from him again.

It was dark outside when she stepped out of the bar. She could still hear Mark playing inside, a cover of one of her father's favorite songs.

She knew all of his favorites and held onto the memory of them like precious artifacts, reminders of a man who once lived but was now gone.

As she climbed into the truck, the memories came rushing back. She realized how much she cherished it too.

Summer days with her father filled her mind, moments she would never get to relive.

What would he think of how she turned out?

Would he be proud of the woman she had become?

Regrets and missed opportunities followed her all the way back to her mother's house, past every place she had once stood, every place where she hoped she had left a mark, a scar on the landscape of the town that shaped her.

Pulling into her mother's home, she saw all the lights were out, even the front porch light. She could see a glow coming from the front bedroom, the one she had been staying in. The blinds that had filtered the sunlight earlier in the day now radiated a soft white glow out into the night.

The buzz from the streetlight interacted with the sounds of insects in the dark. They danced in waves of synchronicity, the world thriving just waiting for order.

The house was dark when she opened the door. She could barely see where she was going. Sara followed the light from Alex's bedroom, stepping over an empty liquor bottle on the floor. She didn't remember it being there before.

Alex's door was cracked just slightly, enough for the light to spill out. Sara gently pushed open the door and saw her mother lying on Alex's bed, the glow of the television lighting up her outline. Children laughing while firecrackers went off were coming from the TV's speakers.

She heard the voices of her mother and father yelling commands, asking everyone to be careful. "You'll blow your hand off with one of those!", her father chuckled, unworried because he knew he had taught them well. There was nothing to be afraid of. The whole future was ahead of them, and everything was going to be okay. They were times that seemed like a million years ago, the fourth of July celebrated with a Woolly Mammoth in the background. It also felt like it was only yesterday.

Her mother looked like she was sleeping, and she didn't want to wake her. Sara turned on the hallway light and walked back into the room. She turned off the old television and checked on her mother. She put her hand on her side and felt her breathing, slowing breathing in and out like waves on a calm ocean. Sleeping was how she was dealing with her pain, along with other things. Sara understood that now.

"I love you, mom.", Sara gave her mother a kiss before she lifted her hand. She looked back as she entered the hallway. Her heart broke into a million pieces looking at her mother, a woman that raised her and is now in an amount of pain that's indescribable.

After a moment, she moved into the living room and turned on the lamp. She sat down in her mother's recliner, immediately smelling her mother's scent as she reclined back. The house was silent. Sara felt like she could hear her own thoughts out loud, the pain of seeing her past and her mother brought into the future.

Sara grabbed a pen from the table beside her and ruffled through its drawer until she found a piece of blank paper. She began writing:

Mom,

I love you. I want you to know I love you more than anything.

Everything that has happened, I want you to know that's all in the past.

After the past couple of days here, I don't think this is the place you need to stay. I want you to come move in with me in the city. I'll take care of you. I need you, and I think you need me.

This is no kind of life you're living. I can't bear to see you like this. I'm leaving tonight. I'm going to start getting everything in order for you to move. I'll pay for it all.

Dad, Alex, they're gone now. The things we celebrated don't exist anymore. We can reminisce, but we can't hang on to it this tightly.

If you do, you're going to sleep the rest of your life away, and I don't want that.

Please, for me. Please.

I hope you'll come be with me, Mom.

I'll call you when I get home tomorrow, and we'll begin a new phase of our lives.

*Love,
Sara*

Sara folded the paper and wrote "Mom: Please Read" on the outside. After placing the note on the kitchen table, she walked back to Alex's room. She grabbed her bags and stood over her mother for another moment.

Tears cascaded down her face as she turned around and headed out of the house. It was going to be a long drive back home.

Starting the truck, she fantasized about a full house, full of voices and laughter, her future children playing with their grandmother, their father playing his guitar in the den. Birthday parties, holidays, smiles, graduations, marriages. A life made for home movies.

The cold realization of her empty apartment crept over her like a black wave as her truck's tires gripped the pavement.