

Vacation Land

Arnie brought a couple their change and they lingered, gazing out the picture window like all the vacationers did at the end of the week. The setting sun hit the distant mountains at an angle so that each slope was a different shade. Golden green, then darker green, while the back of the range looked like something cut out of black construction paper. He pointed out the sunset to them. He'd moved here to be closer to nature, he said, and so he noticed things like that. The woman asked Arnie how old he was. He lied and said he was twenty.

"Do it while you're young," the man said.

"I am doing it while I'm young," Arnie said even though he knew it would hurt his tip. The man's eyes widened for just a second.

Halfway through the season, Arnie was moved to the kitchen.



The summer people turned into fall people. They wore sweaters and cupped their hands around mugs of hot apple cider.

The college kids got drunk, and the winter people showed up after the first snowfall, skidding around on the highway with their ski racks and station wagons.

Nobody came in the spring.

In other words, a year went by. Sometimes two. Sometimes ten. Arnie wasn't keeping track.



On a warm day in March, he got stoned with his roommates and hiked up to the lake where it was quiet. Only the locals knew about it.

A wooden raft was anchored ten yards out. It clopped on the waves in an unsteady beat, and the breeze in the pines sounded like someone trying to whistle. Arnie stood on the shore and watched a gauzy layer of clouds turn vertical over the treetops like it was sliding down the back edge of a dome. That's how you see the curvature of the earth, he realized, by looking at the sky.

And he wanted to be awed some place in his soul, but instead he stripped

down to his boxers and waded into the water up to the tops of his ankles. The lake was cold, still fed by snow. It shocked his feet and shouted pain.

If he'd been by himself, he would have stepped back onto the sand, but his roommates were behind him. He knew they were watching. He took a running dive into the shallows.

His chest. The frigid water hit his chest, and his lungs tightened and panicked. He couldn't even think to turn around. There was only forward, only the raft in front of him. It was far. If he could stop breathing, he could make it, but he was hyperventilating, so he kept his face out of the water. He swam. His lower legs numbed up. His hips too, spreading the threat of paralysis through his body.

The dock was closer.

This was the worst idea he'd ever had, and now he had to use his shoulders to heave his arms forward, and wiggle his torso like an inchworm. And then oh good lord, his fingers were so close to the ladder, and he reached for it and got it, and he didn't even care that he was going to have to swim back at some point.

His three male roommates were spread out on the grass and sand, looking at him. The other two, the women, were on a bench chatting about something. Arnie couldn't make out what.

Barbara waved and called out. "Is it cold?"

He shook his head and slowed his breathing. "Nah, it's not too bad."

No one else spoke. One by one each man approached the water line, shed his clothes, and joined Arnie on the raft.

Barbara was lying out when he got back. She shifted her hips into a movie star pose as he sat beside her. He pinched the tiny jiggle of paunch at the top of her jeans.

"Stay," he said.

"I can't," she said.



In September, Barbara called him long distance. She was going to have a baby. Yes, it was his.



The economy improved. The club renovated the halfway house, and the resort added a chairlift that could fit four people at once. His landlord told him and roommates to be out before Christmas.

They protested. They dropped acid and stopped traffic on Main Street

with picket signs and chants for affordable housing. Arnie climbed a tree and declared it a sovereign state. He hopped between two branches and shouted, “I am the Minister of Re-education!”

The cops were patient. They waited for him to come down on his own. They let him sit in the back of the squad car without handcuffs.

Some of his roommates went back to the city. One was still in school and moved into the dorms. Arnie was offered a room a little further out of town with animal tapestries hung over the windows. He kept them because it meant he didn’t have to buy curtains.



That winter, the resort didn’t give him his job back.



He got a job as a busboy and smuggled shrimp cocktail to the dishwashers on break out back. The owner’s daughter came around from the parking lot. She startled at the sight of them.

“Arnie!” she said. “How are you?”

A group of them had once snuck into the club after a party and gone skinny dipping. She let him corner her at the deep end. She let him make her laugh. She let him get close enough to try and kiss her, and then she laughed again.

“Are you working here?” she asked and glanced at the whiskey in his rocks glass.

He went inside and poured the drink into an empty can of Coke.



Barbara’s mother wrote him a letter. They didn’t want to take him to court. Anything. Anything he could send. It wasn’t about the money. It was about the fact he was this boy’s father.



He got a job as a shuttle bus driver and complained to his passengers about the farmers being forced to sell their land.

“No one’s forcing anyone to do anything,” said one rider. “This is America.”

Sometimes his customers agreed it was a shame. Most of the time he caught them in the rearview mirror, glancing at each other with private smirks between them. This guy, they said to each other. This guy is a leftover.



When his son turned eight, Arnie asked Barbara if he could take him camping. “No,” she said. She said the same thing the next year when he was nine but

said yes when he turned ten.

The boy showed up pale, with a useless layer of softness on his torso. He scanned the woods hopelessly after Arnie told him to gather the kindling.

“You know what I mean by kindling?” Arnie asked. “It’s sticks. We start the fire with small sticks.”

His son roamed the perimeter of their campsite, kicking up dead leaves like a fighter in a grudge match. He picked up a freshly fallen branch.

“You mean like this?” the boy asked.

“Drier,” Arnie said. “Look for the ones that break easily.”

By the end of the week, his son’s limbs were tan and streaked with dirt. He stepped on a flopping trout and removed the hook in one solid move. He told Arnie he wanted to live with him.

“Okay,” said Arnie. “I’ll kidnap you then. I’ll turn you into a wild boy.”

The kid seemed afraid but met his dad’s gaze and mouthed a silent, tiny, “oh.”



The vacationers got to be closer to Arnie’s age. “Thank you,” they said all sing-song and antagonizing. We are dispensing with you, they said before folding back in on themselves behind a shield of good manners.



He got a job as a bellman. An all blond family with two girls, about six and eight, arrived at the hotel.

“Oh this is wonderful!” the mom kept saying. “See the balcony?” Her daughters ran around in lockstep with their mother’s enthusiasm.

“How cool!” they said.

Arnie wondered if she was their stepmother, trying to ingratiate. Maybe the kids had just been adopted, but no, they all looked so much alike.

The dad slapped five dollars into his hand and thanked him out the door.

At dusk, he saw the woman and her kids playing red light, green light on the mall. They were giggling, still working the happy family act.

“Fireflies!” said the mom.

“Where?” said the younger girl.

“In the grass! See those bugs? They’re lighting up!”

Arnie walked toward them. The mom was wearing a tank top. Her shoulders were wholesome and fresh.

“I can’t believe she’s never seen a firefly before,” she said.

“You from the city?” Arnie asked.

“Out west.”

“That makes sense.”

“Really?”

“You’re not from here. People on the East Coast are grumpy. You guys enjoy each other, I can tell.”

The woman nodded like he’d articulated a point she’d been trying to make. “Thank you for saying that. It’s hard sometimes, but I’m working on it. You have to choose joy, you know?”

She looked at Arnie with uncomplicated benevolence. It was something he didn’t see that often. Something like kindness. The older girl ran over and nearly knocked her mother to ground with a tackle hug to the waist.

“I’m sorry, what was your name?” the mom asked.

“Arnie.”

“Sidney, this is Arnie. Do you remember, he showed us to our room?”

“Hi.” The girl gave him a little wave. Her mother swelled and beamed.

Arnie stepped closer. “It is about joy isn’t it?” he said. “Sometimes I have it, you know?”

The woman nodded and looked over to where her younger daughter was doing somersaults.

“But then it sort of goes away,” he said. “You have to guard yourself.”

“You’re absolutely right,” she said with unblinking focus. “Okay, girls? Who wants ice cream!”



His son graduated high school and said he couldn’t visit that summer. Arnie told him to put his mother on the phone.

“We can bring him for a few days in August,” Barbara said. “But he’s staying somewhere nice. We’ll pay for it.”



He got a job as a handyman. The condo renters ignored him completely when he came to unclog their sink. They were in their prime and had expensive phones. Your choices, they said to him. Your choices have nothing to do with us.



Near the close of the season, Arnie waded from the bar into the empty dark of Main Street. He paused at the door of his pickup. The crickets were out by the thousands, calling and responding. Their music always made him jittery, like school was starting soon, and the empty pages of his marble

notebook were a sorry consolation for the end of summer.

A single car lit up the intersection on its way to the highway. For a moment, Arnie thought someone was coming to join him.

He wondered if he'd set it up this way, his life, just so that he could drink in peace. Then again, there wasn't a whole lot to do here.

The rare mornings he awoke without a hangover were desolate, with nothing to push against and nothing to overcome. Nothing to prevent the form and shape of his existence from dissipating into the thin mountain air.



The vacationers were so young now. Roving packs of children costumed in trucker hats and decal t-shirts. He could see it in their peacocking and peekaboo-ing with whoever might be noticing. I see you, Arnie said. I see you.



A couple of them made their way to the bar one afternoon. They were looking for authenticity, they said. They asked him about the sixties.

"I'm from the seventies," Arnie said and told them how he'd once climbed a tree during a protest march.

"I wish I'd been alive then," said one of the kids. "It must have been incredible."



Arnie stayed at the bar until closing and drove the long way home, down the other side of the creek with the luxury cabins tucked away behind the humid foliage.

The classic rock station started playing his anthem, but he didn't sing along like usual. He listened. Hard. Like he'd never heard the song before. The refrain faded out, and he turned the radio off.

Arnie rolled down his window, filling the cab with the smell of evergreen. He cut the headlights, shifted to neutral and coasted to a stop in the middle of the road.

He shook his head. The lyrics were different this time, that's what it was. He could have sworn there'd been some verse in there, some promise he no longer remembered.

"Why would they do that?" he said aloud. "Take a perfectly good song and change it for no reason?" He grabbed a fistful of hair and shook his head again because it didn't make any sense to him. It made no sense at all.

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