

Straight

3000 words

Pete was in the car bright and early Saturday driving to Sebastopol for the spring parade and festival. Around Sausalito he called Helen.

"Sheesh, nothing like a little notice," she said.

He said, "If you're *up* for it . . . I'll be standing near the post office. If you miss the parade, the thing overflows into the park down the street, is my understanding."

"I'm just curious, what's the big deal?"

"I'm thinking of making a change actually. Maybe buy something up there . . . Nothing gives you an honest feel for a place like an old-fashioned parade down Main Street. You get what I'm saying?"

"Well I'll do my best," Helen said.

What Pete was here for--the only thing--was get a feel not for the town but for this guy Jerry Smith, who'd apparently made a bit of a name for himself in Sebastopol.

When Pete was growing up there'd been a kid on the block named Blair Mossey, not a close friend but a pleasant-enough guy, and when he was seventeen Mossey was driving to Eureka to visit his sister and on Highway 20 north of Ukiah a drunk driver crossed over and obliterated him.

That was Smith. He survived the accident with a broken arm. The lawyers took over, and he did a little time back then, not much. It had never sat right with Pete, the guy enjoying himself like nothing happened. There were circumstances recently, Pete was more impulsive . . . and here you were.

They had you detour off Gravenstein Highway in front of the parade route and he had to park a mile away, but it was a perfect day for a walk. Royal-blue sky, temperature in the high 70's, cute little houses overflowing with flowers in the front yards. Pete thought maybe he *should* move here at that.

The parade kicked off with the local war veterans, followed by the high school band, all the student musicians wearing fedoras and sunglasses, which, that part, Pete thought looked ridiculous.

Next was a chain of open convertibles, the dignitaries sitting up high with their feet on the back seats. The prick Smith was third, he and his wife, and they were waving and throwing candy that kids were scrambling to collect. On the side of the car it said: 'The Rotary Club Thanks Jerry and Annette Smith'.

There was a heavy-set woman standing next to Pete with a 2013 Apple Blossom Festival T-Shirt on. Pete said, "What'd that guy *do*, that they're thanking him for?"

The woman said, "Jerry Smith. He helped save the pool when the finances were kaput. Defibrillators for the police, computers in the schools, all that."

"He a nice man then, as far as you know?"

"Of course he is," the woman said. "You give your heart and soul to the community, how could you not be?"

A older guy overhearing the conversation butted in. "Smith had a term on the city council. Pro-development, helped push through the business park up by Hurlbut. They razed an apple orchard that had been

there forever, and now we have asphalt and a bunch of buildings that are half-empty."

"How did he make his money?" Pete said.

"Video games," the man said. "It was during the '90's, when everyone was getting bought out there for a while."

"And he was a small piece of the puzzle, for one of the big boys."

"You got it, his timing was fortunate," the man said.

Pete found himself absorbed in the parade. There were musical combos on floats and Little League teams and a dachshund club and horses performing and a hot rod club and several 4-H groups, including the Future Farmers of America. There were more elements of a rural small town than Pete would have expected, just fifty-five miles from San Francisco.

Halfway through it Helen tapped him on the shoulder. "This is nice," she said. "We have our Jubilee coming up in Terra Linda, but this one's more connected." Whatever that meant.

"How's school?" he said.

"It's good," Helen said. "We've made some real headway on blocking the Lonny baseball dugout naming."

Lonny was a one-time student of Helen's who got in some trouble a couple years after he graduated and ended up disappearing. Pete taught at the same high school for a while and knew the kid peripherally, good athlete. Now the school was trying to honor him with the dugout business.

The flip side being, there was an ugly underbelly to the story, and Helen felt the guy got what he deserved, and she was quite outspoken about it. Pete tended to agree, though he kept his mouth shut publicly.

Helen brought it *up* once, curious, that crazy as it sounds, could he--Pete--have had anything to do with it.

Pete said of *course* not, you're out of your goddang *mind* . . . but he figured still, why draw *attention* to the thing, just let 'em *name* the stupid dugout after the kid, and that's that.

Except Helen was fighting it, she'd apparently formed a committee and so forth.

Pete was thinking now, son of a bitch, can you just let it *go*?

There was an electric vehicle company in town and their display was passing by. They had decked-out funny-cars running on batteries driving in circles, including two guys sitting on a couch that looked like it was floating. Next was a women's dance troupe called West County Samba, where everyone had on silver beaded bikinis that flashed as they danced to a lively horn and drum section that brought up the rear.

"Get a load of *this*," Pete said.

"I know," Helen said.

Some of the women had classically voluptuous bodies, others not so great. One or two might have actually been South American, but the rest were white and fleshy. They were putting considerable energy into it and seemed to be having fun shaking themselves at the crowd.

Pete said, "I'm seeing a combination of salsa and belly dancing here. Not bad, actually."

Helen grabbed his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "It makes me horny."

Pete looked at her and shook his head, but he had to admit he was feeling it himself. The parade ended and they walked over to Ives Park where the festival was getting started. There were games and bands and wine tasting and food, and around the perimeter there were canopied booths. One of them was for the Rotary Club, and Smith was sitting in back, gnawing on a barbequed turkey leg that Sebastopol was apparently known for. He was easy to spot, big guy about six-three, thick red hair, freckles.

To be a *hundred percent* sure he had the right Jerry Smith, he would have to fine-tune a few more details . . . but meanwhile what could it hurt to say hello?

Helen was absorbed in a quilting demonstration a few booths away. Pete walked into the Rotary Club booth and said to Smith, "I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what you all are doing."

Smith finished chewing, swallowed and wiped his lips. "Thank you for that, we aim to please."

"So what's on *tap*, going forward?" Pete said.

"Well, we'd like to re-sod the soccer field at Brookhaven. And adjust the lighting angles if possible.

Neighbors are complaining they shine in their living rooms."

"You can't win, can you? You do the right thing, there's always a wise guy has problem with it."

"Ain't it so."

"I'm sorry," Pete said, "what was your name again?"

"Jerry. Smith."

"Joe Mossey," Pete said, extending his hand. Smith's left eye twitched, very slightly, but it was him.

Smith shifted his turkey leg into his left hand, wiped his right palm on a napkin and shook hands with Pete, getting grease all over him.

"Anyhow, I'll let you go," Pete said, "You guys have been appreciated for years in *our* family, I'm glad I finally said something. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"You too," Smith said.

Pete found a bathroom and washed his hands thoroughly. He looked around the rest of the festival and hooked back up with up Helen. He said, "I appreciate the skill level, don't get me wrong, but if all

the arts and crafts booths disappeared *tomorrow*, would we be any worse off?"

"You mean as a society?" Helen said.

"Okay, yeah."

"That's a *terrible* thing to say, and frankly I'm surprised at you Pete. How about if all the tall buildings in downtown San Francisco disappeared?"

"That'd be fine. I've never understood it, what they could be needing to do in all those offices."

"The difference is, the crafters are people, expressing themselves. The buildings are corporations."

"Fine, I'm not saying get rid of any *people* . . . They still liking Bruce by the way? Far as you know? For the Lonny thing?"

Bruce had been one of Helen's recent boyfriends.

When Lonny disappeared the police didn't seem to have much, and they latched onto this guy Bruce as a person of interest. He'd owned a strip club at one time on Santa Rosa Avenue it turned out, and the cops labeled him difficult to deal with.

It was complicated, why they thought Bruce was a possible in the Lonny deal. You figured it had something

to do with Helen opening her big mouth, that Lonny *deserved* to disappear . . . and Bruce having wanted to please her. Either way, you had to admit it was a heck of a reach.

Helen said, "I haven't had any communication with Bruce, but I don't think so. Lonny seems like a dead topic around town these days, except for the baseball dugout part."

They were back on Main Street, in front of a taqueria that looked busy. "I could eat," Pete said. "I got stuck talking to some slob who was stuffing his face, and it made me hungry."

Helen said Mexican sounded great but she wanted a real drink with it, which the taqueria didn't offer, so how about taking it out and going back to her place?

Pete said, "A couple Dos X's doesn't do it for you?"

"It's Saturday."

"The *new* dude, where's *he* fit in the picture exactly?"

"He has his mom tonight. They have a routine."

"So you're telling me . . . go in and get two super burritos and meet you at your house?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

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Helen had a small Victorian on Uppelt Street on the west side of Terra Linda. Not something you could afford today on a teacher's salary, but she'd picked it up at the right time. Her brother Lew, pretty nice guy actually, had renovated it for her.

One of the touches that Lew came up with was a low built-in bureau in Helen's bedroom closet. He had used redwood, to match the mouldings throughout the house, and finished it off with several coats of high gloss lacquer.

Right now, Helen was sitting on the bureau facing Pete, whose shorts were at his ankles, and they were going to town.

Helen said, "The *atmosphere* today . . . there was an intensity."

Pete said, "Not at *first* so much. But I'm seeing your point."

Helen said, "When I make love to someone else . . . you know what I think about Pete?"

"No."

"The time in your garage . . . against the car . . ."

Someone said, "Is that so."

Pete froze and Helen slid away from him and said, "*Goddamn it Doug*. What on earth are you doing here?"

"Have you been screwing other people just lately, or the whole time?" Doug said. He asked it pleasantly enough, a guy about thirty with an earring, wearing a pullover sweater and a Cal hat.

"You know what?" Helen said. She'd put on a robe, and had her hands on her hips, though she apparently didn't realize it was open down below. "Anyone who puts his mother first has *no* say in what I *do* or *don't* choose to do. Do you understand that?"

"Just a *minute*," Doug said, "We've had an understanding all along, I thought."

"Well you can take your understanding and shove it," Helen said. "Give me the key."

When Doug had driven away Helen said, "Don't even *go* there Pete."

"About the coast not being clear after all?"

"Yes. I'm really sorry."

"Forget that. The main thing, I'm glad he wasn't some psychopath about to pull a gun."

"No, he's a whole different animal than Bruce, if that's what you're concerned with. Anyhow . . . do you want to eat?"

"I'm thinking not yet."

Helen said, "What I wanted to add, to the garage part . . . it turns me on that we were keeping someone waiting upstairs."

"You've touched on that before," Pete said.

"Even so," Helen said, "we were rudely interrupted before I could complete my thought."

Monday morning Pete was outside doing a calf-stretch against the front of his building, about to go for his run, when a black Ford with extra antennas drove up and parked across the street. Pete felt himself hyperventilating slightly--it was human nature--and Detective Cousins from Marin County got out. He'd spoken to Pete once before, when he was canvassing anyone who might have an idea what happened to

Lonny. Just throwing shit out there, hoping something stuck, was Pete's impression.

"Your name came up again," Cousins said, not shaking hands.

Pete said, "It did?"

Whoa . . . No idea there'd been a *first* time. This was scary now.

"How well do you know Helen Eriksson?"

"I'm pretty sure I told you, no way in the world Helen would be capable of anything like that."

"Wasn't my question."

"Well, like I said, she's a good friend. We get together on and off."

"You talk about various topics when you're banging her?"

"Uh, okay, well yeah . . . the usual stuff that comes out spur-of-the moment, I guess."

"What'd you say about Lon Doolittle? When you were wedged into her closet Saturday."

"I don't remember saying *anything* about that person."

"How about her, what'd *she* say about him?"

"Nothing. The only time his name came up was earlier in the day."

"Where?"

"Sebastopol."

"Fuck you doing up *there*?"

"I *like* it there. They had a festival."

"Doolittle came up *how*?"

"Ah, they want to name the high school baseball field after him. Not the *field*, the dugout. Helen is trying to stop that from happening. She said they're making progress."

"And you said what?"

"I told her to let it go. Even though I agree it's wrong."

Cousins took off his sunglasses and started flipping through a notebook. "This goddamn case," he said.

"Yeah?" Pete said.

"Your friend Eriksson, she's gotta pick not one but two pricks."

"Oh."

"I don't mean you. Necessarily. Gilbright, the one owned the strip joint--and this Doug piece of horseshit. We're spending a hundred hours trying to clear the two of 'em."

"Wait a second, Doug just came in the picture recently I thought."

"No, she was doing 'em both at the same time. In theory, either of them could have whacked the idiot, and neither one's got a great alibi . . . What do you think of this Doug?"

"I don't know . . . he seemed *level*-headed enough, considering the circumstances I met him in."

"Yeah, well you're contrasting him with the first a-hole. Did you know the guy lives with his mother?"

"Helen said that."

"The reason I'm here, he called in yesterday and said someone Helen referred to as Pete was talking about Doolittle like he knew something."

"Well I wasn't. And I don't."

"In fairness, we've already established he's a lying piece of shit. Whether he's a homicidal liar, or just a momma's-boy pathological one, that's the problem."

"I see."

"What are you doing, exercising?"

"Most mornings, yeah."

"That help the plumbing and everything?"

"I haven't thought of it that way, but it probably doesn't hurt."

"McGirk, let me ask you something," Cousins said. "If someone came to you cold and asked what happened to Lon Doolittle, what would you say?"

Pete said, "Wow . . . I'd tell them my best guess . . . is someone who despised Lonny might have gone off the deep end. Be hard to go too far away from *that*."

"That's how we've been working it to this point. Now one of my partners is floating a theory it could have been random because there was a similar disappearance in Lake County. You think?"

"I don't know, common sense would say it wasn't random. Other than maybe a random *person* who didn't like Lonny."

"One other one. A kid played ball with Doolittle down in San Diego. One of the JC's. Mexican-American kid. Doolittle was a pitcher, this kid was a catcher, until he dropped out of school. They found him six months ago in Ensenada, the victim of an execution."

"Jesus . . . So could Lonny have been in the drug trade? Anything's possible, I suppose . . . Though I'm remembering I did see the guy once after he got out of high school, and that was in line at a deli and he seemed normal."

"Which deli?"

"Macci's, on Sarkesian."

Cousins said, "Okay. Well I thank you for your time there, pal."

"How's your father?" Pete said. Cousins had mentioned the other time that he was in a facility in the Sunset District.

"The fuck you have to bring *that* up for? Not good. I'm going over there now, since I'm down here. It doesn't help that my lieutenant's kicking my ass every day on Doolittle."

"I apologize."

"Nah, it ain't your fault. Soon as I can take early retirement, I'm out of this racket."

Pete watched Detective Cousins drive off. The last thing he felt like doing now was running, but he figured he better go through with it in case Cousins circled back to check on him. Declaring yourself more impulsive . . . that carried its own set of problems, Pete was learning.