

Micro

2250 words

Pete said to the guy next to him, “The difference, in your opinion? Between her and the ones in the record stores?”

“First of all, my friend,” the guy said. “There *are* no more record stores.”

“That’s a point well taken,” Pete said, “so forget that. I guess I just mean *talent*-wise.”

“I’d give her a B-plus,” the guy said. “Great range though, I’m hearing two octaves.”

The guy finished his beer and picked up his plastic cup of quarters and headed back to the slot machines.

Pete could tell the man did know a little something about music, from a couple of comments he made . . . but then how could you only give her a B-plus if her range is so impressive?

The band performed two more and took a break. The four of them coming down from the small stage into the bar area . . . a guitar player, keys guy, drummer and

the female vocalist. And of course these days the keyboard person could synthesize the heck out of nearly any sound they were trying to emulate, from a bluegrass banjo on down to a line of tubas in a marching band, to a dang full orchestra.

They were called *Luella and the Capris* on the electronic sign at the entrance to the lounge, though you had to be quick to read it because there was other stuff rotated in . . . Texas Hold-em seats open, progressive slots jackpot updates, the blackjack tournament taking final entries, the all-you-can-eat king crab legs tonight in the buffet.

Luella was at a table with the drummer, both of them roaming around their phones.

Pete thought should he or shouldn't he a couple times, and went over there and sat down.

The drummer didn't pay attention, his thumbs continuing to work the phone, and Luella finished her business too before she looked up and said, "Well, *that's* direct . . . we don't mind, as long as you're a fan." Following it with a nice-enough smile.

"You're really Luella?" Pete said.

“No, Terri,” she said, deadpan. “Why?”

Pete said, “So once people get past that voice . . . you have some spunk as well.”

Terri said, “That’s what my husband said when we met. Not in those exact words.”

Oh boy, the husband card right away.

“He one of the band guys then?” Pete said.

“My hubby? No, no. That would never work.”

“Either way, I didn’t mean to be cozying up to you, if you got the wrong impression . . . you’ve been kind of blowing me away up there though. Echoing a *few* great voices. Karen Carpenter, the main one.”

Terri gave Pete her full attention for the first time and said, “Well now I’m impressed . . . Not everyone comes up to me and picks that out. She’s an idol of mine.”

“She had that calm, clear voice,” Pete said. “Straight and pure and angelic. The exact opposite of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, who never sang a straight note.”

“Wow,” Terri said, “you are so right . . . So I might as well ask, what *other* great voices did I remind you of?”

“Two others. Harder to pinpoint, just bits and pieces jumping out, but I was thinking Patsy Cline, and Linda Ronstadt.”

“Well I’ll take both of those,” Terri said. “The problem now, are you going to stick around for the third set?”

“Why? I shouldn’t?”

“No, it’s just that you’ve raised the bar on me. The pressure’s on.”

Pete appreciated the humor, and she seemed like a good-natured person, but what did you really know.

He said, “A couple things I always wonder, when I hear a terrific lounge act like yours. The first thing, dumb question, but you can’t all *live* here, right?”

“No, Reno.”

“You’re kidding. That’s like, 4 hours.”

“They put us up for the gig. We do three-night minimums. We’re headed to Wendover next. Then Tonopah. What was the other question?”

“What the difference is . . . you, and the big stars.”

“You mean you can’t tell?”

“No.”

“That’s very nice of you . . . The answer is, the backstory, for one.”

Pete asked what that meant and she said they had to tune up but stick around and she might get into it.

He decided he didn’t have any other pressing engagements tonight, so why not?

What he was doing here unfortunately, in Bingham, Nevada, three-quarters of the way across the state, was hiding out.

Though he liked to think of it as keeping a low profile--temporarily--which was less dramatic.

Pete was residing currently at the Quality Inn next door to the casino. He’d started off at the Super 8, but rational or not, he felt more exposed out there on 227, so day before yesterday he switched it up.

From the Quality Inn you hopped out your door, crossed the parking lot about eight steps and right into the The Palermo, through the side entrance where they

spun the big wheel of fortune, which they called the Wizard Of Odds.

You kept going and you were in good hands, he had to admit.

Five restaurants, a 24-hour Starbucks, an observation area on the mezzanine level where you could sit under a massive glass dome and look out at the wide open spaces and mountains in the distance.

The lounge every evening, kicking off the live music at 4, with a couple late shows after that, one of which was Terri's *Luella and the Capris* act.

You had cocktail waitresses scurrying around at all hours in what Pete figured were supposed to be lacey Roman tunics, though there wasn't a whole lot to them, political correctness not a factor inside the casino.

In keeping with the theme of the place, there were fountains and a hanging garden and a fake Roman column you could bump into about every two feet, everything oversized. You even had a bowling alley and an indoor mini-golf setup and a mechanical bull, if you were a fan of that stuff.

But essentially, you could spend all day in here, and all night too if you wanted or couldn't sleep. You could eat and drink almost for free, between the bargain buffet and the complimentary appetizers they came around with in the lounge, which were pretty darn tasty, and honestly, the place was worth it for the people-watching alone.

Pete had always liked casinos, and The Palermo had a different feel than most of the Reno and Vegas ones, a little cozier, despite it being pretty huge and going all out with the glitzy Roman element.

Of course the one thing Pete *wasn't* interested in was gambling, which every last detail in the place was engineered to have you *do*, but that didn't matter, you could enjoy all the perks without participating and nobody ever bothered you.

It had been kind of a snap decision there, back in Manhattan Beach, that disappearing for a while might not be the worst idea.

It was the middle of the night and there weren't a lot of options, and at the depot on 7th Street in downtown L.A. he bought a one-way ticket to Chicago.

And actually, the Greyhound experience wasn't as terrible as Pete anticipated, mainly because the snow was so beautiful in the Sierras.

One of the passengers said they'd had a fresh two feet, and you could see snowplows all over the side roads.

Pete had no idea what he'd do in Chicago, but then someone got sick halfway across Nevada and the bus pulled onto the shoulder and people started helping a woman.

The gal rallied apparently, and the bus started up again but later you heard the driver on the CB radio, a medical emergency, and when they pulled into Bingham there was an ambulance waiting and an announcement that everyone could get off for a few minutes.

Pete walked around, maybe a three-block radius from the station, and when he got back the bus was gone.

He considered talking to someone at the counter, but the town seemed okay and he let it go and stuck around.

That was two weeks ago . . . and here you were, in the main lounge of The Palermo, the third and final set winding down from *Luella and the Capris*.

And yeah, you really could pick out the Karen Carpenter in Terri's voice.

They finished it off with a country song Pete didn't recognize but the audience did, and they gave them a nice ovation by casino lounge standards, and a few minutes later Terri was back in the bar area, same table, same guy with her, the drummer, both fooling with their devices. Terri had changed into jeans and a sweatshirt.

She saw Pete coming and held up her hand like *just give me a second* and wrapped up whatever electronic activity was so urgent, and said, "You sat through it. My impression was you wouldn't be. So did I maintain my standard?"

"Honestly?" Pete said. "I kept waiting for you to drop *down* a notch, but you never did."

"Well it's a gig," she said, giving it a playful shrug . . . which Pete interpreted as no, it wasn't New York City or even the Vegas strip, but one does one's best.

“Why’d you think I wouldn’t stick it out though?” he said.

“Because no one stays put for the whole show. Unless they’re real drunk and can’t move.”

“That’s a fair point I guess, given the distractions in here . . . what about that backstory though?”

“What *about* it?”

“Well, I was asking you a question . . . and now I realize it was a little sensitive, so that’s my fault.”

“No, I’m fooling with you,” she said. “There’s breaks in this business . . . and there’s luck, there’s timing, there’s who you sleep with.” Pete thinking Jeez, this may be a little *too* much information now.

“In my particular case,” Terri continued, “I did have a recording deal once. Capitol Records, the old round tower building you still see from the freeway passing through Hollywood? . . . Re-hab got in the way.”

Pete wasn’t surprised to hear any of it, including the last part.

“Well the good thing about that, then,” he said, “and this’ll come *out* wrong . . . but it justifies my judgment. I mean I must have a pretty dang good ear after all.”

Terri shook her head and said, “You’re starting to emerge as a little irritating. What’s *your* backstory?”

Pete wasn’t quite ready for this, and realized he should have had a standard answer prepared . . . but honestly in the couple weeks he’d been holed up here no one asked him that.

There was plenty of *how’s your day going?* and *having any luck at the tables?* type stuff, but no one diving deeper. Which was kind of refreshing.

He said, “I don’t *have* any good backstory. I’m trying to re-invent myself.”

“From what?”

“Well first thing,” Pete said, making it up on the fly, “from living in New Jersey.”

“What *part?*” the drummer-guy said, the first time he’d opened his mouth, Pete assuming he hadn’t been listening.

“Teaneck . . . are you from back there too?”

“Down the shore, yeah,” the guy said. “Not *from* there, but spent a lot of years . . . You remember when AC first opened?”

He was referring to Atlantic City of course, which Pete had only been to once, no idea when it opened but he nodded yeah.

“*Those* days,” the guy said, “the music business, you had the Philly, New York, AC triangle . . . All dried up now.”

“You wouldn’t know it by looking at him,” Terri said, “but Carl played with some big names. Michael Jackson, for one.”

“Ho-ly Toledo,” Pete said.

“Not *with* him,” Carl said. “Everything was overdubbed. I never met the man.”

“That was *Bad* though, right? The album?” Terri said.

Carl shook his head. “After that. *Dangerous*. Two tracks. That’s when drum machines were taking over, but they wanted studio guys in addition.”

Pete said, “Jeez, I’m in rarified company, I’m not kidding.”

“What’d you do in Teaneck?” Terri said.

“Okay that’s enough about me,” Pete said.

“I get where he’s coming from,” Carl said, “Jersey’s not that exciting.”

“So are you passing through then, live here, what?” Terri said.

“I’m running,” Pete said.

“Now that’s a pretty unsatisfying answer,” Terri said. “Not much depth to it at all.”

“It’s a *good* answer,” Carl said. “Let’s play some cards.”

So Pete followed them to the tables, and Terri and Carl weren’t good gamblers, and pretty soon they were both buying more chips, never a good sign.

He thought about saying something to them, like how about we get a cup of coffee and let me make a couple suggestions . . . but he didn’t, he said goodnight and cashed in the 20 dollars of chips he’d been pushing around and went across the parking lot to his room at the Quality Inn.