Letters Home From Montreal

Madeleine had warned me from the first day that she would want me to do most of the driving. “Peter loves the alcohol,” she said, in her rich French-Canadian accent. “If he does some drinking, I will ask you to drive for him.”

I smiled at the way her voice rose and fell: up on drink-eeng, a long vowel on heem. I was in my second year of high school French and was in love with the accent, even misplaced on English words.

I really didn’t know Peter and Madeleine Houston that well. I knew that Peter had worked with my father maybe ten years ago and that they still got together for drinks sometimes. I knew that Madeleine’s family still lived in the house where she grew up in Montreal and that she visited them every summer. I knew that they had a daughter my age, Genevieve, who people at school called Genny. And I knew that Montreal was hosting the 1976 Summer Olympics and that that was why I was going with the Houstons on their annual pilgrimage.

It was the driving part that was so exciting. Sure, I wanted to see the track and field events, I competed in, played out on the Olympic stage, but I was still fifteen, so driving was still illegal. I’d practiced with my dad, but we’d spent all our time going backwards down rows and rows of parking spaces. On this trip, I’d be doing the real thing, on real roads. It was an electrifying thought.

The Houstons picked me up on a Saturday, about midday. They had rented a red
Volkswagen van for the occasion, and I tossed my one duffle into the trunk and turned back to hug my mother.

“Behave your self, Douglas,” she said. “And call. And write.”

“I will, Mother,” I said. She kissed my cheek and watched me climb into the van beside Genny.

Madeleine turned around in her seat and asked, in her beautiful accent, “Are we ready?”

“Yeah,” I said, assuming “we” meant me.

“Then let’s go,” said Peter, who was eyeing me through the rear-view mirror. He turned the ignition and pulled away from the curb quickly, not looking back as my Southern California hometown disappeared in a cloud of dust behind us.

Peter drove most of the first day. When he thought no one was looking he took small sips out of a flask he kept in his left pocket. Madeleine sat next to him, leafing through magazines and occasionally singing in French. Genny sat beside me on the driver’s side, engrossed in a book. Sometimes she would absently twirl a strand of her long blond hair around her finger, between page turns. I had never spoken to her in school, and beyond a brief hello when I climbed aboard, we hadn’t spoken in the van, either, so I was fascinated by that one subconscious motion. It was all I had to guess her personality by.

Madeleine turned around in her seat again. “Do you want something to read, Douglas? All I have is Good Housekeeping and some French magazines, mais peut-être…”

Inwardly I winced. Only my mother didn’t shorten my name to Doug. But I
smiled at Madeleine, not wanting to offend. “No thanks,” I said, and continued to stare
out my window at the vast, empty landscape. The rest of that day I spent alternately
staring at the passing scenery and falling asleep.

We stopped at a diner for dinner. The food was simply diner food, greasy and
nearly tasteless. Peter ordered a beer and by the end of the meal had drunk three.
Madeleine elbowed me on our way out and loudly suggested that I drive.

“I’d be happy to,” I said, approaching Peter for the keys. He didn’t look drunk,
but he stank of alcohol and he walked a little slow.

“It’s okay, boy; I can drive,” he said.

“Peter, we promised that Robert’s son would practice the driving. Perhaps it is
time now to trade with him.”

Peter still looked reluctant and angry, but he handed me the keys and sauntered
over to the passenger’s side. I happened to catch Genny’s gaze as I opened my door, and
her brown eyes were sad and apologetic. I understood. My father drank too.

I drove for two hours to a motel across the Nevada state line. Peter slept in the
front seat next to me, and Madeleine and Genny slept in the back. To keep myself
awake, I composed in my head the letters I would write once we reached Montreal. Dear
Tom, they would start, for my older brother, we drove to Nevada today. Or Dear Mom, I
miss you and the family. Or Dear Dad. But I couldn’t think of anything to say after
Dear Dad, which was fortunate anyway because we arrived in Nevada.

We got two adjoining rooms in a small, Bates-style motel, one for Madeleine and
Genny and one for Peter and me. There was only one queen-size bed, so we lay down
next to each other. Peter smelled like the alcohol he’d been sipping all night. He sniffled
a little, but he fell asleep quickly. I was not so lucky. I lay on my back in the darkness, willing myself not to roll over or hog the covers in the night.

* * *

Up until Vegas, the second day passed pretty much the same as the first. Peter drove all morning, while Madeleine and Genny each sat quietly reading. I sat behind Madeleine, impatient, bored, waiting for something to happen. Most of the morning went by before anything did. We all saw the lights before we saw the buildings. Even in the broad desert sunlight, the lights of Las Vegas were hard to miss.

“Lunch break,” Peter said, pulling into a parking lot near the Mirage.

“Mais mon cher, it is ten o’clock. It is too early for the luncheon.”

“We’ll take a break and then eat lunch and then go on.”

Madeleine didn’t look pleased, but she got out of the car, motioning to Genny and me to follow her. The four of us headed into the casino. Peter quickly staked himself at a poker table and began placing bets and ordering liquor. Madeleine and Genny headed to the all-you-can-eat buffet without a moment’s hesitation, as though this was a routine they’d been through hundreds of times.

I wandered the casino, wondering if anyone would take me for older than I was, maybe even old enough to gamble. It had happened before. Tom had a fake ID that he rarely used. He had pressed it into my hand before I left, reminding me how much we looked alike, making me promise to have a good time. I could have used it if I wanted to. I thought about walking to a table and casually presenting the ID if the dealer asked my age, but I didn’t want to risk it. Instead, I found a stool near a craps table and lost myself in watching the smooth motion of the dice.
The lunch break went on for four hours. I had long since tired of the casino and joined Madeleine and Genny, sitting at the buffet and waiting for Peter. None of us, however, had made much use of our all-you-can-eat privileges. No one, I suppose, was very hungry. Finally Madeleine had to retrieve Peter. He’d gambled away a good deal of his money, and what he had left he’d spent on shots. It was obvious now that he was drunk. His speech was slurred; his eyes were bloodshot, and he walked like a navy man on shore leave.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go.”

Genny’s face turned pinker, but I said nothing. Madeleine broke the repetition.

“Mon cher Pierre, we must let Douglas drive.”

After the music of Madeleine’s English, Peter’s flat Californian-drunk speech was harsh and abrasive. “No, I will drive. Dammit, Maddy, I will drive.”

“No, you made a promise to Robert; you promised him to let his boy drive.”

Hearing Madeleine speak Robert in the French fashion made me wish she knew my real first name, instead of my middle name, my father’s middle name, which I went by to avoid confusion.

Peter continued ranting. “I will drive, God dammit, Maddy. Let me drive!”

“He’s always like this when he’s drinking,” said Genny softly. I looked at her, almost startled to hear the sound of her voice. They were the first words I remembered hearing from her.

“It’s okay,” I said. “My dad is like this too.”

I knew then what the rest of the five days of travel would be like, and the five that would follow our stay in Montreal. Peter would drink; Madeleine would be diplomatic; I
would drive. It was not a particularly exciting prospect anymore.

I drove for the rest of the day, this time with sunlight in my eyes, complicating the task at hand. We made it into Colorado before night fell. Peter snored contentedly in the front seat, and his snores cut into my mental letters home. *Dear Tom, I hope you are having a good time at home. We will reach Montreal in three more days, if we make good time. Give my love to the family, especially to Mother.*

* * *

I was right in my guessing. Peter drove all Monday morning, but after lunch it was my turn after another drunken scene. These debacles embarrassed Genny; I could tell. I completely sympathized; I hated when anyone saw my father drunk. But what could I do now but take the keys and drive?

The next day’s end found us in just barely into Iowa. We stopped, as we had so many times before, at a small roadside diner. Afterward, Peter wandered down the road to a bar. Madeleine, Genny, and I, true to form, trooped back to the car to amuse ourselves; Genny read her book; Madeleine leafed through her magazines, and I rested my head on the cool window. But I was tired of being the responsible one. That was Peter’s job. When, I thought, did I become his proxy? If I was going to take on all of his responsibilities, I deserved his rights as well.

I opened the door slowly, hoping not to disturb the pair of readers in the van. I shut it with great care and headed towards the bar. I had passed for older than I was before, I thought. Why not now?

The inside of the bar was dark. Vague shapes hovered around pool tables to my
right, and the bar itself stretched along the wall on my left. I approached the bar casually, hoping it would help me add years to my age.

The bartender took one look at me and was not convinced. “Do you have ID?”

I opened my wallet and pulled out Tom’s parting gift. Still unsure about using it but more confident in the dim light of the bar than I had been in the brightly lit casino, I passed the ID to the bartender, who nodded.

“Scotch on the rocks with a twist,” I said, accepting the card and replacing it into my wallet. I had heard my father order the drink a few times, and I thought echoing him gave me some believability.

The bartender slid me the drink after a few busy moments. I held it for a minute or so, listening to the way the ice cubes rattled against each other. Then I took my first sip. The sensation was something like having the wind knocked out of you in a schoolyard brawl. Hoping my face showed little of what I felt, I took another sip and another, growing accustomed to the cold, sharp alcohol.

“Another?” the bartender asked.

“Sure,” I answered. “Hit me.”

I must have been on my third or fourth of those before Peter finally noticed me sitting at the bar, alone. “What are you doing here, Doug?” he asked. He was already slurring his words, but his drunkenness seemed less awkward when I had liquor in my hand.

Afraid he would send me out to the car, I opened my mouth to explain, but my breath wouldn’t rise to my voice. I scratched out, “Drinking.”

Peter laughed at that. “You don’t know the first thing about it,” he said, and took
the scotch from my hands and raised it to his lips. The ice cubes sounded louder now, reminded me of Madeleine’s voice, of the music that it made. “What do you have to drink about?”

I didn’t know what he meant, but I answered as best I could. “I was in the car, and I thought –”

“No, Doug,” Peter said abruptly. For a moment there was silence, then he said, “I have house payments to make and a job I hate. I have a daughter to feed and to send to college in a few years. I have a wife that wants to go to the theatre and go to dinner and give our daughter the best of everything. I want all those things, but they cost money, and to get money you have to work. I have to work, morning to night, in an office that could go on without me and probably should. But I give my family the best, without complaining, and I make the house payment every month. And if I go out to a bar every once in a while, so be it. I’ve earned it.”

I stared at him and let the words rattle around in my head. They felt cold, like ice cubes, and the sound of his speech was no different. “I guess I drove,” I said, and let that be enough.

“Yeah, you drove,” Peter said. “You drove. You drove.” Even drunk I knew the rare moment of lucidity was over. Peter was done. “Hey, barkeep,” he said, turning, and the bartender sauntered over to us. “Get this man a beer. Put him on my tab and get him a beer. Get him however many he wants.” He patted my shoulder and walked back towards the shadows of the pool table, still sipping my scotch.

I sat with the beer for a few minutes before things began getting fuzzy. I think I had another beer before I stopped remembering things altogether.
* * *

I woke up in a motel room, lying on a bed with a cool washcloth on my head. The curtains were drawn in the window but the ring of light around them proved that it was already mid-morning. I fluttered my eyelashes helplessly and felt the washcloth lift. Slowly, surely, Genny swam into view.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Doug,” she said, her voice far-off and inaudible.

My head was pounding and the light, dim as it was, forced my eyes shut again. I tried to sit up, but it only made me hurt worse, and I didn’t struggle as Genny gently guided me back to the bed. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have.”

Genny seemed surprised to hear me say that, but she didn’t argue. It was her point, after all. “Just because our fathers drink like fish doesn’t mean that you should.”

“How do you know about my father?”

“That’s what our fathers do together, right? Drink?”

I glared at her from behind my eyelids. “Yes.”

“I just assumed.”

“Well, don’t assume, okay? You’re too right on to be clever or funny.”

“I’m not trying to be clever or funny.” Genny looked at me carefully and replaced the washcloth. “This would probably go better if you didn’t have such a hangover.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

“Sorry to offend you.” Genny didn’t sound hurt, but I somehow felt compelled to apologize.

“I’m sorry. You’re right, blame the hangover.”
There was a moment of silence then. I don’t think either one of us knew what to say. It was Genny who finally came up with something.

“So why didn’t you bring anything for the car ride?”

“What?”

“You know, a book or something. You’ve just been sitting there looking extremely bored.”

“Oh.” She’d caught me completely off guard, and I had no idea what to say. “I just– I didn’t plan well enough, I guess.”

“It was probably because my mom told you you’d be driving.” Genny’s mood had changed. Now she was embarrassed; red crept up her neck and pinkened her cheeks.

“No, come on,” I started to say, trying to laugh it off. Genny wouldn’t meet my eyes, so I touched her hand. “Hey,” I said. “It’s fine. Really. You’re right. My dad is like this. I understand.”

Genny looked at me, still blushing, and nodded. At least I saw her eyes. She changed the subject again. “You writing to your parents?”

I tapped my head. “Up here,” I said. “I’ll send the letters from Montreal.”

“Good,” she said. “They’ll want to hear from you.” She went back to mopping my forehead, and I went back to lying, relaxing, recovering, on the motel bed. I didn’t tell her about my epistle mental block. I wouldn’t have known what to say.

* * *

That day passed the same way as every other, excepting the late start to allow for my recovery. There was one other thing that I couldn’t help but notice – Madeleine bore a fresh bruise where her neck and shoulder joined. I could only imagine how she had
gotten it.

Finally, after two beers at lunch, three at dinner, and countless sips from the flask, Madeleine uttered the words that had become characteristic.

“Peter,” she said, “let’s let Douglas drive.”

“No,” he said. It was always the same; the drunker he was, the more likely he was to resist turning over the keys. I had thought after last night he might trust me. Silly me. In all likelihood he didn’t remember last night. I reached for the keys anyway, and he pulled them back from my groping hand and began cursing at me. “Dammit, Doug, I can drive. Goddammit, Doug, stop trying to be me. I am the father of this family!”

“Give him the keys, Dad.” Genny’s voice was hardly more than a whisper.

I didn’t think I had heard Genny address her father at all throughout the trip. But it worked. Madeleine held his shoulders, whispering words of comfort I couldn’t hear, and Peter, still swearing, handed me the keys. I climbed into the driver’s seat. Peter sat in the front seat and was soon snoring again, calmed by an alcoholic stupor. Madeleine sat behind him in the seat I usually occupied. Genny, reading done with the advent of night, leaned her blond head against the window and tried to fall asleep.

It was night; it was late, and the roads were empty. The last sign I had seen had said “Leaving Chicago,” but I thought we must be in Michigan by now. I drove faster, feeling the speed as the barren land rushed outside the van. I didn’t look at the speedometer, and I didn’t notice that we were suddenly doing 80 down a road with a speed limit of 55.

The sound of the siren was unmistakable, and the flashing lights blinded my rear view mirror. I swore to myself and pulled over, embarrassed and afraid. I didn’t have a
license. I was going to jail; the Houstons would hate me; Peter would have been a better
driver than me. The cop approached the window slowly, taking his time, making me
squirm. Peter kept snoring in the passenger seat.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” he asked.

“Yes.” There was no point in beating around the bush. “I was speeding.”

“Do you know how fast you were going?”

“No.”

“You were going eighty miles an hour.”

“I believe that.”

“Let me see your license and registration please.”

And there it was. “Um, I don’t have a license –”

“You don’t have a license?” The officer was incredulous.

“Monsieur, s’il vous plait.” Madeleine’s voice from the backseat was so
unexpected that the officer stopped reaching for his ticket book and stared at her. She
had leaned halfway into the front seat, supported on an elbow leaned against the seatback.

“May I explain the situation to you, monsieur?”

“Certainly, ma’am.” He was reluctant, despite his words.

“My husband, here, he is drunk. He sleeps like the log. He snores like the, what-you-say, the lumberjack. He could not drive us, but we must drive. We cannot stop
every time my husband is drunk. He is the alcoholic. He is a good man, my husband.
He gives us everything, and all he has left is his pride. So we protect the pride from all
the little bruises he sees people giving it. To let his wife drive him around, that would be
the bruise to the pride. And if it were his daughter, his Genevieve, that would bruise the
pride also. And so we must find some other way to keep going without Peter keeps
driving. And so we bring along Douglas here. Here we have a solution that fits Peter’s
pride and allows a young boy to attend les Jeux Olympics in Montreal. And if he goes a
little fast, we say, ‘It is the night, it is empty, and he is young. Peter would crash now,
but Douglas, he will get us there in one piece.’ You cannot punish him for doing as we
ask. If you punish Douglas, then my husband will drive and be a danger to us all. If you
must inflict punishment, monsieur, punish me for permitting it. You must allow me to
protect my husband and my family, as he protects us. Punish me, monsieur, punish me.”

The officer just looked at her. Maybe he was struck by her words, or maybe he
was struck by the bruise, purple and black, on her shoulder. Either way, he turned to me
and said only, “Don’t speed again,” before he left us.

I turned to thank Madeleine, but as I spun in my seat; I was drawn by the bruise.
It was larger than I remembered, vibrant in the headlights of the police car as it passed. A
yellow stain had begun to surround the deeply colored center. “Did Peter give you that?”
I asked.

“Just drive, Doug,” said Genny from the backseat.

The rest of the night, I focused on carefully adhering to the speed limit and
composing my mental letters. Suddenly, I found I had words for my father. Dear Dad,

Do you and Peter get drunk together often? He’s been doing it quite a lot without you.
Are you a good man like he is? Can you be a good man and still hit your wife? Can you
be a good man if you’re drunk all the time? I don’t want you to drink anymore. I hate it
when you’re drunk. You aren’t the same man. Peter isn’t the same man. And I never
want to drink. And I never want to be like you. You are a good man, Dad, but I never
want to be like you. Your son, Robert Douglas Parker, Jr. I turned the words over in my mind. I could see them on the page; could see my illegible handwriting, shaking with emotion, covering a half-sheet of stationary; could see my signature scrawled to it.

I knew I would never write the letter.

The lights of a motel came up on our right. God, it was already eleven. I guided the car into a spot in front of the office and loudly announced, “We’re here.” Slowly, the sleepy passengers awoke and stumbled into the office to rent two rooms for the night.

Tomorrow, I thought, we’ll make it to Montreal.