

A night at Steeple Street Tavern

By Casey Strickland

The woman slept.

Ray slid his callused hand from her small hand and rose from the bed.

He pressed chapped lips to her forehead for a moment before he turned into the hall, walked through the door and into the night.

Ray zipped his jacket and combed his fingers through salt-and-pepper hair.

He caught a glimpse of his breath, and then he saw the carnival in the street. The beeps from its games assaulted his ears.

He couldn't take the beeps. Not tonight.

When they became more than Ray thought he could bear, he took a hard left.

Ray stopped at the mouth of Steeple Street to straighten his back before he opened the first door on the right and ducked inside.

The room was cloaked in darkness, the way he remembered it. It seemed to Ray like decades had passed since he walked across its floor, and he was pleased the familiar murk inside the Steeple Street Tavern provided its familiar comfort.

He turned when he heard a dish crash against tile, and he knew Linda stood in the kitchen.

Linda was two years older than Ray. She'd made it a habit to seat him in the Steeple Street Tavern since before he was old enough to drink, back when he'd darken the door after he'd left bushels of corn at the farmer's market across the road.

Her hair turned silver, but hints of black stood out and reminded him of the beauty she'd been in bygone days.

She was slight, from too much time on her feet and not enough time to eat.

Linda's steps were light and her words rang, but they carried a rasp from the Pall Malls she smoked on breaks from too many double shifts.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," she said. "I could hear you comin' a mile away."

Ray scoffed, but thought her joke only a slight exaggeration.

For years his footfalls had played a different tune than those of every person he met, and he knew they were off key. Every now and then, to break silences and move stares after he walked into a room, he joked about how well he marched to the beat of his own drum.

Jokes proved easier to tell than the truth.

"Do you remember when you told me about your leg?"

“Yes, ma’am, I do,” Ray said. His voice boomed. “The day after Pearl Harbor. The day I was accused.”

Linda hurried to put a check on her last table of the night while Ray slid into the corner booth.

He enjoyed a view of the right side of the stage, but sat far enough away most patrons sought a better place to watch the shows. Darkness obscured the booth, save a naked bulb above the table, and Ray sat in the same seat every time he entered Steeple Street Tavern.

He stared at the table until Linda’s shift ended and she slid into the opposite bench.

Ray thought about the three men most days, and had for years. The ones who questioned whether he’d crippled himself to avoid the war.

He never forgot their faces.

The two men with juvenile countenances and wide eyes got a few taunts in, but most of their part in the whole thing had been laughter.

The man who stood in the middle had a round jaw and sad eyes he narrowed when he spoke. His lips opened beneath a thin mustache and above the stubble on his chin.

His words still haunted Ray.

“Stupid rumor caused some kind of controversy back then,” Ray said. “The truth is, I wanted to go over there. I wanted to fight. I tried, but I knew they wouldn’t take me. Said I was, ‘not qualified for military service.’ So I walked over here.”

“I’m glad you did,” Linda said.

“It’s a shame,” he said. “I had to duck to walk into a lot of places back then. I used to be as strong as an ox and as wide as a redwood. Heck, I had to turn to fit my shoulders through the city bus door on the way to the clinic, but I got a 4F on account of my leg.”

“Is that why you told me the story?”

“I figured it was as good a time as any, and I figured if I didn’t you’d never leave me alone about it,” he said. He looked at her and smiled. “You were the first person I told.”

Ray told the story to a few more people as the years passed. The details never seemed to fog with time.

“The Depression didn’t take Daddy’s sliver of land, his milk cow, his plow or his mule so as long as the rains came the family still had a little to eat and I still had chores,” Ray said. “Daddy went on out to the field while I pulled Marvin, our old mule, in front of the barn to put him to the plow. Of course, he didn’t want to go. When I got to the plow, I noticed some rust on the blade. I was never much for school, but I’d just learned how rust is evidence of oxidation. I remember I was

pretty proud I knew such a thing. Funny what you remember about the day your life changes.”

Ray thought about how Linda listened to his story once before, and sighed when he saw her eyes locked with his.

“Go on,” she said.

“Daddy always told me, ‘Never walk up close behind the mule.’” Ray said. “It was a rule. I got to thinkin’ about oxidation and forgot. I remember I knelt down to scrape the rust off of the blade for some reason. Marvin kicked the crap out of me. Knocked me out cold and bruised my brain.”

His lips shut, but Linda prodded him to talk again.

“Daddy was there yellin’ somethin’ when I came to, but I couldn’t stand up,” Ray said. “Couldn’t put weight on my leg. It was bleedin’, and we figured Marvin stomped it for good measure. Damn mule just stood there the whole time like nothin’ in the world happened.”

Ray stopped for a while before words seemed to spew from his mouth all at once.

“Mama thought it was sprained, but my leg never healed quite right,” he said.

“The gash where Marvin’s hoof broke through scabbed over. When it started to fester and stink like rot, they called the doctor. He said it was somethin’ called

gangrene. Mama cried. She cried again the day they cut my leg off right below the knee.”

Ray saw Linda’s eyes well up the way they did the last time he told her how he’d been fitted for a wooden leg.

“Got it on my 12th birthday,” he said. “It was cheaper than those other jointed ones, but it took a lot of gettin’ used to. I got new ones later. They just sorta grew with me.”

The manager summoned Linda to the kitchen. She returned with a bin full of forks, spoons and knives. Ray peered at the age spots on her hands while she folded napkins around the silverware.

“I met Isabelle the same night I told you the story,” he said. “Shortly after the accusation.”

“I know,” Linda said.

Ray tilted his head.

“What’d you call her?”

“Bathsheba,” Linda said.

The comparison to the Israelite soldier’s wife King David got pregnant drew a deep laugh from Ray, as it always did.

“I ain’t never been no King David,” he said, “Just a farm boy.”

Isabelle called him “farm boy” the first night they met, and the moniker stuck.

“It was the first night she played in this place,” Ray said. “I watched her mingle with the soldiers for a while. After she danced with her third or fourth man, I think it was the fourth, I couldn’t take it no more so I read the paper. It was all Pearl Harbor and infamy and whatnot. I didn’t even hear her walk over here. Didn’t hear a thing ’til she cleared her throat. She made her rounds the way she did before her shows, you know.”

It was said Isabelle almost wore a rut in the Steeple Street Tavern floor every night she played. She started in the middle and worked her way out to the fringes, to make her presence known and meet the patrons who were too shy or too refined to dance.

“When I looked up and saw her, the paper in my hand started shakin’ without my permission,” Ray said. “Hair like honey flown’ down a woman’s back and curves like country hills will do that to a man. I remember exactly how she looked. She had on a blue dress. It went down to the floor and hugged her all the way. It had those shimmerin’ things. What are they called again?”

“Sequins,” Linda said.

She always rolled her eyes at this part of the story, but somehow Ray never saw.

“It had those shimmerin’ sequins,” he said. “They had nothin’ on the shimmer in those blue eyes. She cracked some joke about my overalls, and that’s the first time I saw her smile. I swear, back then her smile could make the angels sing.

She asked who I was between bites of a Granny Smith apple and sips of sassafras tea she drank help her vocal cords. I don't think I even managed to spit out my last name. It's still the most awkward conversation I've ever had."

Ray cleared his throat.

"We're about ready to shut the kitchen down," Linda said. "You want somethin' to eat?"

"Yes, ma'am, I believe I do," Ray said. "This seems like as good a spot as any to take a little break."

"The usual?"

"What's the usual?"

"A double-decker bacon cheeseburger."

"Please," Ray said. "With ketchup, mustard and --"

"Mayonnaise," Linda said. "I know."

Ray watched her walk toward the kitchen and wondered how she remembered his order for so long, or how she'd seemed to have known he could have eaten a whole Angus right then.

He figured his stomach must have growled and she must have heard it. He tried to think of what he'd eaten for breakfast and lunch, but couldn't remember.

Ray scratched his chin while Linda sat the burger, an order of fries and a Dr.

Pepper can on the table.

"You lose your razor?"

More than a mouthful of the burger disappeared, and Ray stared at the piano on the left side of the stage.

He'd pulled a fry halfway to his mouth when he spoke.

"When she stepped out from behind that curtain the first night she played, she had a mask over her eyes and nose," Ray said. "It had sequins like the ones on her dress all over it so you couldn't see any of her face except her lips and the slope of her jaw. A face like hers is too pretty for a mask."

"You got some mayonnaise on your shirt," Linda said.

Ray gestured toward the piano bench with a napkin.

"She got right about there and gave a little twirl," he said. "Then she sat down and played for an hour. She'd made the last call for requests before I got up the nerve to give her one."

Ray saw Linda lean in a little so he made sure his voice started to crescendo.

"I hollered, 'Beethoven's ninth,'" he said. "Do you know what she said?"

"Nope."

"'Ode to Joy,'" Ray said. "How's a farm boy know about Beethoven?"

"What'd you tell her?"

"I told her the old ode was only part of it, and Beethoven used the words some German guy named Schiller wrote," Ray said. "I said she deserved to play herself out with a symphony."

"How thoughtful."

"I just kept on hollerin' 'Beethoven's ninth' whenever she made the last call for requests," Ray said. "Every night for a long time, she played the part at the end with the ode in it. It was her last song."

"You should have just told her how you felt while she made her rounds," Linda said. "Why didn't you?"

"I had my reasons," he said. "I sat here and watched her, and I figured a fella with a wooden leg didn't have much to offer next to a man with a rank. She'd always come over here, though. We had some good, long talks."

Ray realized Isabelle never said one word about his wooden leg, his 4F classification or what folks said he did to avoid the war. He was sure she'd known about the rumors, though. Everybody had. Ray turned his attention from his plate to Linda, and wondered why she stared at him so much.

"How come you never came around to talk with us?"

"I was jealous," Linda said.

Ray nodded and pretended he'd heard, but Linda's words seemed to run together a lot. If he didn't know better, he'd swear she mumbled on purpose sometimes.

"You know, she finally married one of those men whose arms she was wrapped up in on that dance floor," Ray said. "He was a Ranger. She told me a few days after they wed she wanted a family with him, but they decided to wait until he came back. Trouble was, he never did. I heard tell they sent him up the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc on D-Day. Somebody said he took a machine gun bullet through the heart and one in the brain. She quit piano gigs after that, but I waited a long time for her to come back."

"Ray, listen," Linda said. "Listen good. I got to tell you somethin' about Isabelle."
"I'm listenin'," he said.

He almost told her she needed to speak louder all of the time, but thought better of it.

"She's sick, Ray," Linda said. "Real sick."

"How come this is the first I heard of it?"

"It ain't," Linda said. "I told you when you came in last week, and the week before that and the week before that."

"I ain't been in this place in years," he said.

Ray had not intended to raise his voice quite so loud, but Linda talked too much.

“You’ve been here once a week for the last month,” she said. “Every time, you’ve told the same story about the mule and your leg. Every time, it’s had the same tone, the same pauses and the same excitement like it’s the first time you told it. You ate the same burger every time, and every time you asked what it’s called.” Ray’s mouth opened, but no words came. He’d pondered the reason he came to talk to Linda since he’d walked through the door of Steeple Street Tavern and taken off his jacket.

Had he come to tell her it struck him how much the hospital room’s white walls matched Isabelle’s long hair?

Had he come to tell her he’d swore he’d seen her smile for the first time in half a century, and he was convinced time had taken no toll on it?

Had he come to tell how “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s ninth symphony blared from a tape player in her room, and almost drowned out the beeps from the machine which foretold her breaths?

Linda’s voice shattered his thoughts.

“Every time, you end with the story about Isabelle,” she said. “You oughta tell her how you feel, before it’s too late. You’re almost 70, Ray, and you ain’t gettin’ no younger. Tell her you love her. Here, I’ll show you how.”

Ray’s eyes met Linda’s gaze when she cradled his face in her hands.

“I love you,” she said.

When the last of those three words left Linda's lips, Ray knew what he came to tell her.

He'd gone to the hospital to say the same words to Isabelle, but had said only two when the machine's beeps melted into a solid tone.