

Road

3500 words

"See this is the thing," Rory said, when he arrived in Berkeley at close to eleven.

"There's nothing to talk about," Pete said. "I'm not even going to say I'm sorry, because it won't matter."

"Did you bring your guitar at least?" she said.

"I did, and that's part of what slowed me down. I was somewhere else and had to go back and get it."

"I can see how that would slow a person down by six *hours*," Joanne said. She had joined Rory on the front porch and had a suitcase next to her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Pete said.

"I wasn't planning on it originally," Joanne said. "But with all this extra time this morning to think it over, a road trip could be fun."

And the deal here was he needed to check on something in Idaho. He'd thrown it out there to Rory, playful--why not ride along--not expecting anything, and frankly not sure he actually *wanted* her along--and

surprisingly she said yes on the spot. So he said, *oh . . . what are you going to do out there . . .* and she said *have an adventure*, like it was obvious.

So fine, Pete supposed you could deal with it, except now the added bonus of maybe something stirring between them was off the table, since Joanne was apparently joining the fun.

There'd been a previous situation that got similarly monkey-wrenched where he thought he had it set up with Rory, but this one was his own damn fault. He'd insisted she be ready at 5:00 am *sharp*, so they could straight-shot it to eastern Idaho, 13 hours and change . . . and Rory told him he was being a drill sergeant--she may have even used the word nazi--but she obviously *had* upheld her end of the bargain and Pete screwed up his.

What got him in trouble, the car all packed up last night, the essential details checked off the list, was getting fancy . . . and instead of responsibly watching a little TV and hitting the sack, he decided it would be a good time to inform his tennis partner's wife that the guy was cheating on her.

Part of the reason it made sense was Pete knew the guy was presently out of town, on a supposed business trip.

So he went over there and the wife invited him in and there was drama and hand-holding and soul-searching--which admittedly got a bit melodramatic, but ultimately distracted Pete from what time it was getting to be and whether he had anything on the agenda for the morning.

"It won't be," Pete said now, answering Joanne's declaration that a road trip could be fun. "But whatever. Whoever's in the car the next thirty seconds, I'm going."

A half hour into it on Highway 80 he realized he was starving and pulled off at a truck stop in Fairfield. Rory said, "That wasn't the *longest* first leg of a trip. But I like stopping places."

The service sure felt slow and Pete wondered Jeez, did one of them complicate something with her order, like a vegan item, and he hadn't paid attention and thought about asking them, but finally the food came and everything was good. He said, "I feel better now, getting something in there, stabilized . . . Incidentally,

the towns along here--your Vallejos, your Fairfields, your Vacavilles--they used to be like old middle-America. You'd hear pieces of Oklahoma accents, as remnants of the dust bowl migration. Now it's gangs and oxycontin."

Rory and Joanne were caught up in their phones, but they both looked up for a second--and then curiously out the window. Pete assumed they at least acknowledged that he had said something.

When they were past Sacramento into the foothills of the Sierras, he said, "Something I neglected to ask you all last time. What do you *do*, that you can take off without worrying about it?"

"Temp work," Joanne said.

"Not a bad idea actually. That pay the bills?"

"Usually," Rory said. "And Henry understands our situation, so if we're short he works with us."

"Good old Henry," Pete said. Henry was apparently a local black dude who was their roommate in the not particularly gentrified flatlands section of Berkeley. Pete tried to get a handle on it a few times, mentally, what the heck exactly *was* going on there. The

opposite end of the spectrum being--he wasn't *entirely* sure the girls weren't a gay couple either . . . but you rolled with it.

It was starting to get dark past Reno and he asked if anyone could drive a stick. Joanne said they couldn't and what was the problem, he was doing just fine. The two of them were sprawled out in the back seat, half asleep.

"That's it," he said when they got to Winnemucca. "Unfortunately."

They checked into the Frontier 8 Motel a couple blocks off the main drag. "You guys get the better room," he said. "Two beds, no doubt all kinds of amenities."

"Thank you for getting two rooms," Rory said. "You don't have to."

"Oh yes I do," Pete said. "Here's a few dollars for some dinner, have fun, and don't bother me until the morning."

"Meaning 5 am," Joanne said. "Sharp." She sort of smiled.

Pete got cleaned up and walked over to the strip of casinos they had seen coming off the Interstate. He

picked Stan's Lucky Buck and sat down at the lounge bar. A guy was up front on a little riser, playing guitar and singing Toby Keith with synthesized backup. It was a nice place, it had a homegrown feel to it, very different than the unpleasant corporate atmosphere that had taken over Vegas and most of Reno too.

The cocktail waitresses were jammed into shiny blue and gold outfits. After a few minutes of watching them Pete asked the bartender, a friendly young guy wearing a long-sleeved western shirt, "There any of those legal ranches around that you hear about in Nevada?"

"You mean like the old Mustang?" the bartender said.

"Yeah."

"Well, we got a few of those places in town. Pretty basic stuff, not really ranches anymore for the most part."

"Is there one you . . . recommend?"

"That'd be the *semi*-legal one, the Tumbleweed J. There you *do* have a ranch. It's about six miles east on

Jungo Road, which is State 49. You just go out the main door, go up the corner and hang a left at Burger King."

"When you say 'semi-legal', I mean I wouldn't want to be breaking the law or anything."

"Not a concern. They got technicalities with code and shit. Maybe once every couple years they'll haul in a few of the gals, couple patrons, hold 'em for an hour. It's all for show."

"Anyone in particular there?"

"Well what are you, late 30s, early 40s?"

"Yeah."

"I'd go with Sandra. She's lived a little bit. Very compassionate lady."

Pete thanked him for the tips, finished his beer, and headed out to try to find the place.

It was definitely a ranch, there were barns and corrals and you could smell the animals and feed. The parking area was crowded, and Pete remembered it was a Saturday night.

There were four or five guys standing around in the entry parlor and two of the working women were sitting

on couches, one smoking and staring into space, the other on a device.

An older woman in jeans and a starched white blouse appeared and said she was Daisy and could she help him, and Pete asked if Sandra was available.

"Sandy's here tonight," Daisy said, "but she's booked up through her shift. You've visited her before?"

"No, I got a referral."

"Okay let's see. I'm thinking Nanette might be a good fit then. She's newer here but she's one of our more mature girls, like Sandy."

Pete said that'd be fine, signed something, took care of the credit card and Daisy walked him to Nanette's room, which had an outside entrance.

A movie with Robert De Niro was on with the sound off. Nanette said, "How *are* you?"

"Hard to say," Pete said. "I always anticipated this moment, but now that I'm here, it's an odd vibe."

"Do you mean me?"

"No, that part's fine. Just not sure I want to do anything about it."

“Okay, fair enough,” Nanette said. “There’s no need to announce anything, should you change your mind.”

“Do you . . . get there . . . ever?”

“You mean when I’m working?”

“Yeah.”

“Not during the act. Occasionally from foreplay. Doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy it all though.” She took off her top, everything bounding forward.

“I see,” Pete said. “Well, maybe I can give it a go at that.”

When they were laying back, Nanette said, “I’m really glad you relaxed your guard. It’s just a sense, but I feel you’re hiding from something. Or running.”

“I *am* wrestling with my mid-life direction,” he said. “Which makes you perceptive.”

“You learn to size people up,” she said. “If I can distract you for an hour, I’ve spread a tiny bit of goodness out into the world.”

They had lunch in Twin Falls and got into Pocatello before three. A guy at the gas station mini-

mart recommended a motel on 5th Street, so they went with it. Pete showered and took a little walk out the front door, and just up the block was the beginning of Idaho State University, which he didn't expect.

At dinner he said, "You know something? If I was going to do it all over, you could do worse than go to school here. I mean did you get a load of the campus?"

"No," Rory said, and Joanne shook her head.

"The scope of the thing, it threw me off," he said. "It would rival any Ivy League institution. And the buildings all match. They got that light yellow brick Prairie style out here. You come out of class and there're the dang *mountains*. And Jeez, the lawns, sprawling. They manicure 'em like a putting green."

"That's cause there's no drought here," Rory said.

"Like we have to be mindful of in California," Joanne said.

"How do you know that?" Pete said.

"*Tim* mentioned it," Rory said. "From the motel. Joanne had asked if potatoes were as big in Idaho as one hears."

Pete didn't need to know about Tim, but they told him anyway. He was from Albuquerque but they flew him in for two weeks at a time. Amtrak. Tim was a welder. He serviced what he called *rolling stock*.

"Did you know," Rory said, "that the Pocatello train yard was once the largest west of the Mississippi?"

Pete didn't and admitted that was interesting, and Rory said one of the old railroad buildings is now a brew pub, and Tim invited all three of us to meet him there later.

"Oh," Pete said.

"This happens to be really good Pete," Joanne said, chewing. "I'm glad I tagged along."

They were in a local steakhouse on Yellowstone Boulevard. When they walked into the place Pete had told them, "I'd highly recommend suspending the vegan act for tonight . . . If you insist though there's always the chef's salad, if they hold the hardboiled egg and ham."

To his surprise, Rory and Joanne ordered house specials with fourteen ounce rib eyes. Rory said something about carnivores and this environment. It came out strange but you got the gist.

“Well,” Pete said now, “I do give you credit in one department. You’re good travelers. Not much whining or complaining so far. Even last night, little town in the middle of the desert, you were upbeat.”

“I forgot to ask, what’d *you* do last night?” Rory said.

“I went to a brothel.”

“*What?*” Joanne said.

“Wow. What was that *like*?” Rory said.

“It was pretty much the stereotype you would expect.”

Joanne said, “Meaning *what*? Come on, you have to tell us about it.”

“Everything was handled reasonably professionally. You check in and they match you and farm you out.”

“And were the women attractive?” Rory said.

“I didn’t see many of them, but mine was. She was a few pounds overweight, but I tend to like that.”

“And . . . ?” Joanne said.

“Well there’s a mind-body connection obviously. It took me a while to ‘relax my guard’, was the way she put it.”

“And did she orgasm?” Rory said.

“*Jesus*, not so loud . . . No.”

Joanne said, “Can we go with you next time? Just to take a look?”

“On the way back, you want, I’ll drop you off. But I’ll wait in the parking lot.”

“Seriously Pete,” Joanne said, “have you ever been married?”

“Once, when I was about your age. What are you, twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Gosh, you really think we’re that young?” Rory said. “We’re both *twenty-four*.”

“Okay then, sorry. Bottom line, it went south fast.”

“But do you still keep in touch?” she said.

“No. I wouldn’t even recognize her.”

“So who are you closest to in the world?”

“Man, you’re grilling me. You mean if I was in a big jam, who would I turn to?”

“Yes, who?”

“No one particularly jumps out, to be honest.”

Rory said, “This is what I’m driving at. I’m sorry if I’m overstepping.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I mean, I’m having trouble getting why you would need to visit a brothel. Even though it is interesting to hear about.”

“Let me shift gears on you for a minute,” he said. “If I’m trying to find someone, and I’ve got a name, Jeff Jones, and I want to make sure it’s not the *wrong* Jeff Jones, what do I do?”

“Are they a professional?” Joanne said.

“Probably be considered one, yeah.”

“Did you try Linkedin yet?”

“No.”

“It’s a giant business networking site. People list their past work experience, that sort of thing. You might be able to narrow it down.”

“*We’re* on there,” Rory said.

“It helps in the temp world,” Joanne said.

“Okay thanks,” Pete said, and he did know about it but it was good to change the subject.

Pete tagged along to the brew pub and Tim turned out to be a nice kid. Polite, clean-cut. Respectful of an older guy like Pete, at least to his face, which was good enough.

Pete asked about welding and Tim said it's one of those trades that's going to be around a while, that the 4 core processes haven't changed and still require a human. Tim said he spent a couple years in a shipyard in Bath, Maine, and that it was boring up there on weekends but he helped a guy on a lobster boat.

They started talking about sports and Rory and Joanne were getting edgy and Pete said it's been fun all around but he was heading back. An acoustic combo was setting up and the three of them told Pete to have a nice rest of the evening.

It was quiet at the motel. Minimal signs of human activity. The room had basic cable, not the full shebang that everyone was used to now, and it was amazing that even with sixty channels there was nothing to watch.

One station was twenty-four hour LDS Church stuff, and the Mormon Tabernacle was singing out of the huge temple in Salt Lake City. It was different at least, so he left it on.

Rory knocked on the door close to midnight. “Pete, I’m not sure if I’m going to need to leave the room. Are you still good with it though if I do?”

Unless he was losing his mind, Pete couldn’t recall any previous raising of this scenario from Rory, where *still good* applied. What she was getting at--he assumed--was Joanne and Tim might require some privacy, meaning Rory might need to come into his room for a while.

“I can deal with it, but you’re not sure *because?*”

“Joanne may not be that into her friend.”

“Tim?”

“Pete . . . who *else?*”

Pete thought why not just name the guy then, but whatever. “That’s surprising,” he said, “seemed harmless enough after I left y’all. Hard to see it going *too far south* from there.”

Rory said, “Either way, can we have breakfast?”

“I can probably fit it in,” he said.

Voices and laughter and banging around woke him up, coming from their room. His first thought was, this place is half empty, why was I stupid enough to get two rooms *next* to each other? The activity continued unabated for a couple hours, with one or two lapses, until he couldn't take it anymore, and he bundled up and went for a walk. It was five-thirty in the morning.

A block into it he decided if you were out walking around *anyway* . . . you might as well re-check out the guy who you had the interest in out here's house.

This took some energy. First several blocks heading south, past the little zoo they had, then across the railroad tracks and up into the hills. It was Pete's understanding this was one of the two or three high-end developments in town. Doctors and lawyers lived up here. Pete heard that when it snowed it was the first neighborhood to get plowed.

When he got to the house it was close to 7, though it did feel good to be getting some exercise in the crisp mountain air.

Lights were on in the kitchen and Pete could see the guy at the counter. Pete continued a little ways to where it dead-ended at a dirt parking area, and when he got back the lights were off and the house seemed quiet. It appeared to be garbage day; most of the neighbors had cans and recycling containers out near the road.

He heard a garbage truck nearby and followed the sound. What he deduced pretty quickly was some of the residents went with the deluxe service, where the sanitation guys had to go up the driveway and get the cans out of the backyard or garage. He went back to *his* guy's house, walked around the side of the garage and sure enough, there was a keypad mounted inconspicuously in the back corner above the hose spigot.

He'd spent a year in Teaneck, New Jersey, once, and his apartment complex installed a gate and tenants were always forgetting the code. The cops came by a couple times and one of them told him because of safety regulations you could often get in those things by punching in 911 or 1234.

This was different of course, a private setup, but Pete figured what the heck and picked up a twig out of the guy's yard, tried 911 with it and nothing happened, so he tried 1234, and there was the hum of the garage door in action, and he walked down the driveway, took one more look in case it case it came down to something like this, and began the long trek back to the motel.

They were at Inez's Country Kitchen, the noon-time crowd filtering in, and Rory and Joanne were having bacon and eggs with sides of pancakes.

"All that activity apparently," Pete said, sipping his coffee. "It took it out of you."

Joanne said, "Not right now, Pete, okay? We're not feeling that great."

"At times," he said, "it sounded like a couple battleships pitching around on the high seas. Do you think anyone else noticed, or just me?"

No one said anything.

"The good thing though," he said, "was it got me out early. You can't beat going for a walk when it's twenty degrees and dark. You get perspective."

Rory put her fork down. "I'm sorry that it played out differently than we thought," she said.

Joanne said, "Tim had a friend. Matt."

"Good then, you resolved the uneven relationship with Tim," Pete said.

"No, I got together with Matt. Tim and Rory hooked up."

"Ah."

"But Pete?" Rory said. "We're going have to go take a nap. After that can you help me with the songs?"

"*Songs?*"

"Yes. The open *mic* Tuesday night, at the brew pub."

"She's taking a big step, being an out-of-towner and all," Joanne said. "I'm proud of her."

"We'll still *be* here and everything then, right?" Rory said.

Pete was trying to picture things. "We should," he said.

"Then . . . so?" she said.

Pete felt bad, he should of remembered, there'd been a situation when she'd run a few original songs by him, asking for feedback.

"I guess if I have to," he said. "But I'll tell you upfront, you need to thin out the lyrics. You're trying to do too much. You're jumbling up the listeners. Put yourself in their shoes."

Rory sat there a moment and then, dang, she looked like she might cry, and Pete wondered was I *that* out of line, and is she *faking* this or something . . . but she said, "Is that right. Thank you very much then, for being a royal horse's ass . . . Your true colors showing through, I'm afraid."

"Totally," Joanne said.

