

Ray

9300 words

Pete got beat up by Ray Holmes back in junior high school. A couple other kids did damage too but mostly it was Ray.

They jumped him coming off the 3 Jackson and royally kicked his ass, leaving him lying there in front of Alta Plaza Park. This was in the spring of 1989.

What stuck in Pete's head from that day, ominous as he was coming toward him, was Ray carrying the rake. Who knows where he'd picked it up.

There'd been a War Ball game in PE, and there were some issues afterward, there always were. A guy named Charles Fuqua got hit in the face from a blind angle, and he was part of Ray's crew, and word spread the rest of the day that Joe Roloff was in trouble, Roloff having thrown the ball.

Roloff lived in Pete's neighborhood, went home the same way but that day on an earlier bus, and Ray's gang chased him off it, except Roloff was a tough kid and wiry

and quick, and it took several blocks but he shook them loose.

Pete had the misfortune of getting off the next bus, and here came Ray and the gang back the other way toward Fillmore Street, angry and frustrated about Roloff getting away.

So they took it out on Pete, good odds, 4 or 5 against 1.

When they had him on the ground Ray finished him off for good measure, the butt-end of the rake two-handed across the mouth.

Pete was bleeding pretty good when it was all over, and some adult helped him and they called his parents and he spent a couple hours in the emergency room.

Then he was afraid to go back to school. So he faked being sick for a week.

His first day back, in the yard, there was Ray Holmes tapping him on the shoulder. He had a wide-tooth comb sticking up out of his Afro. He told Pete to remember, he didn't touch him.

Pete nodded, and that was the end of it.

For a while he walked home, the back way, circling down Chestnut to Pierce and up the hills to his house, and eventually he started to relax and took the bus again.

He barely crossed paths with Ray or the others the rest of the semester, and Ray enjoyed himself like nothing had happened, running track that spring and finishing 3rd in the city in the 60-yard low-hurdles.

Now Ray Holmes was on Pete's radar. There was nothing like coming out of your doctor's office with an out-of-the-blue scary diagnosis to get you to reset your priorities in ways you didn't expect.

A few days in, when the shock wore off, he found himself making a mental list. Finally he couldn't help it and he wrote it down. There were revised versions for a couple weeks.

No matter how he shuffled things, tried to rationalize, Ray stayed on top of the list.

The big question of course was could you actually follow through, could you take someone with you if you were going down the tubes anyway.

Pete worked with a guy for a year when he was living in New Jersey and one time the guy described a neighbor from hell. Pete didn't say anything but it didn't sound *that* bad, honestly . . . it was the typical BS where the neighbor didn't cut the trees right, or played the music too late or built the fence an inch over the property line . . . but whatever it was, Pete's co-worker said matter-of-factly that if he had a terminal disease he'd kill that guy.

The co-worker's reaction seemed comical, not to mention preposterous . . . but here you were, maybe.

Pete began carrying the list around with him on an index card. First in his back pocket but then as a bookmark in whatever he was currently reading. On a Saturday he was at a picnic table at Chrissy Field, the herds of joggers and bikers passing by on the paved trail toward the bridge, and a woman with a baby in one of those around-the-shoulder harness deals sits downs, says hello, how is your day going, and what's that?

She was friendly, making small talk, but still, what she was asking about was the index card bookmark laying on the table with the list of names, which now

included some arrows in different colors and a few side notes and some question marks.

Besides Ray, the list contained the names of others who had wronged Pete or one his family members sufficiently to be included as potential victims now.

One guy for example had raped Pete's sister Bonny--according to her, and Pete trusted her--after hours in an office building in Boulder, Colorado, in 2004 and the DA had decided against charges.

At any rate, Pete's clarity of thought didn't improve after a specialist recommended experimental clinical trials, as the best they could come up with.

So he decided he better seek a little therapy, and he got a recommendation--not from any of the doctors, that seemed jinxed--but from a guy he used to play on a co-ed softball team with who had a job with the city mental health department.

The therapist was a woman, middle-aged, not particularly attractive, but 10 minutes in Pete started *finding* her attractive due to the intimate situation, and he couldn't focus great on wherever she was trying to direct him. When she looked at her watch and called

time Pete stood up and asked her out on a date, and of course that would never work, but he thought he saw her blushing and couldn't help thinking if he ran into her cold on the street that something might gel.

The bottom line, he'd wanted to explore *could he actually damage someone?* Could he follow through on these aggressively criminal yet admittedly satisfying impulses?

He finally dived in to what he knew he'd been putting off, which was looking around for Ray on the internet. Ray's full name was Reynaldo, and with the odd spelling it wasn't difficult, and White Pages San Francisco placed one result, a 'Holmes, Reynaldo', no phone number but an address of 1144 Webster.

Right in the old Fillmore neighborhood was where Pete was picturing it, if that was actually the guy.

On Wednesday Pete took his normal morning run from the Marina Safeway to Fort Point and back, three miles each way, past the distance swimmers and dogs fetching sticks out of the bay and hard-core surfers under the bridge near the rocks.

He picked up some French pastries at La Petite Auberge and went back to his apartment and fired up a pot of coffee.

1144 Webster, he figured out, was between Turk and Eddy, on the east side of the street. About fifteen blocks from where they left him lying there back in 8th grade. It was a ten minute drive from the apartment, or an hour walk, and what was the rush?

On the way there he wondered how you would perform something like this. He'd only shot a gun a few times, a rifle, at his Uncle Barney's ranch up near Grass Valley when he was a teenager. It would feel good to use your fists of course, but probably that wasn't practical.

Ray's building was a modern low-rise that took up half the block. It looked a lot like a regular apartment complex, but Pete guessed redevelopment money, a nice step up from the projects where Ray probably lived back then, but still the projects.

A security guard was sitting behind a high desk and a piece of plexi-glass in the lobby.

"Could you direct me to Reynaldo Holmes please," Pete said.

“And who should I say?” said the security guard, picking up the house phone.

“Charles Fuqua.”

“He says he’ll come down,” the guard said. “You’re welcome to wait in the lounge, right there.”

Pete unfolded a hardback chair and took a seat. There was an elderly woman up front watching a talk show with the volume loud.

When Holmes walked in, he looked old. He’d had a high forehead and light complexion and had moved with an easy grace back then. Now he had a slight limp and had gained some weight, but it was definitely him.

“Charles, he had a rough time of it,” Ray said. “He ran with a bad bunch, got into it.”

“Oh yeah?” Pete said.

“That boy been down for some time now. Which bring me to my next question: Who the fuck are you?”

Pete stood up. Ray’s eyes were yellow and he was missing an upper incisor.

“Pete McGirk. From Marina?” He extended his hand.

Ray took it, and Pete knew he knew.

“Man, now you taking me back,” Ray said. “You’re talking junior high school. Only school *I* remember, Galileo. Played some ball there.”

“Is that right.”

“Caught me a touchdown on Turkey Day at Kezar, corner of the end zone . . . We called it Strong 86 Flag, two DBs on me, I went up and got it. We lost to Lincoln . . . They was full of white boys like you.”

Pete said, “Remember playing War Ball on rainy days?”

“Fuck you talking about?”

“You remember, give me a call.” Pete picked up an old newspaper and wrote his number on it.

Ray said, “I got four days a week, four hours a day, they working on my kidneys in a chair . . . Mother fucker asking do I remember *War* Ball.”

“If you do, Ray, call me.”

Pete thought of asking him what the final score was of that Turkey Day game, but that was getting off the subject.

Saturday Pete was in Mill Valley, getting ready to take a hike on Mt. Tam. There was a pizza place he liked on the main drag, run by Brazilians, which seemed weird, but the pie was authentic and they had a two-for-one deal. So why not load some carbs--plus kill a little time--since he wasn't entirely up for the Dipsea Steps today, which put you on the mountain but got the heart rate up for sure.

He stopped back at his car to check his messages. He tried to minimize his phone, and frequently left it in the glove compartment. There were three.

One was unimportant, one was from Bethany, his doctor's secretary, and the third was from Ray.

The one from Bethany, she was urging Pete on behalf of the doctor, Dr. Steiner, to come back into the office and discuss his treatment options. Steiner had tried to reach him unsuccessfully several times, she pointed out.

And this was true. Plus Pete had been rude to Steiner when he'd dropped the bombshell on him in the office. Pete processed it for a minute, like he was an outsider watching a TV show where a patient is given

grave news . . . and then he told the doctor essentially what to *do* to himself, and walked out of there.

The fact that Pete knew Dr. Steiner--Billy--since high school made it easier to be an ass. Pete also decided if he ever did get out of this mess, don't use professionals that you know. But that wasn't worth worrying about right now.

Meanwhile, Ray sounded like he'd been drinking in his message. Pete listened to it twice, couldn't understand much, and he didn't return the call.

When he got back to the city he stopped in for a change of pace at the Booker Lounge on Pierce Street. Not nearly the action of Weatherby's around the corner, but the food was better. He had the house burger and fries, the whole works apparently organic and grass-fed, and a pint of dark stout.

The guy two stools away looked familiar, but he couldn't place him. Then he realized it was Rich Tomlinson, who was a beat reporter for the *Examiner* when Pete was working at the *Chronicle*. Both papers pretty much fell apart ten years ago. He assumed Tomlinson had taken a buy-out like he had.

“Rich, that you?”

“Hey! Petie! Good to see you man, how you been?”

“Pretty good Rich. You latch on anywhere?”

“Well, buddy of mine has a PR firm in Burlingame. Handles a few of the Silicon Valley big wig accounts. He throws me some hours.”

“Good . . . not the same though, is it?”

“Nah, not at all. There’s nothing matches the excitement in that newsroom when a real story was breaking . . . What can you do? You doing anything?”

“Ah I went back and got a master’s, and taught some high school. More recently I’ve been teaching a journalism class at College of Marin, in the fall.”

“And you’re okay?”

“Yeah, between the buy-out, a little real estate I got, whatever, I’m staying alive.”

Rich ordered another round, and Pete moved to the stool in between them.

“Rich, let me ask you a question though. How would you kill someone? What would be the best way?”

Rich laughed. “Why, you researching the topic out of curiosity, or you have something in mind?”

“Every now and then,” Pete said, “I conjure up a couple guys who would be satisfying to take care of. Over a *beer*, obviously, not literally.”

“That’s for sure. With myself, there’s more than a couple of those dudes around. The other day? Some decked-out jerk on a bicycle comes riding up, slaps my fender and gives me the finger. All I’m doing is waiting at a stop sign on Irving Street . . . If I had a bazooka at that moment, I swear I would have chased that guy down and shot it off up his ass.”

“What about hitting them with a baseball bat, is that a clean way?”

“Yeah . . . that might be one of them. You wouldn’t want to leave the bat, or part of it, behind of course. I’d probably alcohol the bat first, wear gloves, long sleeves, all that stuff. If there was a struggle and the guy scratched you or something, you wouldn’t want your DNA under his fingernails.”

Pete was picturing Ray and a couple of the others, wondering if he was truly out of his mind.

“Of course a nice way to handle it,” Rich was saying, “would be to cause some type of accident. No direct contact.”

“How would you go about that?”

“I don’t know, force the guy off a cliff on Highway One on the way to Stinson Beach, something like that? You’d have to pick your spots. There’s also medical accidents, medications and such . . . All I know is, I worked my share of crime stories and it took a little extra for Homicide to look harder at an accident situation. Sometimes it did come to that, of course, but your odds are better.”

“Gentleman, pardon me for interrupting y’alls entertaining conversation.”

It was Booker himself, who was tending the bar this evening. A big black guy with a shaved head, everything neat, a pressed white sport coat, huge hands full of rings. He kept order in the establishment: you want to use your cell phone, you go outside; you come in with a hat, you take it off.

“What you both doing,” he said, “is dancing around the concept. You want to hit someone, you go

get a gun they can't trace and then you shoot him in the side of the head with it."

"Hard to argue with that," Rich said.

"Any way they could trace the bullets on you though?" Pete said.

"Peter, my man," Booker said, smiling. "You really thinking this through, aren't you? Now you got me curious about that. Something to find out."

One thing led to another that night, nothing involving the list, but first it was Pete's brother-in-law getting stuck on a business trip in San Luis Obispo and asking him if there's any way he could feed the dog and let her out. This was down on the Peninsula. So Pete took care of it, and before he left his brother-in-law's place there was a party taking shape, the next unit over, and it spilled outside and Pete figured what the hay, and it ran late.

So by the time he got home he decided why bother going to sleep, and he took his run early. The sun coming up, the foghorns groaning, the smell of the ocean--things could be worse, he supposed.

After breakfast he called Ray back from yesterday.

“Ray, Pete McGirk. I think you called me? I couldn’t understand you though.”

“Yeah. I phoned you to tell you you’re an ugly motherfucker, just like you was back then,” Ray said.

“I’m not losing sleep over it or nothing, but I remember what happened that time by the park . . . It shouldn’t have happened.”

Wow.

“Oh, so now you going silent.”

Pete took a minute.

“Actually, no Ray, you got me thinking a little different here. Would you want to . . . get a drink . . . or have lunch or something?”

“Man, you is one strange white boy. Why not? If I can squeeze you into my schedule.”

They made it for the Monday at noon, and when Pete got there Ray was outside waiting, talking to a guy on the sidewalk who seemed to be laughing at something Ray said.

Ray struggled a little getting in and out of the car, but it went okay. They got squared away in Weatherby’s,

not the exact table but next to the one where Pete had brought a date not too long ago that didn't work out great.

"This is the kind of joint," Ray said, looking around, "I'd never walk into in a million years."

"I hear what you're saying," Pete said, "but you get comfortable with a place. They know you, start you off with a smile, no surprises. That's worth something."

"It is," Ray said. "I had one like that on Turk Street, Monte's, but they let it go. You didn't trust the cuisine no more."

They ordered drinks. Pete got a beer, Ray had scotch on the rocks. Mitch wasn't bartending today at lunch, it was Eloise, a plump redheaded woman with a hearty laugh.

"You okay drinking that hard stuff?" Pete said. "You're on kidney treatment, right?"

"Hemodialysis," Ray said. "I was going three days a week. They got a whole unit at SF General just for us, so we can take a piss. Then they do a big study, how *four* days filters you better than *three*. That's where I'm

at now. I got Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday off . . . Answer your question, we supposed to avoid alcohol.”

Pete said, “Where’d you live, when you and Charles and Williams jumped me back then?”

“On Sacramento.”

“Jeez, I always figured you lived down past Geary. The projects.”

Ray said, “I can tell you getting ready to reminisce about Marina Junior High School now . . . Mr. Gullickson, the PE teacher. Man, that dude kicked my ass for three years.”

“No kidding. Remember how he’d come up to guys and slap you if he thought you weren’t paying attention?”

“Yeah, *man*.”

“You ever hear the one, a kid is looking into the girls' gym, so Gullickson made him put on one of their uniforms?”

“That blue shit?”

“Yeah, the one-piece jobs. Then he sent the kid in there for the period.”

Ray was laughing now, his shoulders moving, the first time he'd smiled.

"I wonder how his discipline style would go over today," Pete said.

"It wouldn't," Ray said, "but it wasn't the worst thing. Kids's too soft now . . . That's not why we here though, is it?"

"No," Pete said, leaning in, lowering his voice. "Any idea how I'd get a firearm that couldn't be traced?"

Ray scrunched up his face. "McGirk," he said, "you a more fucked up motherfucker than I even *thought*. What you want to go messing with something like that for?"

"If I ended up . . . hurting somebody, . . . which I'm not sure about, but if it *happened* . . . wouldn't that be one way to handle it? A short-barrelled something or other that they couldn't track?"

"Sound like you playing Cops and Robbers with me now son."

"No, there's a situation . . . a legitimate one, not around here, but there's a possibility."

Ray gave him a long look.

“What would it be, something like twenty-five years ago we messed you up?”

“Twenty-eight. It was ’89.”

“You been carrying it around with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me work on it. And I wouldn’t mind a refill.”

On Wednesday afternoon Pete dropped in on Ray in the dialysis department at SF General.

“Well now, looky here what the cat brung in,” Ray said.

He had two strands of red rubber tubing taped to his forearm that Pete assumed entered his arm someplace, and then continued into a couple of canisters attached to a standing, computerized machine. Ray was wearing a sweater and Oakland A’s cap and sitting on a hospital-type recliner, partially covered by a blanket. There were nine or ten identical patient set ups, and several TVs were blaring.

“I called you back,” Pete said. “But there was no option to leave a message.”

“And there never will be,” Ray said. “I hate the telephone. I’m a fan of direct contact.”

“Good thing I remembered your schedule, then,” Pete said. “What’d you want? When you called me.”

“I got your thing is all.”

“You *did*?”

“Told you I’d look into handling your business, didn’t I? So why you surprised?”

“No, it’s just, I thought you might, put me in *touch* with someone or whatever. Not finish it off.”

“You want it or not?”

“Oh, yeah. Listen, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t be jumping for joy like it’s Christmas morning. You setting up for some serious shit now.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You owe me nothing. If you want, you can buy me another drink.”

“Ray, you’re a good man, you know that?”

Ray was quiet for a second. “So all these years later . . . that’d be your conclusion then.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re still a little white boy piece of crap,” Ray said. “But looking at the whole picture, I guess I’ll take it.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow night. I got a place we can unwind, hear some music.”

“Fine with me. Long as it ain’t the joint on Chestnut Street again.”

“It’s near there, but a brother’s in charge of this one.”

“That don’t mean nothing.”

“I’ll see you at eight,” Pete said.

When he left the clinic . . . as part of his new impulsive mind-set, Pete decided to inform his tennis partner’s wife that the guy was cheating on her.

The wife was a polite, attractive and refined middle-aged woman with a touch of a Danish accent. Birgitte.

The business with the husband had been going on for some time--the guy, Steve, liked to brag about it on the court--and Pete told him to shut up about it more than once but he figured it was none of his business beyond that.

So Pete drove to the house in Presidio Heights, rang the bell, had a built-in excuse planned if Steve was home, but when he wasn't and only Birgitte was he lowered the boom on her and she took it pretty hard. But it was done, for better or worse.

Birgitte phoned him in the morning, apologizing for her behavior.

"What behavior?" Pete said.

"I couldn't have been more rude and self-absorbed. You were a real gentleman to take the very difficult step and inform me. Especially since Steve is your friend."

"Does Steve know that you know?"

"Oh yes. He denied everything and was quite furious at me, and he immediately booked a business trip to San Diego."

"That where he is now?"

"Yes. It's all so incredibly transparent . . . What a moron I have been."

"Well, maybe you'd like to have a drink tonight and listen to a little music."

"Oh . . . I see . . . with you?"

“I have a friend, we’re going to hang out, nothing serious. I can bring you.”

“Well it certainly does sound appealing,” she said.

“Changing up the routine, it never hurts,” Pete said.

That night Ray was dressed the best Pete had seen him. “It’s how you do it,” Ray said. “You go out on the town, show some respect. *You* still wearing duds.”

Ray handed him a shoebox tied up with twine. Pete opened the trunk of the car and stuck the box under an old Scottish wool blanket he kept back there . . . and hoped to God the thing wasn’t loaded and might rattle around or something, but he told himself he was being paranoid and to forget it.

“Okay, now I’m throwing in a curveball,” he said. “We’re picking someone up.”

“Good by me,” Ray said.

“A lady, in her fifties. She found out her husband is unfaithful, and she’s having a hard time dealing with it. Loosening herself up could help.”

“And she found this out how?”

“I told her.”

“Man, you a mischievous motherfucker. You more complex every day.”

Birgitte was wearing a modest dress with a shawl. Her hair was up, and she looked elegant.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Ray said.

“For me as well,” Birgitte said. “I’m honored to be invited.”

“Don’t be getting ahead of yourself,” Ray said.

“The last place McGirk took me was full of twenty-year-old kids. Let’s see what he come up with this time.”

Parking was impossible, so Pete let Ray and Birgitte off in front of the Booker Lounge and drove across Lombard to find a spot. When he got back, he could see them through the window, set up with drinks and talking steady and bobbing their heads.

“I was asking Birgitte how she got hooked up with the likes of you,” Ray said. “Didn’t know you was a tennis player.”

“I’m no good,” Pete said. “Birgitte’s husband Steve owns me.”

“The way I hear it is you are quite well matched,” Birgitte said. “Do you do any sports, Ray?”

“Those days is long past,” Ray said. “All except for dancing. I’ll show you some moves when the music get started.”

A band was setting up, four black guys and a frizzy-blond woman who Pete guessed would be singing.

“Well this is just splendid,” Birgitte said. “Ray, I’m not sure if Pete told you, I’m in a transition.”

“How’s that?”

“My marriage after twenty-three years is not where I had assumed it was. It certainly creates occasion for pause, especially at my age.”

“Well . . . one important thing you got going,” Ray said, “is you a beautiful woman.”

“You are,” Pete said.

“My gosh, thank you for that,” Birgitte said.

“Okay, here now,” Ray said, “come on.” The band had started up and the frizzy blond woman was singing “Fly Me to the Moon”, two horns, a keyboard and drums behind her.

“I . . . I couldn’t,” said Birgitte, smiling. Ray took her hand, and next thing they were dancing together like

they'd been doing it a long time. More couples crowded the little dance floor, and Booker came over to Pete's table.

"That's a fine woman, Petie," he said. "How'd y'all manage that?"

"Not sure, but she likes it here, is the main thing. The band is good too."

"That Ray Holmes with her?"

"Yeah. You know him then?"

"Little bit of dealings at one time. Look like he got it cleaned up pretty good now . . . That other question you had, when you was giving your hypotheticals about weapons and so forth?"

"Yeah?"

"Couldn't get a straight answer on that."

"Meaning . . . they might be able to trace where bullets come from."

"Might or might not, but that'd be telling me be smart about it."

"I appreciate it. Not that I'm expecting to need that advice."

"Good then," Booker said, and he moved on to say hello to another table.

Ray and Birgitte kept it up for the first set. "This one, she downplay it," Ray said when they were back, sweat dripping off both of them, "but she's a live wire."

"I was just following you," Birgitte said. "You're a magnificent dancer."

"And the thing of it is," Pete said, "walking around, you move like an old man. Then you get out there and you're flying."

"Except now it feels mighty nice to be stretching out," Ray said. "I got nothing left."

Pete said, "Anyone hungry? The food's good here."

They ate and drank, and after a while Birgitte pulled Pete onto the dance floor. "Kind of embarrassing being out here after Ray," he said.

Birgitte said, "I haven't felt this exhilarated in quite some time. I can only imagine what Steve would think."

"You know what? He's a good man. When you strip it all away, he wants you happy."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. He loves you."

"I meant do you think he's a good man?"

"Oh," Pete said. "Maybe not."

Pete didn't speak to Ray for a couple weeks. An issue came up where he had to make a trip to Arizona, and he checked in a couple times with Birgitte and she assured him everything was fine, but then the third time she sounded different and Pete called Ray.

"McGirk, you piece of garbage," Ray said. "I actually kind of miss your ass."

"Ray, I have to run something by you. You drinking anything yet?"

"No, but about to be. I just walked in. Had to sit in the chair dealing with the bullshit all afternoon."

"Okay hold off on that for a minute then. Birgitte might be having a problem with her husband."

"*Man*, you already told me that. In fact I seem to recall it was you *initiated* it."

"No, not that. I'm worried he might not be treating her right. I talked to her just now, nothing she said, I just had a bad feeling."

Ray didn't say anything.

"Ray?"

"Where you at right now?"

"I'm in Arizona, that's the whole problem."

Ray said, "I got this then."

Pete said, "What do you mean, you got this?", but Ray was off the phone.

Pete spent the next day debating how--and whether--to interact with a particular person who lived in Anthem, one of those artificial planned communities north of Phoenix.

It took until dinnertime when he remembered that *damn it*, he'd forgotten all about Ray.

Ray answered on the second ring. He said, "I get over there, nothing jumping out ringing no alarm, so Birgitte and I went out to dinner."

"Okay fine, but what about the husband?"

"No sign of him. According to her, he on a *business* trip. "

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

"Far as I could go with it, she did . . . Fact that's where we went *back* to. They was featuring the music again. I couldn't get out there this time though."

"She curious at all why you happened to stop by her house?"

"Some-*what*. I told her your mind probably running away with you, being out in the sticks somewhere . . . I also mentioned should the motherfucker put his hands on her, I'll kill him."

"Ray, no, no, something like that, that would be me, you have to take my word for it . . . Anyhow, I owe you."

"Pleasure's mine. When you be back?"

"Hopefully soon. This trip has gone 180 degrees different than I expected."

A couple days later Pete had maybe, or maybe not accomplished what he set out to, depending . . . but either way he had seen enough of Arizona, and he drove straight through back home, 13 hours, stopping only for a few serious meals, the final one at a Bob's Big Boy in Barstow.

In fact he was generally pretty dang hungry all around.

It was Mitch the bartender who had raised the subject . . . commenting a few weeks in that Pete didn't look any *worse* so far, and could someone have made a simple mistake in the lab or some shit . . . and what about maybe getting retested?

Pete admitted that had crossed his mind once or twice too, but that at this point he was in a bit deep in a few areas and didn't want to know . . . and of course Mitch looked at him like he was certifiably deranged, but didn't bring it up again.

It was around 8 when he got back to San Francisco from Arizona, and Pete thought, you know what, instead of heading straight home . . . why not swing by Birgitte's and make sure all is well and good?

The next night he stopped by Ray's. Ray came down to the lobby, happy to see him.

"McGirk, you know there's something wrong with you though," Ray said.

"What do you mean?"

"You ain't normal. You always got something urgent you dealing with. Can't wait to hear what it is now, the reason you came."

"You want to get something to eat then?"

"Man, I was getting ready to fix me something when you rang. But if you insist."

"Where to?" Pete said.

"Ah, you know you want to go to that first joint, the one I wouldn't walk into voluntarily in my lifetime. That'd be fine."

Weatherby's was half-full when they arrived and they got a table in back and the drinks came quickly. Pete said, "First of all, what you did, making sure Birgitte was okay..."

"We been over this already. She *still* okay?"

"As far as I know. I saw her last night."

"When you saying 'saw her last night', that mean you did her up?"

"It went that way, yeah."

"Man, I wish I was in your shoes."

"Ray, don't worry about me, you can date Birgitte all you want."

"Believe me McGirk, I ain't worried about *you*.
The problem is I got no libido."

"What?"

"The treatment, it's fucked me up in the head.
Don't got jack anymore in that department."

"You mean . . . no *interest*, or can't do anything
about it?"

"Fuck you motherfucker. *Both*."

"Wow . . . what do the doctors say?"

"That the condition mess with some people, others
it don't. They not sure why."

"Ray, I'm real sorry to hear that. That's no way to
live."

"I don't especially need a piece-of-shit white boy to
tell me that, all the action you getting. Playing the ladies,
maybe even shooting people."

"Have you tried, like a hypnotist or something?"

"No, and not planning to. Bunch of bull roar
there."

"Well on my end--not as big a deal after I hear
your thing--but I got a guy seems to know my business,
insists on following me around."

"Okay here we go. Now we establishing why we here."

"Pretty sure it's connected to the Birgitte husband, Steve."

"That dude? Honestly don't strike me as someone you'd have to worry about, other than he be yelling and screaming."

"I thought that too. But there's this guy he might have working for him. Foreign guy, with a possible MMA background."

"So . . . you afraid he gonna slap a submission hold on you, make you tap out?" Ray was laughing.

Pete thought, actually *kill me* would be at the top of the list of what I'm afraid of. But you weren't going to stick Ray any further in the middle of this, and Pete brought up another infamous teacher from Marina Junior High and Ray got into it a bit and that was fine.

A few weeks went by, and fortunately no MMA guy chased him into the bay on his morning run and drowned him or anything, so Pete relaxed a little on that

front, but it was shaping up he had to make a trip to Idaho.

This one could take longer, and it might morph into an extension to Boston as well, where his sister and nephew lived, and Pete wanted to see Ray before he left.

He got the oil changed and took care of the usual odds and ends and he showed up at Ray's around dinnertime.

The security guard phoned Ray and told Pete to go on up, the first time that happened, since Ray always came down. The place had five stories, and you entered the apartments from outside like a motel. There was a tasteful courtyard in the center with white rocks and a metal sculpture, though there were a couple spots on the sculpture that had been hit with graffiti and painted over.

"McGirk, you ain't catching me at my best moment," Ray said. He was in his pajamas and slippers and hadn't shaved in a while.

"You okay?" Pete said.

"Running a fever is all. The shit fucks with you."

"Your treatment you mean?"

"That, the meds, the nine yards. I'll handle it. Sit down if you want."

Pete sat on a kitchen chair. "Your place is neater than mine. You've got the minimalist touch going on."

"I ain't striving for any particular flavor, to be honest."

"Today's your day off though, right? Are you going in tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you worrying about me, which you better stop doing . . . I don't miss any of 'em. That's *worse*."

"Ray I'm going out of town for a little while."

"How long then?"

"Few weeks. Call me if you need something, okay?"

"Fine, but how you gonna deal with it long distance?"

"I don't know . . . Also the cops were talking to me yesterday, it's weighing on me."

Ray let it hang for a moment and said, "You didn't do nothing, right? So what did they want?"

Pete said, "I might have blurted something *out* . . . about something I *didn't* do . . . which maybe someone heard and reported."

Ray smiled. "Well I'll be damn . . . McGirk, you continuing with the surprises. Someone hearing and reporting *what*, exactly?"

"Cop didn't say. He also implied they were looking at the guy who reported it, that they established he's a pathological liar."

"What *else* they ask you?"

"Ran a couple scenarios by me, wanted to know how plausible I thought they were."

"They got an original *reason* to be liking you? Before they claim you yelling out?"

"It would be a stretch. And if they're going that direction, two guys are on the map ahead of me."

Ray said, "So what you telling me, in your pussy ass way . . . they don't got jack shit. They shut *out*. You the only one not *seeing* it."

"I am?"

"How long has it been, since this deed they wondering did you blurt something out about?"

"Around two months. This guy talking to me, he's playing it straight. I'm worried he's slicker than that."

"C'mon, man, after two months he *ain't*. Only reason they're talking to you, and plenty other people, they praying someone volunteer something. It SFPD?"

"Nah, suburbs actually."

"*White* suburbs?"

"Yeah."

"In that case they even *more* ice cold."

"So when I'm away . . . like if someone rings my bell and I'm not there, that mean anything?"

"Only that you're going about your business. Which you supposed to be ."

"Well, I appreciate it . . . I talked to Birgitte, she thinks her husband disappeared on her."

"Good."

Pete got up. "All right then. Can I do anything for you? The store, whatever?"

"No . . . You doing something for me already, showing your ugly face here. I don't mind admitting that."

Pete reached over and squeezed Ray's shoulder.
"You take care," he said.

Pete was gone for six weeks. He supposed it was a positive that there were no new messages or inquiries from anyone in law enforcement. In fact when he checked his messages periodically there were no inquiries from *anyone*, including Billy, his doctor. And the last thing you wanted to do was celebrate, but it was hard to ignore another solid stretch in the books, with no symptoms--that he knew of--screwing him up.

The first day back home he took a long walk around the city. Up Lyon to Pacific, along Fillmore to Sacramento, over Nob Hill to Powell, and down to 5th and Market, where they turned the Cable Car around. He watched the tourists waiting to get on, looking excited.

Across the street was the old Emporium department store, that they'd butchered by turning into a mall. Luckily they'd preserved the original dome, and there was a seating area underneath it. Pete found a weekly news magazine and settled in and read it cover

to cover. Two items stood out: that otters' private parts are shrinking, and the 'steal of the week' house in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was six hundred grand.

He walked down Market to the Embarcadero. It was the same route as a film clip he'd seen on 60 Minutes, where a camera on the front of a streetcar captured the scene in 1906, a few days before the earthquake. Amazingly, they narrowed down the date by the stage of construction of one of the buildings along the way.

There was cheering coming from AT&T Park, and Pete wandered over there and walked in, the guys at the turnstiles not bothering him because it was late, and he got a hot dog and a garlic fries and found a seat in the sun down the third base line.

It was the eighth inning, the Giants up 8-2 on Colorado, everyone in a good mood. He asked the guy next to him what happened, and the guy said Cain had given them six good innings. Cain had once been a star but then needed arm surgery, and had been trying to hang on ever since.

No particular reason, but Pete thought of Barry Zito. Zito was a former star too, who didn't pitch well after the Giants signed him to a big contract. He got ridiculed on the sports stations and Pete had seen him a couple times at bars on Union Street, and one time some wise-ass spit on him as he was leaving. But he'd hung in there, and pulled out a clutch playoff game and won the fans back. Pete got home and gave Ray a call.

Tuesday afternoon at Weatherby's, Ray said, "You dragging me in here that first time, I went along for the ride. Now I look forward to it. Which pisses me off."

Pete said, "We're the oldest guys in the place, I'll give you that."

"So you tended to your business, then?"

"Yeah. My sister and my nephew are in the picture now. One way or the other, I'm getting them out here . . . Hard to believe it's almost May, summer's around the corner."

"Well I wouldn't mind meeting them."

"Really?"

"I said I wouldn't *mind*, why you need to ask me two times?"

Pete said, "I heard Birgitte stopped by last week, your dialysis session."

"She did again yesterday. She reads to me."

"Oh yeah?"

"She be reading away, and I got no clue what's going on in the book. But she bring a certain style to the occasion."

"I know what you mean. You feel like you're in good hands."

"That's never the worst thing," Ray said.

"No it's not," Pete said.

That fall Pete moved to Manhattan Beach. The loose idea was to reinvent himself, now that it looked increasingly like he wasn't going to die off.

He sublet his San Francisco apartment but then the guy stopped paying the rent on time, and when Pete inquired the guy blew him off. Like one of those guys who might turn it around and sue him for something. Pete figured he better meet the guy in person, iron it out.

So now he was back in the city, and the first diplomatic attempt with the tenant didn't go great, and ooh boy . . . but meanwhile there was a pizza place on Scott Street near the apartment, just a window counter basically, and it was the only place in the Marina district you could eat for ten bucks anymore, including tip, and have a little something left over . . . and that did the trick, much better now, and the day was getting on, 2:30, and why not take a chance and stop in on Ray.

He remembered walking over there that first time, taking it slow, wondering if Ray was still a tough guy grown up, anticipating having to take action. Maybe not the initial visit, but soon enough.

Then of course the rest of the story. Ray with his *own* medical condition, and facing up to the fact, even though it probably killed him to admit, that what happened that time by Alta Plaza park shouldn't have.

Then Ray taking care of him with the firearm, in case it was something Pete would ever need. And something he always appreciated--Ray rushing over to make sure Birgitte was okay when he was in Arizona and got the funny feeling about the tennis partner . . . Ray

getting off the phone without hesitation and handling it, even though he wasn't feeling very good that night. Just *I got this* and that was the end of the conversation.

The security guy in the lobby was the same one from before, and Pete asked him to please call up there. The guy told him Ray was in the hospital, Saint Francis.

God *damn* it.

It wasn't all that far, Hyde near Pine, and Pete grabbed an Uber, and navigated the halls of the place and there was Ray sitting up, looking irritated, pointing the remote control at the TV.

"McGirk, you little *prick*," he said. "Now that you here, how 'bout finding me some fresh batteries somewhere."

Pete never knew whether to shake hands, give the guy a hug, whatever else, since Ray didn't particularly like any of it.

"What *happened* to you, man?" he said.

"Ah I fell."

"You mean like at *home*? What'd you do?"

"Naw, picking me up some wrestling tickets . . . They got so much dog shit on the sidewalks now, was

trying to avoid stepping in a *pile*, got tangled up and went down.”

“Jeez . . . Well, not the worst thing I guess. I mean at least you were out and *about*, compared to old people reaching into an upper cabinet and having a problem.”

Ray said, “Whyn’t you shut up while you ahead.”

“What kind of wrestling?” Pete said.

“Only one kind. Why you asking that?”

“You mean, the stuff we watched as a kid? Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage?”

“Yeah. The Honky Tonk Man coming over the top rope. The Junkyard Dog and shit. They re-enacting it next weekend, the Cow Palace.”

“Not . . . bringing the same guys *back*, you’re not saying . . . you mean re-*igniting* it? The sport?”

“You call it what you want,” Ray said, “and you can take the tickets too. I won’t be able to make it.”

Pete said, “Hold on, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here . . . You look good, I’m not seeing any casts anywhere. You just got shook up, hit your head, what?”

“My hip. They calling it a hairline fracture. Not putting me under the knife or nothing, but I got to go to a rehab joint.”

“Oh no Ray, don’t do that. If you can avoid it. Something like *that*, it can beat you down, the atmosphere. You can lose your motivation, start thinking like the permanent ones.”

Ray laughed. “The lifers, you mean. I keep saying it, you pulling out the surprises . . . Didn’t know you was now a *medical* doctor too.” Ray’s shoulders jiggled as he continued getting a kick out of it.

Pete went down the hall to the nurses’ station and asked for new batteries. No one could find any, but they gave him a new remote and Pete tested it out on Ray’s TV.

“You got some college ball coming up, usually a *couple* games these days on Friday nights, so that should be good,” Pete said.

“Fine. I’ll keep it in mind.”

They were both avoiding the subject, Pete announcing to him the end of the summer that he was moving to L.A. for a while. Pete had told him it was no

big deal, he'd be around on a semi-regular basis, and here he *was* in fact, just like he said.

Ray said, "I appreciate it, you checking on me. I know you got more important business to take care of, now that you a Hollywood type."

"Okay," Pete said, "Let's don't be going all serious on me. You got my number, nothing's changed. I'm an hour away, hour and a half tops, on the airplane."

"I know," Ray said.

And that was that.

Pete walked out of the place, good to get some real air, and the medical smells were tough.

The transition to southern California went okay. There were negatives of course--people were overly into fitness and body image, which could be intimidating, and the drivers seemed more aggressive than in the Bay Area. But you couldn't beat the weather, and Pete stayed busy. Things popped onto the radar. There were adventures here and there, not always what you might expect.

But now it was Christmas Eve, and Pete had the feeling things were already thinning out at his apartment complex, which had become a social hub, at least around the pool.

His friend Ken said he had an aunt in Baldwin Park and it looked like he'd taken off, and another neighbor Marlene had an older couple, friends of the family she said, in San Diego, and when Pete got dropped off last night by another *sort-of* friend, Ned, after helping him with something, Marlene was already on the road.

Ned, who Pete initially thought was dangerous but was turning out to be a reasonably considerate person, picked up on Pete having nowhere to go for Christmas Eve and invited him to his place, whatever *that* meant . . . Pete had told people he was going up north, but Ned obviously didn't buy it.

And yeah it *was* nice of the guy but you're not doing that, for a variety of reasons, and Pete let the day unfold, appreciating what he had in front of him, and he was okay with being on his own.

Though around 4 o'clock he thought maybe he'd head over to the Big Wok tonight, the Mongolian buffet,

since it was a friendly family running the place and they were Chinese and Pete didn't think they made too big a deal about Christmas, and it would be more or less a regular night in there.

But then the phone rang, and it was Sharif, his landlord, and he insisted Pete come over for Christmas Eve dinner with his family.

Pete said what if he had something else to do, and Sharif laughed and said he was rolling the dice calling up then, but please come.

Pete had helped out Sharif a few months back, there'd been a situation with a niece and a white-guy ex-boyfriend who was turning out to be a problem, and Pete went and talked to the guy, no big deal, but it seemed to do the trick and Sharif was over-the-top grateful.

So he joined them for dinner, at the family motel on Sepulveda Boulevard, and son of a gun, Sharif's wife and sister pull one of the best turkeys out of the oven that Pete had ever tasted, and meanwhile they're all decked out in their traditional Pakistani attire.

Everyone was in an upbeat mood, including the grandparents, both sets of them, and the whole gang lived together under one roof, cheerfully making it work . . . and Pete told Sharif he didn't expect him to be into turkey, and Sharif smiled and patted him on the back and said the only thing missing tonight was a game on TV, because you can't beat turkey and football.

Pete had to laugh, and the crazy thing was Sharif was serious . . . and they all retired to the living room and Pete said he was going to pass, and he wished everyone well.

Sharif was a little disappointed but saw him out and Pete said he was pretty sure there *were* a couple of NFL games on tomorrow, and apparently Sharif hadn't thought of that since that'd be Christmas Day, and that seemed to perk him up and he was back to normal when they said goodnight.

But now what?

It was still kind of early, not quite 8 o'clock.

What really didn't sound bad was heading down to the beach. But he'd dressed up a little bit tonight, a

rarity, so he went back to the apartment first to put on some looser clothes.

While he was home he checked his email and his messages, and not much of anything, and what did he expect . . . and he was back out the door and he started up the familiar first hill toward the beach, and then the right, and the left, and the downhill . . . and the houses along the way were lit up with good cheer . . . and growing up in San Francisco this was his favorite time of year, and some good memories came flooding back.

But when he got to the bottom, and stepped up onto the pier and worked his way out to the end, no one else there except one old guy with a flashlight and a fishing line in the water, Pete felt a strong urge to talk to Ray.

So he called him.

“McGirk, you son of a *bitch*,” Ray said.

“How you doing, man?” Pete said.

“Always suspicious when you on the line,” Ray said.

“You’re not fixing to drop in on me right now are you?”

“I wish I could. I’m still down in L.A.”

“Well that’s a relief then,” Ray said, though Pete could tell he didn’t mean it.

“How about your hip? The accident, picking up those wrestling tickets.”

“Whyn’t you be worrying about your *own* two hips, is more like it . . . Answer your question, it’s serviceable.”

“So that means you can have lunch? Maybe after the 1st of the year?”

“A possibility. Long as you don’t drag me to that one joint.”

“Weatherby’s. I thought you said that place was growing on you.”

“Fine. We can deal with it.”

Pete said, “Well . . . I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. It’s been an unusual year . . . Not the worst thing I guess, that we’re both still around.”

Ray didn’t say anything.

Pete said, “See this is why I don’t like calling you.”

“What? Too much drama for you to handle?”

“Something like that . . . you okay tomorrow, and everything?”

“Don’t be worrying about me.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“Yeah I’m okay,” Ray said.

“Well I guess that makes two of us,” Pete said, and they said goodbye, and the one guy fishing was gone now, and Pete had the end of the pier to himself, and the waves kept rolling in in the dark, and after a while he supposed he should head back . . . except really, what was the hurry?