

MIDNIGHT AT THE PET EXPRESS

Day 45

Harry's first drink in 45 days turned out to be six. He was a big guy, football star in high school, and a hell of a lot of fun at a dive bar. He'd missed the bar as much as the scotch. Hell, he missed *people*. His house was so damn quiet since Mary Beth left for her mother's place. She said she wasn't coming back, but he hadn't given up. Tonight, he'd told himself a string of lies regarding what he deserved (a little time out with his buddies), what one drink meant (nothing, if Mary Beth thought he was still walking the line), and what he'd do (stop in quick, watch a little of the game, go home to his empty house like any other night).

After his sixth round, Harry wouldn't drive, more because he loved his car than any instinct of self-preservation. He stood outside the bar and leered at the Pet Express, a hulking concrete monster taking up half the parking lot it shared with a small strip of offices opposite, including Harry's desk at Friendly Insurance. He hated the Pet Express, but in his stupor, the bright green lights pulled at him. He followed the path of green paw prints, making a game of trying to step on each one. The holiday banner upset him—a beagle in a Santa hat with an unnaturally shiny

coat, like they'd used hairspray on the poor dog. He thought maybe he should say something. It was wrong to spray shine on a dog like that.

Inside, the green kept coming at him: trash cans, checkout counters, shopping carts, a gumball machine full of dog treats. The fluorescent light made him sway. He tried to focus. Banners overhead, in the same apple green, screamed: *Reptile Sale! New Rawhide!* Like a dare, they challenged him to stay and try not to blink.

Harry began looking for the dogs but found only aisles of beds and food. He thought just looking at a puppy might help his mood. A beagle maybe, like the one outside. Something innocent and friendly.

He turned in circles and belched. For a few minutes he couldn't remember what he was doing there—why he decided on this night not to drive straight home in the hopes of intercepting Mary Beth, who came by every few days now to pick up more of her stuff. He should get home, he thought. Maybe he could drive okay. Maybe.

A salesgirl found him fingering the silky surface of a dog bed. She wore the expected green shirt, complete with silvery paw-print logo and a mouthful of chewing gum. "Can I help you, sir?"

Harry laughed coarsely. "That would be good, but I doubt it."

She folded her arms and studied him. She was young, maybe seventeen, with a big zit on one cheek. Harry couldn't help staring at the zit; the thing was ready to erupt. He remembered his daughter's collection of tubes and jars meant to prevent the unpreventable. Jessie was about this girl's age, but off at college. She'd tell him

he was an ass if she saw how he was acting. He'd started up with AA because of her. She'd said it was the only way to keep Mary Beth from leaving, but she'd gone anyway, the day before he got his one-month chip.

"Do you have a dog?" the salesgirl asked.

"Oh, no. Never have. Well, except when I was a kid. But it didn't work out. I have a daughter not much older than you. She always wanted a dog. But . . ." He shrugged.

The girl perked up. "That's okay. You know, there are lots of other choices. You were thinking of acquiring a companion, weren't you?"

"A companion?"

She leaned closer. "Sorry. A pet. We're trained to say companion. Part of humanizing the animals, increasing sales. You know."

Harry nodded. He knew. He'd been in insurance sales all his life. Everything about sales was about humanizing: the product, the salesman, the truth of every damn body's grim futures—putting a shine on it.

"What about a hamster? Won't take up much space. Won't poop on the lawn. I bet your daughter would love it."

"Oh no, she's gone now. It's not for her."

The girl frowned. "Oh."

He felt a moment of clarity, as if the whiskey cloud had temporarily moved to one side and let in some fresh air. "I want something serious. A real pet. I mean, there's no dogs here. That sucks." He paused to settle himself down. She was

looking at him like he was an idiot, or maybe just a drunk. “But that’s not your fault or anything.”

She smiled. “Please follow me,” she said, turning and bouncing across the screaming white linoleum. She took him to the rodent section and stopped at a large cage with high glass walls.

He peered in at the ferret. She was curled into a shape like a danish and he could just make out a stripe of light brown on her nose. He wavered a little and had to grab onto the glass, but the ferret didn’t move. He looked at the salesgirl. “Is she alive?”

“Of course, silly. She’s just asleep.”

“I knew it was a girl,” he said.

She touched his arm. “See,” she said, “you’re very intuitive, aren’t you? A ferret would be perfect for you. A ferret is kind of manly, I think. Not like a cat. Most men don’t go for cats, in my experience.”

“Do you have cats here?”

“No.”

Harry nodded. He’d have to take her at her word that she had experience with men and their pet choices, cats or no cats, ferrets or guinea pigs, rodents or aquatics. He began to sweat. He smelled stale cigarette smoke from his shirt and various other poisons oozing out of his pores. “I think I need a minute,” he said.

“Are you going to be sick?” she asked, but not concerned, more like she thought it was funny and a joke they shared, like they’d both been at the same fraternity party the week before and vomited into the same trash can.

“No,” he said. And then again, to convince himself: “No.” He cleared his throat. “So this ferret, what do I need to set her up at home? Does she have to have a big case like this?”

“Oh, no. This is just to keep little kids from sticking their fingers in there. Ferrets don’t appreciate being surprised, that’s all. Once she bonds to you, you’ll be thick as thieves.”

Harry laughed. “You talk like someone older.”

“Yeah, I know. I watch a lot of old movies. Plus I’m really good in school. I’m saving for college right now. Molecular Biology,” she said in a near whisper.

“Is this a secret?” he asked.

“Kind of. It’s better not to advertise your capabilities in a place like this. I prefer that they expect the bare minimum.”

“I get it,” Harry said. “I’ll keep your secret, smart girl.”

She started loading a cart with wood chips, food, and a cage he would put together at home and he listened as carefully as he could to every instruction. His mind was still cloudy, but he fought it. He had to get this right. This ferret thing could not be a bare minimum situation.

She handed him a book on care and feeding and he clutched it like a bible.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Absolutely.” She reached into the case to pick up the rodent and put it in a cardboard carrying case with the green paw prints all over it. He’d feel like an idiot carrying it out, but what choice did he have? He was scared to death to pick the creature up, for one thing. Not until he read that book.

In his vintage Mustang, the ferret rode beside him in her box. He pulled up to his small, but well-maintained clapboard house. The sky was dark and smelled of winter. He carried the box in first, intending to go back for the supplies, but when he walked into the foyer he heard noise coming from the kitchen.

“Mary Beth?” he yelled, as if it could be anyone else.

She walked out to the foyer and crossed her arms. Strands of blond hair had fallen out of her usually neat ponytail. “I’m taking my kitchen things. I’m leaving you enough to get by.”

“Okay,” he said. She was acting nicer than usual. He was frozen, the box impossibly heavy in his hand, which was sweating like a leaky faucet.

“You’re not usually this late.”

“What, were you worried about me?”

She shrugged. “Maybe.” She narrowed her eyes and pointed. “What is that?”

Harry wanted, in the way that a child offers a crayon drawing, to show her the ferret as an accomplishment. “It’s a pet,” he said. “Something to keep me company.”

She coughed out a laugh. “That’s funny. Really, what is it?”

“It’s a ferret. Seriously. A girl. She’s real intelligent and she sleeps curled in a little ball. Do you want to see her?”

She shook her head. “No. It’ll be gone in a week. There’s no way in hell you’ll be able to take care of it. Look at you, you’re drunk now. Can’t take care of yourself. I knew I couldn’t trust you. That stupid little chip, like it meant something to you.”

He glared and looked away, up the stairs at nothing. He imagined the conversation he’d have to have with his AA sponsor. Shit, he thought. Why’d she have to come back tonight?

“I saw the kitchen. When was the last time you washed your dishes, Harry?”

Carefully, he put down the box and stepped towards her. “Look, you left. You don’t get to criticize me about my fucking housekeeping. You left.”

She took a step back. “Don’t wave your finger in my face, Harry. I’m not talking to you until you can pronounce a three-syllable word like ‘criticize’ without slurring, and that will be when? Never?” Her voice wavered. She turned and walked back into the kitchen. “And stay out of the kitchen. I’ll be done soon.”

Harry fumed and paced, accidentally kicking the box. He dropped immediately to the floor. “Oh shit, I’m sorry little guy. I mean girl.” He held one hand on each side of the box. He could hear her moving around and chirping, but he had no idea what her sounds meant. “It’s okay. I’m going to take care of you. You’ll see.”

He moved her to safety in the den and unloaded the car. As he worked, assembling the cage and spreading chips, arranging the little wooden fort the girl had recommended, he kept hoping Mary Beth would look in. He thought she’d be impressed with all the equipment and how careful he was being. He wasn’t really drunk. He was fine. He’d been sober for 45 days. This was just a little slip.

She walked quickly by with a box of kitchen stuff.

Harry said, “You want some help?”

“No,” she grunted. “I’m fine,” and she kept going, loading four boxes into her minivan, which Harry hadn’t even noticed out by the curb.

He really hated her minivan. She never cleaned it and had a little strawberry air freshener on the front mirror that could choke you with its fumes.

He heard the van start up and went running to the door. “Don’t you even want to see her?” he yelled.

She didn’t answer, just drove away. He didn’t think she was serious when she first left. There was a bad fight, that was true, and he’d punched a hole in the bedroom wall, but he hadn’t meant anything by it. He was just a big guy and sobriety was hard. That night her voice sounded like an old tape-recording and she said it was over, really over—that he needed help and a bunch of other stuff he couldn’t remember. Even sober, his mind hadn’t been his own.

He thought now that he’d have to work harder to get her back. He splashed cold water on his face and ate a slice of bread. He was ready to pass out, but he couldn’t, not until he got the ferret out of its travel box and into the cage. He took the book and tried to read about how to handle a ferret, but the words wouldn’t stay lined up. He rubbed his eyes. She’d be asleep, he hoped. Please let her be asleep.

His hands shook. He opened the top of the box and peered inside. She looked up at him and her face wasn’t what he was expecting. Her eyes moved back and forth too quickly, like she was studying him. She was up and out of the box before

he could talk himself into touching her. She ran around the room, under the furniture, behind the curtains. He chased the thing, but even when he got close he was too afraid to reach for her. What if he hurt her? He couldn't afford to hurt her.

He put some food in her cage and left the door open. He sat on the couch and waited, wondering if she'd bite him. He fell asleep within minutes. In the morning, she was in the cage, sleeping. She'd chewed off the hem of one of the curtains, but he told himself he didn't care. Mary Beth had been asking for new drapes for years.

Day Four (the 2nd Day Four)

Harry's AA sponsor was an odd match for him, a younger guy, real sensitive type with lots of pain from his childhood, who did some kind of computer programming. His name was Chris and he picked Harry up for the meeting a few minutes early. He came to the door with his hair combed perfectly, shoes shined, a casual shirt that failed to be casual due to over-starching, and he hugged Harry as soon as he opened the door.

Harry clapped him on the back. He wasn't used to the hugging yet.

"So what's new?" Chris asked.

"Well, not too much." He looked down. "I got a pet. A ferret."

"Huh," said Chris. "A ferret."

"Want to see her?"

Chris said sure and was taken for a quick tour of the cage and books. He looked at Harry with the seriousness of a high school guidance counselor. “It’s a big responsibility, Harry. You know the program doesn’t recommend taking anything else on until you have your own stuff straightened out.”

Harry nodded. “I guess so. But I can handle this. I know I can.”

“She’s a pretty little thing, I’ll give you that.”

Harry beamed.

“How you feeling into month two?” Chris asked, as they moved to the door.

“No better than month one. I thought I’d get more appreciation for this, you know? Mary Beth is still moving out—slowly, but leaving all the same. She was here the other night for half the kitchen.”

Chris nodded. “Be careful not to make your recovery about her, Harry. It has to be about you, and what you’re committing to. All the rest will fall into place, trust me. You make it to your one-year chip and your whole life will look different.”

Chris drove. Harry was quiet. Chris said, “You had a drink, didn’t you?”

Harry’s upper lip began to sweat. “How did you know?”

Chris shrugged. “We have the same disease, Harry. I remember where you are. I remember either feeling proud or fucking hating myself, or both at once.”

Harry looked sharply at Chris, who had never said the work fuck around Harry before. He wondered how well he knew his sponsor and if he should trust him.

They pulled up to the Holiday Inn where the weekly meetings were held. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, Harry, but don’t run from the truth either. You’re an alcoholic. That’s why you’re here. You can beat it if you give yourself over to the program, to God, to everyone else here that’s struggling too.”

Harry wanted to punch him, and it wasn’t the first time. He hated the word ‘disease,’ hated the crowded, stuffy meeting rooms, hated the idea that he’d joined for Mary Beth and she didn’t care enough to see him through it. She thought it was so easy and it wasn’t. Every day was a battle, and he had trouble believing everyone in the room was struggling like he was.

But he sat and listened. He cried once, hiding tears like a thief. There was an element of worship to the meetings; and he both feared and craved the spiritual contact. He fingered the one-month chip in his pocket, the one he no longer deserved. He had to start over now.

Day 60 (for real)

Two months later, he was still sober, dressed in a fresh shirt and pants he’d pressed himself. Mary Beth had called and then swung by to pick up a check and some things from the bathroom. She had a cough, she said, and needed medicine she had squirreled away in a cupboard.

Harry said, “Why don’t you stay? You have everything you need here. I’ll make you tea. Give me a chance. I’ll take care of you.”

Mary Beth wore a pale pink sweater, fuzzy with bits of rabbit fur. Her nose was red and chapped. She smiled at him sadly. "You owe me, Harry, that's for sure. But no, let's keep things clean between us. I don't live here anymore." She started up the stairs.

"But wait, MB, just wait. Let me show you some things."

She sighed. "I'm tired, Harry."

"It'll be fast. I promise."

She followed him.

"First," he said, "the kitchen. Spotless, right? I even fixed the hinges on the spice cabinet. Look." He demonstrated how smoothly the door opened and closed. "And in here," he said as they moved into the family room, "what do you think of the curtains?" He'd chosen a new set from J.C. Penney, a soft, velvety fabric in a pale green.

Mary Beth nodded at the curtains. "Nice," she said. "They look good with the carpet."

"And over here, my new charge. Her name is Glenda." He made sure Mary Beth had a good view of the ferret, even though she was sleeping through the daytime hours, as usual. "See the food I made for her? Fresh veggies and everything. She eats better than I do." He laughed nervously.

Again, Mary Beth nodded. "I don't know what to say, Harry. I never figured you for a rodent owner, I guess. But if it makes you happy, that's great." She crossed her arms. "Are you still going to the meetings?"

“Yep. Went to one already this week. It’s been two months since that night, since I slipped. You were here. Remember?”

“The night you brought the ferret home?”

He nodded. Smelling her perfume made him miss her even more, but he was glad she hadn’t changed it.

She laughed. “Well, it’s better than a hooker I guess. And it’s not something I had to clean up for you. That’s progress.”

He smiled. “I really have made progress. I don’t miss a meeting. I’m surrendering to the whole thing, the disease, God, all of it.”

“Well that’s good, I think. I’ve heard it works for a lot of people.” She turned and climbed the stairs for the syrups and pills.

Harry looked at Glenda, admiring the shine of her fur. Harry waited for Mary Beth, hoping to show her how he held Glenda—how she trusted him.

Mary Beth came downstairs in a hurry. She sneezed and Harry rushed to hand her a tissue. “Thanks,” she said, cradling a small toiletry case under one arm. “I have to go.”

“Can we get together soon and talk?” he asked. “I’ve changed so much already. I think we can work things out. I really do.”

She looked away, towards the ferret. “Last time I saw you, you were drunk, Harry. Saying you’re an alcoholic in a big room is one thing, but you’re still you, and I’m still me, and we’ve wasted twenty years screaming at each other. I’m just tired.

Tired through to my soul, Harry. I don't want to watch you get better, or earn your chips, or learn how to care for a pet. It's just too late."

She left quickly. Harry sat, dumbfounded, and stared at Glenda. How could this have happened? For twenty years she'd given him new starts and new chances and they'd had plenty of good times; and now he'd gone and humiliated himself at those fucking meetings and still, she wasn't coming back.

Glenda was asleep, which pissed him off. "You weren't cute enough, you fucking rodent. You were supposed to win her over. Didn't we talk about this?" But she didn't move.

Harry reached into her cage to stroke her fur and she shifted, turned her head and bit him on his middle finger. "Shit," he screamed, and went for a paper towel to soak up the beads of blood. What was he thinking buying this upscale rat? He'd take her back. Tomorrow. His finger throbbed. He poured peroxide over the punctures before wrapping them in gauze and kicked Glenda's cage with one foot.

He couldn't sleep that night, either because of his hand, Mary Beth's visit, or the shame of trying to sell everyone on the new Harry, growing himself up at 45 years old. He heard Glenda downstairs, running in her wheel and he feared her. She was everything and nothing; he knew he had to keep her and might fail. He had to take care of his fucking biting rodent, even if she hated him, because he was a selfish bastard. He'd heard it enough times in AA, about alcoholics always looking for the easy way out, and he almost understood what it meant.

He stared out the window at a full moon. Its light made the bed look bigger, and more empty. If Mary Beth wanted him to keep going to the damn meetings, he would. He'd stand up there every time and say he was an alcoholic, which he probably was, but knowing for sure didn't matter. The point was to walk the line, do the time at the Holiday Inn and wait for Mary Beth to realize she missed him. No mistakes. No getting caught drinking. No fucking up with Glenda.

In the morning, he greeted Glenda like an old friend. He was used to her little sounds now. Little sounds that never said: "You're a drunk, get out of my sight, look what you just did, quiet, your daughter is listening to your ranting, you idiot, my god, twenty years of this and now you want to go to meetings as if you can erase history? As if you should be forgiven for all of it?" He regretted thinking that he'd take her back. Could she tell? Would she love him less now?

One Year

When Harry stood up for his one-year chip, Mary Beth was still an empty chair in his house and heart, and she wasn't coming back. His daughter had confirmed that his wife was dating a middle school teacher who wore sandals. Harry's friends had stopped asking him if he wanted a beer, though he never explained himself. He still had trouble saying the words outside of a meeting.

Harry's daughter remained aloof, but he could tell she was curious to see how long he'd last. He began, slowly, to separate his sobriety from Mary Beth. His one

year, the applause and support of the others, was like cheesecloth trying to hold back water. He knew it proved nothing, erased nothing. He'd been promised pride, and seen glimmers. But the shame and self-hatred were still bigger.

He kept his one-year chip, a shiny bronze, on the end table nearest Glenda's cage. He looked at it every day and wondered when it would ever be enough—when he'd stop hoping his family would forgive him and come back. The chip was so damn thin and ridiculous some mornings, the world a vast place lined with temptation, a taste here, a numbness there. But Chris said it right one night: "Once you go for the fucking chip, losing it can kill you; it's all you've got." And he was right. The failure, after 365 hard-fought successes, would slice through him and whatever goodness was left in him would spill out onto the pavement, trickle into the grass and never be seen again.

Two Years

The applause used to bother Harry, but not now. Every victory, every person who looked up at him and understood, was important. On this early June night, Harry left the Holiday Inn and headed for the Pet Express for supplies. His daughter would be home in a week. Glenda had learned to walk on a leash. His wife he'd almost stopped thinking of as his wife. The sky was purple like a bruise or a smear of the lip gloss his daughter used to wear. The air felt heavy as he climbed

out of his car and placed Glenda on his shoulder. She sniffed at the air, too, wondering what newness it held.

Inside the store, everything was as green as always. Harry grabbed a cart and started for the rodent section. A young woman arranged sesame seed treats on a display shelf. When she turned, Harry recognized her at once.

She smiled. "Welcome to Pet Express. Can I help you with anything?"

Harry laughed. "No. Not tonight."

She studied him. "I remember you two," she said, pointing at Glenda. "She looks great. You look great, actually. Diet?"

"Not exactly," he said. He wished she hadn't recognized him, that she didn't know who he was the night he bought Glenda. "Have you been working here all this time? I haven't seen you."

"I'm just home for summer break. I'm up at Cornell."

Harry nodded. "That's great." Glenda climbed down his arm, indicating that she wanted to be held along his forearm.

"Well, let me know if you need anything."

"Will do." Harry pushed his cart ahead. He was sweaty and troubled by the fluorescent light. He tried to shop. Fumbled with his list. But he went back to find her.

Harry stammered, "Sorry. I just have to thank you. For her."

The girl said, "Well, sure. Just doing my job. I'm glad it worked out."

The shame Harry carried with him still made him want to recoil; but all of his progress was about setting things right. This girl had no idea what she'd done for him, but he had to make it clear. "When I came in that night, I don't know what you remember, but I was drunk. Drunk and losing my family. And you were so *sure* about this, about Glenda here. It was the strangest thing how I just trusted you and let you load up the cart and send me home with this rodent, as if I had any business taking care of anything or anybody."

"Oh," she frowned. "I didn't know . . . was I too pushy?"

"Maybe. Who knows? I can't remember half that night." He smiled. "But don't look so serious. This really is a thank-you."

Her face relaxed. "May I hold her?"

Harry handed her the ferret. "I buy her organic produce. I take her on walks."

"Looks like you've done a great job."

"Not bad for former drunk who lives alone, eh?"

She narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

"Sorry. Look, I thought my wife would be impressed that I could take care of Glenda, but she wasn't. I'm in AA, and I wasn't supposed to take on anything new back then. Plus, she chewed up my drapes and bit the hell out of my thumb. I almost brought her back."

"But you didn't."

"No."

The salesgirl from Cornell nodded firmly and handed Glenda back to Harry.

“Good,” she said.

Harry looked down at Glenda, who was eyeing the sesame seed offering, oblivious to the fact that Harry had just received absolution, from a girl who knew more about his recent life than his own daughter.

He scratched behind Glenda’s ears. “We’ll take one of those,” he said. He tossed the treat in the cart and moved on down the aisle.

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