

He hadn't been home for some time, and, up until recently, home hadn't crossed his mind. He had left a boy, though he was a grown man: twenty or twenty one - he couldn't remember. He'd left unceremoniously, not being one for theatrics or long, drawn-out ordeals that would delay one's departure. He remembered it'd been a frosty morning. The grass had crunched beneath his boots. Perhaps it was November?

He left a card for his mother on the kitchen table. He signed it in bold cursive, 'your loving son'. His father neither earned or deserved such tokens.

Time, as it tends to do, slipped through his fingers and disappeared. His body became disobedient, revolting against the ravishing of age: his hair grayed, joints tired, and skin became worn, creased with wrinkles, hardened by the sun. He had enjoyed the years, immensely: rambling on the Orleans strip, hopping round the Mississippi bayou, spending a time in the Hollywood-hills, even holding down a stint in a New York office. The years were kind, full of pleasure, but he felt them. He felt them like a boxer feels their chin shatter, or a dancer feels their ankle snap. And now, returning home, back to where he spent his gleeful youth in twilight-licked streets, winding brooks, amongst endless hills soft as breasts, he felt young once again, stripped of his years and exposed.

He flipped up his jacket collar against the nipping wind which stirred from the bow of the ferry. It playfully rustled his hair. He reached into the canvas bag slung over his shoulder, extracting a crumpled box of cigarettes. One left. He took out the cigarette, stuffing the empty box into a nearby trash bin. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and flicked it to life. Quickly a salty gust of wind snuffed out the flame, slapping him in the face. His eyes watered and he turned away. He cupped his hands over the end of the cigarette and flicked the lighter on again. This time it stayed alight and he inhaled when the flame touched the tobacco. The herb was dry and quickly formed a strong cherry. He exhaled his first puff of the cigarette, watching as the smoke was carried away in small wisps.

He'd meant to quit. Thirty years was a long time to smoke. He'd developed a cough. An aching, dry nuisance that tended to strike at night; waking him from some sensual experience he could only enjoy in dreams anymore. Smoking wasn't the same as when he was younger. With what they knew now he thought only a loony would pick up the habit. The sickness. The cancer. How many people had he known who rotted from the disease, their insides turning black. Too many. He took another puff, feeling a tension release. A tension he didn't know existed, not until the nicotine entered his bloodstream. He knew he would never quit.

The ferry, salt rusted, nearing decommissioning, was capable of carrying no more than twenty or so passengers - plus a handful of cars. There hadn't been one there when he grew up, and had there been, he likely would have left home much sooner.

The ferry hit the wooden stopper, that marked the end of its voyage, harder than expected. It sent a jolt across the deck that rocked those aboard. The workers, in luminescent work-vests, connected the ramps and walkways with machine efficiency. One by one the cars engines sputtered to life. An elderly voice echoed through a buzzing speaker system, giving the all clear. Walk-ons were the first to disembark. The throng of people filed out, up the ramp, onto the pier, but he stayed behind. He didn't want to brush against them, to hear their small talk, or smell the stench of their perfumes, colognes, and defrosting lunches. It wasn't that he was

misanthropic. Most days he would revel in the company of others; he was, by nature, an extrovert. But not today. And certainly not here.

He pulled the last tar-dripping drags from his cigarette, smoking it to the stained filter. He tossed the butt away and took his leave when the cars funneled out.

The pier was nothing like he remembered. It was updated, clean, metallic. Thick support beams plunged down into the water, allowing for the weight of heavy traffic. Food stands, performers, and portrait artists pandered to those who passed by. Benches, positioned to view the oceans horizon, were taken by seniors and young families. Flocks of seagulls hung on the fringes, ready to pounce on any stray piece of food.

In his youth the pier had been nothing more than a place to booze up, make out, and smoke hash. He'd spent many misguided nights on its rotting frame, under the vast swarms of pin-prick stars. He had his first lay there. Susan Doyle, a girl just turned sixteen with lustful curiosity in her eyes. They met up on a school night. He brought condoms. They didn't use them. Remembering the small tuft of hair between her legs, the softness of her skin, the smell of her as they thrust against each-other, it sent a spurt of blood to places long dormant. They had gone steady for a while, him and Susan. Eventually he tired of her, as he did most women, and found himself another, then another.

He wondered where Susan Doyle was now. Who she had grown to become. Had she married, birthed children. Maybe she never found love. He wondered where they all were, those faces and names that mixed together to form his childhood and adolescence. He felt it strange he never came across any of them again, out in the world, beyond the borders of this small sea-side town. No chance run in at a restaurant, or a familiar face on a busy street. Nothing. As if they were phantoms, bound to the place of their birth. Cursed never to leave.

He looked up, past the pier, to the colonial houses that rose in the distance, and beyond them, jagged mountains draped in the deep greens of summer. He breathed in the salty air. It tasted the same as he remembered. A little cleaner, sanitized. But the same.

He readjusted the canvas bag and set off. He knew the way. Blindfold him and he could still make it. Damn the years. Damn his senses. He swore he could. It was burnt into him. Past the colonial homes, left through a bend of commercial streets that blended into quiet residential areas. Then beyond that, where the green of the mountains cascaded down to form the towering forest of cedar. Where the creek dried in the heat, waiting for the cool of fall to rejuvenate its clay bed. A little red house with a metal chimney. The front light was on.