

Lost and Found

2500 words

The condominium complex claimed the spa could seat 40, they loved to hit you over the head with that, and Pete noticed they highlighted it in the sales flyers for the new Phase 3 units as well . . . and the fact was he'd never seen more than 5 people in the thing at once.

He stood there for a minute dripping wet from the regular pool, letting the slight breeze chill him a little so the hot tub would have maximum effect, and he eased into it.

Today you had a gal with a big floppy sun hat, her elbows on the edge, working her device; you had a guy with his eyes closed not moving a muscle, looking like he might have expired; and fortunately you had Arty, Pete's new friend.

“Mi hermano,” Arty said. “You're the cynical guy that keeps saying these don't belong in Arizona. Then all I do, is see you *in* it.”

This guy was a bit of a character. Had to be in his 70's, so he could easily be Pete's dad, and Pete was thinking, in some cultures, man, even his grandpa.

Arty was a lifelong New Yorker until he retired down here, he had the thick accent, didn't try to disguise the fact that New York was in his bones and he missed it.

He was one of those industrious fellows that old New York seemed to produce. Started as a runner in the garment district, wheeling open racks of clothes along West 37th Street, and worked his way up to owning a company.

Guys like that usually ended up in Florida, and Pete had asked him, and Arty said he got sent there every summer when he was a kid, to stay with his cousins, and he never got along with them and it left a bad taste in his mouth.

So fair enough, here he was, and in a modest two-bedroom condo with his wife.

The wife was a sweet woman named Kay . . . though Pete was pretty convinced Arty was having an affair with someone else, right here in the Rancho Villas.

Pete was tempted to press him about that part . . . in *general* terms . . . does stuff still *work* right, at your age?

Especially since Pete hadn't yet shaken off an intimidating experience *he'd* had--or rather, witnessed--sort of by accident, but in a fancy beach house back in LA.

Now Pete said, "No big deal probably, but my *walk* today, I picked up something."

"With Patti, right?" Arty said. "There anything there?"

"You know what? You don't miss stuff, I'll give you that, but you *project*."

"Pretty lady," Arty said. "Waiting for someone to float her boat."

Jesus. This guy really did get around if he knew the inner-workings of the staff. Of course he didn't worry about making stuff up, the kind of guy who'd be busting chops, getting a big kick out of it, as he lived out his golden years.

“It’s not like that,” Pete said. “And *I’m* not looking for anything . . . I found a wedding ring, is all. Down by the 17th hole. A women’s one.”

“On the golf course? Or no?”

“Nah, in the weeds on the other side. Not exactly weeds, all that shit’s planted, but you know what I mean.”

“Big *rock* or what?”

“I just told you, that cactus-like stuff . . . oh, you mean the *ring*, big rock . . . not really, no, 3 diamonds, small ones.”

“Well, so,” Arty said, “what do you think happened?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t have brought it up. I’d just be putting my head back, like other people in here, the way this thing’s designed to relax you.”

“I *never* put my head back, plus don’t let the water get above your waist, you can stay *in* longer . . . Your likely scenario is there was an argument.”

“Hmm. A lover’s quarrel you mean? They take a walk to resolve it, she flings off the ring? That sounds kinda extreme.”

“Not if you’ve witnessed the human population around here the last three years like I have. I spot couples every day, it’s obvious their relationships are *all* fucked up.”

Pete couldn’t entirely disagree, based on the two token jobs he’d picked up to help kill time. Two weeks so far greeting people and handing them a towel when they walked in the fitness center, and Thursday evenings when he tended a little bar in the house lounge, and people would open up.

He said to Arty, “Or it’s been there a long time, and got uncovered by the rain.”

“Could be. The million-dollar question, what are you going to *do* with it?”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m picking *your* brain, since it hasn’t started going senile on you yet, I don’t think.”

“Now the key to *that*,” Arty said, “is maintaining the testosterone levels. Plain and *simple*.”

You weren’t going to ask questions there. Pete said, “So just turn it in then?”

“Yeah sure, *you* could do that, like a normal good citizen doing your duty would.” But giving him a cockeyed smile.

“And alternately . . .”

“Well you could have a little *fun* with it. Put it on eBay.”

“I was thinking more CraigsList. Even though I did get burned once there. But at least make the owner identify it. Probably a long shot though.”

“You never know,” Arty said. “There’s gotta be at least *some* story behind it. It would be interesting to hear it, before you returned it to the rightful owner . . . If that doesn’t work, like I say, you can be a Boy Scout and hand it over to the lost and found.”

“Uh-huh,” Pete said. “And that’d be the end of the line, and I can move on.”

“Which you don’t want to be doing,” Arty said. “I can tell.”

“You got a crystal ball then.”

“You’re one of these *guys*, I can’t put my finger right *on* it, but I’m getting there . . . you’re running from something.”

This got Pete's attention, and he tried not to overreact . . . but what the *heck* . . . where did the old guy get off on *that*?

"Arty, I have to be honest with you," Pete said, "you got a little too much Brooklyn left in you. I lived back there a while too, and it didn't take long, I learned to be suspicious of *everyone*, until they proved me wrong."

"I never said suspicious," Arty said. "You're on the *move*. Two different animals."

Pete said, "A, you're out of your mind . . . but B, how's about we don't worry about *me* . . . Or I could just pawn the thing, right?"

"If you're going *that* route I'd try a jeweler first. If they don't make you an offer at *all*, then yeah, you probably have to . . . Have you asked a simple question around here-- anyone lose a *wedding* ring?"

"Not yet," Pete said, realizing that was pretty dang logical and obvious, wasn't it.

"I'll see ya," Arty said, getting out, looking at his watch. "You extended me past my allotment."

Arty was fit and clearly precise with his habits, and Pete said to take it easy.

He hated to think about a particular *other* guy, but Arty did remind you of an older--nicer--version of Maierhaffer, Pete's tennis partner in San Francisco before things went sour. Both of them self-made, both street-smart and both likely screwing around on their respective spouses.

Wednesday morning Pete was in the Rancho Villas in-house coffee shop enjoying a pretty dang good butter croissant when someone asked if he knew who had the heart attack this morning.

He said no, he hadn't heard, but by 9, a half hour into his front desk shift, there were whispers that someone was doing something they shouldn't have--meaning in someone else's apartment . . . and you had to admit, wouldn't *that* be an embarrassing way to go.

Pete got off at 1, swam a few laps and headed for the 40-person spa and there was Arty.

"A little fireworks around here apparently," Pete said.

“It happens,” Arty said. He had a Wall Street Journal open and seemed focused, like he was committing stock tips to memory.

“Unh-huh,” Pete said. “Buddy of yours though?”

“Part of our *bridge* foursome. Not in the regular rotation though, he was a sub.”

“Ah.”

“Decent person,” Arty continued. “Standup guy. He was a steel executive in Pittsburgh. Interesting part of that *being*, he could have bought half this development, but there he was in a basic ground floor unit, like anyone else.”

“Wife and all?”

“Indeed.”

“But she wasn’t around . . . when it happened.”

“No. He had a girlfriend,” Arty said, not lowering his voice or otherwise trying to be discreet. The candor was a bit surprising, since *he* was probably doing the same thing . . . except Arty was a straight-shooter, no reason to tip-toe around.

“So, what,” Pete said, “he spent the night in another apartment? That blatant?”

“Nah. What he did, pretty sure, he always started his normal day at 5. Got up, showered, kissed his wife, went for a walk . . . Took him a couple hours, he’s back by 7, coffee with the wife, plus a half a grapefruit and a poached egg--and he’s ready to start his day.”

“It takes that long, for you guys?” Pete said.

“Huh?”

“Couple hours of activity? At your age?”

“Depending, why not.”

“If the . . . equipment doesn’t work though?

Then . . . no, *forget that*, don’t give me the plan B.”

“You almost asked,” Arty said, starting to laugh.

“Okay let me shift gears on you for a second. How would someone avoid leaving their DNA somewhere.”

Arty stared at Pete and boosted himself up on the edge. “I’m getting close to my limit,” he said, “but I gotta stick around and hear *this* now.”

“There’s nothing to hear,” Pete said. “Basic, generic question, is all.”

“Fine . . . I’m not sure. Ask someone who works in a lab, the way you see ‘em on those forensics shows, all

suited up like they're ready to operate on an Ebola patient."

Pete was picturing the get-ups. Hazmat Suits.

He said "What about eyelashes. Do *they* automatically count, or does it need to include the root? You know what I mean, what's the word . . . the follicle."

"Jeeminy Christmas," Arty said.

"What? . . . I'm *wondering* this stuff, because this 40-year-old serial killer case in California, there may be a breakthrough."

Arty said, "Not the *Zodiac* guy, you're talking about? *He* was cagey. A lot smarter than they gave him credit for."

"Different guy. Later. Started in the east bay, then Sacramento, some southern California activity too."

"Okay I know who you're talking about . . . What *kind* of breakthrough?"

"Not sure. Just that they have an improved way of testing for it now. Genetics-wise. Anyhow . . . just thought I'd run it by you."

Arty tugged on an earlobe and watched a reasonably well-endowed dark-haired woman in a bikini pass by and head toward the pool.

He turned back to Pete and said, this time quieter, “You’re in trouble, aren’t you.”

“No, no . . . *nothing* like that, are you *kidding*? . . . at the *most*, we’re talking a pre-*emptive* concern, is where *I’m* at.”

“Unh-huh,” Arty said. “You want to tell me about it?”

“Sure, I’d be happy too. If there was something *to* tell.”

Arty gave him a long look, and said, “What happened with that ring, by the way?”

That was another thing, there’d been three replies to his Craigslist posting and he hadn’t dealt with them yet.

Pete opened his phone and read them to Arty.

Hey, my wife lost that down there walking around. We were renting a time share for a week. It sounds goofy but it slipped off her

finger. She was on the Atkins Diet. Please return my message.

I am responding about the FOUND RING. Please hold on to it for me, I am pretty certain it is mine. My husband lost it in the vicinity of the Rancho Villas Planned Community.

Yeah I need my ring. I'll make you a deal for it. This is Ronald Haymaker.

“What do you think,” Pete said, “how would you handle it?”

Arty poker-faced him. “Well good luck with that, my friend,” and he said to have a nice rest of the afternoon and took off.

Friday back in the hot tub--though a little later, cocktail hour--Arty's in his usual spot.

“I switch my schedule,” Pete said, “to throw you off. But it doesn't matter, you're always here.”

“You have a sense of humor,” Arty said. “You’re not all that *funny*, but you have some adventure to your delivery.”

“Well,” Pete said, and he was starting to add a sarcastic come-back . . . but just then this gal Patti who he’d been spending a little time with came bounding out the door of the fitness center and marched across the aquatic deck straight to him and said, “And I was right the *first* time. Ass-hole.”

And she picked up the nearest chair and flung it, surprisingly forcefully, into the hot tub.

Pete was prepared to dodge it, or go underwater, but fortunately the chair landed a little short of his position, and Patti went back inside.

Pete and Arty were the only ones in the Rancho Villas 40-person spa at the moment, and the chair was bobbing around in front of them.

Arty said, “She seemed excited.”

“Yeah, well,” Pete said.

“What about your ring deal?” Arty said.

“Ah don’t remind me. That was a *big* mistake, picking that *up*.”

“No takers? Or the wrong ones, you mean.”

“Wouldn’t you think,” Pete said, “two, three, mass communications by now, *one* of them can tell you what it actually *looked* liked?”

“You would think.”

“There’s been a couple more replies. One guy with a real attitude, like *where do you get off holding other people’s rings?*”

“Ah.”

“I get the distinct impression he wants to strongarm me . . . Just a hunch, if I met *that* guy--like he keeps wanting to--that he’d rob me.”

Arty considered it. “So why not call it quits, put the ring back exactly where you found it, and inform them all.”

“I thought of that.”

“But . . . that would be no *fun*,” Arty said. “Correct?”

“Something like that,” Pete said.

