

# High School

6600 words

Pete's reunion was Saturday night, suddenly looming very real. He better get off his ass.

For starters, his new friend Emma. She was being wishy-washy on how she'd even *get* here from L.A., and when. Not to mention the *if* part--that wasn't totally clarified.

But assuming she shows up, where would they stay, and how well did he know her.

He needed these complications like a hole in the head and wanted to be ticked off at *someone*, but he wasn't even sure who talked him into this, it was a big blur.

One call he better make right now, Gloria Johansen, the reunion chairperson, it being Thursday already, in case you unfortunately had to stop by a school office or something tomorrow.

Gloria was happy to hear from him, one of those glass-half-full people back in high school and probably

still the same way, her name showing up consistently in Class of '94 announcements.

There was some social noise in the background, but she was in no rush to get off and she had questions for him, the usual catching up, and Pete answered a few but said, "Lemme jump you here. I might have a date, for the big event? Which was a late development. How do I get her in?"

"Well . . . you obviously didn't read the fine print, did you?" Gloria said.

"With all due respect," Pete said, "no. And if that optional bus ride picnic thing to Half Moon Bay--in the *large* print--was mandatory, you wouldn't have seen me for *sure*, for *another* 25 years."

"You're more *amusing* than you used to be," she said.

What did *that* mean? . . . He'd *tried* back then, and *fell flat*? Or he'd just walked around pissed off?

"What's in the fine print?" he said.

"You can bring a spouse, guest, whatever you like. *Everyone* can. It's included."

"Oh," he said. "Okay then. Good to hear."

Gloria said--the din in the background louder for a second and then calming back down--“What are you doing now?”

“*Right* now?”

“We’re having a little thingy. You’re welcome to come over.”

Pete considered his other prospects for the evening, and admittedly there weren’t a whole lot of them.

Which again, was pretty dang sad. Him being *from* here and barely away long enough so far to let the paint dry.

He was on the outside looking in, wasn’t he, no sugarcoating it, and the same would be true at Gloria’s get-together . . . but he got the address and said he’d see what he could do.

Traffic crawled back into the city from Marin County, the opposite direction of what you’d expect, and Pete found the jazz station he liked but they were in the middle of a pledge drive and only playing big band when they did play something. Bottom line, the Bay Area had become as screwed up traffic-wise as southern California.

Mercifully you had the far right lane exit at the toll plaza, into the Presidio, and Pete couldn't help it, he remembered a guy following him once, starting right here . . . and when Pete got to his destination the guy'd parked up the block and gotten out and watched him, making no bones about it.

Nothing further came of it, as far as he knew, but you didn't need to live like that.

Gloria's place was on Jackson, two blocks east of Arguello. Presidio Heights. Blue-chip neighborhood in a market gone berserk. Pete was thinking, just by *living* in one of these things, place-holding, everyone up and down the block made minimum a hundred grand in equity this year.

Gloria opened the door and seemed shocked that he actually showed up, and a little embarrassed. Pete figured it was something with her appearance, though she looked fine. There were about 15 people, most of them standing in the kitchen, the rest sitting in the family room off of it.

Gloria introduced him around, tugging him by the arm a couple times when he didn't need to meet anyone

else, and pretty much as he expected, it was a small prelude to the main event Saturday night. Several of them had come from out of town or out of state for the weekend and they were getting right to it, the old spirit, the red and white.

When there was a slight lull in the conversation, which wasn't often, someone would inject, "*Hey*, how about the time when . . . !"

One guy *Pete* remembered, Steve Proctor, from freshmen football, didn't have a clue who *he* was, and that was fine . . . Pete picking up that he was in Atlanta now, separated but for the best, and running software for the transit authority. It was hard to tell if he and Gloria were an item tonight but it looked that way. Tough to gauge *her* story as well . . . did she earn, inherit or *divorce* her way into this 5 million dollar spread.

It was dessert time. There'd been trays of likely pretty gourmet appetizers, but those were scavenged. Someone was having a birthday that overlapped the reunion, Jeannie Battaglia, so you had a cake and a few people raised their hand and said kind things about her, a little shaky from the booze . . . and the toasts

continued and gravitated toward high school and friendship and life.

The final toaster, some guy Pete couldn't place but who insisted remembered *him*, got all choked up and could barely finish, the gist of it being, we'll never replace those days, but we can keep them alive in spirit forever.

Pete started to feel a little nauseous, probably his imagination, though it could have been the apple fritter from a donut place in San Rafael mixing with the champagne . . . mixing with the bullshit.

He went out in back and sat down, a small yard but impeccable, everything red brick, and he could still hear as much from inside as he needed to. He checked his messages, nothing there at all, Emma the main one he was wondering about.

Then he had a thought, *Jeez*, not a bad one at all . . . Why not let this be *it*, on the reunion business. He'd caught up sufficiently, had a few laughs, and had the *idea* now.

“*There* you are,” came Gloria’s voice, closing the screen door behind her. “That’s a relief, I thought something might have offended you.”

“Are you kidding?” Pete lied. “I wouldn’t have *missed* this tonight, really glad you invited me, all that emotion in there . . . What it is right now, I kind of haven’t slept much.” Which was true, he wasn’t all that convinced he’d be able to get out of this chair.

“Yes,” she said, “I could tell when I saw you, you don’t look great.”

“I *don’t*?” he said, always wary of a development in that regard.

“I mean you look handsome, that’s not it,” she said, Pete thinking, *oh no*, too much to drink, plus what about the other guy in there, Proctor.

Gloria continued, “You’re welcome to stay right here if you like.” She excused herself for a moment.

Now what did *that* mean? Before he wasted too much energy trying to figure it out, she re-surfaced, Proctor with her, the party inside winding down, and he had his arm around her.

Pete said, “Didn’t really dawn on me until now, but man you got a fair amount of smoke down *here* too.” It was wildfire season, and it had gotten worse the last couple years.

The Steve Proctor guy from freshmen football said, “You say *too*. I take it you live in the north bay then?”

“I don’t, but I was up there today. Then coming back through Marin it seemed okay.”

“Ours is from the *east* bay, the outer perimeter,” Steve explained. “Different flow systems. The marine layer is a factor.”

For sure you didn’t want to extend this into a meteorology lecture, but Pete said, “What about in closer, the Berkeley hills? There any threat *there*?”

“Always,” Steve said. “We all remember what happened in Oakland, in the 90’s. It’s supposed to rain soon though.”

Pete’s only interest in the status of the Berkeley hills was an event this Sunday at Tilden Park, the day after the reunion, the guy he’d been checking out in Marin today supposedly involved with it.



Gloria said, “On a funner note, Steve and I are going out for dinner. Would you like to join us?”

“Well where’re you going?” he said, always interested in the restaurant scene, though didn’t everyone just eat? But you figured that was irrelevant.

“We thought Tadich’s,” Gloria said.

“Wow, old time San Francisco,” Pete said.

“Appropriate this weekend,” Steve said.

Pete considered it for a second and said thanks but he can’t quite handle it tonight, and to have a great time and he’d see them at the reunion.

Gloria asked where he *was* staying, and he said he was all set, but she didn’t believe him and now she insisted he stay here. He protested but there wasn’t a lot of oomph behind it, and soon enough she was ushering him into an upstairs guest room, which was as big as a master suite.

That bed sure looked good. He thought he better ask one final question, that he’s not going to be *surprising* anybody is he, and she said definitely not, it was her daughter’s week at her ex’s, and he could sleep here all

day tomorrow too and no one would notice--and she closed the door and he barely made it past the click.

\*\*\*

It felt real quiet when he woke up, and Pete was pretty sure it was the middle of the night, but he checked the time and *wow*, it was 10:47 in the morning.

The room was still pitch black so it must be the shades, everything in this house the best apparently, and he'd have to remember to ask Gloria about those, since it would be great to work something like that into the mix back in the apartment in southern California.

He showered and dressed and made a little noise to let anyone know he was in motion, but there was no response and when he came down to the kitchen there was a note from Gloria, big flowing decorative strokes to her cursive, that they'd gone out, but there are fresh scones in the bag and all he has to do is push the button on the coffee.

Gee.

It was hard to know *what* to do today. You were a tourist in your old home town, so you could sight-see. Go out to the Cliff House, check if they were hang

gliding at Fort Funston. Stop in the park on the way back, the DeYoung, catch the tail end of the Summer of Love show, Haight Ashbury 1967, that must have been a scene.

Pete stuffed down the second scone, and man this coffee was good, he'd need to ask Gloria about *that* too . . . and he decided the neighborhood public library on Sacramento Street was simpler, and you could check on a few things.

The branch had added more computers, which seemed silly since everyone *had* computers. Pete figured other than the homeless, it was a few guys like him who were paranoid about leaving keystrokes on their personal devices, that needed the library ones, but whatever.

Late afternoon there was a text from Gloria. She and Steve were going out for Chinese noodles, and did he want to come.

That sounded tempting and he called her back, saying he'd be glad to, as long as he wasn't wearing out his welcome around here.

Gloria said you're kidding right, you just *got* here.

There were certain people where you simply felt like you were in good hands. Even if they were sugarcoating it. Which Gloria wasn't.

They met at Noodle Kingdom on Irving Street. Big portions, piping hot. They split a plate of garlic greens, and gobbling it all up Pete realized he'd been eating pretty bad, not just up here on the road but down in L.A. too, and he better clean up his act.

Gloria said, "Well how was your day? Good to be back in the old stomping grounds?"

"It is," Pete said. "One thing I can't believe, how far I went every day to get to school. I rode my bike sometimes. I looked it up, Jeez, 14 miles round trip."

"We lived at 43th and Taraval," Steve said. "Pretty foggy, but yeah different animal getting there."

"We lived close too," Gloria said, "West Portal."

"So . . . without getting too nosy," Pete said, "how'd you end up on Jackson and Cherry?"

"My husband. He's done exceedingly well for himself. He does of course come from Connecticut family money."

“Pardon my two cents on this,” Steve said, “but haven’t you been over-using that expression, you think?”

“Which one?” Gloria said.

“The *exceedingly well* one.”

“Okay, then, I apologize,” she said. “What he’s referring to, Pete, I assume, is other events these last couple of days. Cocktail parties and so forth.”

“Reunion related,” Steve said.

Gloria said, “And I guess I’ve naturally been asked that question a fair amount, you know, the *how’s your family* thingy.”

“Unh-huh,” Steve said. “And always answering ‘em the same way.”

Pete could see the guy’s point. If she kept bragging about the ex-husband, why didn’t she just get back together with the guy, he was so perfect?

To deflect things slightly, Pete said, “So that’s the story then, people checked in at various hotel locations, you making the rounds?”

“We’re trying to,” she said. “Some of them are spread out, and quite a few have already checked into the Marriott.”

“Kind of reminds me of those UFC fight nights,” Pete said. “They give you the *pre-lims* on TV for free. In the end they’re probably as good if not better than the main event you’re paying the big bucks for.”

“That’s an interesting analogy,” Steve said.

“But the Marriott,” Pete said. “The airport one, right?”

Gloria rolled her eyes and smiled. “Correct. I suppose you were going to double-check *that* tomorrow night about 6:45, where the reunion might actually be taking *place*.”

“No need,” Pete said, “since you just confirmed it . . . I’m sure there’s a logical answer, but that’s *Burlingame*, correct? You’d think everyone would want to re-une inside the city limits.”

“Good point,” Steve said. “Are you bringing a date, or--I’m sorry if you told me, but I don’t have it straight--are you married?”

“Hopefully,” Pete said, “I mean a date. We had a little falling out there, right at the end, and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Gloria said. “If she hasn’t officially backed out though, I’d call it a hopeful sign.”

“Right at the end of *what?*” Steve said.

“That came out wrong. When I was getting ready to drive up from Manhattan Beach, is what I meant.”

“Sweet,” Steve said. “What do you do there?”

“To be honest . . . walk around. There was a guy my *dad* used to talk about, he knew from the chess tables in Golden Gate Park. When people would ask the guy what he did, he said, completely serious, *I walk* . . . That was always a funny story, but now I understand it.”

“I envy you then,” Steve said. “The location, and the occupation both.”

“Hey, come and visit any time,” Pete said. “I got a guy sleeping on my couch, temporarily, but I’ll just kick him out.” Steve was turning into an okay guy, and he meant it.

Gloria said, “So Pete . . . you *were* married briefly, though, correct?”

“Right out of the gate, yeah. She’s done *exceedingly well* for herself, post-me.”

Pete meant it as a joke, figuring they were getting along pretty well, the mood had lightened up, but it backfired, and Steve seized on it again and Gloria got defensive . . . and then she threw in a couple habits she didn't like about *him* these past few days either.

Pete said, "Hey, I got a place, over on Chestnut . . . can I set us all up with some after-dinner beverages?"

"Works for me, I suppose," Steve said.

"That would be fine," Gloria said, neither of them smiling.

\*\*\*

It was the same old Weatherby's, things heating up on a Friday night, though Pete felt increasingly like a stranger in here. Not just because he'd moved away, but because there was no one in the various herds of Millennials he could relate to.

Until he got a seat at the bar, and Mitch came by. Then it was good.

"Yo, baby, my brother," Mitch said. "You been hiding yourself in the white sand, or what?"

Pete introduced him to Gloria and Steve, and they went with Brandy Alexanders, and everything seemed



better, the two of them agreeing this was a great place, and what a colorful bartender--but a few sips in they started arguing again and told Pete to please excuse them, they were moving to a back table.

When Mitch came back he said, “Nice folks, your friends. There an occasion, connected to it?”

“There always is,” Pete said. “Listen, I can see you’re busy, so let me ask you about one *thing*, in case we don’t catch up much tonight.”

“You know you’re a funny guy . . . You put that to me every time, a variation. Always something real important.”

“I do?”

Mitch was waiting on someone and Pete was thinking, that therapist gal in Bel Air, with the large chest, did she help me any, and is it worth trying again, or was I too damn distracted and juvenile to accomplish anything?

No one was in shape to drive when they exited the Booker Lounge an hour and a half later, the second stop of the night in the Marina district.

Instead of calling a service, Pete suggested why not walk it?

Gloria and Steve shrugged their shoulders and said fine, and the three of them crossed Lombard and started up Pierce Street.

Steve limped a little, you could see now, while Gloria was powering along like a mountain goat.

Pete said to Steve, “You’re reminding me of *me*, your stride. A little short. It the shoes, or something deeper-rooted?”

“Deeper. I tried rugby in college. Nothing fancy, club ball, up at Whitman. But a mistake.”

“Walla-walla, Washington,” Gloria said.  
“Fwhittman.”

“Huh?” Pete said.

“I had a girlfriend at work, older,” Gloria said, “she’d gone there too. She always called it Phwittman. An f or ph in there at the beginning.”

“She from down south then, your friend?” Pete said.

“She was from Alameda. If you listen carefully, you can hear Steve pronouncing it the same way.”

“Oh,” Steve said, “the implication being, I’m talking down to you then, via my delivery?”

“What’d you guys think of the Booker Lounge?” Pete said. “As compared to the first place, Weatherby’s.”

“I think I’m going to crash at my cousin’s tonight,” Steve said.

They walked in silence for a few blocks, and luckily around Lyon Street the endorphins started to kick in, and Steve brought up a movie he saw on the plane and Gloria chimed in, and by the time they got to her place any disaster seemed averted.

They sat around for a while and Gloria announced she was exhausted and heading upstairs, and when she’d gone Pete asked Steve if he was in the way, sleeping here another night.

“Because *I* can always go to your cousin’s,” Pete said.

“A,” Steve said, “stay right here . . . B, you’re all right. I *get* you.”

“Well you’re a good man too,” Pete said. “Tonight was fun.” He didn’t want to go all *kumbaya* here, but maybe there *was* something about people you went to

high school with. By now, you'd been through at least some of the same shit, and on the same timetable.

“What’s it run you,” Steve said, “living down there?”

“A lot, but it’s relative . . . One time when I was there on vacation, there’s two guys making a deal in Starbucks. The way I read it, the one guy was an investor from back east, looking at the guy out here’s company. Or idea. I got to talking to the investor after, bringing up local real estate prices, and he made a good point . . . How much do you *need*, because you’re not gonna be spending any time inside *anyway*.”

“Well I won’t lie to you,” Steve said, “that’s a mindset I could embrace.”

“So go for it,” Pete said. “The gusto.”

“I remember that. An old beer commercial.”

“This thing with Gloria, that gonna continue after the weekend? Or you have it limited to a reunion-only effort.”

“Why? Are you into her?”

“I don’t think so. She’s too nice. I mean okay she was ribbing you tonight, but man, what a good heart.”

“I know . . . So *you* prefer the ones who keep you guessing whether they’re going to show.”

“Yeah . . . I lived here all my life. A *few* years other places, but forget that . . . I come back, day before yesterday, I’m trying to think, who do I want to see? And conversely, who might want to see *me*? . . . I come up with one person, a guy who beat me up 30 years ago. How pathetic is *that*?”

Steve was listening carefully. “I think I see where you’re headed,” he said, “how it could apply to your taste in women.”

“I’m cynical,” Pete continued, “and I can be an ass, that’s for sure.”

“More fun though, that way,” Steve said.

“It is, yeah.”

“Something you don’t learn overnight. You need to live a little first.”

“You do.”

\*\*\*

Saturday morning Pete was thinking maybe it’s the mattress too, in addition to those blackout shades, why he was sleeping so perfect, and that he’d have to flip it

over and check the label before he moved out of here for good.

No one else was up yet and the Presidio was close, and he decided to jog there, up to the end of Jackson and then a right turn through the Arguello Gate.

He would have continued down the hill toward the main base, and then the left toward Baker Beach, then the figure-eight through the old officers' quarters that was now pricey housing.

That brought you back along the golf course, a neat little 5-miler. Pete knew it well from the old days, it was one of the great runs in the city.

Today once he got inside the gate he could barely move, his fasciitis kicking in bad, and it was a tough trek back to Gloria's.

She and Steve were having coffee and they both seemed kind of stressed. Not necessarily a carryover from last night, but the actual event looming, and stuff you needed to do.

Gloria was getting her hair done, and she had taken on some decoration obligations, and Steve said he had

to see his dad who he didn't get along with too well, and he'd been putting it off since he got here.

Then they'd both be checking in at the Marriott, like the sensible attendees. Which was logical, wasn't it, if you were a team player. There'd be plenty of carry-over after the main thing, all right there.

"I'll see you tonight then," Pete said, after a good slurp of that award-winning coffee brew. "This has been . . . beyond the call of duty, honestly."

"Here," Gloria said, handing him a set of keys. "Since you're a party pooper and aren't staying at the hotel."

"Jeez," Pete said. "You're embarrassing me now. You sure?"

"She's right," Steve said. "*Stay* there, we'll be getting some late poker going. I plan to get back at a few people."

"Steve has carried around some grudges, all these years," Gloria said. "I've heard all about them the last few days. The hows and whys."

"Well . . . grudges *can* be overrated," Pete said. "People change. It could end up, *you're* still ticked off

about something, *they* don't even remember it happening."

Steve said, "I hear you, but *I'm* remembering them the way they were, I can't help it. No benefit of the doubt."

"At any rate," Gloria said to Pete, "what's on *your* agenda today?"

"I thought I'd wander over to Berkeley," he said.

"Oh terrific idea, always one of my favorite places."

"Wow, the second *one* now," Steve said. He was on his iPad, the morning news.

"What?" Gloria said.

"Mountain lion. Same guy's property, upper Broadway. They come out of the Presidio." He held up the device, and there was a 10 second black-and-white surveillance video of a pretty big looking cat walking across a driveway at night.

"Those things," Pete said, "they ever finish *off* people? Or is that like a one-in-a-million shot?"

"Oh they absolutely can," Steve said. "The lucky part, they don't like conflict. So you see one, make sure



you stand up to him. That should take care of it, unless something goes haywire.”

Pete was thinking *Jeez*, one *more* news tid-bit the world didn't need.

\*\*\*

It was tight getting around Berkeley, there was a football game he hadn't anticipated, Cal playing Oregon State.

He found a spot on Hillegass and was crossing Derby headed toward campus when Emma called.

“Dang,” he said.

Emma said, “Pete, I'm hoping you can lighten up. I'm looking forward to seeing you.”

“You're . . . *here*, you mean? Or looking forward to it when I come back?”

“I'm at the airport. Bob Hope. We're getting ready to board, I should be in Oakland at 3:15.”

“Oh.”

“No need to trouble yourself picking me up. I'll call you when I've reached San Francisco.”

“No no, I got it.”

“Fine, do you want my flight number?”

“I’ll find you,” he said.

*Wow.* Though Gloria’d been right, don’t overthink things, they tend to work out.

What he was scratching his head about, Bob Hope Airport.

You had what, two, even three that were closer to Manhattan Beach? LAX, Long Beach, even John Wayne, out in Burbank--all more convenient than Bob Hope.

She was mysterious, and no point asking her. The main thing, he had a date tonight, which he was starting to get used to the idea of *not* having, but it’d be for the best. Less awkward in the end . . . And you put a gun to his head, he supposed he missed her otherwise, too.

Which was another thing, you better reserve something *after* all, so he called the Marriott, too late for the group rate which expired a month ago, which the desk gal enjoyed explaining to him, but at least a room was available and he booked it.

He could have saved the \$279 and brought Emma back to Gloria’s, pretty positive Gloria wouldn’t have a problem with it, but it was done.

He had to hustle now, the hot dog place on Durant was in his head when she called, and that might screw up the timing with the airport, but it worked out and the plane was right on time.

Emma was traveling light, just a carry-on, and a reasonably big smile, and, boom, she planted a nice wet kiss on him, on the lips.

“So here we are,” Pete said, throwing her stuff in the trunk. “Back to normal I guess. Or even a little beyond it.”

“Let’s go somewhere,” she said.

“We can, anywhere you want. We have a post card day, and fortunately you got a native in the driver’s seat.”

“No,” she said, “I mean let’s *go* somewhere.”

Pete looked at her and she was staring forward out the window but nodding just enough, and he was able to absorb the whole package--a bit of a serious element apparently . . . in fact an urgency . . . even a frustration, if you put it in perspective.

The blouse open three or four buttons didn't help, nor did the fact that she kept shifting around . . . *What can you do?*

The Marriott was a good call, it turned out. One of the best features was the robes, thick, plush terrycloth, two folded up waiting for you right in your room, and unlimited ones down by the pool if those weren't enough.

They were laying back, making use of the robes and both beds at this point, the sky nearly dark outside, only airplanes visible out there, specifically the landing procession dropping into SFO from the south.

"This is worth the price of admission, you know it?" Pete said. "I love watching 'em. I wouldn't get tired of it."

"You," Emma said. "You're goofy. Come back over here." There was a slight dreamy edge behind it.

"I might actually consider it," Pete said, "if I didn't have to pace myself, save some energy for tonight."

"Now you make me mad," she said. "But thank you for inviting me."

*Jeez.* Pete figured fine, this was one way to work it before a 25th reunion.

\*\*\*

The band was in full swing when they walked in, a three-piece job but sounding like more, with how they synthesized everything these days. They were playing current hits you recognized--your Ed Sheerans, your Ariana Grandes, your Taylor Swifts--but of course sprinkling in stuff from 1994.

Pete introduced Emma to a few people he remembered, without overdoing it.

“I’ll say this,” he said, “the Asians in our class have held up a little better than the whites. I mean there are exceptions.”

Emma looked at him funny and said, “Who’s *that* person?”

It took Pete a moment to place him, Aaron Dreue, unfortunately. Out there dancing with Nadine Wallace.

There’d been a party at someone’s house, one of those stupid sophomore year ones where you don’t know what you’re doing, and Pete and that guy had words.

Over something trivial no doubt. But it stuck.

“Him?” Pete said, pointing with his head. “Guy named Dreue. Why?”

“He looks interesting,” Emma said. “The way he moves. I wouldn’t be surprised if he were some kind of creative artist.”

“Well . . . why don’t you ask him?” he said, a little more edge than he intended.

Emma didn’t say anything back, but a couple minutes later, the band taking a break and a reunion committee person announcing a big raffle coming up momentarily and Pete in the middle of saying hello to someone who tapped him on the shoulder . . . and son of a *bitch*, there she is, over by the bar, talking to Dreue.

Gloria happened to stop by then, first time tonight.

“I’m so glad it’s working out for you,” she said. “Not to mention how attractive your date is.”

“She is,” Nadine said, standing there too. “Is that a serious relationship?”

Gloria had moved on, continuing her rounds, permanent smile plastered on her face. Pete said to Nadine, “Do you want to dance?”

She said why not and he said, “Do you remember Mr. Peterson’s class at Marina? Where you sat?” He and Nadine went back to junior high school.

“That’s an extremely odd question,” she said. “But yes I do.”

“Someone brought it up recently, how Mr. Peterson configured his seating chart . . . How *did* he?”

“How would *I* know?”

“Well I’m going to take note of your answer, because I’m pretty sure that’s the first question you *didn’t* get right since 7th grade.”

She smiled. “*You* didn’t answer *my* earlier question,” she said.

“I will in a second . . . one more observation first-- not only do you *talk* more than you did, but you’re direct as well . . . No, I don’t think it’s a serious relationship. I might have answered you differently a few *minutes* ago.”

They looked over there and Emma and Dreue were leaning in pretty tight, engaged apparently in a fascinating discussion.

Nadine said, “Well how have you been otherwise? Do you stay in contact with people?”

“No, but I *should*, I realize. An occasion like this, it gives you perspective.”

“It does . . . There’s a quirky dynamic to it. My husband, for example, he wasn’t interested in attending.”

“*That* I can understand,” Pete said. “He’s the odd man out, it’s *your* deal.”

“Except he was in our class. Marty Heath.”

“*Sheesh*, I remember him . . . you went out with him back *then*?”

“No, we got together later . . . Speaking of which, didn’t you go with Leslie Stemphill?”

“Yeah?”

“I said hello to her. She seems good.”

The way Nadine said it, the good part might be a question mark. Pete had heard Leslie had some ups and downs.

“I *did* see her when we walked in,” he said. “But with my friend Emma and all, no need to pile on any awkwardness.”

“As you say, that might not be such a big issue now,” Nadine said.



“You know something? You’re a little devilish, aren’t you? You stick in the needle.”

“Only when appropriate.”

“I still like you.”

“I like you too,” she said. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Leslie was at a table that included, if he was recognizing people correctly, Pam Stallings, Susie Hennigan, Drake Andruss and Eddie Salz, plus their husbands, wives, partners, whatever.

Nadine had been right of course, her implication that Leslie'd be someone you'd at least want to bump into. So fine . . . he went over there.

“Well, what’s up?” he said, to the collective unit.

Pete felt a few sets of eyes squinting up at him, *some* recognition but not exactly unbridled enthusiasm, though Susie did stand up and give him a hug, and Eddie responded with a *where you been dog*.

Leslie reacted more slowly, got up a little booze-unbalanced and hugged him as well, and introduced him to Adriano, and Pete pulled up a chair from another table.

“Well it’s great to see you,” he said.

“Good to see you too, Petie,” she said. “I’ve tried to keep up with you through the grapevine. Though there have been gaps.”

“Oh,” Pete said.

“Do you still live in San Francisco?” Adriano said, very polite, and a lot younger than Leslie, he was noticing.

“Mostly I have, yes. It’s tricky though. I wonder if you polled the room, how many of ‘em still do.”

“You almost have to inherit something,” Leslie said. “And my parents--you remember the house--they sold it quite some time ago.”

He *had* heard this, they sold it because they got a *scare*, not something you wanted to think about tonight.

“We’re in Walnut Creek,” she continued, “a bit pasteurized but it has its moments. Funny to think, my dad used to tell stories, that when he was a very young child, the family would come over from the city and they’d go swimming in the actual creek.”

Pete felt like he’d heard that one before too, maybe from his own dad.

“Well,” he said, “family outings are different today. The one living across from me, the Marina, they’re out front packing for Tahoe, and I ask the mom where, and she says some new zip line they have up there.”

“And that’s a good one,” Adriano said, “if it’s the one *I* tried, near Heavenly. A little hairy in a couple spots too.”

Pete took another glance over at Emma by the bar, and this time she wasn’t there, and Dreue wasn’t either.

Leslie said, “People are different at the 25th, have you noticed?”

“Different than in real life?” Pete said. “Or than the other reunions?”

“Both probably, but yes, the other ones.”

“Well your earlier variety,” he said, “there’s more pressure to explain what you *do*.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it,” Adriano said.

“You’re saying,” Leslie said, “they’re done judging you by now?”

“We’re into that second stage I guess,” Pete said.

“You mean, like *work*?” she said, a little louder than you wanted. “If we’re talking boob jobs, I’m detecting plenty of *those* in this room.”

Pete said, “Adriano, I’m sorry I haven’t asked you, where’d *you* go to high school?”

Adriano said up in Portland.

“What happened to your gal friend?” Leslie said.

“You two look like a nice couple.”

Pete scanned the room again. He said, “Looks like it may be a no go.”

“Which can happen,” Adriano said.

“What are you gonna do,” Pete said.

“Right?” Leslie said.

\*\*\*

The thing wound down at 11, the band finishing it off with ‘I Swear’, by All-4-One, which you figured was either the number 1 song of 1994 or close.

There were a few final announcements and the committee members went up front and led a rendition of the school hymn. Pete never learned the words but you weren’t going to be a jerk and not at at least stand there for it.

People were saying be sure to come by the 7th floor, and Pete went outside and got a little air. There was a small section off the parking lot that opened up to the edge of the bay, and planes were taking off and landing, real loud.

One thought was go back to Gloria's, since he still had the keys, and if Emma *did* turn up later she'd have the room to herself and there wouldn't be any strain.

The other thing though, he was curious how Steve might be making out in that poker game he'd been carrying on about. He'd only talked to the guy for a minute tonight, but Steve made sure to remind him.

So Pete gave it a half hour and went back inside, and the 7th floor really *was* where it was at, the doors wide open and music coming out of most of them, along with ice cracking and glasses clinking.

One of the rooms, the whole bed was flipped up on edge against the wall and a real poker table had replaced it, the green felt and everything. Steve's game.

Steve didn't look too good. He was slumped forward and he kept fingering his chips, and there weren't all that many of them.

Cleaning up so far looked to be a guy named Calhoun. Big guy, huge forearms. Wrestled. Kind of happy-go-lucky in high school, but applied himself later and became an ER doc.

Also Wayne Ho, big stack, quietly doing the job.

Pete wondered who at this table, if any, were the ones Steve was going to get *payback* on.

Steve noticed Pete and motioned for him to take a seat and join the fun, but it was a half-hearted gesture.

Pete put his hands up, like not just yet, and he watched a little longer and got out of there and went down to the bar, where the guy next to him, who he'd learn was a salesman from Cincinnati, went into a thing about why the college football playoff system was screwed up, and Pete listened to him ramble, and it was okay.