The Stranger

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by Randall Brokaw
Economics, Jr.

Ben Cooper washed down the last of his pancakes with a big gulp of coffee. His blue eyes were rimmed in red, and his face wore a strained and tired look. He sat in the back of the Bluebird Cafe, well away from the early morning customers gathered around the counter. All through his meal, Ben had kept his eyes on his plate. He didn’t want to look at the dirty floor or the bare fluorescent lights. Now, though, Ben leaned back and stretched his long legs under the table. He flexed his aching muscles to remove the tension produced by a sleepless night.

A young waitress in a uniform still showing yesterday’s grease and dirt walked back and asked him if he wanted some more coffee. When he nodded, she smiled and asked, “You’re not from around here, are you?”

Ben mumbled, “No I’m not,” and looked away, afraid she would talk some more. She didn’t and was soon gone, leaving him alone again.

He lit a cigarette and settled back to enjoy his coffee. Looking out the front window, he could see it was now daylight. Funny how different the street looked in the sun.

Ben had come into town on a Greyhound, arriving about 5:00 A. M. that morning. As the bus approached Postville, he had cursed himself for failing to get any sleep on the twelve-hour ride from Chicago. Not knowing, after an absence of five years, how he would be received, he wished he had more energy on which to rely. His construction job, last of a long line of tiring, boring jobs, had ended two days ago and Ben, unable to find another, had decided to visit home.
No one else got off at Postville, so he found himself alone in the cold street. A glance up and down Main Street told him nothing was open. Ben sat on the bench outside the deserted bus station and waited for the town to wake up. Kept company by the one light burning above his head, he shivered through a lonely hour.

Finally, about six o’clock, a light went on in the cafe down the street. Picking up his duffel bag, he walked down the brick paving and stared at the blazing neon light. “Blue-Bird Cafe” read the sign, but the “i” in Bird and the “fe” in Cafe were burned out. Dirty gray and brown under the streetlights, Main Street looked just as it had that night five years ago. He hadn’t really meant to hit the man that hard. The law had been easy on him, locking him up for only thirty days, but the town and especially his father hadn’t let him off so easy. If he had stayed, he would have been given a life sentence of strange looks and intentional snubs by the community. . .

Ben shook his head and rubbed his burning eyes. He’d almost fallen asleep. It was time to go, so he grabbed his bag from the floor and shoved a quarter under his plate. At the cash register, he gave the girl a couple of dollars and stuck a toothpick in his mouth. Waiting for his change, he noticed a group of men down the counter with their heads together. From their glances and gestures, he knew they were talking about him.

The waitress noticed, too. As she handed him his change, she swallowed, and a smile flickered uncertainly across her face. “They’re just remarking,” she said, “how much you look like someone who used to live here. You sure you aren’t?”

“No,” Ben cut in on her, “it must be a mistake. I’m a stranger to this town.” He ignored the clustered men as he walked out.

Out in the street, the warmth of the autumn sun made Ben feel tired. He hadn’t really lied to the girl. He was a stranger. The town looked about the same, but something had changed. He didn’t know why, but walking down the street didn’t feel the same as it had all those years ago.
Ben walked toward the end of the street where the river road left town and wound its way on down the valley. As he neared the edge of town, he began to look back over his shoulder. A car barreled past him, but the driver ignored his outstretched arm and extended thumb. The next several cars that passed did the same, so Ben, growing more and more weary, finally sat down on his duffel bag.

A honk and the screeching of brakes caused him to jump. A pickup slid to a stop beside him, and the driver, a burly old man in a railroad cap, gestured for Ben to climb in.

Ben threw his bag in the rear and got in. "Thanks for stopping. I'd just about given up hope."

The man laughed, his scarred and weatherbeaten face creasing around his eyes and mouth. "Oh, no trouble. I thumbed it myself more times than I care to remember. My name's Joe. Where you headed?"

"Hi! I'm Ben. Out by Cherry Creek Bridge. You know the old Cooper place?"

Joe's eyes narrowed. He started to say something, but then his face relaxed. "Yeah," he said, "I know where it's at. Right on my way. I'm headed to Thompson's Crossing."

They stopped talking as Joe took his truck through the gears, slowly and noisily building up speed. To talk, they would have had to shout.

The truck bounced down the gravel road, always in sight of the tree-lined river. In the summer, the river was hidden by the trees. Now, however, in the late fall, the river was plainly visible through the bare branches. On the side of the road opposite the river, brown fields of stubble and bare dirt stretched along the river bottom. Occasionally, they passed houses built in clumps of trees by the river. The valley was fringed on both sides by timbered hills.

Joe didn't talk much. He spoke only to indicate such points of interest as Mac Brady's cattle and the spot where the new Deputy Sheriff wrecked his car last month. Ben's usual response was only a mumbled word or grunt. He
was too absorbed in the changing scenery to pay much attention. This was the setting of his early years. How many times had he passed this way, going from home to Postville and back again. That bend in the river—he had spent many summer afternoons skinny dipping there with Leo Mack and Andy May. That little white house with the red roof brought back memories. Leo Mack had lived there.

He broke into a sweat when the square, red building came into view. The trees, the old rubber-tire swing, they were all so familiar, yet somehow different than he had remembered. He had gone to grade school here.

Joe looked over at Ben. They both knew what was around the next bend—home. And my family, thought Ben. He wiped his wet hands on his jeans. Would they be glad to see him? Had they forgiven him? Would they be as happy to see him return as they had been to see him leave? Five years—a lot of things happen in five years.

Then they were around the curve, and Ben could see the bridge over the creek. A hundred yards beyond that, high on the hill, stood the big white house and red barn. The old pine tree was gone, though. He noticed that first thing.

Joe slowed down and stopped by the mailbox. "Well, here you are. The old Cooper place."

Ben turned to the old man. "Thanks for the ride. I appreciate it."

Then he jumped out of the truck and slammed the door. As he reached to get his duffel bag out of the back, Ben looked up at the house. He froze. He could see clothes, hung out to dry in the morning sun, on the line beside the house. Somebody—it was too far to see who—was looking out of a window in the front of the house. A cloud, the gray, shapeless kind that usually signals the approach of snow, blew across the sun and darkened everything.

Ben dropped his bag, and it fell with a thud into the back of the pickup. He opened the pickup door and got back in.
Joe was biting his lower lip. "Don't want to stay?"
"No," Ben said. He looked out his window and saw nothing. He wasn't going back.

Untitled

by Rick Hupp
Journalism

pebbles rush down a stream
shoved with the current, and
bash into the stoic stones
hidden along the path.
chipped and scarred
some hide in the cold black security
of the larger, stronger stones.
still others slide along down stream
becoming polished and smooth
settling in a small basin
to smile at us from the silence.