

## Pat's Pit

By Alejandro Pena

Even after eight years, Colette never once let my coffee go cold. With a hell of a step for a career waitress, she was fond of every patron and lost soul that sat at her counter during the graveyard shift. "I think it's my parental instinct being put to good use since I never did have kids," she had told me some time ago. To a typical waitress everyone's 'shug' or 'hun'; Colette came up with a nickname for every one of the Pat's Pit regulars the first time they were served and she would never forget their name. To most of the regulars, Colette was one of their few sure bets in a weary world of lay-offs, work-related injuries and their own failing health. This was why within the walls of Pat's, worlds crumbled the night Colette let my cup go empty.

The night was typical and the faces familiar, but the mood was off. When I looked up from my day-old newspaper, all I found were the worried faces of Big Ford and Tractor Jack who had their eyes locked on the coatroom. Two voices were going at each other and from the sound of it; Colette was on the verge of hysterics while the other remained cold and threatening. The words were muffled but everyone within earshot could tell the exchange had ceased to be pleasant when Colette screamed, "I don't have the money, Two-Tone!" An uncomfortable silence filled the restaurant, save for the bustling kitchen. Soon Colette began to sob and a bald-headed man in a NASCAR jacket walked out of the restaurant and into a waiting pick-up. The bawling lasted a few moments after the truck sped off and Tractor Jack was getting off his stool to play the comforter when she burst from behind the door, eyes bloodshot and make-up ruined. Still, she wore a smile as bright as high noon while she went from table to table, refilling coffee mugs and clearing plates. From what I saw on her face, she was fighting a war between keeping her composure and losing all hope. When my turn finally came around, I saw it in her eyes that if she wasn't about to fall apart at the seams than she was going to choke on her grief. "Colette, how can I...?"

"Oh, don't you go and worry yourself over me, Fingers." I got the name by making the mistake of coming into Pat's drunk as a fuck the first time - when simple things like lighting a cigarette or eating turned into brain surgery. When she came to refill my coffee I dropped my mug and earned the name Butter Fingers. A couple of months later, another drunken patron walked in and started giving a hard time to Hannah, the waitress working to put herself through school. He kept telling Hannah that she should have been a stripper with a body like that, which was true enough, but the trouble started when he started groping her anatomy. I was the first to have the John Doe by the lapels, dragging him to the door. As soon as I saw the blade glow in his hands I threw him up against the wall, tossed the blade and broke his fingers. It was a fitting way to end what was bad day for me.

Colette's voice yanked me back from my memories as she wiped down the counter. "Nope, you just worry about paying that bill and leaving a healthy tip. Every bit helps, you know?" She stopped dead in her tracks when I asked if she was having money troubles, looked up and out of the window front, shook her head and smiled again. "Oh, no, no. Well... I-" Her voice was drowned out by a roaring engine screeching across Pat's parking lot. Every set of eyes in the diner were glued

to the truck when the cab lit up with automatic gunfire that shattered the window, giving the figure in the truck bed the spot to hurl a Molotov cocktail. The smoking section burst into flames and blood-curdling screams, the soundtrack to a stampede for the back exit.

The shrill fire alarm rose above the din of crashing plates and mugs and the smoke was filling up the diner fast, but I knew that there were good men engulfed in that fire. I ran towards the inferno with fire extinguisher in hand and found Chopper Charlie rolling frantically on the floor and screaming. When the last bit of his flaming beard was put out I dragged him by the vest out through the back.

After I coughed up half a black lung I asked who was missing. "Everyone with an ashtray," answered General Boots from the door, though he was crawling out on his stomach, no one bothered to ask why.

"Pager was smoking again, wasn't he?" Tractor Jack reminded us about the Native American kid who was on his way home to finally see his baby girl. No one could stomach answering the question.

The moment of silence was broken when flames began to leap from the roof so we moved to the front parking lot, called the police and confronted Colette about who Two-Tone was and why he had torched Pat's. She broke down on the pavement, screaming that she was sorry, and kept begging for forgiveness. It was clear that no one was going to be able to get her to make sense for a while. I would have taken a chance at comforting her if it wasn't for the tap on my shoulder that turned me to the General asking, "Fingers, you're good with a gun, right?" Coming from anyone else the question would have thrown me for a loop, but the General failed to surprise me.

"Why?"

"That truck headed west at top speed but they got forty miles ahead of them before they get to the first exit and the cops aren't going to catch them coming from the east."

Enough was said. "You're crazy general, but I'm with you. You better have a fast car."

Twenty seconds later my hopes were answered with 120 miles per hour in the General's German import. The car was lined with leather, real woodgrain, digital everything and a stereo system built for a space station, but all I could tell him was that he had a nice car. He told me I could find a gun in the glove compartment. Instead, I found a heavy custom magnum with all the toys: lengthy barrel, scope, infrared dot. I told the General that I was good with guns, not anti-aircraft artillery. He responded with a warning that the cannon was already loaded.

I told him that they would see us coming from miles behind, but he grinned and asked me to pull out the compartment from underneath my seat. Inside I found a pair of goggles wired up with lenses that looked like they served a purpose. He steered with his knees, which I'll admit had me doubting his sanity, and strapped the device to his bald head. Before I got to ask what they were, the General turned off his headlights while a whistle filled the silence. I could tell he was wearing a shit-eating grin in the dark. Night vision goggles, but I still wasn't surprised.

"It'll take us a minute to catch up with them and I have to concentrate. Do you mind if I play some music?" I told him to do whatever he needs to make sure we didn't end up paste on the pavement. The CD player lit up and an orchestra exploded

from the speakers. I closed my eyes tight to adjust to the dark and thanked no one in particular that there was a full moon out. The bass of the thundering drums rattled through my body like a rap track, but the building up of the music suited the situation as a pair of tail lights came into view up ahead. I got a feel for the gun but let myself drift for an instant back to when I shot my first gun: my grandfather's .44. Family legend said that the gun had bodies on it from when he was a hoodlum in Tijuana, but he died before I could ask.

As the tail lights grew closer, the General's gentle giant of an engine eased up to match Two-Tone's ninety miles per hour. Cracking the window created a vacuum of wind that had me forcing both eyes open. The muzzle flash blinded me but I went deaf at the sound of crashing cymbals. I would have inspected the gun closer to see if the General was crazy enough to have a silencer built into the barrel, had I not dropped the pistol out of the window when the performance brakes took hold.

The sound of screeching tires and crashing metal told me that my aim was true. In the darkness, General Boots described the destruction with "Wow." I felt the car pull forward as we pulled up to the wreck while my vision came back to me. The monster tires were still turning when we hopped out, though now they were sticking straight up into the air. I found Two-Tone in the ditch, a few yards from the truck, his body contorted and broken, eyes empty, mouth still gaping in that moment that he was caught with his pants down. He looked young and ratty, acne scars all over his face, and an unkempt pair of porkchop side burns. The Tech-9 was still in his hand but the threat was long gone. Two-Tone's wallet told me that his name was Garfield Pauls and lived a life in Amarillo, Texas until he met his demise in the Nevada desert in the twenty-third year of his life. He also owed the bank three-hundred dollars.

When I came back to the car, I found the General puking in the road near the wreck. He looked up to me with dribble on his chin and face as white as a ghost. He pointed a shaky finger at the wreck and said that we better have a good answer 'at the End'. It reminded me why I had never spoken to the General in the three years I'd been coming to Pat's. I walked around the wreck to the driver's side and found a teenage girl with curly red hair hanging upside down from the seat belt. In her eyes was the same void that I saw in Garfield's that said she was gone. Streaks in the blood on her forehead made it clear she was alive long enough to regret everything. I reached out to steady her swinging body and went to join the General and asked for a phone.

Twenty minutes later an armada of emergency response vehicles joined us. The General had calmed down and was making coherent sentences by this time. A sheriff took our statements and informed us that Colette was caught up in a crystal meth ring running state wide. Garfield was Colette's stepson with his own addiction to violence and heroin. Garfield had been coming to Colette for cash advances for a month now, but when she had refused Garfield pulled the biggest hissy fit anyone had ever seen. Terminator Tom, Ringtone Ross and Pager perished in the fire. Colette was so guilt stricken that before the stoves blew she ran back into Pat's and went up with the restaurant she had spent too much of her life in.

The girl's name was Alison Gray, Garfield's girlfriend of three years and six years his minor. She'd run away from home a month ago and her family was desperate to find her. The General's military pass and respect from every officer in

the county meant we weren't asked many questions, though the General had to have been shaken to his soul, the way he looked after the wreck. We drove in silence back to Pat's parking lot while Alison Gray haunted me and the General drove the speed limit. I didn't ask about his gun and neither did he. I wondered how Alison could've gone so wrong so young. How could Garfield have let her become a crook? What price will I pay for taking her life?

I thought back to the night that I lost my virginity all those years ago, in Rosa Lee's parents' house, both of us conscious of every sound we made at three in the morning. I remembered her mother cracking the door to Rosa's room mid-orgasm and breaking into hysterics when she realized why her daughter was grunting primal. As I raced to put on my pants without the underwear I couldn't find, her mother was racing down the stairs to wake her father, who chased me out of the house with a Louisville Slugger and fire in his eyes.

I had stolen his only daughter's innocence (even though she was the one who invited me into her room) and there was no getting that back. I made it a point never to show my face around there again, since the man was the mayor of the one-horse town and I ended up staying with my older brother Nick in Nevada who was sympathetic to my dilemma and lived a half mile down the road from Pat's.

Even with the threat of a fractured skull, I still thought fondly on that night that changed my life, and let out a quiet chuckle, hoping the General wouldn't hear and think of me as heartless. As we pulled into Pat's parking lot, the fire engine was still soaking the smoldering ruins of the Pit. Before I turned over the engine of the Monte Carlo, I figured I couldn't really blame Alison for letting someone like Two-Tone suck her up into his lifestyle. After quickly praying that I never have a daughter, I pulled onto the freeway and wondered whatever happened to Rosa Lee.

*Alejandro Pena is a nineteen year old punk-ass who rests his head in the Brooklyn neighborhood of East New York, having transplanted from Michigan. While working as a barback and seeking future writing opportunities, he reads too much Donald Goines. He would like to dedicate this story to his family and his Old Man especially.*