

Peter Luger's

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Sloane Taylor is getting married. My muscles tensed, my stomach clenched. I waited for the inevitable wave of heartache to return. Nothing happened.

I didn't feel anything. I took a cautious breath. Then another. The pain I had so long imagined did not appear. It'd been years since I last saw Sloane and months since I even thought about her. Sloane had been dating an up-and-coming Hollywood producer, and now she was marrying him. I thought I'd be envious, but I wasn't.

I'd carried around the fantasy of Sloane, the perfect woman, the woman who would make me whole. But I didn't want to chase fantasies anymore. I wanted something real. Someone imperfect who I truly loved, who would love me—the real me, the messy, insecure, damaged, transcendent, sober man I'd become—in return. If Sloane wasn't interested in me—and by now, I thought with a chuckle, it's pretty clear she wasn't—then I didn't want to be with her, either.

My relationship with women had already changed. It had been almost two years since I stopped looking at porn. Several months after I quit, I started having an easier time with women than I ever had before. I'm not sure if it was because they sensed I was no longer trying to steal from them, or whether I just gave off a healthier energy. Or because I was a little older and a little richer. Whatever it was, I became attractive to women in the way I'd always wanted. For the first time in my life, lots of women were interested in me. I dated women at work, friends of friends, my yoga teacher, a woman I met on the street. I had a string of short, casual relationships with women I liked but did not love.

I'd always thought that dating and sleeping with tons of women would make me happy. When I finally experienced that, it was the same as all the other fantasies: the reality wasn't nearly as satisfying as what I'd imagined. I'd meet a woman and thrill at taking her home, but when it was over I was left with a woman in my bed whom I wasn't sure I wanted there. As soon as the sex was over, I often just wanted to be alone.

I liked sex, and I liked sex with different women, but in the end it left me more lonely and disconnected than before. I decided to stop.

Several months passed, and for the first time in my life I wasn't focused on luring in women. It wasn't that I didn't want a relationship—I did. But now I was willing to wait patiently until I found a woman I cared about.

I didn't have to wait long.

I'd moved to a modest attic apartment in Brooklyn Heights, and Ben came to stay with me for the summer. It was 2009, and he had just graduated from Harvard's Kennedy School, where he'd been elected student body president, and was about to start Harvard Law School. Instead of returning to consulting or going into corporate law, he planned to do poverty law, providing legal services to those who couldn't afford it. Toward the end of summer, he hosted a brunch at my apartment. He invited some college friends over and cooked coconut pancakes.

I'd been out all morning and arrived late. I pushed the door to my apartment open and froze. It was as if all the lights in the room were off except the ones around the woman standing in the middle of the room. She was tall, with long brown hair, the brightest smile I had ever seen, and deep blue eyes.

It was Kirsten Thompson, the girl I'd made out with when I'd gone to visit Ben at Cornell thirteen years earlier. I hadn't seen her since.

Her face looked the same, but her hair was now long and straight, and curled at the ends. She carried herself with confidence, grace. She was smiling without flirting. Warm without being effusive. She was stunning. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I walked up to her and introduced myself, and she remembered me. I tried to think of interesting things to say so she would keep talking to me. I asked her about her life since we last saw each other, and she told me her story.

After Cornell she'd come to New York to work for J.P. Morgan. The office was a block from the World Trade Center, and her first day on Wall Street had been September 11, 2001. She was in the lobby when the first tower went down, and when smoke and debris exploded past the window she was standing next to, she ran for her life. As she ran, she saw a portly middle-aged man running alongside her, clutching his briefcase. She noticed how tightly he held onto it. I don't want that to be me, she thought.

She quit her job at J.P. Morgan. Lots of people said she was crazy to leave such a lucrative career. But she had seen what she had seen and didn't want a life dedicated to the security of money. She didn't want to be running for her life, clutching her briefcase.

She went back to school to become a doctor. For two years she worked full-time in a medical lab and took premed courses, waking at 5:00 a.m. to study for three hours before work. Then she applied to medical school and was accepted. Now, she was about to graduate. She was going to be a surgeon.

There were a few moments where we stopped talking and just looked at each other awkwardly, and then both started laughing.

At noon everyone started to leave, and Ben called me over to help him wash dishes. When I looked up, I saw Kirsten about to walk out the door. She was all the way across the room, so when she smiled and waved at me, I just waved back.

After she left, I asked Ben about calling her. He had been friends with Kirsten since college, and even though he wasn't romantically interested in her, I knew that after what he and I had been through, I needed to talk to him before asking one of his close friends out on a date. We'd worked through our issues about Emma Ramsdale, but there was still some soreness. That conversation brought up some old issues, which we talked through, and then Ben gave me his blessing.

Kirsten agreed to meet me for coffee on a Sunday afternoon. That day I was meeting Marshall and a few Wall Street guys at Peter Luger's Steak House in Williamsburg for lunch, so I planned to eat and then walk three miles to a coffee shop in Park Slope to meet Kirsten.

Peter Luger's was my favorite restaurant in the world. It was old school: wooden tables, no tablecloths, career waiters. The clientele varied, from Wall Street traders to lower-middle-class families from the Bronx, from slick Italian guys taking their girlfriends out for dates to old couples from Coney Island celebrating their anniversaries.

The food was incredible. The meal started with thick sliced onions and tomatoes with heavy homemade blue-cheese dressing. Then, salty slabs of bacon that you needed a knife to cut. Next, sizzling, redolent lamb chops with au jus spooned over them. For dinner, huge porterhouses on family-size plates so hot that if you wanted your steak cooked a little more, you slapped it on the side of the plate with a snap and a sizzle, and a minute later it was browned. There were bowls of heavy-creamed spinach and German-spiced potatoes. I covered everything in Peter Luger's heavy, sweet steak sauce. It was the only restaurant in the world where I wouldn't eat the bread; the rolls were delicious, but everything else was so much better.

The best part of the meal was dessert, which at Peter Luger's was a two-course affair. First, the waiter would drop off a large bowl of "Schlag"—

heavy, sweet, freshly whipped cream. He'd toss dozens of gold-foil-covered chocolate coins on the table. While you perused the dessert menu, you'd use the chocolate coins to scoop Schlag into your mouth. The dessert menu was all-American: hot-fudge sundaes, thick slabs of apple pie. I always ordered the pecan pie—easily the best I'd ever had. It was so sweet it made your teeth chatter.

But Peter Luger's wasn't my favorite place in the world because of the food. It was my favorite place in the world because I ate there with Marshall. He'd been eating at Peter Luger's at least once a month for twenty years—he no longer needed a reservation. He started bringing me when I was a junior trader. I was a little surprised when he invited me. Marshall had so many friends that the faces at the table were almost always new; Marshall could assemble a dozen or more people at Peter Luger's for a late Sunday lunch with a few phone calls and an hour's notice. His crowd was hard drinking and loud, and I was sober and shy. But Marshall invited me anyway.

Marshall treated me like I wished my father had. He never let me pay for anything. He seemed happy I was there, even when I didn't say a word. And I trusted him. I knew unequivocally that Marshall was on my side, even though we were different in many respects. Marshall liked nothing more than a boozy dinner and a late night at a bar; I liked quiet dinners and nights alone. People would sometimes ask me how it was that Marshall and I were so close, even though our social lives were so different. "I don't know," I'd say. All I knew was that Marshall loved me unconditionally.

I talked to Marshall about leaving Wall Street more than anyone, and sometimes he would really get it. He would lean in toward me, listening intently, while I talked about how I no longer believed being rich would make me happy or that making money was a sufficient purpose for my life. He would say things like, "By God, Sam, you really don't compromise, do you?" and "Your work with Linda seems to have given you a much deeper way of looking at the world." But then he'd start talking about how things would be different for him when the next trading desk became a market leader, despite the fact that he had already run three different number one trading desks.

He'd been in the game too long to agree with me. Marshall was forty-five and had worked harder than anyone I knew. He spent his life on trading floors, in Michelin-starred restaurants and old New York bars like P. J. Clarke's, and usually returned home alone, or, if he was lucky, with a stranger he'd met at the bar. He had the biggest heart of any man I ever knew, but he had never married. My surrogate father might never become a real father. He had committed his life to the fulfillment of a fantasy I was now calling false.

I loved Marshall. I wasn't angry or disappointed with him—just the opposite. I planned to spend the rest of my life honoring him for what he'd done for me. That day, at Peter Luger's, Marshall had a new date with him, an attractive blond woman, ten or fifteen years younger, with the glazed-eye look of a woman three drinks into numbing herself to endure a night with a man she is with for reasons other than love. As usual, Marshall was in the midst of telling a story, and the whole table was captivated. Instead of listening, I watched his face. I looked at the red, puffy skin drooping exhaustedly from his cheeks, the visible consequence of five thousand consecutive restaurant dinners. And I looked at his eyes, already glazed from too much food and drink, and knew that on this next step of my life I couldn't look to Marshall for guidance. Navigating Wall Street, Marshall was my guy; leaving Wall Street, I was on my own.

At the end of the meal, we stood up from the table and walked through the bar to the front door. Marshall let the rest of the party go ahead of us so we could have a private word.

"How are you doing, buddy?" he asked. "Your thoughts seem elsewhere."

I smiled at him. "They are. Happens a lot these days."

"I'm proud of you," he said. "It takes courage to do what you are thinking about doing. I may not agree with it, but I admire it. I only wish you had a plan for once you leave."

We stood there silently. This would indeed all be easier if I had a new profession to dive into after leaving Wall Street. But I didn't. All I knew was that I needed out. I wanted an adventure.

I was scared. When I'd tell Wall Street guys I was thinking about leaving the business, the number one question they'd ask is, "How will you fill your time?" I understood the fear behind that question. It was scary to fathom days, weeks, and months where I didn't have to be somewhere, didn't have someone telling me what to do. One of the most terrifying passages I ever read was Thoreau writing about how sometimes he would spend an entire day sitting in his doorway, watching a field. But what, I wanted to scream, did you DO all day? Part of me realized the absurdity of fearing boredom from a life where I got to choose exactly what I did each day—I was afraid of the very thing I most wanted.

In Netherland, Joseph O'Neill wrote that one of the great consolations of work is its abbreviation of the world's space. I think he meant that at work, you know where you stand. Working in a successful hedge fund, with rich, successful people around me, I knew that, by the standards of the world, I was a success. Sometimes I would have the bizarre experience of reading about a rich finance guy in the paper and for a moment envying his life and success before remembering that I had reached the exact same success, and it had left me feeling empty. Now I was beginning to create my own definition of success.

And what if I was wrong? What if this whole plan to leave Wall Street was, as Marshall seemed to think, a well-meaning but adolescent process I had to go through that would ultimately lead me back to the sage realization that financial success was indeed what life was really about? If I stepped off the track, the race would go on. Each year, guys would make huge bonuses, get promoted, start new hedge funds. And I was proposing to do . . . nothing?

Since I could remember, I felt threatened by other people's success. Now, the entire world might pull past me. Guys I had left in the dust, like that trader in Vegas who had chanted, "Thirty-five sticks! I'm up thirty-five sticks!" would outearn me in a year or two. How would it feel to read newspaper articles in twenty years about guys I had started with on Wall Street who were now CEOs of investment banks or billionaire hedge fund managers?

It seemed safer to play by the rules I had always played by. What if I left Wall Street, and the rest of my life amounted to nothing? I was afraid that the infinite world would open up before me, and I would disappear into its terrifying maw. I believed that since I didn't know what was coming, then nothing might.

Marshall and I stood quietly for a second longer, lost in our own diverging thoughts. I was glad he was next to me. The difference between Marshall and my dad is that if I step away from Marshall's world, I know he will still have my back. I loved him for that.

"So you are going to see Kirsten now, huh?" Marshall said. "She sounds like an amazing woman."

I nodded, excited. I hugged Marshall, endured a round of handshakes, and then walked out into the brisk fall day.

As I walked to Park Slope from Williamsburg, I thought about what had happened in the thirteen years since Kirsten and I first met. I was an almost completely different person. I hoped she liked who I had become.

I was thirty minutes early, and when she finally walked into the coffee shop, she was even more beautiful than I remembered from a few weeks before.

This time she asked me about my life, and I told her I was thinking about leaving Wall Street. She told me that when she left J.P. Morgan, they had her talk to six or seven different people and each one was supposed to convince her to stay. When it became clear her mind was made up, each one started telling her about how they wanted to do something else with their lives.

One woman told her she wished her career involved helping people. A senior executive told her he had been trying to leave for a decade but year after year failed to muster the courage. The last guy she talked to said he'd never been happy on Wall Street, but he couldn't leave, because he felt compelled to maintain his family's lifestyle.

Even on Wall Street people live lives of quiet desperation.

It wasn't that Kirsten had it all figured out. She wasn't smug about being a doctor instead of an investment banker. She, too, struggled with feeling inadequate. Underneath the successful doctor was a shy, sometimes socially awkward woman. I was glad for that. I stared at her in that coffee shop and thought that I could spend my life with this woman. I wondered if someday she might love me.

After coffee, we walked around Park Slope in a light rain for hours. We went into a chocolate store and had dessert. Afterward, I kissed her on the cheek and left and felt like something important had happened.