



What is his name, the pimp on our street? I've thought it over, and I've settled on Peter, "petros," which in Latin translates into "rock." He stands like a boulder near the corner *Circle K*, at his station between the pay phones and dark alley. Even when he is being ushered into a police car, he still manages to look in control, even in the handcuffs. He always wears neutral colored clothing, lots of grays and browns, and except for his dark ebony skin, he blends in with our neighborhood's presiding dirt landscaping. Everything about him demands respect. He governs 21st Ave. with an authority that only a fool would stand up to. Instead of the dirty clothes that hang on him, the people of this neighborhood see instead an invisible cloak and crown. He is the closest thing to royalty that Van Buren knows.

I can imagine him out of this environment, out of his current career situation and into the backyard of any home in my mother's north Phoenix neighborhood. He's cooking on the grill, god he's a good cook, the serious kind, you know what kind I'm talking about. He's got two beautiful teenage daughters, with boyfriends who are both rightfully intimidated by him. Simply put, he's a good man who at times forgets to count to 10 but who truly adores his wife and knows what's valuable.

The truth is, is that I don't know him at all. I've never even spoken with the man. Mostly our relationship consists of staring too hard and too long, like teenagers with crushes on each other. Even last night as I drove home, I strained my tired eyes to see if that figure loitering in the dark near the slum apartments was Peter. It wasn't him. He wasn't by the pay phones either and not by the bright orange liquor store. I didn't turn down my street but continued through to Adams Street, hoping that I would spot him, which I never did. I went home feeling without.

Despite the fact that I don't know him, I still am able to imagine away. I can envision him in a dozen different realities. I want to tell him what I've seen, how somehow I can hear his hearty laugh when he plays practical jokes and can imagine being annoyed that he won't let me have control of the remote when the game is on, how it's not even up for discussion. I can picture him in different clothing and I can picture him away off of this drug-dealing street. But some things won't ever change. His strong 6-foot tall black body I can't imagine away. The body that either beats his waifish employees or takes down his brother-in-law and nephews at tackle football, goes with him into the changing environments that I transfer him into. His remarkable king-like posture is also carried into all of my imagined realities. But in place of the simple gray backpack that he carries with him, he has a black leather briefcase or a tattered paperback Bible that he confidently brings to the men's Tuesday night Hebrews Bible study.

Peter is one of many “others” whose headquarters is west Van Buren Street. I am the “other” to him also, me with my freckled face and worn Old Navy overalls. One would assume that our lives are almost entirely opposite. Being the “other” means that we are separated and we are strangers. It means that there is a sort of comfort in the fact that we are strange to one another. We prefer this alienation. Despite the fact that we seem like the ultimate “others” to one another and most assuredly would have an unrelenting tension at a more intimate face-to-face encounter, something very real in me is desperate to discover that we are not as foreign to each other as we both want to think. Maybe it’s because I see that he’s stuck inside an identity that is not really him. That something very real in me envisions him more completely as my strong father than as an oppressor. Sometimes the fact that I am drawn to him feels very strange to me, and I don’t understand it really. Maybe it’s because my own father left us early on. So growing up in a home that always had broken faucets, an unmowed lawn, and a brother who intimidated my mother, I felt the lack of a strong presence. Maybe I see in Peter the rock that I needed for a father, and I hate to see that strength and confidence be used for evil things. I can’t stand the thought of him using his strength to slap and corner when it could protect and cradle.

Since he seems unable to dream for himself, I’ve decided to dream for him, in my restful sleep while he’s out roaming these troubled streets. I close my bedroom door late at night, crawl into my soft chocolate brown sheets beneath my down comforter, and through the white embroidered sheer curtains, the moonlight pours over my deep slumber. In those dreams, he is a man who loves. He is a poet. He owns *Otis Redding’s Greatest Hits*. In those dreams, I see that he wishes he didn’t have to walk so hurriedly with intention. Instead he meanders slowly and quietly down Monroe, drinking in the scent of spring’s orange blossoms. I refuse to believe that he instead prefers the smell of excrement, although I’m not certain that *he* knows that he was created for better things.

The other day I went to visit a pudgy 6th grader I know who knocked down a smaller boy during a fight they found themselves in last week. His mom is a crack dealer and serious addict. She sleeps with other equally gaunt women while the kids’ step dad is locked up in Florence. The closer I got to their 15th Avenue apartment, the more the grossness of their lives slowly layered itself onto me, and soon I realized that I was close to being suffocated by what this boy lives in daily. He and his siblings all live in denial. I asked him to describe for me his mom in 3 words...“Good...kind...ummm....and helpful.” Not really the words I would have chosen.

If he acknowledges the decay of his mother and how it affects him, if he could smell the moist shit outside their apartment door, how could he survive through each day? When he closes his eyes at night while trying to sleep on the stained and lice-infested couch, the darkness is just a continuation of the day. As he lies there, all he hears is the moaning that comes from his mentally handicapped grandmother’s sleep, like she’s being asphyxiated by the memories

of her own dark past. There is no moonlight overhead. He hardly sleeps and he never dreams. He lives stuck inside resignation. Just like Peter.

Therein, the difference between the two of them and myself is the fact that they're both imprisoned by resignation whereas I want to live with eyes that see Canaan. I pray that the younger one doesn't become like Peter who has accepted his fate. He not only survives the sadness, but he digs deeper into it with his very own shovel that was passed down to him from his own father. He digs and digs, wanting to be swallowed up into the abyss.

A part in me feels like I've taken it too far, and that he is *just* the man everyone sees and knows. But I don't know *how* to see Peter as the enemy, no matter how hard I try. I try to see just the anger and the senseless malice. I try to imagine that he is incapable of gentleness and mercy. But when I close my eyes and dream the dreams that he cannot, all I see is him picking up a smooth glistening rock, touching it with his rough fingers and storing it away inside his shirt pocket, next to an old copy of *Dandelion Wine*. All I hear is him humming Chopin.

The closest I've been to him was unintentional and late at night when I was visiting some kids down our street. He came out of nowhere and it took me by surprise. Normally, I am more than ready to look him in the eyes no matter how scary he seems, but it's always when there are lots of people on the streets or as I'm driving within the protective boundaries of my old Toyota Corolla. Here, we were barely a few yards apart, and I walked hurriedly past him staring at the dirt ground. It made me a little sad that the moment passed by us so quickly.

More than anything, I just want to ask him what he wanted to be when he was four. Or what goes through his mind as he walks down that alley. I have so many questions for him that I currently lack the nerve to ask. What if he and I spent the afternoon together eating pb & j and talking about what is beautiful. What if while we are sitting on our front porch catching up, he'll begin to see how I have my mother's hands and her slow-spreading smile. We'll both begin to see how I have his eyes.

And what is beautiful. It is this new lack of resistance. It is singing this lullaby to soften the haggard ones. It is the calmness of this Monroe Street.

