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Pierce Says Goodbye

By Daniel Clausen

Contently, with thoughts as simple as a child's, Pierce realized something he had known long before he had bothered to read about atoms, or strings theories, or anything so complex that it required a textbook to explain it. Long ago, he had known the simple power of wanting something badly. That if you held your breath, closed your eyes, and wished harder than you'd ever wished before, then, and only then...

*

For as long as he could remember looking at Jennifer had been his pastime. If he tried hard enough Pierce was sure he could trace back the lineage of his two eyes' infatuation to those awkward days in middle school, when he was still apt to run into poles or trip over himself while watching members of the opposite sex. Any attempt to go beyond that time would necessitate a re-imagining of his early childhood with her in it. An act that, despite its lack of factuality, Pierce felt confident he could do.

Quietly, contemplating a future without her, his eyes watched Jennifer timidly play with her food. He was reminded of how she looked the first time he saw her, seemingly simpler times. Their moods and gentle tones filled his head and he wanted desperately for them to return. And it seemed possible, just for a moment, that if he wanted to badly enough he could simply will things back to their beginnings.

Jennifer made a quick beat on the table with her fingers, before meeting his stare across the table. She looked at Pierce for a moment and smiled.

"Drumming practice," she explained. "When I go off to college, I'm going to join a rock band. Pay your way through rock and roll, that's what I say. For sure. Anyway, where were we? Oh yeah, two most offensive things a teacher said to you in the last four years of school? Quick, don't think about it, just answer," Jennifer said.

Pierce looked up for a second.

"You're thinking about it. Don't."

"Okay, here I've got it. One: You should be a teacher. And two: You should definitely be a teacher. This from people who admittedly hate their jobs."

"Hmmm. Interesting. Same teacher?"

"No. I don't think so. But then, I can't really tell any of them apart."

With a small bit of sour cream hanging from her lower lip, she looked as if she was about to say something. She bit her lip for a moment, licked the sour cream free and thought better of it. She then returned dutifully to picking at her potatoes.

Pierce too wanted to say something, but instead swallowed his mind's content with a spoonful of baked beans and pondered her features. Jennifer wondered why Pierce had gone silent when just a second ago he had talked so carelessly. More than his words though, she longed for a quiet place where he could touch her thoughtfully: caress her cheek, tug gently on her nose, or some more adult gesture he had only recently added to his repertoire. She wondered where his hands were and waited for them, but when she looked up, Pierce only smiled lightly, his hands folded in front of him.

"From the first time you brought me here, I loved this place," Jennifer said. "It reminds me of you, Pierce. Simple, quiet..."

"Oh, I'm simple, am I? Well that's okay, because you're a stuck-up nerd. You know what the real best part about this place is: it's relatively free of jerks and alcoholics. Not an easy thing to pull off in South Florida."

There was a moment of silence, and he thought tactically about how to fill it. "I think you look really nice tonight, Jennifer." His voice came out awkward, and he wished his voice could have had the smoothness of a Sean Connery, even though Jennifer denied ever liking the original Bond.

"You always say that. But tonight, I need description. In what way do I look nice?" she asked.

"The way you always do, I guess, but also different. The way you looked beautiful the first time I met you, and also the way you're beautiful now. Like you can pull it off without even trying." It wasn't what she had wanted, or what she had asked for, but then Pierce never got it quite right. It was part of his charm.

She smiled at him and he smiled back. They were kind smiles, and Pierce despised them because they made the night feel desperate and final. He waited in the hope that she would say something. But when she didn't, instead of breaking the ice with some crude comment, a joke, or a not so clever insight, he simply let the silence lie. Pierce's eyes went out the window and into the infinite ocean.

After playing with his shrimp for a few uncertain moments, toying with the ice in his soda, he turned to re-mashing his mashed potatoes, suppressing their right to free speech, and implemented on top of this a severe campaign of political repression (the potatoes were getting a bit too critical of his abuses of the fork).

Jennifer spoke, desperate to break the silence. "So what are you reading these days? Are you still in your science geek phase or have you finally moved on?"

"I don't think I'll ever get a handle on science. It's always been my weakest subject," Pierce said. "Actually, I'm finding the time to read more science fiction."

"Anything good?"

"H.G. Wells."

"Classic SF. Not usually your genre of choice. Let me guess: *War of the Worlds*?"

"Nope."

"*The Invisible Man*?"

"Not that either."

*

There was a short time in high school when Jennifer had been obsessed with postcards. It started with the realization that she rarely traveled. From this simple thought came the realization that she had never had a good reason to buy postcards. Pierce received the first one, on a random day, in the fall semester of their senior year. The first one was a picture of a beautiful beach, not unlike the one they lived near, with the simple message: Missing you, babe. Love and kisses from my room.

Pierce found it amusing. He quickly chalked it up to one of Jennifer's whims and thought nothing more of it. That was until a postcard came the next week and the next. Pierce always made it a habit to thank her for the postcards at school, and had the better sense at that point not to ask about her rationale.

The custom died out around the time Jennifer realized she was going to go away to school. Then it became serious, and the act of sending a postcard took on gravity. Science being Pierce's weak point, he didn't quite understand the interplay between emotions and physics--at least not yet, but he did understand how Jennifer's decision to leave suddenly made things more serious.

Weeks had gone by without postcards. Pierce understood the reasoning, he thought. He understood that soon there might be more postcards, but not from her room.

The last card, then, had to be attributed to spontaneity. Written on it was the line: *One last memento, in the hope that we might grow younger together.* On the card were a young boy and a young girl, no older than seven or eight. Jennifer had drawn a line to the boy and written Pierce over it. There was an arrow pointing to the girl, over which was written Jennifer. The boy and the girl were on the beach together, and the little boy was leaning over to kiss the girl.

He embedded the image in his mind of the little boy and girl on the beach. With his eyes closed, just before he went to sleep he could see them: the little boy held the girl's hand in his own. Standing together, the boy put his lips on her cheek in the most innocent but grand of gestures.

Pierce hung the postcard on his wall and committed the image to memory once every day before going to bed even though it made him sad to think that they could indeed not grow younger.

*

Their stomachs filled with steak and mashed potatoes they shrugged off their shoes and walked along the shore until they found a place that was deserted. Looking up at the stars sometimes at night, Pierce wondered if there wasn't some planet out there with a quiet beach he and Jennifer couldn't live on. Whereas the beaches of Florida were smooth with sand, soft and beautiful, he wondered if out there, there might be some beach with even

finer sand, whose transparent waters betrayed glows of exotic fish. More than anything, though, he wanted to return to the beach in the postcard. Not a science-fiction beach, but a fictional beach none-the-less because the two kids in the picture were hopelessly, irretrievably young.

They sat down next to each other, and watched the waves die slowly into the sand. The sun was coming down. What once seemed like a slow, complacent sunset, now seemed to move too fast.

"Have you thought about applying to any colleges?" Jennifer asked, looking off into the ocean.

"Actually, I haven't," Pierce answered. "I've had other things on my mind."

"You know, you should put some serious thought into it. It's only your future, Pierce," Jennifer said.

"I will," he responded. "But not now."

A seagull flew overhead, and Pierce was content to look at it for the short time it appeared.

Jennifer looked at Pierce as he watched the bird fly overhead. She picked up Pierce's hand from the sand and kissed it. "You're a really talented person, Pierce."

"Thanks," he said simply, hoping the matter would die.

"I just want to see you do good things with your life, that's all. I don't want to see you waste your talents."

"I think I am doing good things with my life. I mean, I have a good job, and I do things in my free time that I think are meaningful, and, of course, I'm dating you. I'm all right."

"Things change, Pierce. You can't stay eighteen forever." Jennifer looked off for a moment. "You're a great person Pierce, and yes, you have a good job, but ten or even five years from now you might not think so anymore. And, well, the things you once thought were pretty great might not be so great."

"I don't know," Pierce said. "I think you're pretty great, and I can't ever see that changing. I'm glad you think I'm some kind of great person, but I know I'm just ordinary. That's okay, though, I don't dislike being ordinary. In fact, six days out of the week, I appreciate being ordinary. I can go to my job, not have to worry about being anything spectacular, go home, and then do something unimportant. And the seventh day of the

week well...here I am." Pierce looked at her and smiled. "And when you're gone, well...I'll be alright. I'll read more books. I'll take up basket weaving and listen to rap music. I'll fulfill my life-long passion of playing the violin."

"Shut up, Pierce." Jennifer looked like she was about to cry, but she didn't. Pierce knew Jennifer didn't cry, and he loved her for that. Instead, she hugged him, and the two held each other. Pierce squeezed hard, and it was the first time Jennifer could ever remember him holding her so tight.

Pierce closed his eyes and focused on the image of the postcard. He tried to imagine himself as an eight-year old boy. With all of his will and desire he willed things back as far as they would go. To a simpler place and time, where simple gestures seemed monumental, and simple visions were impossibly powerful. He closed his eyes kissed her hard, and then let his kiss become something less practiced, unskilled, childish, his lips slid from her mouth and found a smaller rounder cheek than he remembered, he was sure now that he was no longer sitting but standing, he could feel new sunlight on him, like the day had begun, he was holding her hand, he hoped one more time, and opened his eyes.

About Daniel Clausen

I'm currently a Master's Student at American Military University majoring in Strategic Intelligence; I am also slowly working my way toward a certificate in humanitarian assistance at the University of South Florida. All of this I hope will lead to a challenging and rewarding position either in government, or working for a respectable company or non-profit.

My undergraduate degree was in English Literature and I've wanted to be a writer ever since I was in elementary school. Thus far I have had fiction published in *Slipstream Magazine*, *Black Petals*, and have had one non-fiction piece published in *Leading Edge Science Fiction* magazine. In addition, I've published one novel and one short story collection using Lulu.com's free software and publish on demand capabilities. Working on my short story collection—*The Lexical Funk*—has been my passion for the last four years. Anyone can download it free at my lulu website www.lulu.com/danielclausen.