

Traffic

2200 words

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“Two things on my plate,” Jim said to Bert. “First one--I probably told you about--I break my ankle at camp and they got me laying in a hospital bed overnight.”

Bert said, “You’re right, I heard this one. Still weird they’d hospitalize your ass with a broken ankle.”

“This’s a small town, remember. We’re up in the mountains. A Sunday. No docs available till the morning . . . Not kids camp, a sports camp.”

“I get that.”

“You want to hear me re-tell it? How I did it?”

“No, but go ahead, it floats your boat obviously.”

“In a nutshell,” Jim said, “I make a play. One we had to have. It was like the grand finale, we were playing the staff.”

“Which sport again?” Bert said.

“Know what, you’re annoying. Anyhoo . . . the guy in the room with me, he’s younger. His girlfriend visits him, *60 Minutes* is on, and after a while they pull that divider thingy and they go to town.”

“Yeah, that part I don’t mind hearing again.”

“You get the idea. So, later they wheel this guy out for an enema or some shit, and we get to talking, me and the gal.”

“Wouldn’t work that way, the enema’d take place right there.”

“Wheeled him out for *whatever* the fuck. She’s skinny, the hair shaved around the temples, a bunch of metal on her person. What I typically can’t get into at all. Fullish boobs though.”

“So let me guess,” Bert said. “The intrigue factor sprouted up. Along with something else.”

“You can’t let me finish?”

“You’re not complicated. But you’re not going to tell me something happened.”

“All’s it was,” Jim said, “she and the dude, they’re trying to buy a house. In Vacaville. I’d given her my card, and so she asked a few questions.”

“And you gave her your card because?”

“I don’t *know* why, I just handed it over.”

“Fine. Vacaville’s where all the traffic stops, when you’re trying to go to Tahoe.”

“You got that right. Brutal. Cutting to the chase, she called me couple weeks ago.”

“Wait, why was the guy in the hospital up *there* with you then?”

“Guy said he got food poisoning at a Red Lobster. That’s not the point.”

“They got Red Lobsters in the mountains near your camp deal?”

“Jesus. So he got it somewhere else and it hit him later . . . What I’m building up to, I had lunch with her and so on, and I’m not sure what to do about it.”

“Just a wild hunch--the guy not on board with that. Or else they split up, is where you're going.”

“Definitely wouldn’t be okay with it and no they didn't. He was at one of those weekend National Guard meetings they have them do.”

“So he’s in the reserves, not a bad gig. But uh-oh, so you went back to their place? The one they closed on?”

“Nah they couldn't get a loan she said . . . and *no*, we wouldn't do that, but we went somewhere else.”

“Figured. Before I ask how it was, what’s number two?”

“Huh?”

“Two things on your plate, you said.”

“Oh. Well, maybe not as urgent, but I can’t shake off this fucker who keeps bugging me like a little gnat. I did

his wife once, but it was like 15 years ago, I swear. Guy can't get past it. Or pretends he can't."

Bert said, "Variation on a theme. What a surprise. Like I was saying when you cut me off, still leading with your dong . . . He's bothering you how?"

"You know, little jabs, emails to my work address. Reminders. I went on Twitter, I don't know why I did, waste of time, but he found me and shoots me messages sometimes."

"I thought you had to follow each other to do that."

"You doubting me here? Bottom line, do I continue to ignore it--or step up for once and take a little action."

"So go on offense you mean . . . Well has there been escalation? Sounds that there has, *some* department, otherwise you wouldn't be wrestling with it."

Jim said, "One thing, probably irrelevant, I heard they got divorced. Before you get all bent out of shape that *a-ha*, he's blaming me now--the wife gained like a hundred pounds, someone said."

"Wait, before the divorce?"

"Yeah. I could see it going that way, even back then. She liked her sweets."

"Yeah? Thought you said you only were with her the once."

“So? She liked her sweets the one time. What do you want from me?”

“Where’s this guy live at?”

“I think Marin County.”

“Have to say, a dude obsessing this long, I’d be a little concerned. Maybe not freaked out but watching my back. If you did the guy in, what are the odds you’d get away with it?”

“Okay you’re messing with me. I’m looking for a practical solution here.”

“Guy decent looking?”

“No idea.”

“So if he is, get him together with the camp gal. Work it somehow, redirect their focuses.”

“You’re in the twilight zone, man. I shouldn’t have brought this shit up.”

Bert said, “I just read about one. Down in Florida, that really happened. You ever see the movie *Fargo*?”

“That was a great one,” Jim said. “You never knew who the story was about really, the car sales dude or the police chief lady. What about it?”

“S’almost like the Florida guy uses the script. Oh and the guy’s a car dealer, if you can believe it. Though I think higher up than the Fargo loser. What it is, he has

an affair with someone out of state. When he re-contacts her she's got a boyfriend in the act, wants money from the guy or he'll expose him. Guy's married, the car guy."

"Already not sounding that credible. These days, everyone screwing around, not a deal breaker if the wife finds out."

"You would think. For whatever reason it hits a nerve, and the car guy puts a contract out on the pair."

"She's in on it too now? The one he was banging?"

"Apparently. And not a contract to kill anyone, just mess them up, I think kidnap them briefly."

"Just *like* the movie then. So it gets out of hand?"

"Oh yeah, they find the two bodies in a construction site. Took 'em like a year, but they just arrested the hired idiots, along with the auto dealer. Couple of ex-marines, which you wouldn't think."

"Dumb," Jim said.

"I know it," Bert said. "You gotta at least disappear the bodies. That seems basic."

"Dialing it back to my deal though . . ." Jim said.

"You *are* trying to package it? That why you brought up both messes together?"

"Like I said, didn't consider it that way. Any specific suggestions?"

“Nope. And you’re all over the place there Bud, if you’re even being straight with me.”

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On the phone Jim said to Paige, the hospital guy’s wife: “So Babe, what do you think?”

“About?” she said.

“You know. We cool the jets, or what?”

A pause. “Rick’s away for a couple of nights. If that means anything.”

“Jeez. More reserves shit, you mean?”

“No, his mother got Covid. She’s a hearty bitch, she’s okay now, but she had to go in for a few days. He’s bringing her home and you know, organizing her. Down in Oxnard.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well . . . you know that plaza off 80, before you get to the Nut Tree coming my way? They got an Applebees, Olive Garden, Black Bear Diner, those assorted chain deals? 7 or so works. I vote for Applebees.”

“I suppose I can make it, fine,” Paige said.

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The better move would be get her down to his place in San Leandro, meaning out of her territory entirely, on

the off chance but a scary one that the guy comes back from his alleged mom's early. Unlikely even then they'd all run into each other but you never know.

But he suggested that last time and it didn't work, so if you wanted to fuck this person another time or two you had to do it on her terms. Admittedly on his end it had been pretty great when the lights went off. Hard to tell for sure, her end, if she was enjoying it a whole lot or was there because she was bored.

Jim hadn't thought of Bert's angle to package the deal, even though it was laughable, but he didn't have to leave for a couple hours . . . so why not throw it out there . . . and he emailed the 15-year prick to meet him at the Applebees.

Which he'd forgotten about entirely, he and Paige working a couple of watered down apple martinis and a wings appetizer, when the guy shows up.

"James Dool?"

"You've *got* to be kidding," Jim said, his mouth staying open.

"Why are you surprised?" the guy said, shaking hands with Paige and introducing himself as Morf and sliding into the booth next to her.

Jim said, "I get who you are, your last name Morford, but kinda presumptuous to nickname yourself, you think?"

"Rick calls his own self Dix sometimes," Paige said.

"Is that right," Jim said. "Cute . . . reason I invited this low-life, he's been hassling me. That a meeting of the minds might clear the air. Unlikely of course, but nothing like the long shot of him actually showing up."

"I want to clear the air too," Morf said.

"Good. Because I was trying to figure out, if I killed you and wasn't stupid enough to leave you out in the open, like a construction site, could I adequately disappear the body."

"Are you referring to DNA?" Paige said.

"Jeez," Jim said, "you're supposed to be shocked up the wazoo, not chiming in."

"She didn't really," Morf said, "she asked a reasonable question."

"What are you, a comedian?" Jim said. "How is your wife, by the way?"

"We're not in touch."

"She gained a lot of weight though? That part of it?"

"Part of what?" Paige said. "I'm confused."

"You're a pig," Morf said to Jim.

Jim said to Paige, “I’m getting too old to sugar coat stuff. I had a fling with his old lady, okay, but we’re talking a decade ago plus. Dude needs to get a life.”

“Gosh,” Paige said. “That is quite a grudge. You don’t think Rick . . .?”

“Well Baby,” Jim said, “how’s about you don’t make an announcement to Rick--Dix--so we don’t find out?”

“Putting it together,” Morf said, “you guys are fornicating each other, behind someone’s back.”

“Aren’t *you* a genius,” Jim said. “I’ll bet you can finish the New York Times crossword like nobody’s business . . . Friend of mine, he actually suggested getting you two together, resolve both messes simultaneously.”

“How odd,” Paige said. “For real?”

“No, not for real obviously,” Jim said. “My friend’s a moron, more or less.”

“I don’t understand,” Morf said. “How would that resolve anything?”

“I just *said*, forget what some doofus blurted out.”

“Why did you bring it up then?” Paige said.

“Really,” Morf said. “Crazy.” Though Jim couldn’t tell for sure, but it looked like Morf put his hand on Paige’s knee.

Paige said, “I mean like what would be the . . .”

“Payoff?” Morf said. “For this clown?”

“Yes,” she said, and Jim thought he heard a little extra huskiness in there, and wondered, God forbid, is she being stimulated.

At the same time . . . Jim thought: *Holy Toledo, this might work*, and excused himself to use the men’s room . . . give them a little space--if there actually was some kind of vibe in play--plus he hadn’t gone since fighting all that traffic.

When he got back Paige was sitting there by herself, on the phone. When she got off she said, “I was double-checking with my girlfriend. Would Dix hold like a 15-year grudge, in her opinion.”

Jim said, “What about the other guy?”

“I took his information.”

“*What* information?”

“You know, full name and such. So I can background check him a bit. You’re very strange.”

“*I’m* strange? What, you’re worried if he’s a stalker or some shit? I can answer that one for you direct.”

“My girlfriend said Dix wouldn’t hold a grudge.”

“Is that right.”

“Unh. She said he’d act on it right away.”

“Oh.”

“Yep. So.”

“The new idiot though? You’re going to hook up with him, you think? Potentially?”

“I think I like you better. Probably not . . . What?”

“No, nothing.”

“You’re disappointed? How insane is that?”

“It’s just . . . there was no way . . . but then, Jeez.”

“That you could have got out of this mess?”

“Something like that, yeah, I’ll admit.”

“You’re kind of pathetic Jim. I’d almost go out on a limb and call you a loser.”

“Except not quite?”

“You fuck fine.”

“Well *whoopee*,” Jim said.