

The Closing of the Joshua Tree Café

By Carl Peel

I was stealing soup on my seventeenth birthday from the big pot in the kitchen of my after-school job. Chicken noodle. It smelled salty and meaty. I thought Donald might like it. I'd ladled some into a quart-sized Styrofoam container, pushed the plastic lid onto the lip and wrapped it all in a plastic bag. I was easing it into my backpack, careful to not knock off the flimsy lid, when Mitzi's heels clicked behind me on the kitchen tile.

"What are you doing, Paul?" she said. Mitzi owned the café. Her hair was silver and her skin a walnut shell from the desert sun. Her eyes were all blue business.

"Just getting some soup."

"In your bag?"

"For Donald," I said.

"You need to steal soup from the café?"

"He has the flu," I said. "He's been in bed five days."

With a few steps she bridged the distance between us and put her arm around me. I resisted the urge to squirm away.

“I would hope if you needed something you would ask.” She looked like she was waiting for an answer to a question she hadn’t asked.

Just fire me already, I thought.

“Despite what you think you know, people are generous.”

“Sorry,” I said, my voice all miserable weakness. “I just thought this would be good for him.”

“Take it,” she said. She pulled her arm away. “It doesn’t matter anyway.”

I turned to go before she changed her mind. Or before the embarrassment of being caught stealing showed in my face, or before the miserable sulking started as I realized not she, and not anyone, had yet wished me a happy birthday, not at school, not at home, and not here at work.

“Paul,” she said. I stopped and faced her. “I’ve sold the Cafe.”

I may be a desert rat, and technically, a juvenile criminal, but I’m not stupid, I knew what that meant: I was out of a job.

“Saturday’s the last day.”

“Jeez, that’s quick,” I said.

“There’ll be a couple weeks extra pay. I know it’s not great news but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since Robert passed away. I can’t,” she motioned around the stainless kitchen with her eyes. “I can’t do all this without him. It’s too much for me.”

“You have us.” I said. “Staff.” I tried to sound upbeat. I’d generally been trying, to be in a good mood those days. Despite everything. I was, in fact, happy to be almost

finished with high school, to have summer coming up, when I'd get to work full time, try to catch up on the bills my mother had left behind. I was going to save my money and get out of here.

“I want to go back east, be closer to Patty and Mike and kids.”

A panic in me organized around thoughts of what I would do for money. I'd started working part-time for Robert, Mitzi's husband, when I was thirteen. It was a job my father, who'd been a friend of Robert's, had gotten me as his last fatherly gesture before he left my mother and me and moved to Oregon with a woman I never met and whom my mother only referred to as “His Bitch.” Come summer, I was going to pick up all the extra shifts I could, finally able to work the good ones, and spend my days in the blast of the café's air conditioning. Not anymore.

“What about the new owner?” I asked.

“They're a local couple,” she said. “Remind me of myself and Robert at their age.”

“Are they going to keep the café open?”

“They'll want to create their own place, naturally” she said.

I nodded, like I understood, the way I thought a smart adult, one who was only a year from living on his own would.

“Go home, take the soup to Donald. I'm going to gather whoever's here and tell them. We can talk later. You're young, bright. You'll be fine.” She hugged me, her bones jabbing mine, then left the kitchen.

I stood, stunned. The swirls of polish in the stainless steel looked like giant fingerprints the police might take off a fifteen-year-old kid stealing liquor from a Circle

K. I wanted to apply for college, but there was no money. I just wanted to earn enough to get the hell out of the desert, go to Los Angeles, or San Francisco.

I zipped up my backpack and moved to leave. Everyone finishing the lunch shift, and those coming in for the dinner one, sat around the big booth in the west corner of the dining room with Mitzy holding court.

I heard Cindy huff out, “I can’t believe you would do this to us.” Some people she was too confrontational, “bitchy” a customer called her once. But I admired the way she would speak up about stuff. I liked her confidence.

We’d gone on a date once, Cindy and I. She was a year older, eighteen, with straight blonde hair and jagged bangs, bright golden-brown eyes, a bit of freckle. She often stepped into the bathroom, her foot holding the door open to quickly check how she looked in the mirror. She knew she was pretty. I was shocked she said she’d go out with me. We ate dinner at the Thai restaurant in Yucca Valley, then saw a horrible cowboy band at Pappy & Harriet’s. She wasn’t in a good mood at first. Her father had said she’d have to pay her own insurance since it’d gone up on account of two speeding tickets. She complained about her mother’s constant harping. “Does a bathtub really have to be scrubbed after each and every soak?” She asked me rhetorically. Complaining about her parents seemed ridiculous to me. At least they were there. I told her about how my mom had followed some guy she did drugs with out to Missouri or somewhere. It was fresh then.

Later we drove out to Pipes Canyon and made out. We kissed and talked about all kinds of things, music (she liked Australian bands, which seemed random) and movies (she liked rom-coms which gave me hope) and what we wanted out of life — she wanted

to travel the world, have adventures; I wanted to finish school, work more, keep the lights on, escape eventually. We drank from the Peppermint Schnapps bottle she brought. She sat on my lap facing me in the driver's seat, her hair tickling my cheeks and neck. After a bit she stopped and sighed dramatically. She grabbed my hand and put it inside her blouse. I laughed, ran my fingers, nervously, across a nipple. I loved all of it, the round feel of her breast, the warmth of her mouth, the smooth brush of her hair on my neck. I was happy. We went on like that for a while, my hand on a breast, then the other, kissing. Then, she stopped.

“Don't you like me?” she said.

“Of course I do,” I said.

“Then...?” She wiggled a bit on my lap.

“Then what?” I knew what she meant, but the territory seemed complicated. Girls never wanted just sex. They wanted a boyfriend first. And I wanted a girlfriend. I didn't want to blow it by being a jerk.

“Then act like it,” she said, smiling.

I laughed, and felt like a dork for doing so.

We continued but after a while she rolled over into the passenger seat, sighing again. “I've got to go,” she said. “What time is it?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“I have to get home,” she dug in her purse. “Next time, maybe.”

It was our one and only date.

I exited the back door of the cafe, hearing Mitzi repeat what she's said to me., "It's not the same without Robert." It seemed a strange time to sell the café. She'd just had the parking lot dug up, for repaving. I wondered if that was already paid for or would fall on the new owners. A few Joshua trees lined the edge of it. A network of roots lay shallow in the dirt, radiating out from the trunks and entangling like they were reaching out to each other just to survive.

I passed the boulders Robert and I used to sit on during breaks. I rapped them with my knuckles for good luck and as a hello to Robert, wherever his spirit might be. I imagined him right around there, watching over all of this.

He'd said that when he retired, he would let me manage the place, maybe take it over or help me buy it when I was older if the time came. I was never sure if he was serious. I had the feeling he pitied me on account none of us had ever heard again from my father. Then there was the sudden, more recent, flight of my mother with her parting words of "You're old enough, you can take care of yourself."

Robert would expect me to be understanding toward Mitzi. And I was. She was an East Coaster. She'd talk about the vines and lush forests of Western Massachusetts. I'd seen pictures. She hated the summer here when it turned furnace hot. "Firepit of hell," she called it. The trees we had were mostly Joshua trees. Joshua Tree was a skeletal place where if you looked out at the dry, rocky landscape for a while you began to see it as the backbone of the earth, bumps of hill rising up like vertebrae, hard but fragile.

I wondered what Robert would have said if Mitzi wanted to move while he was alive. He'd loved the place. Mainly, I envied their kids.

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Our house was dark, the porch light out. I opened the door and felt the day's trapped heat rush by. I set my keys on the entry table and went around opening windows. Down the hall, I knocked on Donald's bedroom door.

I wanted to tell him that I thought we should do something, maybe talk Mitzi into selling the café to us instead of whomever she was selling it to. Maybe the deal wasn't done and we could still get in there. The news was always talking about entrepreneurs and small business loans, maybe we could get one. Or if not Mitzi's café, then another one, we could get another building, open something before the new owners did whatever they were going to do with it. That could have been a ray of hope for Donald. Since my mother left him for her meth friend, he'd hit a real slide. It'd been a year. It wasn't that long after when the recruiting office Donald worked for closed shop. He needed something as much as I did.

Donald didn't answer. I opened the door and found him slouched against his headboard, watching the little black and white on his dresser. The picture wasn't coming in, the screen static and the vertical hold slipping. I turned the channel to one that came in, a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Then I opened the window to let in air. It was like I wasn't even there. Donald just stared at the. "You want some soup?" I asked. He didn't answer. So I left him alone, thinking the flu had really gotten to him.

In the kitchen I spread out the Hi-Desert Star on the counter and read the want ads. I started daydreaming about Donald and I having a restaurant of our own. My mother used to say Donald had missed his calling, he should have been a chef. He loved to cook.

He'd make pizza from scratch, spicy pasta dishes, meatloaf. He didn't make it in such large quantities after my mother left. But he did still cook sometimes. And with me working at a restaurant we weren't starving. We didn't always have money for the light bill, and the phone was often down like it was then, us living on my tips. But we usually ate okay.

There was one good job working for the National Forest Service in the monument but it required a college degree. The rest — there were maybe twelve job ads in the whole paper — were the usual crap, desert-town jobs: night cashier at the Circle K in Morongo, a housekeeper for the Yucca Valley Motor Inn, and a couple work-from-home scams. A new Taco Bell was hiring, but all the way out near the Marine base. I set the pen down without circling any of the want ads.

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On its last night the café was busy with locals. Tourists don't come out much after Memorial Day because of the heat. At nine o'clock we closed for the last time. Everyone was invited to a party at Mitzi's house afterward, both as a parting, and as a celebration of my birthday as word had gotten out I'd turned seventeen that week. None of us bothered to do our side-work. The dishes remained undone in the deep metal sinks, the stainless went unpolished, the ketchup bottles stood half-empty. It was eerily quiet without any of the usual machinery humming: no swamp cooler, no cooking fans, no psht-psht of the soda carbonation lines.

Mitzi handed me a quart of soup, lentil this time. "How's Donald?" she asked.

“Okay,” I said. “Not eating much. I take his temperature and he seems fine, but he’s kind of out of it, like a zombie. Maybe he’ll be better tonight.”

“If he is, bring him to the party.”

“No. Just get everyone sick,” I said. “You need help locking up?”

“Nah, get out of here.”

“Thanks for the soup,” I said.

“You are coming to the party, right?” She said. “Not skipping out like you do?”

“It’s my birthday party.” I smiled so she would know I planned on going.

I drove home thinking I’d ask Mitzi who the new owners were. I’d like to talk to them about working there. I knew the place. Even if they changed the menu, no one knew their way around the counters and tables better than me.

At home, I set the soup on the kitchen table and opened windows. I heard Donald’s door open, a good sign. I was about to ask him if he wanted something to eat when all six feet and 250 pounds of him fell backwards. He was holding a water glass and as I ran to him I was afraid it would break and he’d cut himself. He fell hard on his ass and hit his head on the wall behind him. I would have laughed if I weren’t so scared.

“You all right?”

He kept looking at the glass, which hadn’t shattered, but lay on its side. He looked at it and then back at his hand as if he didn’t understand how the glass got on the carpet, as if it was the only thing that had fallen.

I picked the glass up and set it on his nightstand.

“Let’s get you up.”

He stared at his hand the way he’d stared at the cup, like he’d never seen it before.

“Donald!” I yelled. He squinted up at me. “Let’s get you up, back into bed.”

I helped him up and walked him, each step a lumber. I had him sit on the edge of the mattress, then lean back. “That’s it,” I said. “Just lean back and rest. You shouldn’t be walking around.”

I propped pillows against the headboard. “You want some water?”

At the kitchen sink, I couldn’t see the lights of the two neighbor’s houses I usually saw. It’s rural out here. The closest neighbor is a hundred yards away. Seemed no one was home. I kept repeating what I’d seen. He’d fallen like a tranquilized elephant.

When I held a glass of water out to him, he just looked at it. His leg had fallen over the side, like he was going to get up. “What do you need? I can get it. You want the air on? It’s so hot in here.” I lifted his leg, thick and heavy, and placed it on the mattress. It fell over the side again. A new panic entered my mind. “Do you want me to take you to the hospital? I think you should see a doctor.”

He focused on his leg, not responding again, like I was a ghost he couldn’t see. I wished someone else were there, my mother or father. Mitzi. What would any of them do in this situation? My mother complained once that her friend shouldn’t have called an ambulance when my mother almost OD’d, it had been so expensive, four or five hundred dollars. Then I remembered the phone was out. And neither of us had a cell phone. Service was notoriously shit in our area anyway.

“Can you walk to the car?” I asked.

Nothing.

“Donald?”

He was drooling and looking at his leg the way he had looked at his hand before, like a giant toddler. I wiped drool from the corner of his mouth with a Kleenex.

I could use the pay phone outside the café. I was afraid to leave him alone though.

“Come on, Donald. We’re going.” I shook his shoulder. “Can you move? Can you walk?”

He just looked at me with big brown glassy eyes, his jaw slack and his skin pale. Wisps of hair were sweat-glued to his forehead. “Talk to me, Donald.” I put my hands under his armpits and lifted, pulling him toward me. “Christ, you’ve got to help me.”

His face was a child’s asking *why*.

I pulled him off the bed. His feet hit the floor with a clunk. He wasn’t even moving them, or trying to.

“You’re too heavy,” I said. “I don’t want to drag you.” I pulled him into the hallway, my elbows under his armpits, my hands across his chest, using all the power I had in my legs.

I got him out the door, down the short walk and to the passenger side of the truck. I’d just gotten the door open, figuring out if and how I could lift him up, when he started shaking. His eyes rolled in his head. His body bounced.

In five seconds it was over. He lay, blinking, stunned.

“Christ, what was that?” I asked and knelt down.

He blinked a few times. I would have given anything for someone to drive by. The cops could come by and accuse me of stealing from the Circle K again. I’d welcome it.

I moved as much behind him as I could, put my arms under his shoulders and lifted with all I had. I heaved him up to the opening.

I slid from under him and pushed so he was sitting sort of upright in the doorway of the truck. "Just stay there," I said.

From the driver's side I crawled across the bench seat, zinging my hip on the steering wheel. I got my hands under his armpits and pulled. I moved my knees under me and pulled backward, my back and butt screaming. I positioned him half on his back, half on his side, almost on top of me, and managed to pull his door shut.

I fired the engine and raced down the ruddy dirt road, the truck vibrating, dust rising in the dark in the rearview. I turned left on Highway 62 at the bottom of the hill, ignoring the stop sign, and floored it. I didn't care if I got pulled over; bring on the escort.

Donald's head lay near my hip, his position, awkward, knees falling off the seat into the floor-space below, twisted, uncomfortable. I reached out and stroked his arm the way one pets a cat. I shook the top of his arm. "Donald." I said.

"Donald," I said louder.

I pulled over. The truck rocked with the idle of the engine. His face felt cool, like he was running the opposite of a fever. I bent down toward the gearshift. His eyes were open but not looking at me, or, I thought, at anything. I listened with my ear to his mouth and heard nothing. I put my finger to his nose. Somehow I fuck up everything I touch. My father used to tell me that. "Please, Donald," I said, shaking his shoulder.

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The glass doors to Emergency slid open automatically. At the other side of the waiting room several people – an elderly woman, a middle-aged man in a dirty blue jumpsuit, a mom Cindy’s age holding a baby – all crowded a woman who sat behind a window. I interrupted and said I might have a dead guy in my truck. Two men in aqua scrubs followed me and eased Donald onto a gurney while listening as I described it all again, Donald falling and staring at his hands, the shaking. The men disappeared behind the glass doors and then down a hall. I moved my truck to a regular parking space, then went inside again.

Back at the window the woman gave me a clipboard with forms. “Go ahead and sit down. Fill these out and return them to me.”

I entered Donald’s name and address. Under *Reason for Visit*, I wrote “Death,” and worried whether that sounded smart-ass, and how else I might put it. I wrote myself down as the contact and “N/A” under the insurance questions. I checked the box indicating Donald was married, and wrote my mother’s name, but under address I wrote, “unknown.” I returned the clipboard to the woman behind the window.

“Have a seat,” she said. “Someone will be with you.”

Hours passed. The soundless television played reruns of sitcoms. People came in complaining of dizziness and food poisoning. The young mom was panicky and impatient, her baby had a fever. Eventually, a doctor called her in. A man was wheeled in from an ambulance on a gurney, involved in a car accident, a broken leg, maybe more. Amazing, in a place with seemingly few inhabitants, so many people were hurt. The woman at the window told me, yes, someone would indeed be with me shortly.

It was almost midnight before a doctor in a clean white coat called out my name. “That’s me,” I said rising from my slump.

“Follow me,” he said. He led me to a small conference room. Pastel paintings of boat scenes hung on the walls, a strange thing to see in the desert. “Coffee?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

“Your father.”

“He’s actually my stepfather.”

“Your stepfather has passed away, you know this, right?”

It’s indescribably saddening to hear the official pronouncement. But it’s even more saddening, because it’s so lame, to know, but not *really* know, until someone says it, as if I’d been hoping that I was wrong the whole time hoping people were in some operating room somewhere reviving him.

“We’ve put cause of death down as a cerebral hemorrhage. Your stepfather had a massive stroke. He’d probably been having several small strokes over a period of time. Had you noticed anything like that?”

“Maybe,” I said.

He paused, waiting for something. “Do you have any questions of us?”

“What happens now?” I said.

“We’ll release the body tomorrow. You may have whomever is handling funeral arrangements pick the body up here or at the county morgue in San Bernardino.”

“Funeral arrangements?” I said.

“Is there someone who will be taking care of that, your mother or grandparents?”

“It’s just me.”

He lifted a paper on the clipboard. “You listed him as married. Can we contact his wife?”

“I wouldn’t know how. No one knows where she is.”

He sat up in his chair and moved his head back like an owl.

“How much does a funeral cost?” I asked.

“I can give you a couple of phone numbers to call.”

“Okay.”

“Or,” he added. “The body can be donated to scientific research.”

“How much is that?”

“That doesn’t cost anything,” he said. “But I really think we need to get ahold of your mother, who can make these decisions.”

I shook my head no.

“Is there an aunt or uncle?”

I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head no. Thinking about it, I’d never heard mention of Donald having family. I knew he came from Ohio, but that’s it. And I’d never wondered before. I really knew nothing about him. But the reason I wanted to cry was that I hadn’t even been curious enough to ever ask anyone about him.

“An adult has to sign release forms,” he said.

“He was the adult.”

The doctor sat back in his chair and sighed. He looked down at the table. “Okay. I can give you the numbers of some funeral homes. Maybe someone from social services can help you with arrangements. Do you know if your stepfather wanted to be buried or cremated?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Did he have a will or a lawyer?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

The doctor nodded.

I shrugged and let tears run down my face. I was thinking about how for the last year, since my mother left, maybe before, I, and most people I knew, had thought of me as an adult. I had always felt older than I was. But then, listening to the doctor ask basic questions I had no answers to, I felt as if I’d been living in a dream world, pretending to be adult when I didn’t know the first thing about it.

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Mitzi’s house was dark when I drove by. No one’s car was parked out front. It was 1:15 a.m. and all the lights were off, even the porch.

I reached into my shirt pocket and fingered the paper the doctor had given me to make sure it was there. I was afraid with my luck I’d lose it. It had his number and the number of a county worker he said would help me. I’d been hoping Mitzi might be able to give some advice. I continued up Mitzi’s road and turned onto Sunscape Avenue, not knowing where to go, not wanting to go home.

In the sky, stars were spread over the valley, the Milky Way spilled across its length. I remembered my mother telling me she’d been married before my father. Her first husband was the love of her life, she said. I asked her where he was. She said he was

up in the sky, a new star. He died in a car accident when he was twenty-three. I looked out the windshield at the sky as if I'd notice a new star.

In my headlights, down the road, a girl with blonde hair and a denim jacket was walking on the shoulder. If she raised her arms, her silhouette could be another Joshua Tree dotting the landscape. As I drove closer I saw it was Cindy. A jackrabbit darted across the asphalt as I slowed. I reached across and lowered the passenger window. "Are you walking home from the party?"

"Where were you?" she asked, stumbling like she'd had a lot to drink.

"I couldn't make it."

I wanted to tell her everything, everything about the night. How without Donald's unemployment check or my job I didn't know how I'd pay rent. How while I pretended I didn't care about my mom leaving, or about my dad leaving before that, I really wished they were still around, and felt like if I'd had to hang around a loser like me I'd want to leave too. Mainly I wanted to tell her I was sorry I was so timid that one night. That I really did like her and wanted to do what I thought she wanted us to do.

"Can I give you a ride?" I asked.

"Naw," she said. "I like walking at night." She was already moving again.

I put the truck in gear and slowly rolled forward.

"Can I *please* give you a ride," I yelled out. "I want to talk to you," I said, wishing the fact I was about to cry wasn't soaking into my voice.

"No, really," she said turning around, smiling and walking backwards. "I'm just a couple more streets."

"Cindy," I said. And I began bawling, like a stupid child.

“My God, are you okay?” she said. She ran back to the truck. I reached out when she climbed in and took her forearm into my hand to help her, trying to think of a way I would never have to let go.

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