

# A Little Knowledge

3650 words

The Sam person and his wife lived a couple miles from campus down a leafy little dead end lane at the base of Bidwell Park.

“Something like *this* for instance,” Pete said as they pulled up, “what do you think it would run me?”

Miranda said, “I’m not sure. We can ask *them*. I know Sam got in at the right time.”

“Before we say hello and all . . . you guys were going to town on each other at one point? Or it wasn’t like that.”

“Goodness, do you have to be so crude . . . It *was* essentially, what you just said. Yes.”

“Because I was going to wait,” Pete said, “let that part clarify itself on its own.”

“But you lack discipline,” she said.

“That’s for sure . . . That’s why I like to binge-watch stuff. I can jump ahead, eliminate the suspense, then go *back* and fill in the blanks, but only if I need to.”

“I *hate* jumping ahead,” she said, “it ruins it.”

Pete turned off the engine but they didn't get out yet.

He said, “Did you ever watch *The Affair*? Or *do* you? It's still on.”

“No, sorry.”

“*That* show, you had a good premise. A guy on summer vacation with his family, out at Montauk, the end of Long Island . . . He hooks up with a married local gal who's suffered an awful tragedy.”

“Okay I did read about that one. They're both British right? The actors? Playing Americans?”

“Yeah but that's not important. The affair part is semi-credible. You can understand their motivations, even though you don't approve . . . The *other* way they hook you, there's a backstory where you don't know who it was that hit-and-ran someone, killed 'em off.”

“It sounds interesting. Maybe I'll check it out.”

“Nah don't bother. By about the fifth episode I stopped watching. It was like they thought the set-up wasn't *enough*, so they screwed around with it, had the simple wide-eyed local gal running drugs off fishing

boats, making deliveries on her bicycle, la-di-da, and the whole town oblivious.”

“Why do they *do* that? I know what you mean.”

“So I took a look again just for kicks, now the whole gang lives in Brooklyn and it’s a full blown Millennial soap opera. Same tropes as in your daytime ones.”

“So . . . what are you saying?”

“I’m *saying*, all that *time* I saved.”

“Hmm . . . which applies how?”

“Just jump me to the bottom line on you and Sam. Skip the *blanks*.”

“I feel like you’re ticked off . . . I heard what happened, your lady friend from your high school reunion, but I didn’t think it was appropriate to bring up.”

“The *other* point you made,” Pete said, trying to keep it moving, “it *was* a logical one, don’t rush things on that front.”

“For heaven’s sakes, you don’t have to *apologize* . . . but what point was that?”

This gal processed statements funny, but whatever.

“The rental house business. You’re right, too deep a dive, too quick. Forget that for now.”

Which is what he was hoping--quietly address the *main* reason he was here without having to fake being here for some *other* reason.

But Miranda said, “Oh, don’t be silly. I’m looking forward to it, exploring some properties. I mean you don’t have to *buy* anything this trip, is all I was getting at.”

So you were back to square one, and they got out and rang the bell.

The wife, Laurel, answered the door, and she seemed genuinely happy to see Miranda and she gave Pete a big hug as well, though unfortunately she weighed about 300 pounds.

Sam came around the corner out of the kitchen, a normal skinny guy, a chef’s apron on, and something did smell pretty good, and he was equally effusive with the hellos.

Right away he said to Pete, “Hey, I really appreciate you bringing Mandy. It’s just too few and far between, these days.” Shaking Pete’s hand, and the ordinary way

fortunately, not trying to make a point by crunching your knuckles like some guys in this situation might.

Entirely none of his business, but Pete couldn't help wondering, was Laurel huge when they met and got married, or did that element surface later on.

At any rate, they sat in the living room, and Jeez, Pete was already being handed a cocktail, a Bloody Mary, and when he hesitated for a second Sam cheerfully reminded him it was a *food*, and that hopefully it would hold him for a couple hours until the *real* McCoy was ready.

It was small talk, energetic and pleasant enough . . . the kids, the pros and cons of the Bay Area versus Butte County, and what was wrong with the Raiders, which Pete kept out of but surprisingly all three had an opinion on.

Laurel and Sam butted heads, Laurel insisting you need to be patient which is why you gave the coach a 5-year contract and Sam countering *Babe are you nuts* and why.

This led to a discussion of head injuries, and the grim stuff popping up in the news.

Sam said he was going to have a real hard time if Hardy--that was their 9-year-old--wanted to play high school football.

“Is he big?” Pete said, curious, he couldn't help it, which side of the family the kid took after.

“He’s average for his class, but that might come later,” Sam said. “He’s strong, likes to mix it up, wrestle you.”

“Well, it’ll work itself out, these things do,” Pete said, knowing it might not, and Sam said hopefully you’re right and he got up and told Miranda to come take a look at what he’d done in the garden since last time.

They disappeared out the side door and Laurel said, “I’m sure you can tell, it’s pretty darn obvious, he still has a thing for her.”

Pete looked at her, not exactly what he expected her to be dropping on him, even if she *did* think that.

He hoped she was amused, nothing deeper, but her voice cracked when she said, “They talk to each other online too.”

And she went in the kitchen and fixed him another Bloody Mary, which he *really* didn't want because the checking-out of someone in town was still on the agenda.

But you weren't going to be impolite, so he thanked her for the refill, and she sat back down and was quiet, and he felt like she was dangling in no-man's land and he should offer *something*.

"My *general* opinion on the subject?" he said quietly. "Good to give 'em some rope. You're not interfering with human nature."

"Well you put it so eloquently," she said. "And I know, intellectually, you are correct."

Pete wanted to add something but couldn't think of the right thing, and might easily inject the *wrong* thing.

Sam and Miranda stuck their heads in the side door, and Sam announced they were going for a short walk, and they'd be back.

When they were gone Laurel said, "There are other women too. I know it's my fault."

What Pete *wanted* to say--but he knew you never *could* because that was the *worst* thing for their

psyche--was *Dang* It, go with some *soup* for a year . . . close the fridge at 5pm . . . *something*.

What he said was, “Fine, you’re overweight. But you’re an attractive woman.”

Which she could *be*. She had a classically beautiful face.

Other aspects of her too, were becoming more attractive than Miranda at this point.

“Thank you,” Laurel said. “I really needed to hear that . . . Even though I know you’re pulling my leg.”

Pete said, “I’ll hit you with one quick story, and then I gotta get going.”

“What do you mean get going? You’re not staying for dinner?”

“No, I’ll be back, thank you . . . This one I read in the *New Yorker*, not something I’d pay for but people leave them lying around, coffee places where I live.”

“This is true, or no?”

“Fiction. But it could be . . . What happens, a guy responds to an internet dating thing, connects with a woman, then travels all the way out to meet her, someplace like Missoula, Montana.”

“I can feel where you’re going with this I think.”

“She used a phony picture of herself, is the rub. He’s mad, but at least has the decency to finish the meal, pay the check, walk her to her car . . . Then he dumps her.”

“He did the right thing, then.”

“The way he sees it, since he wasted a trip out there, he might as well stick around a few days, explore the night life scene. He meets a woman he’s interested in, goes home with her, but *her* thing is she's hoping he can make repairs to her apartment, right then at that hour, since she found out he’s a plumber.”

“Gosh, what a bitch. He didn’t deserve that.”

“There’s a final scene though, they’re watching a local baseball game together. The guy and the *original* woman, who falsified the photo.”

“Wow . . . So they come full circle?”

“Sort of. You get the impression there may not be romance there, but at least they’re friends.”

The detail Pete skipped, which let’s face it Laurel probably figured out, was the fictitious woman was 300 pounds too.

“I like that story,” she said.

“But let me ask you this,” Pete said. “When someone takes a *little walk down the street* around here, where do they go?”

“See? You’re jumpy too.”

“I mean . . . they couldn’t be *doing* something, could they? . . . Somehow? That’d be *too* far-fetched . . . right?”

“They could,” she said.

“Well,” he said, “this has been . . . I’m not sure the best word is *different*, but we can leave it at that.”

“But you need to *go*, you’re saying . . . Can I drop you someplace? I have to pick up the kids anyway. No problem at all to swing back and get you later.”

Pete said he appreciated her hospitality, that it was borderline embarrassing considering they’d just met--but he should be fine.

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When he got back, there was more action in the house than just Sam, Laurel and Miranda, and salsa music was playing, not the modern hybrid stuff but the authentic Tito Puente sound.

Sam seemed happy to see Pete again, and he shut the volume and introduced him to Shelly and Lee, who

lived down the block. Shelly explained there was a babysitter involved tonight, her kids and Sam and Laurel's lumped together, so reduced stress all around.

Everyone had eaten, things were casual, not all the plates had been cleaned up, and no one seemed bothered that Pete showed up late, though Miranda told him privately when they were out in the side yard where Sam had shown her the gardening progress earlier, that she took care of it.

"Well that was nice of you," Pete said. "I was afraid I was the bad guy, there. What'd you say?"

"The truth. You're looking around at real estate and you lose track of time because you're not very responsible."

"Ah. Concluding with a *So let's eat*, then."

"You're amusing. Sort of."

"And you're . . . interesting as well. It doesn't matter to *me*--at least maybe--but are you *still* banging Sam?"

Without missing a beat, Miranda said, "He wanted to today. But we didn't."

The good part here, Pete supposed, at least this confirmed that Laurel wasn't a whack-job.

There was commotion in the kitchen, and then it was over, and you heard a door close and Pete and Miranda stayed where they were, until Lee poked his head out in the yard and said that Laurel had hit Sam in the head with a pan.

Miranda rushed back inside and Pete thought *maybe not*, actually, on the Laurel deal, his conclusion there.

At any rate, he figured there was nothing he could help out with, he'd just be in the way, so he found a patio chair, and then you heard voices outside and a car start up, and then another, and it seemed quiet in the house so he went back in.

There was a college basketball game on TV, they were playing in Maui, and they kept showing you shots of palm trees swaying and people surfing and bikini-ing and stand-up paddleboarding . . . and Pete thought now *would* be a nice time to simply get in the car and go back to Manhattan Beach. Except of course you'd brought Miranda.

After a while there was rustling outside and people were coming back. Sam walked in and said, “Pete I’m sorry about that. Did you find everything you need?”

He had a prominent white bandage high on his forehead, with tape around the sides and draping down behind his ears.

Pete said, “Don’t even think about it. Y’all *right* though?”

“Oh absolutely,” Sam said, waving his hand, not all that convincingly, and he lowered his voice a notch. “Every two, three years--sometimes more often--there’s a little blow up . . . *Sounds* a lot worse than it is.”

“Part of the routine, then,” Pete said.

“You *got* it. Listen, can I fix you another drink?”

Pete said fine, and Sam disappeared into the kitchen and so far that was it, no one else back in the picture yet.

Sam handed him the beverage and they clinked glasses and Sam said, “They’re on their way. Then hopefully we’ll be all *set*, starting it up where we left off.”

Pete said, “You and Miranda schtupp each other today?”

Sam was in the middle of a big gulp of alcohol, and his eyes got bigger and he cleared his throat and said, “Now something like *that*, with all due respect . . . you *couldn't* be more off-target.”

Pete didn't say anything, and Sam said, “Not sure I asked you before, but did you actually *eat*? I know you had errands to run, did anyone take care of you when you got here?”

“You're a good host,” Pete said. “What about the emergency room though, they didn't ask questions, who might have assaulted whom?”

“Ah . . . Well you *are* correct there, I'm afraid, no point getting into the system, even on the periphery.”

“Databases and such,” Pete said.

“Exactly.”

“In case it might happen again, or some variation. And on top it, you might have a *he-said she-said* thing going.” Pushing him a little.

“Yes. So, being prudent . . . we went the alternate route. Shelly knows someone, an athletic trainer at the university.”

“Huh . . . so they took care of it then.” Pete was thinking that wasn't a bad idea. “You needed a couple stitches?”

“Oh Gosh yes, it took 12, I'm told, to close it up.”

“Whoa. She hit you with . . . like a *frying* pan?”

“Yep, you got it. *Small* one, 4-incher. But heavy. Cast iron.”

Pete took a moment. “Don't screw around on her anymore. She doesn't deserve it.”

“Pete . . . for Heaven's sakes . . . if you're still dwelling on Miranda, I can assure you, you're barking up entirely the wrong tree . . . Laurel and I, we've been at odds for some time, it ebbs and flows, it's complicated. We're in counseling.”

“Fine. So ebb and flow your way into keeping your hands off other people.”

“Pete, you're not hearing me.”

“Your *thoughts* too, I forgot to add. Keep *those* off other people too.”

Sam studied him for a second and picked up both drinks and went back in the kitchen, Pete figuring either he's getting rid of me, the most likely, or bringing me a

refill, which he gave 10 percent odds . . . but you could hear the microwave going and the fridge opening and Sam came back with fresh drinks and a plate of bite-sized triangular things that you'd see at those sample stands in Costco.

“Let's back it up, if we might,” Sam said, but right about then the others came trudging in.

Laurel . . . and then the neighbors again, Lee and Shelly, the three of them laughing about something, and then Miranda bringing up the rear, carrying a bag and pulling out a couple half gallons of ice cream.

Pete wondered Jeez, what about the kids, wasn't it past their bedtime, and a school night too, but Shelly said because of this *event* that happened they were all four sleeping at *their* house tonight, and the babysitter was gone but her older daughter had it under control.

And the music came back on, though more mellow this time, piano jazz, and they were combining after-dinner beverages with ice cream, and Pete thought he caught one or two subtle looks between Sam and *Shelly*, indicating *they* maybe had something going, past or present, as well.

Though admittedly . . . he could have been projecting the histories and who had an ax to grind, and maybe nobody was screwing *anybody* and Sam and Laurel *did* have a separate beef, and for a second she saw red and lost it.

Someone brought out a deck of cards and they gravitated to the dining room table, and something on the news swung the conversation to gun control, Sam throwing in that a state like Utah, *loose* with the regulations, has very few murders.

“That’s the same argument you hear about pit bulls, Lee said. “It’s the *owners* not the dogs.”

“In Utah,” Shelly said, “more people get killed from guns than car crashes. You need to inform yourself.”

“I know a Mormon couple,” Miranda said. “Slightly off-topic, but *their* thing was they swung.”

“*Wow*,” Shelly said, “you mean . . . they traded partners, is that part of it?”

“That’s *all* of it,” Sam said, “I can see it, they’re repressed, and eventually can’t take it and they react the *other* way.”

“Well how does it work though?” Shelly said.

“The way I understood it,” Miranda said, “on the weekends they went to Las Vegas, and there was an organization they were part of.”

“Yeah right,” Lee said, “more like a glorified whore house sounds more accurate.”

“But what would the *justification* be?” Shelly said. “I mean wouldn’t that ruin their marriage, effectively?”

Lee was laughing. “I was going to comment on the justification requirement, but I won’t . . . Bad taste.”

“To the contrary,” Sam said, “something like that, it may serve to *strengthen* their marriage. Who knows?”

Miranda said, “Yes, that was my impression, *these* folks, that they saw it as a positive.”

“What happened to them?” Sam said.

“They left the church two years ago, and moved out here, the Bay Area. It’s been a bit of rollercoaster, as most of their old friends disowned them.”

“Not the Vegas ones though,” Lee said.

“Well are they attractive?” Shelly said. “Do they still participate?”

“Okay I’m joking around,” Lee said, “but I think that’s about enough, we should change the subject.”

“Or not,” Sam said, “this is all pretty interesting . . . the precarious nature of the human condition.”

Meanwhile Laurel, over on the couch next to Pete, said to him, “Can you believe this *bullshit*?”

Pete tried to open an eye and said he heard some of it but wasn’t paying too much attention.

Laurel said, “You poor thing, I’m forgetting what a long day it’s been for you. Come on, I’m going to set you up.”

He followed her into a small room off the garage, that was packed with all manner of crafty stuff.

“It’s my workroom,” Laurel explained. “But right in the middle, just give me a moment, I’ll clear some things, and we’re going to put a Japanese futon down, and I have a comfy quilt for you, and you’ll see, it’ll work really nicely.”

She left to get the supplies and Pete checked his messages, nothing there, fine of course that there was nothing *bad*, but also confirming he really didn’t have a whole lot going these days.

Laurel returned with her arms full and organized everything and she was right, it didn’t matter the pad

was on the floor, it was thick and plush and plenty wide, and she told him to get down there and try it and see what he thinks.

So he did, slipping off his shoes, and she reached down to cover him up with the comfy quilt, and Pete looked up and saw coming toward him one of the more monstrous units of cleavage a typical human would encounter.

Laurel had either changed to something a lot looser, or taken something off period . . . and Pete was thinking this wasn't how he expected the day to play out, her continuing to dangle above him, asking how it was, and what else could get she him.

Pete eased sideways, not wanting to blatantly embarrass her that he was trying to escape, but still . . . and there was a kiss on the cheek and she lifted up and said don't be polite, if there's anything later.

It was loud out there, not clear if they were playing cards anymore but they sure were carrying on, and Laurel's voice was in the mix as well, and they'd roar with laughter and then it would tone down but you didn't know when another one might erupt.

Pete sat up on an elbow and tried Facebook.

That window across the room had potential. He'd gone through this already, why you *couldn't* just take off--but what the hay.