

Distance

4600 words

Pete's brother Floyd lived in a tract house in Mesa. Not only did the houses look the same but the neighborhoods got you mixed up too. The people next door to Floyd had a giant Winnebago in the driveway with a flag flying off it, so Pete figured Floyd could use that as a landmark to find his house.

The inside smelled like fresh paint. "I'm drawing a blank on when you were down here last," Floyd said. "Pretty sure though I was still in that first condo."

"Big spread with a couple pools," Pete said, "bikinis walking around, the whole nine yards."

"That's right, downtown. Then I had another one in Tempe. I got a sweet deal on this place though. You know, the housing downturn. No pool, but I joined a club to cool off and shit. It works."

They were having cocktails at the little kitchen table. Rory said, "You don't *look* that much like Pete, but you kind of *talk* the same."

Floyd said, "Not sure I want to hear, but how did you all get together for this adventure?"

"I met Pete at a coffee place," Rory said. "He was having a difficult day, and I asked him if he wanted to go do something."

"A little shaky on the details, but it doesn't matter," Pete said.

Floyd freshened everyone's drink. "And we took a lovely, long stroll through San Francisco at night," Rory said.

"I was there too," Joanne said. "We had that really good Indian dinner, remember?"

"Oh that's right," Rory said. "Then you went to the lesbian party."

"You're a lesbian?" Floyd said.

"No."

"She sort of is," Rory said. "She brings girls home sometimes."

"Interesting," Floyd said. "Could you see yourself in a long term relationship with a woman, or is it just for pleasure?"

Joanne said, "The second thing. You're worse with the direct questions than Pete."

"So Floyd, what do you do, like for your job?" Rory said.

"I scramble a little bit, no set thing. I teach some golf at a resort, you get the snowbirds coming down from Chicago and New York, and the money can be good . . . I've been a little lucky in real estate also."

"Doing what?" Pete said.

"Actually the same type stuff I was doing for Chip. Distressed houses, flipping them. He screwed me, but then again he taught me the ropes."

Joanne said, "Who's Chip?"

"Guy in Las Vegas, sort of a player," Floyd said. "Smart, but sleazy. I told Pete he got murdered a few weeks ago."

"My God," Rory said. "What happened?"

Floyd said, "He'd moved out to L.A. and someone got into his office and killed him. At first I was kind of celebrating because Chip owed me money and he didn't care. Then I started thinking he wasn't that bad of a guy."

"But they think it's mob-related, right?" Pete said.

"They thought so, but now they don't know. I hear bits and pieces from my buddy in Vegas. They're pretty sure someone used a baseball bat on him though."

"Well," Pete said. "Anyone hungry? Whatever's your restaurant of choice, it's on me."

"Nah, I got steaks and burgers ready to go on the grill. That's how we do it here in Arizona in March."

The girls went for a walk and Floyd and Pete hovered around the backyard barbeque. Floyd said, "Still not clear on how you pulled it off my big brother, but those are two righteously foxy women."

"They have their moments. They can be impulsive though, which you have to roll with."

"Are you currently hitting on either one of them, or what?"

"No."

"You're sure."

"I'm sure. Almost happened once, Helen got in the way. Never re-ignited itself after that."

"Jesus, Helen. What happened to *her*?"

"She's around, we're on good terms."

"Little more *subtle* with her, but she was one hot number too."

"Yeah, well, what can you do."

"I know it . . . How'd she get in the way though?"

"Rory came over to my apartment. Helen shows up unannounced to ask a question, broke up the whole flow. I was already irritated because I had a chance to see someone *else* that night."

"Did you follow through with the someone else?"

"I did. A very warm lady. She says she's got an ex-husband messing with her mind, holding her back. Physically."

"You buy that?"

"I go back and forth. I'm tempted to talk to the guy though."

"Now why would you want to fool with something like that, man?"

"I know, there are other opportunities, without the baggage. Just something that's been bothering me, that's all."

"Okay whatever. At least coming down here, you can put all your concerns behind you for a few days."

Pete was drinking his morning coffee in the kitchen, the patio sliding door open, birds chirping, sunshine flooding in, when Joanne appeared wearing an Idaho State University tee shirt that only covered half of her turquoise thong.

"You've got to be kidding," he said.

"Good morning to you too. What?"

"To be laying that on someone this early, that's unfair." Not taking his eyes off her as she opened a cabinet and reached for a cup.

"Pete, we're in Arizona," she said. "It has to be seventy-five degrees out already."

"Fine, not to change the subject, but you sleep okay?"

"Like a baby. I had the window open. The air here . . ."

"Dry, right? I'm going take a run, you want to come?"

"Hmm. Okay, I'll try. I feel like I've been gaining weight on this road trip."

"I wouldn't worry about it, honestly," he said.

Everything outside was cement. Even the high school, a few blocks away, had a fake grass football field with a fake dirt track surrounding it. Pete ran laps on the track so Joanne could go at her own pace, but she didn't last long and ended up sitting in the bleachers.

"You have a fluid stride," she said when they were walking back. "It must make jogging easier."

"Pain in the ass is what it is," he said. "The best thing, find a sport. Then you don't have to *know* you're exercising."

Pete's phone rang. He stopped walking and took the call.

He said: "Fair to middling,"

He said: "Steve? Have you stopped doing your thing?"

Pete hung up and called someone else.

He said: "Everything still good?"

He said: "Except your voice is sing-songing on me . . . I don't *think* it's still good."

He said: "One more time . . . the Stinson Beach house is off-limits, *why?*"

He said: "*Okay* then."

He waved Joanne away as he plugged one ear and dialed someone else. "*Damn* it," he said. "No answer. What time is it in California?"

"I think 12:20," she said, "the same as here, now that it's Daylight Savings? You seem upset."

"Ah, I got a friend I can't reach. It's Saturday, he's probably getting dialysis as we *speak*."

Joanne waited a moment and said, "Honestly? Some of that sounded bizarre. Someone's voice quality, a beach house. Jesus, and dialysis? What's *up* with all that?"

"Hard to say. Hopefully it's just me putting my nose where it doesn't belong."

"Pete you're on a *holiday*, okay? You have to eliminate these projections. Stay in the here and now, let yourself have fun."

She was standing close to him, concerned. He bent down, grabbed her behind the knees, and when he straightened up she was upside down over his shoulder. "Wait . . . what are you doing . . . don't," she said, but she was giggling sufficiently and he kept her up there

dangling and jostling around until they got to Floyd's house.

"I see what you mean about that weight gain," he said. "I could only carry you two blocks."

"You're *not* funny," she said.

Floyd and Rory were next to each other on the couch, Floyd flipping pages of a photo album. "Hey, *morning* Petie, Joanne," he said. "Remember the summer mom and dad dragged us to that lake in Wisconsin?"

Pete said, "You guys bang each other already?"

"No," Floyd said. "We're hitting it off okay, but it's not like *that*. Jeez."

"They did," Joanne said.

"Long as everyone's having fun," Pete said. "I'm going to look around Anthem this afternoon. You guys feel safe being left with my brother?"

"I thought I'd take them over to Scottsdale, find a little action," Floyd said.

"Actually, why don't I go with Pete," Joanne said.

Pete had been carrying the address for Kyle Lamb around in his wallet since he pulled it off the computer at the Funston library a few weeks ago. No idea how it might play out--or *if*--but it did seem the responsible thing all around to at least say hi.

Traffic was light. They passed various planned communities on both sides of the freeway, extensions of north Phoenix. "Think you could ever live in one of these?" Pete asked Joanne.

"I'm not sure, what about you?"

"There's an artificial feel, no doubt . . . *But* . . . there'd be redeeming aspects . . . All your needs within five minutes, everything bright-spanking clean, no crime to worry about. A giant year-round pool in your complex."

"Probably I could," she said. "Not now, it'd be a tad slow, but when I settle down to have kids."

"Hold on, you're leaning that direction?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've wanted to be a mother since I can't remember . . . You're laughing."

"I'm not laughing at you, you could have fooled me is all. I'm happy that's your goal."

"Your brother is red hot, incidentally," Joanne said.

"You think so?"

"Totally. Look at Rory getting her hands on him right away. I love her, but what a single-minded little bitch."

"The way things have been playing out, pretty good odds you'll get your chance."

"You'd be fun too though," she said.

"Oh," he said.

There were two similar developments that made up Anthem it turned out, one a little fancier with a golf course and requiring you to deal with a guard booth. Luckily Kyle lived in the more modest section you could drive right into, and when they got to the address, there he apparently was, a thin guy with a backwards baseball cap and a goatee shooting baskets with his kids in the driveway.

Pete said, "Something could be off, but there's a chance that's the person."

"What person again now?" Joanne said.

The guy glanced toward the car and they kept going and turned the corner. Pete said, "Okay. Don't tell Floyd or anyone else about this . . . A friend in San Francisco, I'm trying to help her get on with her life. She says her ex-husband is essentially mind-fucking her."

"Interesting," Joanne said, "though the man playing basketball back there, he doesn't seem the type frankly."

Pete had to agree, based on first impressions. And it seemed like a bogus-enough claim to start with, from his friend Evelyn--that the reason she hadn't been able to progress with Pete, or apparently anyone else, was her ex holding her back, from 800 miles away.

It was also debatable at this point if she still fit the *friend* designation, and for *sure* she'd explode if she found out about this little visit . . . but what are you gonna do.

Pete said, "Bottom line, this stuff can surprise you . . . Hey, would you want to talk to him?"

"Me?"

"Yeah . . . How 'bout . . . tell him you're looking around, considering moving into the area. Pick his brain, see how he is."

"Well I guess I *could*. If you really need me to play detective."

"Just walk back there right now before he goes anywhere. Make sure you introduce yourself so he gives you his name too. My guy is Kyle."

It took her twenty minutes. "That was kind of a trip," she said.

"What'd you get?"

"I got that those are his step kids, he's lived here eight years . . . let's see what else . . . the quality of life is great except for July and August, but it's a bear if you have to commute . . . And his name is Kyle."

"Dang. You are good."

"And also, last thing . . ."

"Yep?"

"I'm having a drink with him. At six."

"Oh my *God*."

"He's actually really nice."

"I'm not believing this . . . What about his step-family obligations?"

"He didn't mention that. What else should I ask him?"

"Wow . . . ooh boy . . . Well, the main thing we're trying to determine, is he purposely sticking it to my friend, or is she feeding me a line of baloney."

"Okay don't worry, I should be able to get you that. It might take a couple of drinks."

"Try to make it 7-Up or something, on your end."

"Pete, I can take care of myself."

The place was called Jackson's Hole And Bistro. It was in a shopping center near Safeway, a short drive from Kyle's house. Pete said, "What I'm wondering, what kind of guy cheats on his wife right in his own backyard? At least put some distance on the situation."

"He's not cheating on his wife."

"You know what I mean. He's either a dumb shit, or just as likely, he wants to show off his new prize."

They were on the far side of the parking lot, and Joanne got out. "I'll be right here," Pete said. He watched her walk over there and disappear inside.

It occurred to Pete he'd been spending way too much time lately sitting in parking lots. Finally, nearly 8:30, he spotted Joanne in front of Jackson's Hole mingling with the doofus. Pete waited for the obligatory

hug and peck on the cheek so he could thankfully get the hell out of there . . . but no, she follows Kyle to his car, gets *in*, and they drive away.

He followed them as they jumped on the freeway toward Phoenix and got off fifteen minutes later, turned into a Holiday Inn Express and went inside. Pete sat there with the engine running, trying to digest this. He sent Joanne a text, and went home to Floyd's.

"You're back," his brother said.

"Sort of," Rory said. She was sitting on Floyd's lap, in the kitchen, beverages in front of them.

"She's having dinner with someone," Pete said. "I have to go pick her up later."

"Yeah, right," Rory said, playing with Floyd's hair. "Now you're getting to know Joanne, Pete. She's not particularly complicated."

"Well, hey, how's everything going otherwise?" Floyd said.

"You know," Pete said. "Could be worse. Took a look around Anthem. Nice to see all that red rock. People there seemed reasonably cheerful."

"That, or they're a bunch of zombies," Floyd said. "A little bit too controlled up there for my taste."

"Could be," Pete said. "Plus I got one or two issues that are dogging me, on the back end."

Floyd said, "I already *told* you, you go *away*, check that shit at the *door*."

"That used to be easier," Pete said. "You went somewhere, you wanted to address something back home, you needed to find a pay phone and come up with about ten dollars in change--so you said forget it and had a good time . . . Now you're held hostage by modern technology."

"So turn it off, and lock it in the trunk," Floyd said.

"Don't quite have enough discipline to. Speaking of which, I have to go outside and make a couple calls. After that I want to ask you something."

He walked to the corner, no luck reaching any humans, so he went back inside. There was no one in the kitchen and there was music on now in Floyd's bedroom, some new guy trying to sound like Marvin Gaye.

Pete went over to the counter and helped himself to what was left in the shaker, a sweet, citrusy vodka mix that wasn't bad, and when he turned around he had an angle through the living room into the bedroom, where the door was slightly open and Rory was riding Floyd.

He watched for a few minutes, sipping his drink. Rory mostly had her hands clasped behind her head, her back slightly arched. She would occasionally bring them down and say something to Floyd.

Pete went back outside and checked his messages, nothing from Joanne, so he went over to the high school and walked around the track for an hour. When he came back, Floyd and Rory were showered and sitting on the couch watching a comedy special on HBO.

"Took you a long time," Floyd said. "What was *that*, you wanted to ask me?"

"Whether you know of any strip clubs in the greater Phoenix area," Pete said. "I thought I'd go to one."

"Hey, can I go too?" Rory said.

Floyd said, "There's a couple that come to mind. Your best bet consistency-wise is Judy's Rendezvous. It's in Tempe, not too far from ASU."

"Babe, I'm serious, can you take me?" Rory said. "I've never been to one of those."

"Jesus, *babe* already," Pete said.

"You wouldn't feel awkward?" Floyd said.

"I'm with you and Pete," Rory said, "why would I?"

Pete took his own car in case he had to go get Joanne. It was a relatively small place, three women dancing at a time on a runway in the middle of a circular bar. Whatever song was playing, even something light out of the '70s, it had a heavy rhythm section engineered into it. There were strobe lights that kept changing the setting to different colors, but mostly the women looked slightly purple up there.

Floyd was right, the majority of the performers were attractive and the bodies were tight and supple. "One thing I'll give this place," Pete said, "no poles. This you can get into easier."

"I must say, they're good dancers," Rory said.
"More professional than I expected."

Floyd said, "With this place, a lot of the girls are supposedly from Brazil. Doesn't seem logical, but I heard that."

"Actually, I can see it," Rory said.

"Wait a second," Pete said, "*what* can you see? Who's Brazilian up there now?"

"The middle girl for one," she said, "I mean look how exquisitely she moves."

Pete studied that one for a moment. He said, "Take away the lighting, she's white as a sheet. My guess is she hails from Rapid City, South Dakota."

His phone rang, Joanne. He excused himself. "Yeah," he said.

"Pete, please . . . Can you at least say something?"

"What time is it?"

"It's ten to one."

"Okay, just be in the lobby."

He told Floyd and Rory to continue having fun and took his time, stopping for a donut and coffee on

the way. Joanne was reading a paperback when he got there.

"Well?" he said.

"I think I have some stuff for you, but can it wait until tomorrow Pete?"

"It can, absolutely. In fact *never* is fine too."

"You know what? It wasn't quite what you thought."

They got home to a dark house, Floyd and Rory were still out, and Pete went straight to bed and barely moved until noon.

He went in the kitchen, where someone had been frying bacon. "One of you looks relatively fresh," he said, "while the two late arrivals look like shit."

Joanne said, "You didn't tell me they were watching strippers. We could have met them."

"You didn't ask," Pete said.

Rory said, "It was pretty amazing. When I feel better I'm going to try to write a song about the experience."

Floyd said, "The *pace* that you're all setting, it's a little heavy for me."

"Is there a Starbucks nearby?" Joanne said. "I have to go over a few things with Pete."

Floyd gave them directions and headed back to bed. Pete said, "Might as well walk it then. Give you time to gather your thoughts."

The Starbucks was a mile or so down Seneca Avenue, everything pretty quiet on a Sunday afternoon. Half way there, Joanne took his arm.

"Now that," Pete said, "is an error."

"It makes me feel good. You can't lighten up and leave it at that?"

"Fuck, I forgot all *about* something," he said, and he stopped walking and made a phone call.

You heard Pete say, "Okay fine, but what about the Croatian tennis pro?"

And then: "But she seemed . . . the same? As when we went to Booker's?"

And: "They curious at all why you happened to stop by the pool party?"

And: "Okay, now something like that, that would be *me*, you have to take my word for it . . ."

And concluding with: "Hopefully soon. This trip has gone 180 degrees different than I expected."

When he put the phone away and they'd picked their pace back up Joanne said, "Are you a secret agent or something? I'm not kidding, you have a secondary life."

He looked at her and said, "Okay, hundred percent confidential? What it *really* is? . . . I'm one of those people you read about, who the medical experts give a year to live. I'm trying to cram in what I can in the time I have left."

Joanne stopped walking and let go of his arm, her mouth half open, looking up at him.

"Jiminy Christmas," he said. "I'm joking."

She hit him hard on the shoulder. "Don't play around like that, I'm serious. You almost gave me a heart attack."

"That's my fault then. But you better start smiling again, get rid of that crinkled up face."

"Why should I, you piss me off."

Pete gave her a minute. Hard to tell if it helped, but he said, "There you go, back to your cheerful self."

She said, "Maybe temporarily. 'Til you start cross-examining me about Kyle."

He waited until they had their tall skinny white chocolate mochas or whatever it was she'd ordered. "Just start me off with the bottom line," he said.

"Well, he does have a wife in California. They're still technically married."

"Did he strike you as someone who could get violent?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so, but then he got really angry when he couldn't get it up."

"He couldn't?"

"No. He tried for an hour and left. He didn't even say goodbye."

"*Wait* a second, you got there at nine. What took you so long then?"

"They had one of those fancy bathtubs, with the jacuzzi jets? I wanted to try it. Then I turned on the TV and fell asleep."

"You *gotta* be kidding me . . . What else did he say about the California wife?"

"Only that they see each other every so often. They spend most of the time making love. *Supposedly.*"

"Anything else?"

"He said he wants a divorce so he can marry his girlfriend but your friend isn't being cooperative. That he tells her she needs to get on with her life."

"You tell him your name was Joanne?"

"Of course, I'm not a sneaky person."

Pete took a moment. "I guess that covers it then," he said. "What else is going on with you?"

"Pete, please do me a favor? Can we drop the whole thing now?"

"We can," he said. "It's nice to finally have some closure."

In a *perfect* world, or a Netflix series, the simplest thing would be to kill Kyle, because he was a piece of scum that no one would miss. What the real dope was between Evelyn and the guy was irrelevant.

Anyhow . . . Rory was sleeping when they got home and Floyd was in the kitchen reading a Sports Illustrated. Pete said, "Thought I'd take a little personal time this afternoon." Floyd didn't look up and Joanne said that sounds good and plopped down in the living room.

As Pete started to drive away he noticed some red rocks in Floyd's front yard, framing a scraggly piece of cactus. Hmm. He found one that felt good and headed back up the interstate to Anthem.

He passed the house and parked around the corner again and walked back and rang the prick's bell.

Kyle answered, chewing, a beer in his hand. "Whoops," Pete said, "I might have the wrong address. I'm looking for Joanne?"

Kyle flinched. Pete could see a pretty, strawberry-blond woman, pregnant, down the hall at the kitchen sink. "I guess not, then," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

There was nothing to do but walk around the neighborhood and pass by the house every twenty minutes, hoping Kyle's girlfriend went somewhere. On the fourth pass, one car was gone and Kyle's was still

there. Pete looked around, was satisfied there were no neighbors in the way, and rang the bell.

This time when the door opened Pete hit Kyle in the mouth with the rock. Kyle went to his knees and held his face, and there was blood all over and Pete was pretty sure he'd eliminated several of the guy's teeth. There was kids' laughter coming from an upstairs room, not a huge concern.

Kyle was lying on the floor now, sobbing like a child. Pete said, "What you *take* from this, Kyle? You bothering Joanne again, that would be an error."

Kyle nodded just barely.

"Oh, and on a related topic," Pete said. "*Evelyn*. The thing there is, she needs her privacy. I find out you're ever in her presence--rest of your life--sorry, but."

Kyle covered his head with his arms looking like he expected to get hit again. Pete said, "We good then Kyle?"

Kyle moved slightly indicating they were.

Pete walked back to the car, moving fast but not rushing it to where he was conspicuous. The asshole

could call the police of course, which would be a mess, but looking at the big picture it didn't seem likely.

Rory and Joanne tried to talk Floyd into coming to California with them. Floyd said the idea had potential, but he couldn't right now. They were out front, the car packed, a perfect blue-sky morning.

Pete said to Floyd, "Next time I come visit, I'll give you more notice. I feel like we kind of turned you upside down there."

Floyd said, "Yeah you did, but it was good for me."

Pete gave him a quick salute and got in the car. No hug or handshake or big thank you, he didn't feel like going there, even though you never knew.

They stopped for coffee at a rest area on I-10 an hour into the trip, and then pretty much drove straight through. As they approached the Ashby Avenue exit for Berkeley, Pete said to Rory, "You haven't said squat since about Needles."

"She thinks she's lovesick," Joanne said. "Give her until Wednesday."

Pete said, "You notice how my brother was less animated as the weekend wore on?"

"Ror does that to people," Joanne said.

Rory said, "It happened so fast. I'm not sure I'll meet anyone as interesting, or fun."

"You mean cute," Joanne said.

"You think what you want," she said. "But Pete? Thank you for taking us. I mean it."

"Well, I guess it wasn't the worst way to spend a few days," he said. "There won't be a part two though."

"Hey, it's not even *nine* yet," Joanne said. "Why don't we go into the city and do something?"

"Yeah, right," Pete said.