

Embankment

2700 words

Matt took a different trail today, and halfway to the beach he noticed some stirring off to the side in the shaded overgrowth, and he was pretty sure a young couple was in the middle of the act.

He had to admit, if you're going to screw around outdoors in nature this wouldn't be the worst choice.

Though another 20 yards in would be more secluded. But the couple was playing the odds, there weren't a lot of humans coming through here typically on a Tuesday afternoon, and Matt himself would have passed by without noticing if the woman hadn't made a high-pitched sound.

There was another trail that fed into this one up ahead, and that's the one the locals used, one of the main reasons being this one had a ton of poison oak.

Not directly on the trail so much--they had maintenance guys who tried to cut it back every spring--

but immediately off it. If you swung your elbow wrong for instance, you could be in trouble.

That's what he thought of as he walked the rest of the way down to the beach, the gal unleashing her noise back there in the splendor of the moment, the two of them laying down--or squatting or kneeling or however they were doing it--smack dab in the middle of an acre of the lush green native shrub.

On the beach there was a middle-aged woman throwing a stick to a dog, and she was heavily endowed, lots of movement with each new throw, nothing supported adequately. She had bird legs. Matt wasn't sure if the scene was erotic or even attractive, or an oddity, but it caught your attention, the couple in the brush setting the tone.

Depending on the tide you were limited how far you could go left or right before running out of beach, and today he went right, toward Doran, and he did get cut off around the bend but that was fine, he was calculating he'd put in a couple miles and still had the return trip.

Speaking of which, coming toward him now he was pretty sure was the couple.

They were having a pretend argument, playfully shoving each other. Big smiles, all kinds of energy, Matt guessing early twenties.

As they were passing him he weighed the *should I or shouldn't I*, but he figured if it *was* them they might appreciate it.

So he put up a hand, which seemed to startle them both, and they angled away from him and Matt said, “Yo. I have a public service announcement, is all. Maybe it benefits you, maybe not.”

The guy and the gal stopped walking and the guy said, “Sir? Are you speaking to us?”

Matt looked around and the lady throwing the stick was gone and there was an older man way down there toward Point Reyes and that was about it.

He said, “Have to say, it's like someone warned you to watch out for random people on the beach . . . which I guess I can understand, someone told me the same thing first time I visited New York. Of course I was in high school.”

“That's where we're from,” the guy said.

“Not the city,” the young gal said, “but near there.”

“Okay here’s the deal,” Matt said, “before I re-scare you.”

“You’re not now,” the guy said.

“No,” the woman said.

Matt said, “And this is a little delicate . . . so feel free to shut me down. Was that you two, frolicking back there?” Signaling the direction with his head.

No one answered right away. Then the woman said, “We saw you.”

“Sorry about that,” the guy said.

“Nah, don’t be silly,” Matt said. “Only reason I ask, you know what poison oak looks like, right?”

“Not sure,” the guy said. “You’re saying we may have contracted it?”

“Contacted it, yeah,” Matt said. “At the minimum.”

“Oh wow,” the woman said, extending her arms and rolling them around and looking at them.

“Well is it similar to poison ivy?” the guy said.

“That’s what we have back east. I don’t believe I noticed anything like that.”

Matt was thinking man you’re an idiot, they’re almost the same thing, maybe the leaves on the oak

version are a little larger, but Jeez. He said, “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but if it were me I’d want to get some water on stuff. Sooner than later.”

“You’re saying that’s a remedy?” the gal said.

“Maybe not the textbook one, but it’s bailed me out a couple times. The issue is the oils, you hope to eliminate ‘em before they take hold. Or you pray to.”

“I got a terrible case of poison ivy once at sleepaway camp,” she said. “My eyes closed all the way for a day.”

“Really?” the guy said. “What camp you go to?”

“It was in Maine.”

“Get out of here,” he said, “mine was too. We flew to Bangor.”

“Mine was near Portland,” she said.

“Hold on,” Matt said, “you guys *flew* to summer camp? . . . but we’re getting sidetracked. I’d recommend going in the ocean. I mean don’t drown or anything, but get good and wet.”

“A preemptive strike,” the guy said, sizing it up, the water looking fairly nasty at the moment, Matt agreeing that it wasn’t a friendly swimming beach, waves

pounding big rocks, plus you had the undertow that the sign at the bottom of the trail warned you about.

“Or I guess,” Matt said, “as an alternative . . . I do have an outdoor shower.”

The couple looked at each other. “That’s okay,” the guy said, “we don’t want to put you out, Man.”

“We don’t,” the gal said. “But it’s around here?”

“You say *around* here,” Matt said, “that’s an interpretation. But yeah, once you’re back at the parking lot, it’s a two-minute drive.”

“We actually took the bus,” the guy said.

“Jesus,” Matt said. “No one does that. I didn’t even know there was one.”

“Well,” the guy said, “it lets you off on Highway One, bottom of the hill. Seemed kind of normal.”

“Where from?”

“Santa Rosa,” the gal said. “We’re staying at the hostel.”

“Okay now you got me twice,” Matt said. “I moved here *from* Santa Rosa, and I wasn’t aware of a hostel. But yeah, you want, I’m happy to drive you. Though we should get a bit of a move on, I’m not kidding.”

Heading back up the trail Matt didn't say anything when they passed the spot, but the woman pointed it out.

So Matt took a careful look at the foliage and said, "Yep, you're arguably screwed."

The couple laughed, kind of nervously, and Matt realized he used the wrong word, but whatever, it was accurate and more importantly he was worried now about them in the car, leaving oils behind that might screw *him* later. He figured you better spray the seats with bleach or some shit.

"Whoa what a view," the guy, Jason, said when they pulled into the driveway.

"Honestly," the gal, Erin, said. "This reminds me of my uncle's one, in North Carolina. The Outer Banks."

"Thanks, it's fair," Matt said. "Plenty of house blockage between us and the water, as you can see. Plus you caught a nice day. No fog. Sometimes we're socked in for a week."

"Who is we?" Erin said.

“No you’re fine,” Matt said. “Just me in the house, no surprises . . . Meanwhile, the shower’s around the side, I’ll set you up.”

“Do you always refer to yourself in the third person?” she said.

She was mixed up on her persons, but she was starting to get interesting, and kind of cute.

Matt said, “I’m thinking about something else now too. Everything you’re wearing, we’re better off bagging it up and throwing in the garbage. I’ll look around, I think I can give you fresh stuff.”

Jason said, “You *are* taking this seriously. Don’t get me wrong--which we appreciate.”

“You mean you have fresh women’s clothes as well?” Erin said.

He was tossing it around. That woman Andrea had left some stuff here from when they’d been connected a while back. She was a little skinnier than Erin, and if the clothes didn’t fit or were tight Erin might feel bad, you never knew.

Matt realized there was a simpler solution and said how ‘bout he just throws everything in the laundry when

they're done, and they said that sounded great, and Matt brought down a couple terrycloth robes and towels and some soap.

“Now it's good I remembered I had this,” he said. “Tecnu. Take your time with it, don't skimp. We used to use Fels Naptha. Not sure if they fooled with the formula, but this stuff's better.”

“Dude,” Jason said, “you're really . . . going beyond the call of duty.”

“You certainly are,” Erin said.

“Fine. Main thing, like I say,” Matt said, “be thorough. Also cold water, if you can handle it. Lukewarm at the most.”

He went inside and it was a little early but it had been an eventful day so far, at least by his reduced standards living full-time out here in Bodega Bay, where nothing much happened.

So what the hay, and he fixed himself a gin and tonic.

You could hear the water going strong through the kitchen wall, the outdoor shower.

A lot of the houses had them. Some people out here surfed, especially the weekenders, and Matt supposed the showers made sense, though he could only remember using his once, when he stepped in a bunch of dog shit coming back from the little fitness room that was part of your HOA fee.

You had to give the architect credit, the shower was perfectly secluded. Once someone shut that gate they had total privacy.

Admittedly . . . you did have that one angle from inside the house, upstairs, the northwest corner of the guest bedroom, where when you leaned to the right you had a couple inches of glass that gave you an overhead view of the situation out there.

Hmm.

Matt didn't want to be an ass . . . but maybe just take a glance, make sure they have everything they need? Kind of a no harm, no foul deal?

So he trudged up there and took a look--and Holy Toledo--Erin had her towel, but not on her, it was folded up neatly on the cement and she was kneeling on it, and

the guy was standing in front of her and she was going to town on him.

Matt gave it another minute, and the positions changed slightly but the torrid pace down there continued unabated . . . so Matt refreshed his beverage and sat down in the living room and started flipping channels, no good sports on right now, settling on a water ski jump competition from a lake in Florida.

There was a tentative knock on the front door, and he realized he didn't clarify to come in the house when they were finished, and he told them to make themselves comfortable and asked how it went.

"Oh wonderful," Jason said. "The set-up, the ocean air. You have the full package here my friend."

"It's quite inspiring," Erin said.

"I know, right?" Matt said. "Peaceful. Kind of a Zen situation, when you let yourself go with it."

He brought out a couple beers and Jason got caught up in his phone and said something privately to Erin.

"What?" Matt said.

"We've managed to foul this up," Jason said. "The bus back, it left at 4:42."

“One a day, you’re saying,” Matt said, “each way . . . Not a problem, I can you drive you back.”

“You’d do that?” Erin said.

“Sure. It’s like 35 minutes. I can always find something to do in Santa Rosa. They have a good Barnes and Noble. Reasonable homeless element to it, but that’s okay.”

“Well one thing,” Jason said, looking at the label on the Black Butte Porter, “this hits the spot. Where is it from?”

“I think Chico,” Matt said. “Or . . . you’re perfectly welcome to stay over. We have an extra bedroom all set.”

Erin said, “You keep adding or’s.”

“Babe,” Jason said. “What are you saying to the man?”

“Nah I can tell she’s just fooling,” Matt said.

“Anyways, think it over. No imposition. You have your own bathroom up there, I’ll barely know you’re here.”

Matt threw the clothes in the machine and made sure to bleach the heck out of his own hands when he closed the lid, and when he came back Jason said they’d

love to take him up on his offer, and if there's any way they can reciprocate when he comes back east just name it.

Matt made a fire and after a while Erin went in the kitchen and pulled together some creative odds and ends, and Matt decided it all tasted pretty dang good, and they finished it off with rocky road ice cream.

Jason told a story--since summer camp had been brought up--a kid at his broke into the freezer one night and came back with a tub of it for everyone in the cabin, and the head counselor caught him and made him run a mile, and the kid collapsed with an asthma attack.

"Then what?" Erin said.

"Come on," Jason said, "I don't know *then what*. That's not enough?"

"What did you want to have happen?" Matt said.

"I like conclusions," she said.

"Well, you won't love this one either," Matt said.

"But lemme ask you first--you didn't put like a couple drops of CBD oil in that sauce did you? I'm feeling kind of spacey."

Erin said, "What a strange thing to say."

“Wouldn’t do anything anyway,” Jason said. “That’s the whole point of CBD.”

“Oh right,” Matt said. “So . . . I had someone tell me once they killed someone at *their* summer camp. Bumped them off a high trail.”

That shut things down for a minute. Erin said, “And that’s all? Which I’m assuming, since you led off with a tease.”

“He didn’t exactly,” Jason said. “All’s he said was the story would be inconclusive.”

“I don’t like teases,” she said. “Anyhow . . . gentlemen . . . I’m going to turn in. Matt, it’s been quite an interesting day. So thank you for that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said to Matt when she was gone. “She gets argumentative when she’s tired. Part of her make-up, which I’ve learned the hard way a few times.”

Matt was thinking there might be an interesting story or two there as well, but he was pretty beat himself and said goodnight.

When he woke up Erin was in the living room. “Jeez,” he said, “almost 9. I never sleep that late.”

“Jason’s out finding coffee,” she said. “Your pillows, are they down? We slept like babies.”

Matt said he had no idea but was thinking without a car you weren’t going to find coffee around here, but then remembered the little trailer that was sometimes there in the mornings for the maintenance guys, so maybe Jason would get lucky.

Erin said, “I have an uncle in San Jose. When I come out to visit, you should come down.”

“Seriously?” Matt said.

“You really should.”

“Un-huh . . . that’s the second uncle now you’ve mentioned.”

“Is that a problem?”

He said, “How’s your trip been otherwise? Your needs been met?”

She said, “Who told you that story?”

“The camp deal? Ah, this lady friend. She was a librarian. Fertile imagination, I’m guessing.”

“*Could* it have happened?”

“Sure, why not.”

“And just like that, you’d be okay with it.”

“Meaning . . . would I call the authorities on her if I had believed her?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Well, you think you got me pegged pretty good. That’s amusing.”

“Did you watch us?” she said.

“What’s that now?”

“I couldn’t help but notice, the guest room.”

“Oh. The vantage point. I took a look, yeah.”

She said, “I think *you* may have bumped someone off a trail once. Not some librarian person. What do you think of that?”

“I think you’re playing. You’re looking for an edge.”

“Right. I like that.”

“You like what?”

“How you put things,” she said.