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What Comes After Dessert

Ren Benton

ACKER'S SERV-N-GO BEGAN holding down the corner of Main and Magnolia in 1958. Since opening day, a seventeen-foot cowboy by the name of Howdy Hank had welcomed arrivals to Westard and waved off the departing after they'd stocked up on sufficient gasoline, Cheetos, and Mountain Dew to get far, far away.

Now, an expanse of cracked concrete landscaped with knee-high thistle greeted arrivals with *You should have stopped for gas back in Sterling, buckaroo.*

Because every kid who grew up in Westard knew nothing ever changed in Westard, Ben had zoomed through Sterling without glancing at its lone service station, and the needle on the rented Buick's gas gauge was getting to second base with E.

Because the Serv-N-Go had Servd-N-Gone, it looked like the happy couple would be going all the way before the night was over.

He was standing in Howdy Hank's abandoned

footsteps when a police cruiser stopped nose to nose with the rental.

The door of the cruiser opened, and a booted foot landed on the pavement. "Put your hands in the air."

Rural cops spent much of their time interacting with rural folk who felt a strong attachment to their guns. Rural cops consequently possessed a reasonable distrust of poorly visualized hands.

Ben raised his to prove he was harmless.

The lawman stepped out of his car. The last of the sun's rays glinted off his mirrored shades and his high forehead. "Now wave 'em like you just don't care."

Ben's hands dropped to his sides. "Fuck you, Officer Beaver."

Shane smacked him on the shoulder, a broad grin splitting his face. "I'm flattered, Fielder, but I can do better than you."

Ben had run into Shane five or six times in the past dozen years. Every time, they had slipped into the rhythm of friends who'd known each other since their diaper days, as if he'd never left town. "I almost didn't recognize you. Did you do something new with your hair?"

Shane ran a hand over his buzz cut and a lot of scalp that no longer required shearing. "This is what real men look like."

“Real old men.”

“Jude Law has this hairline.”

“Jude Law works out.”

Shane hitched his belt up over the beginning of a paunch. “He’s obviously insecure in his masculinity and compensating for having a little dick.”

When they were young and immature, Ben would have commended Shane for accepting his own diminutive penis. Shane would have responded by dropping his pants, challenging his accuser to a duel, and declaring himself the victor when the invitation to do a head-to-head dick comparison was declined.

The fact that they were having this conversation—again—suggested the ensuing years hadn’t come bundled with maturity, and neither of them had invested in the upgrade.

That was their rhythm.

To protect himself from exposure to Beaver junk, which the girls of South Marion High had avoided like it was radioactive, Ben sacrificed the perfect comeback in favor of being the bigger man, so to speak.

He inclined his head to indicate the razed lot.
“What happened here?”

“Same thing that’s happening all over. Bunch of bankers got in trouble for their gambling problem, and

people who never had any money to gamble with had to pick up the tab so the world didn't end, or some bullshit to that effect. How long has it been since you've been back?"

Ben missed his last annual visit due to a previous engagement with a judge, a couple of lawyers, and his now-ex-wife. The year before that, he'd convinced his mother to let him take her on a real vacation to get acquainted with his then-new wife. "About three years."

"You're in for a shock, then. How close to empty are you?"

"Too close to get back to Sterling." Funny he should ask. "Does this happen a lot?"

"Often enough the station in Sterling ought to put up a sign. Bitching about how nothing ever changes is the official sport of Westard and everyone's all-pro, so it's a kick in the nuts every time you come home and something else is missing."

In the days after Ellen moved out, Ben came home from work at night and played a few rounds of *What Did She Take While I Was Out?* He'd expected her to keep nibbling away at his property until he came home to an empty lot like this one, but on the fifth day, she took the last thing she wanted from their life together and left her key in the mailbox. No note.

Coming home to find his net worth further diminished had been a hand job compared to coming home to find he had nothing else worth taking.

He had recovered enough to quip about it now, to the kind of friend he saw five or six times every dozen years. “Sounds like my divorce.”

The twinge in his gut when he spoke of that failure had downgraded from the twisting, red-hot poker it was a few months ago.

“Mine, too. My dog is living with the Prius-driving asshole who’s banging my ex.”

Shane’s overt disgust distracted Ben from the remnant of his ulcer. “Which part are you more broken up about?”

“That dog deserves a man with a truck. You staying at your mom’s?”

If she would let him in. If not, the Back Seat Inn had a vacancy and required no reservation. “That’s the plan, such as it is.”

“I’ll bring by a gallon in the morning. Lock your car so it doesn’t wander off, and I’ll give you the guided tour.”

“Aren’t you on duty?”

“I could flip a coin, stroll to the other side of town, and be back here before it hits the ground. You’re the worst thing likely to happen in the meantime.”

Except, apparently, grand theft auto. Ben pressed the lock button on the key fob like a good city boy and followed his tour guide. Anything to postpone the reunion with his mother.

Westard proper consisted of four streets and four avenues. With the exception of Main Street, all were residential. Night life on the strip had never been wild, but there were always men jawing in front of the hardware store and women dragging cranky kids into the market on a quest for the fastest food available in a town lacking a drive-through.

Ben had never seen Main Street deserted. With no cars angled into the parking slots on either side of the street, the gray stripe through the center of town looked as wide as the highway that brought him here from the airport.

He used to do odd jobs for Jed Bartlett around the hardware store: sweeping, running to the post office, washing the big plate glass windows. Judging by the grime concentrated in the corners and fanning across the glass like brown frost, the dark, empty space beyond the windows wasn't a recent development. The cramped aisles, limited selection of inventory, and waiting two weeks for an off-stock part to be special ordered made that forty-mile trip to the nearest Home Depot seem like a day at the amusement park.

Sentiment couldn't compete with bulk pricing and a garden center.

Shane caught the direction of his gaze and nodded toward the adjacent building. "The clinic, too."

Ben's first nineteen years of cuts, breaks, burns, and coughs had been treated in that office. "I'm not surprised. Grady was nine million years old."

"He would have gone on for another nine million if he could afford the staff to handle all the insurance crap. He tried to get a replacement in here before he retired, but the medical needs of this whole town don't generate enough revenue to make it a 'viable business opportunity.'"

The natives of this cable-forsaken region hadn't been brainwashed by nonstop commercials to believe every sniffle, ache, and bad mood required a prescription. They prided themselves on being hardy and resisted going to a doctor unless bones were poking through the skin.

Now that the nearest doctor was an hour's drive away, they'd put a Band-Aid on that wound, too.

Ben's mother believed complaining was for weaklings. If anything ailed her, she needed a doctor who would bump into her outside of the appointment she would never schedule and knew her well enough to ask the right questions to unearth the diagnosis. In

the absence of such a relationship, Ben would be happier if she lived less than an hour away from the nearest emergency room.

How many other services had she been doing without? “Is Sheila still doing hair in her kitchen?”

“Sure is.” Shane smoothed a hand over his coif. “But she sold her house to Julie Acker and her new husband and moved in with Norma after Doug died, so her kitchen is across the street now, should you decide to get a manly haircut while you’re in town.”

“Nah, I’m good.” Ben was overdue for a trim, as usual, but he preferred a style that didn’t begin with *buzz* or *bow*, the only two manly haircuts he’d ever seen emerge from Sheila’s salon.

The sidewalk dipped in front of the market, the better to ease the passage of shopping carts and skateboards. His feet took root at the sight of those windows covered with plywood. How many times had he been one of the cranky kids dragged through that door three minutes before closing time because his mom had to work late and choose between feeding him dinner from a box and keeping him up until midnight cooking a dinner grandma would approve of?

He’d always hated those trips to the store, but now that the option was missing, he saw what a blessing it

had been to not have to go all the way to Sterling to get milk for his Cocoa Puffs. “Jesus, is anything left?”

“The bar is still open. Doing such a booming business, they expanded into the firehouse.”

“Tell me you mean you can report a fire and get wings and beer delivered with the same phone call.” The negative jerk of Shane’s head restored some heat to Ben’s twinge. “How the hell do you close a volunteer fire department?”

“The town owned the building and the truck and needed some cash. For what it’s worth, the volunteers will still come and point a garden hose at your fire.”

Worth about as much as pissing on it. No doctor, no food, no fire rescue. The town hadn’t been upwardly mobile from the day its foundering father misjudged where the railroad would be coming through by twenty miles and broke ground in the wrong spot, but its current state was tumbling toward third-world conditions. “I’m surprised we still have a cop.”

“I’ll be the next to go.”

Shane’s only career had been as the law in Westard, and he’d called dibs on the job in fourth grade. “That’s shit. What will you do?”

“Go to the troopers and try to get Westard on my beat so these folks don’t have a stranger pulling in the

driveway to separate them from their booze and guns.”

A responding officer who could reminisce about eating meatloaf at the kitchen table, playing ball with a son, or dating a sister had a chance of talking through a conflict, but no one discussed family business with outsiders. An outsider with a badge and a bunch of questions had a better chance of getting a tragic reception. “No wonder the bar’s still open. I’ve only been in town ten minutes, and getting wasted seems like the natural solution.”

“That goes around like a virus, but it’s not all bad.”

Bad enough. Throughout his childhood, like every other kid in Westard, Ben dreamed of escaping, but the town had been paradise then compared to this cluster of abandoned buildings in the middle of nowhere.

The only bright side was that his mother couldn’t possibly look him in the eye and claim there was anything to keep her here now.

The streetlight overhead buzzed to life in response to the darkening sky. Only half its counterparts did likewise, casting cones of jaundiced light that staggered from one side of the street to the other in a testament to municipal penny pinching.

The only well-illuminated establishment currently open for business was the bar.

Shane checked his watch. "If we're lucky, we can get some free cookies."

Ben perked up at the first good news he'd heard since discovering Howdy Hank had gone AWOL. "The bakery's still open?"

"Don't ask me how, but yeah."

Ben didn't need to ask. Stella Hood wasn't a Westard institution because of her pretty face. The woman was a wizard in the kitchen. "Stella always gave me free cookies."

Shane snorted as they crossed the intersection where Oak fell across Main like a bridge leading to one of the shady parts of the street. "Rumor has it almost every female in town gave you free cookies."

"Almost?"

In a town with a population of just over two hundred, *every female* of their approximate age amounted to ten. Any boy who hadn't made the complete circuit had been blacklisted after being a shit to one of them. The girl friend pool was every bit as shallow as the girlfriend pool, and those girls kept no secrets from each other.

"Nobody ever got their hands in Tally Castle's cookie jar."

The twinge grew spurs and twisted.

Ben hadn't thought about Tally since the last time

he came to town, where memories of her were embedded everywhere he looked. The front steps of the school, where he'd laid eyes on her for the first time. The lightning-split tree in the woods between their houses, where he'd carved their initials in the dead wood and, years later, kissed her for the second time. The boathouse at the lodge, where he'd asked her to marry him and she'd said no.

He went back to Seattle after that trip down memory lane and bought a ring for Ellen. *She* said yes.

But Shane didn't know any of that. Only two people knew, and the other one had left and never looked back at what she'd left in her dust. He'd never had to endure sympathy from all sides for that failure. He kept it private and close to his heart, as he'd done with his love.

Shane pushed open the bakery door, releasing a whirlwind of yeasty perfume that made Ben's mouth water. Stella would have her own kind of Band-Aid for that twelve-year-old wound.

The buzzer over the door stuck, competing with the greeting Shane called out.

A voice that was not Stella's smoker's rasp answered from the depths of the kitchen. "Swat that buzzer, will you?"

Shane said, "Sure thing."

Ben, standing just inside the door, stretched an arm overhead and smacked the buzzer into silence. Which sucker had the old slave driver gotten to work the late shift so she could go home early and watch the game?

The sucker stepped through the doorway separating the storefront from the kitchen. A loose braid of dark hair dangled over her shoulder, ending in a curl that rested high on her chest. An oversized flannel shirt committed the crime of concealing what Ben knew to be a body wet dreams were made of.

Scents from memories wiped out eau de bakery. Her flowery shampoo. Cherry lip gloss. All the warm, sweet, hidden places of her skin.

Or almost all of them.

Wide hazel eyes, at the moment dominated by mossy green, stared at him.

He returned the favor, searching for imperfections to use as armor against her. Short, fine hairs formed sweaty curlicues against her temples. A gray smudge angled across a forehead crimped with tension. Violet shadows, stark against the paleness of her skin, punctuated the delicate space between her nose and the inner corners of her eyes like outward-facing parentheses. A red spot marked her lower lip where she bit it when she worried, which had to be kissed extra gently because it was always tender.

Dammit, she was still perfect, and he was still defenseless against her.

That was *their* rhythm.

Tally Castle wasn't the first or the last girl he'd been a fool for, but she was the only one who made it happen by burning up all the oxygen so he couldn't breathe around her, leaving him lightheaded and incapable of intelligent speech or action.

He made his lungs inflate with the empty air, deflate, repeat in a facsimile of respiration that kept his affliction private and close to his heart.

Why did his weakness to The Fortress have to be the one thing immune to change?

END OF PREVIEW