

## Love's Last Sacrifice

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**Petty** wears his shades like armor. Inside, at night, in the dead of winter; he doesn't care – they're his eyes. His hair's slicked back in the coolest, baddest James Dean you ever saw. Black jeans and black boots and black leather jacket. Stepping from the Roadhouse Bar and Grill, he pauses, poses, looks into the dark night, right then left in smooth easy turns that rotate around the bridge of his nose rather than some other, more normal axis. There is no one present, but he always plays to his audience, anyway. Settles his jacket down around his spray-paint-tight white tee shirt with a practiced shrug, spins his keys around his finger *chank chank chank* to his car.

Petty spends his evenings at the Roadhouse. From after work till closing time, the end stool at the bar has his name invisibly etched in the sagging red leather. Denny knows not just his drinks, but the exact timing and sequence of them as the night progresses, and Petty thinks he's loved and welcomed. He's not. He's tolerated; he's allowed.

The other regulars come to the bar to get their rounds, all tinkling glass and small talk and that curious circling noise of dropped change, and they greet Petty with small sad words, and Petty thinks, because he sits near the register where they have to come near him, that he's holding court. When they move away too soon, back to their tables, bearing fistfuls of mugs and slopping glasses, he thinks it's respect. When they reach their friends, they whisper things like "stuck in a long-gone time he never knew." Things like "sad, so sad."

Every few days, mostly toward the ends of the week, a woman comes in that Petty doesn't know, and then the slump goes out of him, and he lifts a needless finger toward Denny. Two straight shots of single-malt are already on their way, though, and mouth-squeezed Denny sets them down with a bitter thud that Petty never seems to catch. One shot in each hand, Petty strolls toward his conquest, carefully rolling his shoulders like a cat. Clunks her shot down in front of her and throws back his own like he's famous and plays his line to the hushed house.

"Hey, baby," he says, drawing out "baaay" in a baritone he stole from the silver screen, tacking on a tenor "bee!" he got from Roy Orbison. "How would you like to lay down beside me forever?"

Not the best pick-up line ever. In fact, it may quite possibly be the worst, and it's never worked for him. Never. Twenty-three, he's still a virgin, and that line has cost him every almost-friend he's ever mortified with it. No one wants to even be around him whenever another woman finds her way to the Roadhouse, one who hasn't shot him down already. In years gone by, there may have been chuckles as the scene played out. In later years, there were at least giggles. Now, only silence, deep and embarrassed, follows him back to his stool as woman after woman rejects this stranger.

Until tonight.

**She** may be the mousiest girl you've ever seen. She's a caricature of mousy. Her face comes to a point somewhere between her nose and her mouth, and she peers through glasses like goggles as she makes her way to the stool that's farthest from any occupied ones, trying to watch where she's going without having to see anyone as she goes. Brown hair, brown eyes, straight brown dress to her knees. Brown shoes of no particular type. It takes her thirty seconds of dithering to order a cup of coffee, trying hard not to have to see Denny while she does it, and by that time, Petty's made his approach.

"Hey, baaay-bee!" he croons, "How would you like to lay down beside me forever?" and in a frightened clench of her entire body, Susan spills her coffee. Thus begins perhaps the most pathetic love affair ever lived.

**Susan** became Susan Petty not six weeks later, swept along in a whirling of emotion she thought was love, carried by invisible wings, inches above the ground, feathered and caressed by his every whim. Drifting and floating through that day, she missed her mother more than ever.

Four days later, he held her, squirming and squealing, clamped like a naughty toddler under his arm, while he

forced her fingertips into the blue fire of the stove burner. She'd not gotten his black jeans ironed smooth enough, and she needed to be taught what "hot" meant. A few days later, his tee shirts sat in the dryer till they went cold and wrinkled, and he dragged her into the laundry room by her hair.

A week after that, she doesn't move fast enough when he wants a beer, and he needs to show her what happens to slowpokes. One hand twisted into her hair, the other fist aimed at her face, he makes her set a mouse trap, shaking her at every fumble till it's snapped and leaped at her a dozen times. She stops begging when she realizes he's pulling her hair harder for every "Please! No! Don't!" and by the time she gets it set and laid out on the counter, she's only crying silently. He drops her hair, squeezes his hand into his crotch, his other fist still aimed at her face. He's not holding onto her anymore, not even touching her now, and the door's right there, not six feet away, and yet she reaches out her hand to the waiting trap, her eyes clenched like fists, and she bites blood from her lips at the sudden searing of that fresh new pain. She loves him. He loves her. This must be what love does.

"Love makes sacrifices," her mother told her, when she was fourteen, when they had The Talk. "It's humiliating and dirty and messy, and it hurts," she told her. "There's nothing in it for you. It's all for him. It's part of the curse laid on women, earned by that single bite of apple, and there's nothing in it for you. He gets fifteen minutes of fun, and fifteen seconds of ecstasy, and all you get is fifteen minutes of pain and the need to take a second shower after he's done and snoring next to you. But, God willing, then you get a baby, and still all he has is his fifteen seconds, so that makes up for it, but the point is, love makes sacrifices. It just does."

"Love makes sacrifices," she told herself every time he punched her stomach, gasping all the air from her.

"Love makes sacrifices," she told herself the first time he bent her over the kitchen table and lashed her with his belt, their nine-month-old daughter screaming in her high chair, arching so far back the tray came unlatched, screaming a terror so deep you couldn't even hear it.

She got good at setting mouse traps and springing them on her fingertips. She got good at gulping back the screams that would only make the lashings worse, good at keeping her eyes from his and her mouth closed. She got used to wearing long sleeves and high collars, keeping her face averted from shopkeepers and bus drivers. She got good at making love's sacrifices.

But when Ellen was seven, and she took a dislike to spinach, and Petty slapped her face so hard she spun around and fell down, something somewhere snapped. Someone somewhere screamed "No more sacrifices!" and it may have been her. Her wholly inadequate arms shielding Ellen, hugging her to her meager bosom and nuzzling their wet faces together in a flood of tears, she turned some corner in her mind. Kneeling there on the kitchen floor, she was standing up straighter than she ever had.

**Susan** lies on one elbow, smoothing an arc of the satin bedspread in front of her, slowly, over and over, her fingers stroking all the way from her curled knees to tuck, reassured, under the edge of the pillow. When he comes from the bathroom, scrubbing his wet hair with his fingertips like he does, she lets her eyes go up his body, almost all the way to his. He was so much to her, once. She gently pats the smoothed arc of bedspread.

"Hey, baby," she whispers to his chin, "How would you like to lay down beside me forever?"

**Later**, a long time later, Petty lies sprawled like a starfish, like the bed-hog he's always been. He doesn't watch as she rises so slowly, he doesn't listen as she showers so carefully. He can't smell her lotions and perfume as she dresses so perfectly, can't hear her as she goes downstairs to phone so calmly. He lies with his eyes fixed on the ceiling like he's watching something there. A black plastic screwdriver handle juts from his forehead, the skin around it bruised and crushed where she ground it in little circles, like grinding seven years of bitter herbs in a mortar and pestle of hate.

He's taken so much from her. He's taken everything she had, everything she was, everything she thought she'd ever be, and now he's finally given something.

Now he's love's last sacrifice.