

Spiked

3400 words

Pete was looking something up in the Manhattan Beach library. On the upper level you had a panoramic view of the ocean. It was a pretty dang terrific design, if you were in the mood to absorb it, which today he wasn't.

Someone said, "Is everything all right? Are you finding what you need?"

It was one of the librarians, an attractive enough woman, her name tag telling you she was Emma K.

Pete said, "I look that discombobulated?" He was thinking maybe he'd been moving his lips when he read, which he did do sometimes when he was stressing over something.

Emma said, "I didn't mean to imply that. The internet *can* have a mind of its own, naturally." She had a nice smile.

“So you weren’t trying to get in my business,” he said, “so much as you were concerned about my mental state.” Joking, but who knows, maybe she *was* concerned.

Emma cleared her throat. “Well, if there’s nothing else.”

“There *is* something else,” Pete said. “How come everyone talks so loud in the library these days? It used to be, you didn’t talk at *all*, even the troublemakers knew enough to keep their mouth shut . . . And here *we* go, doing the same thing.”

“Are you typically this observant?”

“You’re ducking my question.”

“I believe it’s a complicated answer actually. Reflective of a deeper societal shift.”

“Oh boy . . . How about ‘cause you *let* ‘em? Does that work?”

She laughed. “That’s part of it.”

“So you can tell me the other part at dinner,” Pete said.

Emma studied him for a moment and then continued circling through the aisles, stopping

occasionally if someone needed help. When she returned to Pete's cubicle, she handed him a slip of paper, with her phone number and a comment: 'You're not going to try anything, are you?'

She waited for his reaction and he looked up poker-faced and scissored his hands, the safe sign in baseball, and she went away again, and soon he'd had his fill of the computer. He went outside and smoked one of the cigarettes he'd bummed off this guy Ned last night at the bar down by the pier that he'd gotten kind of comfortable with, and phoned Emma.

She said that was quick, and he said no point giving her time to re-think it, plus he wanted to see if she'd break a rule and answer her cell at work . . . and she didn't address that but they settled that he'd see her at 5:30.

Pete hadn't used the car much since he moved here, besides going to the tennis courts, and he wasn't a big fan of picking people up, but he was slightly embarrassed having her meet him at his apartment, and of course they could meet at the restaurant except he wasn't sure *what* restaurant, so there you were.

He'd been thinking maybe he should get a bike. A doofus almost ran him down with one on The Strand, early on, but that was beside the point. It seemed practical and that would kind of cement the local stamp on you.

You saw a lot of them parked on the actual beach, simple fat-tire jobs leaning up against each other, and one advantage was you could expand your territory, see what El Segundo, Marina del Rey, Venice, even Santa Monica were all about.

One thing holding him back was not wanting to disturb the minimalist vibe he had going in the apartment, but he supposed he could leave the bicycle outside on the railing, doubtful anyone would bother with it . . . and if they *happened* to, well, you'd probably let it go, depending.

Either way, you couldn't ride a dinner date around on the end of a bicycle, and Pete hoofed it back up the hills to the apartment, detouring slightly to get a *torta* at the little stand on Sepulveda since you never knew how these dinner things were going to work out, and

showered and figured why not lie down for a minute and was out like a light.

“I was reasonably convinced you stood me up,” Emma said. “You did strike me as a bit of prankster.”

“Well I wouldn’t mind being called a *playboy*, in the *good* sense, if that’s where you’re going,” Pete said. “*Sorry* about that though.”

It was 10 to 6. He’d screwed up by over-sleeping and then the traffic was a little confusing, there’d been a one-way situation on Ardmore which you wouldn’t have expected around here. But Emma had waited patiently out front, her hands folded around her purse.

“Playboys are jerks, generally,” she said.

“I know what you mean, but I’m thinking more *James Bond* . . . Never off-balance in a social situation, always delivers the right line, and treats women with respect.”

“You *think* that? He treats women like *dirt*.”

“Hmm,” Pete said. “Well where to?”

Emma ran four or five restaurants by him and he hadn’t heard of any of them, but he liked the sound of

Big Wok, except he was a little suspicious of Chinese food down here after coming from San Francisco, but she told him it was Mongolian and that's where they went.

It was a bustling place, one huge room, and you stood in line at first collecting raw meat and vegetables and noodles and sauces in a bowl and the guy went to town with what you gave him and handed it back to you all cooked and combined beautifully, and you sat down.

“Solid choice,” Pete said when they were squared away. “Although I see what the regulars are doing. *Two* bowls, and go easy on the noodles. Much higher percentage of meat.”

“You can go back,” Emma said, “it's all-you-can eat.”

“This'll do the job. I notice you're wearing a ring . . . That to send a message, then?”

She said, “I'm still married. However, we're separated. One would think.”

Pete said, “There was a young gal used to work at a coffee place on Union Street. She had a ring on, big rock right in your face, but she flirted with a lot of guys. Finally one day I butted in and asked what her husband

thought about it. She said she was single, but had to add the ring after her first day working at the place because she kept getting hit on.”

“Well that’s interesting, though not that original-- but your point is?”

“I don’t know.”

“So why’d you bother bringing it up?” You could see she enjoyed dishing it some.

Pete said, “Okay forget that . . . I guess the *one would think* part, is what a rational human would find noteworthy.”

Emma dabbed her mouth with the napkin and took a healthy sip of white wine. “He and I are quite different,” she said. “When the girls both made it out of the house, we re-assessed our priorities . . . We still live together, and plan to look after each other when we’re old.”

“I see . . . But meanwhile, you both screw around with other people . . . Sorry, I didn’t mean it exactly *like* that, but you get my drift . . . and Jeez, the *girls out of the house*? How old are you?”

Emma didn't answer right away, and Pete wondered if he'd been too up-front and she might walk out of here and call a cab.

That was one thing for sure about his diagnosis--the impulsiveness factor. You tended to just blurt stuff out. Not always with a lot of decorum behind it.

Now it was looking more like he might be sticking around *after* all, but it felt good to be winging shit, no need to change.

Emma said, "In response to your second concern, I'm forty-four."

"Dang," Pete said.

"Is there a problem with *that* now, as well?"

Her being only a couple years older than him, in the ballpark, seemed logical on one level, but man, grown daughters on the loose and grandkids around the corner then.

He said, "You *look* great, that's not it."

"I'm not sure how I should take that," she said.

"Especially when I see old pictures, where I've been included on someone's Facebook."

“I know. Tagged. And the reverse too . . . Some guy stuck me on his timeline, a kids’ birthday party, sixth grade, we’re at an Oakland Seals hockey game. I’m chubby with a bad haircut, and of course I’m stuffing my face.”

Emma laughed. “So tell him to remove it, or you’ll un-friend him.”

“Nah, you roll with that stuff,” Pete said. “But you know for a fact your husband-guy’s not screwing around on you? . . . Or it’s part of the *equation*.”

“I don’t *care*, is the correct answer,” she said. “It’s complicated.”

“These type things though, when you strip ‘em down, usually aren’t . . . but hey the *good* thing, you’re not paying a double mortgage.”

“Let’s change gears, if we may,” she said, and Pete happened to scan the room, absent-minded, and sitting off to the right about eight tables away, yukking it up with another guy, was the kid from the apartments who’d apparently beat up his girlfriend.

There’d been an incident, middle of the night, the police came, took them both in, separate squad cars.

The gal screamed *You Pig* a bunch of times at the boyfriend. She didn't look good. They lived in 7-a, three doors over. Pete hadn't seen either of them in a week.

"This is a popular place," he said, still looking the kid's direction.

"Oh very much so," Emma said. "Perhaps the best value in MB, when you factor in quantity and quality together."

Pete said, "Good for *young* people too, I suppose, money being tight, and so forth." Thinking money couldn't be *that* tight, if the guy'd at least been coming up with half the rent on the apartment . . . But more importantly, how would you handle this?

"Naturally I can't afford it here, on a municipal salary," Emma was saying. "Nor can my husband, he's a teacher. So we settled on Torrance."

"Is that right . . . where's he teach?" Pete said, not caring about the answer, wondering would this kid have to get up and take a leak or something, or was his youthful bladder just too strong.

He did notice the kid and his buddy drinking tea, which was included with the meal but Pete had waved

off because *he* didn't want to be up all night with his not-so-young one, and Emma opted out as well and was working on her white wine seconds now.

She said, "He's at Orange Coast. A bit of a commute, but you work around it."

"Unh," Pete said. "That a JC?"

"A community college, yes, he teaches Chemistry," she said, and son of a bitch, the *other* kid got up and went back toward the right corner of the place where Pete assumed the restrooms were. You couldn't see for sure from here, but what else would he be doing?

You Pig of course puts down his fork and whips out his phone right away, and starts rifling around. Why'd they always have to do that, what was wrong with staring into space once in a while, even for a *moment*? Especially when you're right in the middle of an excellent meal.

The other kid isn't gone long, and they continue eating, the kid-of-interest eventually getting up once, but with his plate, going back for another helping.

The booze, or maybe some MSG in the food, or a nerve that got triggered *somewhere* has Emma rambling

on now about the departmental dysfunction that academics universally endure, which trickles down to the families and invariably screws them up in a substantial way.

Whatever . . .

You Pig came back to the table loaded up, and then *whoa*, before he sits back down he heads to the bathroom.

Pete told Emma excuse me for a moment and headed back there too.

It was a decent layout because there was a urinal and a stall, plenty of room, and a half wall that gave everyone privacy when a new person opened the outside door, so there was no need to lock it when you went in.

Though it was conveniently possible *to* lock it if you wanted, which Pete did, turning the little latch.

The kid was finishing up at the urinal and Pete waited for him to wash his hands before saying, “How’s Stace coming along?” Pete knew her name, Stacey.

“Oh fine,” the kid said, sharp enough, placing Pete right away. “Thank you for asking.”

Pete would have said you're welcome but the kids today seemed to favor *not a problem*, which was a cringe-worthy expression--you felt like telling the waiter, *wait a second, did I bring up a potential problem here, where I needed a ruling?* Though it wasn't the waiter's fault, he was just acting normal.

Anyhow, that's how Pete answered the guy here, "not a problem", and when the guy'd finished washing up and was looking in the mirror rubbing the corner of one eye Pete grabbed him by the jean jacket and spun him around and marched him head first into the stall.

Fortunately the guy wasn't very strong and couldn't do much, though Pete felt he had enough adrenaline going tonight where he could have handled someone tougher. Though maybe not. His main concern, replaying some of the gangster movies in his head, was did you put the seat *up* for maximum effect or not worry about it?

He tried with his foot to lift it but that didn't work so he decided forget it and rammed *You Pig's* face into the bowl.

He let him swim for a moment, and then lifted him out by the back of the hair, like they worked it.

Then boom, back down.

You had to hand it to the kid, he wasn't crying out or saying anything, and Pete initiated the treatment one final time, prolonging it slightly, not enough to drown the guy for God sake's, but to complete the point.

The kid gulped and gasped for a while and then looked for a towel, but you only had the blower, so he used a half roll of toilet paper to do what he could, and he told Pete, "Not what you think," and went back out in the restaurant.

Pete took his time, hoping the kid and his friend wouldn't hang around at this point, and when he did emerge he was right, though *Jesus*, Emma was working on a *third* glass of wine now without missing a beat.

"You're kind of sweating," she said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, well," he said, "I think it's more humid down here, than what I'm used to."

“Absolutely. You’ll find that our coastal conditions, they’re deceptive. One rarely requires underwear to keep warm.”

Pete looking at her, in her modest librarian’s dress, thinking *what the heck*.

“I’ll qualify that,” Emma said, slurring her words slightly. “You, as a man, you won’t need that extended t-shirt too often.”

She had a point there, Pete had trouble keeping his shirts tucked in, and the t-shirt was usually hanging out the bottom somewhere.

“Dessert?” he said.

“There’s a Baskin-Robbins,” she said. “Though you do take your life in your hands crossing Sepulveda.”

“Maybe a little walk then? Brave the humidity?”

“Do you live nearby?” she said.

Emma suggested stopping off first at Sampson’s, one of those high-end supermarkets that affluent communities have for when Safeway doesn’t quite cut it. Though in Manhattan Beach your high-end places tended to be over the top.

Little 6-ounce jar of imported tuna from Italy for instance, which Pete noticed heading back to the liquor section, \$10.19.

“The after-dinner drink is a bit of a lost art,” Emma was saying. “Do you have a blender?”

Pete did not, he essentially had *no* kitchen items, so when they got out of there they had to make a second stop at Target, before finally pulling in at the *Cheater Five Apartments*.

Emma got to work right away, efficient, and Pete turned on the TV and took a look at Thursday Night Football, though it was only Houston and Cincinnati, so he tried House Hunters but it was the international version he didn't care for, so he opened the door for a little cross-breeze and said, “You didn't comment on my digs here.”

Emma was measuring, getting things just right, and soon the blender was fired up and she was coming around the counter with two Jungle Birds, naming the drink, a pretty darn nice presentation given what she had to work with.

They touched glasses and she said, “I like it. Except for the couch.”

Pete said, “I lived in Teaneck, New Jersey, for a year. No AC. From about May to September, no way you could wear a shirt in the apartment. I had a couch similar to this and your back was always sticking to it, coming away with little fibers.”

“How are they?” Emma said.

“Really *good*. I see why it took so long picking out just the right version of black-strap rum.”

“Don’t forget the Campari,” she said, moving a little closer to him on the couch in question.

Pete said, “I was telling some guy the other night-- Jeez, I guess it was just *last* night--that part of my objective coming down here was to turn over a new leaf.”

“I see. Let me guess. No more late-night shenanigans.”

“Very funny.” Coincidentally there was some laughter coming from the pool, people splashing around.

“Do they ever skinny-dip?” Emma said. “I noticed it’s reasonably dark out there.”

Hmm. Pete was picturing Emma back at the reference desk, letting her hair down.

He said, “Not that I’m aware of, in my admittedly limited experience . . . Any particular preferences?”

“Yes. I like to look at men, who are . . . you know, in shape, and all that goes with it. Women as well.”

Holy Smokes. “Well I give you credit for honesty . . . never the worst quality.”

“You know what?” she said, back at the counter, giving the blender a short poke and refilling her glass.

She sat down again on the couch and left her hand on his leg this time.

Pete said, “You didn’t answer your own question.”

“Have *you* ever been married?” she said.

“Me? No.” Which was technically a lie, though it had been a flash in the pan and she’d bounced back quick with the Nascar mechanic in Pensacola, Florida, or it might have been Gainesville.

“*My* husband,” she said, “sometimes I think, if I had a howitzer . . .”

“Take it easy,” Pete said. He had to admit the blended booze was going down nice at the moment, things were loose, so he said, “I messed up some guy tonight. In fact on account of an incident right here, couple doors over.”

Emma surprised him, by-passing the logical follow-up questions, saying, “So you’re more of a mystery man than I would have expected.”

“Whatever,” he said, flipping channels again and leaving it on *regular* House Hunters, this one in Portland, Maine.

Emma said, “I did that too, once. I killed someone. When I was 12. At summer camp.”

Pete was ready to say, ‘And I kind of feel bad about it now, flying off the handle . . . which is what I resolved to *not* be doing.’

“Come again?” he said.

Emma was nodding, looking right at him. She’d been slurring more than in the restaurant, but she’d kept it reasonably together, *didn’t seem out of her mind*, and she started to cry.

No idea what the woman could *possibly* be talking about . . . and it was a strange way to handle it, but Pete put his arm around her and brought her in.

There was no more splashing at the pool, whoever'd been frolicking out there had enough. "Dang, is that crickets?" he said.

"It is," Emma said. "Until we get our first chill."

"All the cement around here, who would think," Pete said.