

## Brandon, a Beer Bottle, & the Mystery Inscription

DOWN A LONG, SLOPING ENTRANCE, beneath a canopy of aging oak trees, was a cottage-styled house with Spanish blue siding in the southeast corner of sleepy, southern, Athens, Georgia. And during the hottest summer days, the slant of ochre sunlight spilled through the cracks in the branches of those weathered oaks, leaking onto the surface of the house, and its flaking gray shutters, and the porch just before it.

And it stood in that same spot for nearly forty years.

People came and went, children grew older, outgrew it, and there were even four young men, who thought it best to stay there, keeping watch over it during their college years, after the previous, older tenants grew tired of staying there.

Only a fraction of these men attributed any major significance in their lives to when they stayed there. To them, it was nothing more than a smelly old house to study, to drink more than they could stand, to get high, to meet girls, to keep those girls, to *fuck* those girls, to keep them shelter during what would be the best years of their lives.

One of those, men, however, saw so much more. To him, the house not only brought him one step closer to his dream career, but served as a turning point in his life. It was at that point in which he realized that a man had control over very few things in his lifetime, should he be given the opportunity to live a full and healthy life. He could choose his career path, and even then, that came with its own set of advancements and setbacks.

And happiness was the biggest factor, maybe.

While making an insane amount of money was desirable, it in no way made up for how awesome it felt to wake up each day, enthused to be heading into work. The vast majority of the people he knew, young or old, would and could not ever reach that type of satisfaction.

He could choose where he lived. He appreciated a quieter, more comfortable, more convenient shelter. He enjoyed the notion of returning to the same spot after a long day,

feeling the serenity that security brought him. And the older he got, he realized that even in its simplicity, the sensation of familiarity was overwhelming, and equally welcomed.

Reaching for the bottle opener on the kitchen counter, Brandon Greene thought keenly about the impression of fate. He contemplated the choices he'd made in his damn near thirty years of life, and wondered what calamity had been created out of his decision-making. After all, it was *his* decision to leave his home in upstate New York, and relocate to Georgia when he was only eighteen. Surely he was too young and far too impressionable to come to such a conclusion. Surely he should have thought longer and harder about where he needed to end up. He was always close to his brothers, his mother, and fond of his father. Why hadn't he made the decision to stay near home and go to Syracuse? Syracuse is a good school, right?

What the *fuck* happened?

Cracking open a new bottle of beer, he stared down into the open spout for a second before pressing the edge to his lips, and closing his eyes. His head was beginning to swim a little bit. He didn't mind it. He was still able to remember it all plainly.

He received early acceptance to the University of Georgia. Full scholarship to play soccer for the Bulldogs. He remembered staring down at the letter, sighing. He'd even looked at Vassar or Cornell, but something about the idea of living somewhere new appealed to him. The climate, the slower pace, the diversity. No longer would he be the baby of the family. No longer would he have to hide behind his brothers John, Mark, and Matthew. To an eighteen-year-old boy, relocating seemed to be the only ticket to manhood.

Still, he arrived in Georgia a day later than his dorm advised, ready to embark on a new adventure. Eventually he'd meet three guys, who'd inevitably become his roommates, and they'd make the decision to live off campus, and "get all the bitches", as Scotty Kelly so eloquently put it once. They looked everywhere, rent had spiked, and the cheaper places were too far from campus. Suddenly the illusion of being a man and living like a man seemed far too daunting a task, and he wanted to give up on it all.

Brandon Greene finished that beer and opened another. And as he pressed the bottle to his lips, he let out a small chuckle, recalling the old lady he nearly trampled with his cart in the grocery store one morning. He had a girlfriend, then. Her name was Sophia Christine Baldwin, and for all intents and purposes, he thought he was in love. Even so much so that he felt the need to include some of her shopping needs into his own. Simply put, when she asked him to pick up a box of tampons while he was out, he was a sucker enough to do so. Maybe that was simply a part of his character. He wanted to do everything for everyone he cared about, and be there for them. Even something as trivial and minute as grabbing something for

the woman he loved. He adopted more than just "out of convenience" actions, but it was his way of showing that he gave a damn.

Now, whether or not they recognized it was a different story.

But back to the old lady he nearly ran over...

He was distracted, trying to decipher his own handwriting on a grocery list he half-arsed assembled on his way there, and he haphazardly collided with a woman no taller than his waist, with snow white hair, umber skin, and red framed glasses that covered her entire face. Apologizing profusely, she simply laughed heartily in return and waved her hand at him from side to side. He offered to assist her with the groceries he'd knocked over, and she fanned him away, assuring him that she'd lived long enough to do it herself without any help from a man. Her response, of course, struck him oddly, but he cleared his throat and backed away, standing just close enough to catch anything that her small, weak-looking hands may have dropped. When she was finished, she looked up at him, and smiled wider, regarding him keenly. She remarked on his height, and his handsomeness, before stating something that stuck with him.

*"You look mighty fine, but you look mightily lost, child. But don't worry, you'll find your way soon."*

He didn't know what it meant until he was driving home afterward, and a dog ran out into the street. Swerving evasively, he missed the dog, but ran his 1999 hunter green Ford Explorer onto a curb, knocking a mailbox just enough to tilt it backward. Lucky for him the house seemed vacant. Still, he felt it just to jot down the number, included on the "For Sale" sign perched in the lawn, and dial the number when he got to Sophia's place.

He'd simply explain to the realtor about what a klutz he'd been and offer up anything monetary he could.

Who answered, instead, was an older man, who shrugged off the tilting mailbox incident, and thanked him for his call. He then said that since his wife passed and kids had moved away, he realized how little the minor inconveniences mattered in the grand scheme of things. He then asked that if he knew anyone who wanted to inhabit his old house on Trent Road, he'd be more than happy to oblige.

He quickly called up Scotty Kelly, and two of his other friends and they moved into 411 Trent Road on a balmy Sunday at the end of July, just two weeks shy of his twenty-first birthday.

The house was built in the early sixties, and their landlord had taken considerable time upgrading appliances, fixtures, floors, and countertops, painting walls, and keeping the lawn aesthetically pleasing to the potential buyer's eye.

"I did it all for my wife," he said once. "It was supposed to be our humble beginning. I paid nothing for this place. But we were able to raise three kids and a dog in it. It became our lives. But it has too many memories. And I couldn't stand it anymore. Picture that. A home can have *too* many memories."

It was all one level, and the carpets had been stripped away, and the original hardwood refinished. While it initially felt small, there was an immediate facet of coziness to it, often leaving one with the impression that they were home, even when they weren't.

Brandon Greene opened another beer, sliding off of the barstool in which he sat and tapped at the pockets of his jeans, expecting his car keys to be there. Grumbling something resembling, "My goddamn keys" under his breath, he sighed heavily and clamored about the room in search of them.

It wasn't even his idea to celebrate his twenty-first birthday party in the house on Trent Road. It was Scotty's. He'd invited all the people, who would show up that night.

All of this bullshit was his fault. Had he not opened his mouth and invited all students from the University of Georgia to that one house, then maybe the word-of-mouth would've remained controllable, and he could've prevented it all.

Was it that simple?

Perhaps she wouldn't have been there at all.

Brandon Greene dropped to his knees and crawled around, scanning the floor with his hands, muttering, "goddamn keys" once more.

He thought about all the times he may have passed her on campus prior to that night. She would've gone unnoticed, surely. She wouldn't have ever mattered.

Then he contemplated that pesky ass fate again, and wondered if that night, or any night preceding or seceding would have mattered in the grand scheme of things?

Was he simply doomed from the start? Or had he taken a misstep somewhere, ultimately relinquishing his free will and falling victim to whatever overseer in the universe had in store for him?

She once read to him: "*Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.*"

And it angered him. What happened to him having a choice? Shouldn't he be strong enough to figure it out for himself?

Hell, maybe he'd foolishly believed the wrong thing for far too long.

Maybe all of this was bigger than him.

The point then, it seemed, was to question why. Why him? Why her? Couldn't they both have been spared from this?

Brandon Greene gathers to his feet once more, sloppily dusting himself off. He makes the choice that while he didn't choose *her* per se, he could choose to have another beer and finish off the case, and maybe Asha wouldn't notice.

Before he reached for another beer, he glanced down at a small white sheet of paper, which read: "1202 Montague Court, Harris Building, Portland, Oregon".

It was written in her hand.

And he had a choice to make: he could go with Scotty to the store as promised. After all, he needed to clear his head, adjust his thinking, get some fresh air.

Or he could see where the address led. He could get some answers, he could feel the intoxicating sensation of relief, and he could hold her in his arms again, inhale the smell of her, taste her skin, envelop her wholly.

He'd never let her leave again.

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