

The Couple

2450 words

My old friend Rich Tomlinson won a cruise for two at the annual KQED raffle, so I told him I'd take care of showing his property that week. Rich inherited a nice spread up in Healdsburg and wanted to unload it, a Mid-Century modern house set on six acres with views of Mount St. Helena. The interior needed some renovation, but still.

I met the couple at six on a Thursday, which I never should have agreed to, since the Novato Narrows lane reduction was brutal at that hour. The man said, "We parked on the main road and walked, to get a feeling for it. That house you pass on the right, what's the story there?"

I'm already in a bad mood and I'm thinking, buddy, see if you like this house first before you worry about other houses, though the neighbor's house was admittedly a bit disheveled, with a couple of junk cars in

the side field. I had no idea who lived there. "He's a good neighbor to have," I said. "Always around, keeps an eye out."

"Well you certainly can't have too many of those, in the country," the woman said, smiling. She had blue eyes, red hair and a melodious Irish accent. She was young, mid-20's, had a ton of freckles and appeared to be quite large-chested under the mohair sweater.

"So where you folks from?" I said.

"Marin," the man said.

"Know it well," I said. "I wanted a little more action out the door, so I live in the city now, but I'm back on Mount Tam every chance I get. Whereabouts down there?"

"Let's start with the outside," the guy said.

There was a Japanese garden in back with a pond, an orchard to the left and a large open space, at least a couple acres, that wrapped around the perimeter. I pointed out the weeping Japanese maples in the garden along with some unusual shrubs and cactuses, and named the various fruit trees as best I could. The guy said, "Whatever. What concerns me is the lawn."

I said, "The what?"

The woman, whose name was Edith, chimed in.

"Yes, Stephen, what lawn?"

"All these weeds. The whole thing's dead."

I said, "No, no, you're in Sonoma County is all. This is open land, unspoiled."

"If you say so. What would it run me to plant one?"

"Well, it's not just planting it, it's watering something that large. And you're on a well, don't forget."

"Stephen, why would we need one?" Edith said.

"This is special just as it is."

"Your opinion," the guy said. "Let's have a quick look at the inside," and he marched ahead toward the house.

I said to Edith, "I had a friend in Santa Barbara who went to Ireland every year on vacation. Always the same, landed in Shannon, made a bee-line for the Cliffs of Moher."

"Gosh," Edith said, "I grew up not far from there! Have you heard of Athlone?"

"No. Is it rural?"

"Oh yes. We had a small farm actually."

What I wanted to ask was how she jumped from there to this Stephen. I said, "You grew up doing chores, working with animals, the whole nine yards?"

"Very much so. There's a peace one gains from the land, and I feel it here as well."

I said, "You should break up with that guy."

Edith cringed. She stopped walking.

"Don't you think?" I said.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but you simply could not be more out of line."

I said, "I had a health scare last year. After one of those, the world is more cut and dry. You tend to speak your mind."

"Well I'm glad it was only a scare . . . That said, I'd appreciate if you would adhere to real estate for the duration of the showing."

"Understood . . . You all looking to move up here full-time, weekend place, what?"

"Stephen sees it as a retreat at this point."

"And maybe somewhere to host your wedding, while you're at it?"

"I believe so."

"You dated other American guys, or you started with him?"

Edith didn't answer, but when we got to the front of the house and could see the guy in the living room through the picture window, swiveling his head all over the place like a bird, she said, "You sir, are an asshole."

I stopped off and had a drink at my friend Joyce's on the way back to the city. She lived in Petaluma, the west side, in a cozy little bungalow down the street from the high school where she taught.

"Well it's good to see you Chris," she said. "Have you even been over here since that last time?"

"I was thinking the same thing," I said. "Has to be close to a year. What was the name of that guy, your boyfriend?"

"Doug."

"Yeah, Doug. The next day was when Cousins questioned me again."

"I remember," Joyce said. She had a low bureau in her closet and that's where we were when Doug had walked in.

"He been back at all? Cousins?"

"No. And like I told you, my sense, around town? It's on the backburner at this point."

What happened was I had killed a guy, someone who deserved it, a guy who drugged one of Joyce's students at a party and got away with it, the girl ending up on life support and then dead. Joyce was glad it happened but also suspected me. That medical scare I told Edith about, it had me convinced I'd be dead in six months, so I made a list of people who shouldn't be walking around any more. This guy was number one. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was able to cave his head in with a baseball bat while he was jogging in the woods in back of Sonoma State.

Cousins was the Rohnert Park detective on the case. The Doug guy told the police I blurted out something relevant while I was with Joyce in the closet, but whether I did or not, I got lucky because Doug lived with his mother and such and the cops started to focus on him.

I said, "So the next guy you hooked up with was that math teacher, correct? He still in the picture?"

"Dave Luccia . . . Yes and no . . . What were you doing up here tonight, by the way?"

"I was showing a piece of property. It kind of pissed me off. An obnoxious, rich guy from Marin duping an innocent Irish gal."

"Were you into her? It sounds like it."

"Don't be silly. It was just hard to watch it unfold . . . Anyhow, it was good to see you."

"Do you want to stick around a while? For old times' sake?"

"I do, but I'm not going to," I said.

Rich was back from his cruise and I met him at the Booker Lounge on Monday and gave him the keys. "You look brown," I said. "Your nose is all peeling."

Rich said, "Never again. First of all, the amount of waiting. SFO, Miami, the bus to the ship, lining up for two hours to get on the thing. You're reduced to sheep."

"Charlotte have fun at least?"

"She did. She's wired different than me. Stuff bounces off her . . . Anyhow, those people show any interest?"

"It was a funny thing. I'm telling the guy what you said, how the architect Reece Clark was a disciple of Maybeck and Frank Lloyd Wright, and even spent time working with Wright in New Mexico."

"All true. The influence is unmistakable."

"Yeah, I'm pointing out the touches, the yellow brick extending from outside in, the redwood built-ins, the complex angles in the ceilings. The guy says, 'Never heard of any of 'em.' "

"Jesus Christ . . . Clark fine, Maybeck, okay, you're not very educated in California architecture--but Frank Lloyd Wright?"

"Would you have a phone number for the girlfriend?" I said.

"Just for the guy I think. When you say it was a funny thing, what's that mean?"

"Well the whole time, it seemed like he couldn't wait to get out of there. At the end he says he'll be coming back with his contractor."

"Wow. So it could happen. Thanks for doing this, Chris."

"How about an address? They live together probably, right?"

"Let's see," Rich said, going through his phone. "No just a number. Why?"

"I want to talk the woman out of marrying the idiot."

"Very funny. Whatever it is, I'm not going there . . . Here's what I have, just don't screw up my deal."

I dialed the number and the guy answered, sounding like he was driving. I said, "What I'm thinking, on the Healdsburg place? I'll just drop the keys off."

"For what?" he said.

"Well, so you can bring your contractor up there, or whoever, at your convenience, give it a second look."

"Pretty sure the Healdsburg one is dead in the water. There's one in Glen Ellen that suits us better. Thanks, though." He hung up.

I called him back and mentioned I was in Marin today and could drop the keys off in the mailbox just in case, you never know. He said fine and gave me the address, and of course they lived in Tiburon, where you

couldn't touch anything for less than a couple million, and that would be considered a tear-down.

Edith answered the door in workout clothes. "What in God's name are you doing here?" she said.

I said, "You exercise yet, or just getting set up for it? If you already have, the endorphins didn't kick in."

"I am not believing this."

"I told Stephen I'd drop something off. But forget that, why don't I buy you lunch?"

There was a trace of a smile. She said, "Really. And I'm supposed to justify something so absurd?"

"What absurd?" I said. "You're discussing real estate possibilities with your agent."

"You are actually an agent."

"No."

"I didn't believe so. You had no knowledge of taxes, square footage, zoning, anything. Though you certainly carried on about the architecture."

"What I'll do," I said, "I'll be at a place called Weatherby's, in the Marina, on Chestnut. You have a four-block stretch, good shopping both sides. You drop in, we'll have a bite."

Edith said, "Is that what you do, when you're not showing property?"

"You mean hit on engaged women? Or hang around bars?"

"Both."

I said, "I have a run I take first thing, most mornings. Fort Point and back. It stabilizes my day, and I go from there."

"And you ran today?"

"No, I slept late."

I was shooting the breeze with Mitch the bartender when she walked in. She had on jeans and sandals and that mohair sweater again, with the serious implication of the full chest.

"So you thought about it, started to get in the car, stopped, and then said what the fuck," I said.

"Sort of. The delicatessen down down the street," she said, "Stephen likes their prosciutto."

"He's a man of good taste then. That place, and the cleaners next to the Pottery Barn, they're all that's left from the old days."

"Tell me about your health thing," she said.

"Well . . . not sure if you follow football but it was right after the 49ers lost the NFC title game to the Giants, Harbaugh's first season. I went in thinking they'd give me a little Pepto Bismol, and next thing I know they're talking experimental therapies, clinical trials."

"My God. How terrifying."

"I actually came straight here that day. My friend Mitch over there, he helped me out."

"What did he say?"

"Basically to man up and just go for it . . . Also to try to tie up loose ends."

"You mean go for the therapy?"

"I asked the doc to put me in touch with one patient with my diagnosis who's still around, and he couldn't. So I never went back . . . No, Mitch meant go for the gusto."

"I see . . . so that's been your approach?"

"To an extent. I made a kind of To Do list of the important things. I got a couple of them handled. But as

the weeks and then months went on, I didn't get any worse, in fact I felt fine."

"And what was the doctor's opinion?"

"They wanted to re-test me, in case someone made a mistake in the lab. Which they called a one-in-a million shot. I didn't do it. At this point, I don't want to know."

Edith picked at a breadstick and took her time. "You should go in," she said.

I said, "Man, it's warm in here, you know it? I'm surprised you don't want to take off that sweater."

"Back home," she said, quieter, "you'd be known as a naughty boy."

"But not here?"

"We'll see."

The Jetty was an old-time place along the northern shore of Sausalito, sandwiched between a boat builder and a business park. I opened the door a crack for a little air, and was surprised it was dark out.

"I don't mean to say nothing," I said, "but you probably should be getting out of here."

"It's okay," Edith said. "Stephen is in Los Angeles." She was standing at the mirror, her hair wrapped in a towel, another one sort of covering the rest of her.

"What's he do, you don't mind me asking? Though give me the limited version."

"He manufactures a small part that apparently most tow trucks in the world need."

"Oh."

"And the answer is yes, you were naughty," she said.

"Well I gave it a try," I said to Joyce. It was Saturday and we were on the Matt Davis Trail on the eastern slope of Mount Tam, headed to Stinson Beach.

"Very considerate of you," Joyce said. "But that's human nature sometimes, they want to be duped."

"They do."

"Did you offer anything beyond the event, to sweep her away somewhere and so forth?"

"No . . . you never want to offer them that . . . I tried to change her focal point, that was about it."

"And it didn't work."

"Not at all. Reason I know, she asked me when another good time would be."

"And you're going to accommodate her?"

"No way . . . Jeez, you should know me well enough by now--one thing I'm not, is an enabler."

"Well, an ex-jogger would certainly agree with that, is my guess."

"Okay, here we go again," I said. "You know what? Just stick to the trail and look at the ocean, will you please?"