

From How I Became A Fisherman Named Pete: Chapter Six

By David Spencer

I woke without the slightest tinge of a hangover, yet I woke in pain.

The first thing I saw that morning was a fat trail of rain trickling down the window of my back seat passenger door. It looked like a crystal furrow running down a slab of pewter. The rain was fine and warm, and sounded like sizzling bacon on my roof.

When I woke up in the back seat of my car, it took me a few minutes to realize where I was. My back ached from the cold and from a safety buckle that imbedded itself between my shoulder blades. My jacket had been pulled out of my duffel bag and stuffed under my head, but nothing covered my body, which trembled. As my brain focused through the dull haze of sleep, I felt a stinging burn under my chin.

When I sat up in the seat, I noticed that I had a map stapled to the front of my shirt. The edges of the paper had rubbed against the skin under my chin all night, and I was bleeding. It was a map of Maryland, torn from an ADC road atlas. Frederick had been circled in pink highlighter, and so had Dewy Beach. Fritz had highlighted the entire route. Written on the map (in the light blue gap of the Chesapeake Bay) was a note from Fritz, which read: HERE'S HOW TO GET TO DEWY BEACH. GO TO PARADISE BAR AND GRILL ON ROUTE ONE AND ASK FOR LEAH GREENE. SHE WILL FIND YOU WORK. FRITZ.

His note bothered me. At first, I thought the message was careless and breezy, the shortest thing he could have written. He didn't wish me well, didn't say he had fun last night, nor did he mention how I got to my car. Fritz had been ordering me around so much last night that I was disappointed to see how little he cared that I went to Dewy Beach to hide from the police.

As I became more awake and blood began to saturate my brain, it occurred to me that Fritz cared a little too much. He cared so much that it was exhilarating. There was much more to the letter than just the writing.

Nobody I know carries a stapler on him. A pen, sure; a paper clip, maybe. But not a stapler. After Fritz (or Mrs. Hartly) put me in my car, one of them must have either gone to his truck or inside the diner to get a stapler. Then one of them had to find a road atlas from which to tear out a page. Fritz could have easily written me a note on a napkin with an eyebrow pencil from Mrs. Hartly's purse. Why bother getting a map? And why staple it to my shirt, why not just put it in my pocket or rest it on my chest? It was clear that Fritz wanted to make sure that I had to see the map. It must have been after two or three in the morning when he or Mrs. Hartly drove me back to the truck stop. I didn't understand why anybody would put me in the car, then

go find a map of Maryland, mark the route with a highlighter, then walk back to where I lay and staple it to my shirt.

As I sat up, yawning, the map was snatched from my hand by the static on the door's glass. The cling suspended the paper on my car door like a crooked X-ray. There was something else that bothered me about the note.

I got out of the car and stood up. Alcohol still swam in my system. I looked at my watch, and it was only two minutes past seven in the morning. I wasn't due for a hangover for a couple of hours.

The traffic on Route 70 was light; I watched it from where I stood on the slick pavement. The morning rush wouldn't start for an hour. The parking lot of the truck stop was more crowded than last night. The diner looked very busy with truckers getting coffee and breakfast. At the edge of the parking lot, a possum had his entire head in a can of beans, pushing it across the pavement, trying to eat whatever was left inside. I had never seen a possum during the daytime before.

From the glow of the white sky, the spilled gasoline and oil on the pavement gave the parking lot a sheen like ice.

I sat back down in the back seat of my car with my legs on the wet pavement and read the note again as it was suctioned to the glass of the door. Fritz had used a black ball-point pen to write the message. I could see where the point of the pen had indented the paper, displaying the strokes he used to make each letter. There was something strange about his handwriting; the letters looked funny. I squinted at the note. I followed the curve of each letter with my eyes. That's when I noticed that Fritz had written each, letter twice, one on top of the other. I pulled the map from the car door and held it up against the sky; the squiggly lines of roads from Massachusetts bled through from the other side. I followed each letter with the tip of my index finger as if I were reading Braille. The note Fritz had written was done first in pencil, then traced over with ink, which was how we had written our book reports and essays in elementary school. First we'd write a rough draft, which would be hacked by the teacher, then we'd make the corrections and write it again in pencil. Then, when we were sure there were no spelling mistakes or grammar errors, we'd trace over the pencil in ink. Fritz not only took the time to find a stapler and a road atlas, he also was careful enough to write the note twice—a rough copy in pencil and another committed in pen.

The possum slid the can of beans to a concrete parking divider, which kept the can stationary enough so the possum could get to the beans at the bottom.

I closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. The misting rain felt good on my skin. It caught in the hair on the backs of my forearms in tiny silver beads. I put the map on my dashboard and studied it for a moment before starting the car. It was a good thing Fritz had stapled the map to my shirt and taken the time to write me the note twice. If he hadn't, I still would have stayed in western Maryland and followed Conrad's plan. But I wanted to see what

Fritz thought was so important for me to find in Dewy Beach. There was obviously more than just work there.

As I was pulling out of the parking lot, I realized that a few miles away, Mrs. Hartly and Fritz were probably sleeping in bed. Steve was probably wetting down his hair, getting ready for work. Conrad would be waiting impatiently for his house manager to drive him to RHP. I knew my brother would already be at work. And, undoubtedly, my mother would be praying. I felt a wonderful freedom from them—none of them knew what I was doing. No one, especially the police, knew where I was. It was a beautiful feeling.

As I hit route 70 east, I glanced back at the parking lot and smiled.

Two Mack trucks started up, burnt diesel belching from their exhaust pipes. Their motors growled and scared the little possum—who was running blindly for cover with the can of beans stuck on his head.

It took me almost four hours to get to Dewy Beach.

I made only one stop on my way to see Fritz's niece. I stopped in at an empty family restaurant for some lunch. A man wearing a brown sweatshirt took my order; he wrote it down in a red spiral notebook. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich, the cheapest thing on the menu (which was hand-written on a three-by-five index card and thumb-tacked to the wall next to my seat). The sandwich was two dollars and came with a pickle and potato chips. The man in the sweatshirt also cooked the sandwich; it appeared as if he was the only employee. Before he grilled the sandwich, I tried to ask him if he had any work for me to do.

“Doing what? What looks like it needs work?” he asked. He seemed a little offended, as if I was asking him because I didn't think he could handle the restaurant all by himself.

“Well, if you're the only guy working here, you think you might have something for me to do?”

“Like what?” he asked nervously, rolling the spiral notebook in a tube and wringing it in his sweaty hands.

“I don't know, I could wash dishes, clean your windows, cook stuff . . .”

He looked at the front entrance. “My windows are dirty?” He stuck out his tongue, which wagged across his bottom lip like the tail of a cow.

“No, your windows are fine. I'm just trying to make some pocket money. Is there a job around here that you don't want to do and would rather pay somebody to do it for you?” The man didn't answer; he was still staring at the windows, searching for the smudges and streaks on the glass that only I could see. He still hadn't pulled his tongue back in his mouth. It was as if he needed his tongue out to concentrate.

“Forget it,” I said.

He seemed relieved that I stopped asking for work. He went behind the counter and started the grill. Before he started to cook, he put on a Redskins baseball cap and turned it backward. He faced away from me as he worked, shifting his weight from foot to foot as if he were dancing to a song that echoed around in the hollow recesses of his skull. A woman walked through the kitchen and patted his back. She looked out over the tables and chairs of the restaurant with a grim face. Her hair was stringy, the color of dishwater. I could see her skull through the skin of her face. Her eyes were like white marbles pushed into clay. She was visibly startled when she saw me sitting in a booth.

“Is that for him?” she asked the man at the grill.

“He wanted a sandwich, right?” he asked her. Questions seemed to confuse the man. He yelled to me, “You still want this sandwich?”

I nodded and tried to smile.

The woman looked back at me and grinned. Then she caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection on a stainless steel refrigerator and gasped. She combed her hair with her fingers and laughed to herself. I didn’t think she was expecting to see any customers.

When my sandwich was done, both the man and woman presented it to me as if it were a birthday cake.

“Here you are,” he said. The woman was quiet; she just stared at me and smiled. They both stood next to me, hovering like vultures the entire time I ate. Each time I’d take a bite, I’d turn to them and smile with a mouthful of bread and melted cheese. They watched me eat with an uneasy mixture of astonishment and pride. They acted like this was the first time anybody had been willing to eat something they had prepared. The man even took off his hat and held it to his chest, as if the National Anthem was now playing in his empty head.

The sandwich was cut in two. I ate the first half politely, taking my time. But when I realized that they were going to linger around for me to finish the whole thing, I stuffed the entire second half of the sandwich in my mouth. After that, I nearly ran out of place. The man and woman watched me leave through the front window.

I promised myself no more stops until I reached Paradise Bar and Grill. And I promised myself that I wouldn’t try again to find myself work. I would leave that up to Leah.

The sun came out when I pulled into Paradise’s parking lot. The sky was a dirty blue color from all the humidity. I was close to the water, and the air was warm and dense.

It was easy to find the restaurant; Dewy Beach was barely three miles long. Paradise was in a strip mall on Route One, sandwiched in between a tanning salon and a dog grooming academy. Some of the cars in the parking lot had tarps pulled over them for protection from

seagulls that bombed the parking lot with their arsenal of droppings; the unprotected cars were speckled with globs of white bird shit.

On Paradise's sign, the letters were written in orange, and at the bottom, there was a cartoon drawing of a bearded fat guy lying on a hammock that was stretched between two palm trees. Behind the lounging fat man, a surfboard was stuck into the sand. This sign was a little misleading to people who weren't from the area; palm trees don't grow in Maryland, and nobody surfs in Dewy Beach.

The first thing I saw when I went into the restaurant was a chalkboard that had all the beers they kept on draft written in pink and baby blue chalk. Under the board was a bowl of peppermints that sat on a little ledge. Before I went in to talk to Leah, I filled my pockets with the mints.

When I went inside, a short blond woman wearing a pink Polo shirt was vacuuming the cardinal-red carpet. Everything inside Paradise was red: the upholstery was red vinyl, the walls were stained mahogany, and every table had a candle in a red globe. The woman was struggling with the vacuum; its left wheel was bent and wouldn't move. As she shoved the vacuum forward and wrestled it back, she held her breath, which made her face as red as the walls. Her scalp shone pink through her straw-colored hair.

She shut the machine off and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She stood, panting and dizzy, when she saw me she could barely speak. "Not open." She managed to say. "Open . . . one o'clock."

"Actually," I said, "I'm here to see Leah. Is she around?"

The woman teetered on her feet trying to catch her breath. She plopped down in a booth and held her right hand across her chest.

"Are you Tom?" she asked.

"Yes."

Her breathing simmered down, but her face still glowed from the blood trapped in her cheeks. "Fritz called us this morning, but it was too late. Leah will be in Ocean City for the summer."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what else to say. I thanked her and started to walk out.

"Hold on," she said. "Let me get Mike. Maybe he knows where she is down there."

I didn't really want to go looking for this girl in Ocean City, but the lady had already walked off, dragging the immobile vacuum cleaner behind her.

Mike came out, wearing a filthy apron and a white towel over his shoulder. He was probably six years older than Fritz, but instantly I saw the resemblance. Mike was a little overweight, but it was evident from the fleshy slackness of his jowls that he had just shed a lot of pounds. His eyes were pretty, like Fritz's, and he had a nice smile with bone-white teeth. His hair was thinning, but he wore it down to his shoulders.

"Tom!" he said as if he knew me. "I'm Mike Greene. Fritz called me from Shelly's place this morning and told me you'd be by." Before he extended his hand for me to shake, he pulled the white dish towel from off his shoulder and rubbed his hands in it. Mike was a big guy, but his grip was strangely weak, as if he lost some of his strength along with his fat.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

The woman who had been wrestling with the vacuum came back. She pulled a chair from off a table and sat down. The red vinyl cushion rumbled when she settled her weight.

"I'm only going to be in town for a week or two, and I was looking for some work."

Mike shook his head and sucked his teeth. "Sorry, kid. You're a little ahead of the ball. It's still the off-season around here. Nobody I know will be hiring for at least two weeks."

"But after that," the red-faced woman said, "everybody's hiring."

Mike smiled at me and shrugged. "She's right."

"Is there anything I could do around here?" As I talked, my eyes shifted from stain to stain on his apron.

"Sorry, kid," he took the towel of his shoulder again and rubbed his hands in it. "I'd like to help you out, but I just don't have anything open right now."

I nodded and sighed.

"Yeah, I feel bad. I don't know what Fritz was thinking telling you to come here for work." Mike reached over and slapped me on the shoulder.

"He told me to come here to find Leah, though." I said.

"Oh! Are you going to work with Ron, too?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Fritz just told me that Leah could find me a job."

"So she's going to get you a job with her at Sunset?"

"I don't know, what's Sunset?"

“It’s a bar in Ocean City,” he said. “Her boyfriend Ron’s the assistant manager. He gave her a job tending bar while she’s house sitting.”

I shook my head. “Maybe that’s what Fritz meant. He wasn’t real clear about it. How far am I from Ocean City?”

Mike pointed to the front door of the restaurant. “That road out there is Route One—stay on that until it becomes Coastal Highway. When it turns into Coastal Highway, you’ll be in Ocean City. It’ll take you about half an hour.”

“That’s it, just go south and I won’t get lost.”

He laughed. “If you go left, you’ll drive into the ocean, if you turn right, you’ll go in the bay.” He slapped me on the shoulder again and bared his gleaming teeth. “Fritz told me you were a funny guy.” He turned to the woman on the chair. “Did you know this guy took my brother and Shelly Hartly to a cemetery last night?”

The woman scrunched her face. “A cemetery?”

“Yeah, Fritz said this kid was looking for ghosts!”

I groaned. “It wasn’t a cemetery, and I wasn’t looking for ghosts.” I wanted to explain what I was doing there, but I didn’t have the energy. The alcohol from last night was turning sour in my body. My legs started to ache and my head felt like a melting glob of wax.

Mike saw that I wasn’t smiling, so he tussled my hair and punched me in the arm. “Don’t worry—Fritz said you were a good shit. Just thought you were a little queer is all.”

“Honey,” the woman said to Mike, “don’t say queer—that means something else these days.” It seemed as if both Mike and Fritz had found women who were keen to clean up their language, although this lady didn’t seem to be romantically involved with Mike.

Mike looked back at her and laughed. “He knows I don’t mean nothing by it. Fritz just said this kid was a little goofy.”

“OK, just don’t call him queer, call him goofy.” Then she added, “—if you have to do that.”

They were talking as if I wasn’t standing there, so I cleared my throat to get them to stop.

“Actually,” Mike said, “if you’re desperate for some cash, I have something for you to do.”

Before I left, Mike paid me twenty dollars to clean his bathrooms. I scrubbed the toilets and sinks with a wash cloth and a canister of Comet. I poured the white-green powder on the pink porcelain of the toilet and marveled that Conrad’s roommate (the man from the Pentagon

who wanted to tell me how to fake my own death) once snorted this stuff, thinking it was cocaine. The cleanser had completely devoured his nasal cavity. The guy had to wear a scarf over his nose and mouth in the winter because breathing in cold air dropped him to his knees in pain and tears.

Mike sent me on my way with a day old bag of potato rolls and directions to get to the bar called Sunset.

“I’d tell you where Leah’s staying if I knew,” Mike said as I was leaving. He walked me out to the front entrance. “She left two days ago and she didn’t tell her mother or me anything— just said she was house-sitting for a friend.” He shook his head and squinted in the sun. “How do you like that?”

I smiled with forced sympathy.

“Well, you tell her that her dad wants a phone call when you see her. Got that?”

I nodded. “I’ll tell her.”

Mike wished me well and thanked me for cleaning his bathroom. As the door was closing, I heard him shout, “Where’re all my goddamn mints?”

On the map, Ocean City resembled a coccyx (that tiny bone at the end of the human spine that hugs the outside of the colon). I found the shape fitting, because I thought Ocean City was a shit-hole.

I parked on a side street behind Sunset but walked along the boardwalk for a couple of hours before going in.

The shops along the boardwalk were closed. Green wire garbage cans were outside of every fourth store, over filled with trash that spilled down onto the ground.

The sun slipped back under the cover of the one luminous gray cloud that covered the sky. The rain had stopped long ago, and the air was warm, which eased some of my soreness from last night.

Down the side streets bits of trash blew in the wind and slipped into the gutters. The salt from the sea breeze ate away at the buildings, dissolving wood and rusting trim. On some of the buildings’ foundations, cracks were in the cement as thick as my thumb. The planks of wood on the boardwalk were deeply grooved and splintered.

I peered into some of the shops that sold T-shirts and posters and sunglasses. None of them had doors; instead they had large plastic partitions that covered the openings, like the stores in a shopping mall. Only one man had his shop open. He sat in front of it in a lawn chair while eating cantaloupe with a plastic fork. He sat next to a spin-rack filled with postcards that were curling into C-shapes from the humidity. He didn’t look at me when I walked into his store. He

sold useless crap: Budweiser beach towels, hippie T-shirts, drug paraphernalia, and cheap silver jewelry. Above his cash register were designs that he could air-brush onto a T-shirt or a license plate for you. Everything in the store was tourist shit; and almost every single store along the boardwalk was the same as his, a caravan selling beer T-shirts and flip-flops.

A huge Ferris wheel was at the end of the boardwalk. In the gray light, it reminded me of the Domino Sugar factory's sign—an ignored, skeletal hulk. It sat motionless in the gray air, surrounded by other unused carnival rides and game stands. I walked along the empty stands, where people would get ripped off trying to knock down lead bottles with a baseball or throw blunted darts at under-inflated balloons. Everything was deserted. I only saw one other person, one guy sitting on a stool reading a car magazine outside a funhouse. He was the ticket taker. When he saw me, he disappeared into the funhouse and left his magazine on the padded seat of the stool.

As empty as the boardwalk was, Sunset was pretty crowded. Most of the customers were wealthy-looking old men. They were drinking imported lager and good brandy. Their faces glowed red from the alcohol as they played cards and cackled to one another. One man—wearing white pants, navy jacket, and a white captain's hat—had a nose so red-purple it looked as if it was going to fall off, like cigar ash, into his Scotch and water.

The walls of the bar were darkened from the smoke that loomed around the pine green stained-glass chandeliers. The shutters had been drawn to block out all the light from the front windows. The interior was so dark, it was hard to see your own feet as you walked.

Two men stood behind the bar. One guy was unloading bottles of liquor from a cardboard box, and the other was watching a soap opera on television. They wore crisp white shirts, black vests, and black bow ties. The man watching television was a heavy-set black guy. He watched the soap opera with a mixture of disgust and curiosity.

I went up to the counter and asked the guy emptying the boxes if Leah was around.

He looked at me suspiciously. “No,” he said with enough finality and rudeness that it made the black guy look over at us. The man I was talking to looked about thirty. He was an inch shorter than me but had a thick frame and tan skin. His hair was short and combed back.

“Well,” I said, “can you tell me when she works next?”

He pulled a bottle of Seagram's lime twisted gin from the box and volleyed it from hand to hand. “I don't know when she works next,” he said flatly.

“Can you find out?”

He slammed the bottle down on the bar a little harder than I think he intended to; he immediately checked to see if he had cracked it. “Hold on.” Without saying anything more, he walked through two silver doors and into the kitchen.

The black guy turned the soap opera off and turned to a golf match. The men at the tables cheered. I sat at the bar, and he asked me if I wanted anything to drink. I said no, but he set a coaster in front of me anyway. The bottles of alcohol sat in front of a large mirror that had been dulled from age and smoke. I looked at my face and was shocked to see the dark rings around my eyes. I was as shocked to see the harshness of my face as the woman in the family restaurant had been to see hers.

I waited about ten minutes for the other guy to come back out. The black guy started to wash some glasses in soapy water in front of me.

“Is he coming back?” I asked him, referring the other employee who was checking to find out when Leah was working next.

“Ron?” he said. “I guess so.”

“That’s Leah’s boyfriend?” I asked and pointed to the door from which he left.

“Who’s Leah?” he said, then he asked me again if I wanted anything to drink.

An elderly woman came out of the kitchen and yelled at the black guy. “Who turned off my stories?” She reached up and switched the channel; the geezers in the tables jeered. She looked at me then slapped the guy on the arm. “Have you waited on that kid yet?”

“He doesn’t want anything,” the man said.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” I said. “Can you tell me when Leah’s working?”

She came over and pulled a piece of paper that was in a plastic sleeve out from under the bar; it was dotted with spilled beer.

“I have her down to work tomorrow from noon until five,” she said. I tried to ask her if she was hiring, but she frowned at me and said, “If I come back out here and you’re not drinking, out you go.” Then she walked back into the kitchen.

The black guy gave her the finger behind her back and turned the channel again.

I looked towards the kitchen, and saw no sign of Leah’s boyfriend. I could understand being a little cautious about a stranger asking for your girlfriend, but he had been so short with me that I felt pissed off.

As I left, I took the bottle of gin that he had unpacked from the box and tucked it under my jacket. One of the men in the bar saw me steal it. He smiled at me and nodded approvingly.

Out in the rear parking lot, Ron was pacing, smoking a cigarette. He stopped when he saw me and dragged deeply. I thought he was waiting there to fight me. He glowered at me from the parking lot, and I just blinked at him. I had never been in a fight before. If he had

attacked me, I would have thrown the bottle of gin at him and run. Hitting him with the bottle would have been the only thing I knew how to do. But it was unnecessary. Ron only spat on the ground and went back into the rear entrance.

I didn't really remember having the dream until I was on the beach that night.

One hundred yards in front of Sunset, I lay on my back and tried to go to sleep on the sand. For dinner, I had eaten a handful of peppermints and three of the rolls Mike had given me. To get rid of the spongy staleness, I toasted the bread in a little fire I had made in an empty beer can. I had tried hard to go to sleep, but my head was welling over with worries.

The moon was low in the sky, the color of infected urine. Its light shone down on the crashing waves and made the sea foam that spilled out onto the sand glow yellow like sulfur.

I lay on my back and stared at the black sky, unable to blink. I wished the dream I had about my father meant something. I wished I could have talked to him. In the dream, I walked to him on the sand, then everything around me dissolved into another dream. One second I was approaching my father, the next I was in a parking garage somewhere being told by a gang of fifties greasers that I could join their gang if I was willing to eat a candy bar in a haunted covered bridge.

I mostly couldn't sleep because I was worried about the police. I worried that RHP still wanted to press charges even though Conrad had paid back the money for me. It made my head ache to think of cops pounding on my door, disturbing my neighbors and making them think I was some criminal. I wondered if my gun-selling neighbor had panicked when he saw the cops pull up to the front of our building. Maybe he thought he was lucky because they'd knocked on my door by mistake and not his?

I sat up and took the bottle of gin from my duffel bag. I took a deep drink of it and gagged. The liquid burned like a gas in the center of my chest. I wondered if drinking after-shave could have tasted much worse. Stealing the bottle was my petty revenge for how much of an asshole Leah's boyfriend had been to me. I capped the bottle, grabbed it by its neck and heaved it into the ocean. It cartwheeled in the yellow moonlight, but I couldn't see where it smacked down in the water.

I lay back down on the sand and tried to close my eyes, but my mind just kept rolling things over in my head. Two days ago, I had a life. I slept in a warm bed and I ate hot food. I had my friend. Now, I slept in the cold and ate stale bread. The police wanted me for a crime I was too stupid to realize I had committed. I was a hundred miles away from my home, but everything seemed to be waiting for me just over the wall of buildings on the boardwalk; the copper glow from the street lights was where the police were waiting for me. With every wave that spilled out onto the wet sand, I could hear them plotting when to grab me.

A large wave unfurled to about five feet from where I lay. I scooted myself back.

I was far away from home, but the black water outside RHP was still following me. It had trapped me at the end of the world. I listened to the water fizzing out on the sand; it sounded like laughing. There was nothing at the line of the horizon, just black. Each wave that broke was reaching out to snatch me up and take me out to sea, carry me on the crests of black water until I was treading and bobbing in complete darkness in the middle of the ocean. Every direction I'd swim would lead me further out into nothing.