

Adjacent

2900 words

"You look like you're into this match," someone said.

Pete looked up. A woman with a San Francisco Bay Club name tag was smiling at him.

"It does get the hooks into you," he said. "Especially this angle through the glass back wall."

"So I take it you don't play then, yourself," she said. "How come?" She was petite, early 30's, no mistaking her enthusiasm.

"Why should I?" Pete said. "I'm fine just watching my friend."

"Which one?"

"The one waiting for the serve."

"Celeste. *She's* great. Not at squash so much, but a lot of fun to talk to when I'm working the front desk."

"You working it right now?"

"I'm on a break. Today's my *long* day--noon to close."

Pete stood up. "I'm Pete, by the way . . . Would you want to, get a coffee or something, afterward?" Celeste was real red in the face now, and looked increasingly frustrated. She appeared to be losing most of the points.

"Golly. Could we be a little more forward, how about?" Hard to read, but at least seeming amused.

Since his diagnosis, Pete was all *about* being forward. "So what time?" he said.

"Well, we shut the doors at midnight, and I'm off at 12:30. It's up to you if you'd like to circle back, but I'm thinking probably not. It's Peggy though."

The reason Pete was here was Celeste invited him to watch the match and then grab a bite after . . . and Pete was game, you never knew how it might play out, though it became clear when Celeste had showered and changed that the grabbing a bite part included her teammates, who'd been playing their own apparently connected squash matches on adjacent courts.

They went to the Big Horn around the corner on Sansome. Pete thought the place was only so-so, the

menu a cross between New Jersey diner and California fusion, and pricey.

He sipped his beer. He had some issues going, the main one being a guy who he was pretty sure had started following him. Not all the time, sporadically, but enough. So admittedly a little socialization was nice, despite the bit of a curve ball.

The team was discussing the matches. Celeste had lost hers and kind of stormed off the court there, and someone said she was a bad loser but it only lasted an hour.

It did seem like she was coming around now, laughing at certain things. People named Jeff and Margo and Roy were doing most of the talking, with Phyllis and John chiming in.

"I had my guy 9-6 in the fifth," Roy said. "Then I don't know what happened."

"What *happened* was you hit the tin four times in the last five points," Jeff said. "If you'd just kept your poise there, we would have won the overall match."

"*Hold* on Jeff," John said. "You lost three-*zip* to *your* guy. Let's not be too critical."

"Okay, but I was playing number one," Jeff said. "I wouldn't have let that guy off the hook two points away, is all I'm saying."

Margo said, "Pete, we're sounding quite foolish here, *aren't* we?"

"No, the shop talk doesn't bother me a bit. Makes me wish *I* had something as exciting going on."

"Well, you certainly look fit," she said. "What do you do?"

"Mostly just run, which is boring. When I lived back east I enjoyed playing tennis, until my partner got mad at me."

"What happened?" Phyllis said.

"Oh, I got in his business where I probably shouldn't have. He beat me five sets in a row one day and I thought he was making bad line calls on top of it. I said you were handling me straight up, why'd you need to make shaky calls?"

Steve said, "So you got in his business by questioning his on-court character?"

"No, I got in his business by offering my opinion of his personal life. He had a really nice, devoted girlfriend

who would come to the courts sometimes. He was cheating on her with his ex-wife." Pete noticed Celeste--and Jeez, Jeff too--shifting around.

"How did you know that?" Phyllis said.

"He'd bring it up, brag about it. Though he put it on the ex-wife, that she couldn't get past him."

"What a son of a *bitch*," Margo said.

"Yeah, that's a crock of horseshit," John said. "It's not like someone was putting a gun to his head, making him participate."

Phyllis said, "So what did you tell him?"

"That if he wasn't going to stop doing it, then stop talking about it. Evidently that hit a nerve, because the guy never spoke to me again."

"Well good for you," Margo said. "That is scum of the earth behavior. He should be shot, and the ex-wife too for that matter."

"I agree," Phyllis said. "But just find another partner then."

"Oh, I still play once in a while. But the other day I was watching some hackers, and it was embarrassing. I

realized that's how *I* look too. On the other hand, *you* guys all look good out there."

"That's very kind of you, "Margo said. "But really?"

"Absolutely. You're giving it your all, running around like chickens with your heads cut off. What can I say, you look like athletes."

"Gosh, just hearing it put like that is amazing," Phyllis said.

"Totally," Roy said. "That's over the top, Pete, but we'll take it."

"We will," Celeste said, glaring at Pete.

"So where do you like to run?" John said.

"The Marina usually, down to Fort Point and back." Pete said. "The scenery helps."

"And that's what you did today?" Margo said.

"Yeah . . . Although today I actually repeated it twice. I was looking for a little extra."

"How far?" John said.

"I'd say maybe seven, eight total. I'm feeling it now, that's for sure."

Celeste said, "Jesus *Christ*, Pete. Do you really think you should be out there trying to run eight miles?"

Jeff said, "E, take it *easy*, what's the big deal?"

"Exactly," Phyllis said. "Why not?"

Celeste said, "It's just . . . I don't know, increasing your intensity like that, without building up to it . . . it seems unwise."

"I'll keep it in mind next time," Pete said.

They were at their cars, and Celeste had said goodnight to everyone, including Jeff. She said, "Pete, what got into you? You certainly know how to humiliate someone."

For better or worse he'd confided to Celeste that he had a heath scare, but it wasn't the running she was upset about now, it was the sticking the needle in with the guy and the ex-wife, touching Celeste's not identical but in the ballpark situation.

"What do you mean?" Pete said. "The only one who might have raised an eyebrow was Jeff. My educated guess is he's the only teammate you're schtupping."

"My God, do you have to be so crude."

"While we're on the subject, it work out any better with him?"

"Jeff? . . . No."

"So, one more time--it's not me, or my prognosis."

"It isn't . . . In fact, since we're being so honest here, Jeff wants to go to have a talk with . . . my ex."

Pete was digesting this.

Celeste said, "What?"

"No, I was trying to visualize how that'd go. I wouldn't mind being on hand to find out."

"Believe me, it couldn't go well. Jeff might get hurt, and I'd probably lose him as a friend."

"The ex a tough guy then?"

"I already told you. Scary."

"He have a new wife, kids, anything?"

"A girlfriend, and I think she's expecting."

"Hmm. He ever ask you for an official divorce?"

"No. . . Can we please change the subject? You're welcome to come over for a while, if you'd like."

"Tell you the truth I'm pretty worn out. That eight miles you scolded me for, it's starting to kick in."

"All right, then."

"I were you, I'd tell Jeff to sit tight. Little baby coming into the picture, your old man could get his priorities straight. Wouldn't surprise me if you didn't hear much from him going forward."

"Pete," Celeste said, "you have no idea what you're talking about."

He checked his watch and it was 12:10, and the Bay Club would be locked up, but he thought he may as well see what happens. Peggy and another employee were straightening up the lobby, and Peggy saw Pete and let him in.

"What happened to Celeste?" she said.

"We had a group meal, plenty of laughs. I'm on the outside looking in though."

Peggy worked it around. "So I assume you're full then."

"Yeah, but I love to eat, I can always force it."

Peggy smiled. "In that case, I was thinking Vesuvio's. If that appeals to you."

"On Columbus?"

"Yes. They're open until two."

"Nah, doesn't sound good. I'm gonna call it a night."

"Oh. Okay."

"Jeez, I'm kidding."

Peggy was eating like a horse, which motivated Pete, and he almost finished his beef braciole.

"Dang," he said, "small individual like you."

Peggy said, "I'm always famished when I get off work. It drives my family crazy, everyone's constantly on diets."

"Can't beat a healthy metabolism."

"I know, I've never had a weight problem. I feel guilty sometimes."

"So what's your *story*?" Pete said.

"Nothing dramatic, if that's where you're going. I grew up in the city, and except for college in Northridge, I've been here my whole life."

"I grew up here too. My guess is, you take most of your restaurants in the city, it's not that common to find two native San Franciscans at the same table."

"Tell me about it. I love working at the gym, but no one's *from* here. Where'd you go to school?"

"Chestnut Street's the same way. It has its moments, but if you polled a hundred people, maybe two would know the 49ers used to play at Kezar . . . Lowell."

"So did I! What year?"

"'94."

"Get *out* of here, my *sister* was '94."

"Oh no."

"Did you know Leslie Stemphill?"

"Jesus . . . That's your sister?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"What were you?"

"I was class of 2003."

"Wow . . . you had another sister, right? In between."

"Margie. She was three years behind Les."

"I remember her. That means you were like, eight years old then . . . Ah man . . . I actually remember you *too*. I'm not believing this."

"My God, I remember you also! When you'd drop Leslie off, Margie and I were all over her, wanting to hear everything."

"Well that puts a damper on things, to say the least," Pete said. "Serves me right for being truthful. What an idiot."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was going to try to maneuver you back to *my* place. Except for a small detail emerges, that you're my high school girlfriend's little *sister*. Unreal."

Peggy grimaced, taking it in. She said, "I must say, that wasn't an answer I was expecting."

Pete said, "That's my fault then. And I didn't mean I'm not enjoying your company. You're a good kid, that's obvious."

"You say *kid*, but would it occur to you I worry about my biological clock ticking? . . . You mean *that* kind of kid?"

"No, not that kind."

No one spoke for a while.

"You know what?" Peggy said. "If we hadn't made this connection there'd be no way I'd go home with you tonight."

"Oh."

"Now I *can*. If you want me to."

"You mean fire up the scrabble board? Since you don't have to worry about any moves being put on you?"

"You're funny," she said.

Pete made coffee and they sat on the couch and flipped around late-night TV. *Carnal Knowledge* was on, where Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel swap girlfriends, Ann Margret being one and the other a familiar actress Pete couldn't place, all of them so young.

He muted the sound and said, "I ask a few questions but you do most of the talking, okay? And if I start falling asleep, elbow me."

Peggy tucked her feet under herself and got comfortable. "I'll ask the first one *for* you," she said, "What's Leslie doing?"

"That was number two. The first one, are your parents still alive? I really liked them."

"Mom passed away, but Dad's hanging in there. Leslie lives in Walnut Creek."

"Yeah?"

"She has two teenage sons. They've both been in a little trouble. Les has had a fair number of men in and out."

"Who's the father?"

"Two different guys. The first, you probably knew, Tim Boglou."

"Holy Toledo, the basketball player? She ended up with *that* guy?"

"Seems like everyone knew that. You must be out of the loop entirely."

Pete said, "I am until they ask for those alumni donations. When I give them something they don't acknowledge it, but they do solicit me earlier the next year."

"Well you have your 25th reunion coming up. You should *go*, Leslie's been talking about it."

"To be honest, on my list of things to do, that's off the bottom."

"I could go *with* you, it would be so much fun." She moved next to him and without thinking too hard he put his arm around her.

Pete said, "Your dad still in the same house?"

"No, a retirement complex on Van Ness. They had something bad happen and sold the house in '04."

"Something bad . . . what?"

"Oh, I would always ask them not to, but they were driving up to visit Margie, she lived in Seattle at the time. My dad was stubborn, he insisted on driving straight through and sleeping at rest stops. They got robbed and beaten up pretty badly at one in the middle of the night, near Bend, Oregon."

"Fuck."

"It was touch-and-go for a while, especially with my mom. When they recovered they put the house on the market and moved to an apartment. It wasn't rational, but they felt vulnerable."

"*God* damn it."

"On a brighter subject," Peggy said, "how come you're not involved with anyone? Or are you?"

"What happened to the guy that beat them up?"

"There were two. They caught them the next day trying to use my dad's credit card. There was no way my parents were going back up there to testify, so they pled guilty to a watered-down charge and served 90 days in the county jail."

Pete took a deep breath. "What *else*, besides the house?"

"Only that Mom seemed a little slower, mentally. We never knew if it was early dementia setting in, or the incident."

Pete said, "Well now I probably can't sleep. Which isn't the worst thing."

Peggy said, "You know what Pete? You look absolutely exhausted. Please go in, and I'll leave."

"I'm good right here. I'm actually afraid of having a bad dream tonight."

"A *serious* bad dream, or one because it didn't work out with Celeste?"

"She leave the squash club with various guys, in your experience, besides that guy Jeff?"

"Oh yes, she's very much out there."

"That's what I figured. Lot of mystery to her."

"Made more complicated no doubt by that body, which you were studying carefully during the match."

"Don't you think most of them hit the ball too low on the front wall, though? She got mad when I told her that."

"Probably. So are you involved with anyone Pete? Or you just fool around."

"No. You?"

"I've broken up with some nice guys. I can't put my finger on it."

"Let me tell you something," Pete said. "You're never going to find that perfect package. Something's always a little *off*. You accept that, you move forward."

"Interesting, Dr. Phil," she said. "So how come you aren't settled down?"

Pete said, "Those two guys, anyone ever follow up what happened to them? After they got out of jail?"

"No, that wouldn't make sense. Why would we want to?"

Kim began tidying up the apartment a bit, starting with the kitchen. He had to admit, she had a nice style, good instincts.

Meanwhile he opened the laptop and took a quick look. It was amazing what you could sometimes find, and how quick. Pete could never completely wrap his head around modern technology.

Sure enough, you had a couple articles, a local Oregon paper, telling you the *who* and *how* of what happened to the Stemphills up there . . . and the names of the two mutants. One of them, it wasn't clear, but the other sure looked like he was living in Chico now, employed by the State of California, doing maintenance work at the college there. If that *was* the guy.

Pete knew Chico a little bit. It was 3 and a half hours away. You picked up 505 past Vacaville, 5 at Dunnigan

and 32 at Orland. 32 was two-lane, parts of it a little dicey, you had to concentrate, and then you were in town, the west side. It wasn't a bad place. You could typically smell the farm fields in the afternoon, when the wind picked up.

He closed the computer, wondering could you let it go like Kim and her family did . . . and if you couldn't, well, dang.