



## THE LAST DROP

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Lost in thought, haunted by the old neighborhood, he forgot how long he'd been walking. It was afternoon now, the summer sun intensifying. He was thirsty and tiring, as an old man might expect.

He'd passed by the house they lived in so long ago. He and Linda revisited these surrounds periodically, relishing fond memories. They enjoyed watching as the younger generations made their modifications.

When *they* were *them*, this inner-city neighborhood was working class. Now the real estate was out of reach for couples not each pulling down six-figure incomes.

Walking by the old department store building, long ago converted to lofts over quaint retail shops, he remembered the old man who had once worked there as an appliance salesman. They'd struck up a conversation in a nearby tavern when he was very young. The old man told him how he'd been cautiously courting a pretty young woman in the accounting office. One day she stormed onto the appliance floor toward him. "What did I do?" he'd wondered. She walked up to him and said, "I love you stupid." Then she marched back to her office. He said he and Peggy were married the next day. "Peggy." Not "my wife" or "she." He remembered the name because the old man delivered it so matter-of-factly, almost intimately. "That was forty years ago," he'd said. Then a tear fell from his left eye as he spoke of her terminal condition, and his fear of living without her.

As that memory faded, the man's thirst intensified. When he retired twenty years ago, he'd walked out of his workplace and halfway across this city contemplating his next phase of life. As he probably just covered a similar distance now, he decided he'd earned a beer at the Irish dive bar on the next block.

As he approached the weathered, routed-wood marquee touting "The LAST DROP Bar and Grille" he noticed the underlying banner stating "Going Out of Business after 60 Years—Come say goodbye."

Stepping into the cool darkness he saw an empty bar—the same one where he'd had the conversation with the old appliance salesman some fifty years ago—but now with a side door to a patio.

The bartender approached from behind the bar with a menu and welcomed him as she gestured toward the patio.

"All we have is outdoor seating. And you'll need to order food to be served alcohol," she said, eyes smiling above her mask.

“Sure. All I want is a cold local craft, but bring me whatever light fare is on the menu,” he said.

“That’d be the tater tots. And the IPA. Follow me, hon.”

She led him to an outdoor table about ten feet from the only other patron, a young man in his mid-twenties.

“I saw the banner. I guess I’m here to say goodbye. I don’t get this way but every few years or so,” he told her.

“Then you’ve been in before?”

“I was served my first beer here just after turning twenty-one.”

“That was about what, twenty years ago?” she joked.

“You’re kind. No, it was well before you were born.”

“Well you came back just in time to get your last,” she said, and then turned away to fill his order.

“Last,” he thought, suddenly feeling melancholy again. He was still troubling through some thoughts when his order arrived.

“Thanks,” he said to the bartender as he removed his mask. Just then the young guy looked up from his device for the first time.

“Cheers,” he said to the older man as he raised his half-full pint.

“Cheers,” he responded. Not feeling it but raising his pint anyway.

“Sad,” said the young guy. “I worked this bar here until last week. Susie there is the last employee. She’ll be gone next week when they shut the door for good.”

“Sad,” said the older man, feeling it. Pushing the tater tots aside he finally quenched his thirst. After a few minutes, when the pint was just about empty, he looked up to see the young guy studying him. Staring back he saw himself as the young man, having just been served his first of-age beer while engaged in conversation with the old appliance salesman.

“Time can be confusing. And cruel if you let it,” he said. His eyes began to tear up unexpectedly.

The young man looked quizzically at him. “Everything okay? Can I buy you another beer?”

“No thank you. I’m fine.” He put cash on the table and stood to leave. “I just walked halfway across the city from Mount Hope,” he explained.

“The cemetery? That’s quite a hike.”

“I just buried my wife.”

“I’m so sorry,” said the young man, obviously anguished and at a loss for more words.

“Her lungs were compromised. She didn’t make it through the intubation.”

Raising his glass toward his lips he considered the remaining swallow. After a moment he put his glass down unfinished. He nodded to the young man, pulled on his mask, and resumed his walk.

