

Trifle

1800 words

There was a complex south of Market called *The Rialto* that played off-beat, artsy films which didn't make it into the mainstream theaters. Pete picked the one titled "A Graceful Exit", not knowing anything about it.

He'd met someone a few days ago at a Starbucks, Rory, and she showed up on time at six, but she had a friend with her, Joanne.

"Good choice," said Rory. "This got really good reviews."

It was a documentary about a dance troupe in Egypt that was able to perform freely finally, after the overthrow of Mubarak. Pete didn't think the liberated dancing was much better or that different than the restricted dancing, but the dancers were so joyous that you couldn't help root for them. Naturally, it ended with a performance in New York.

"What did you think?" Pete said.

"I cried," Joanne said.

"I did too," Rory said. "I can relate."

“Wait a second,” Pete said. “You relate to them, *how?*”

“I’m an artist as *well*. A musician. Depending on circumstances, it can be very inhibiting.”

Pete was thinking about the Warriors game he was missing. Miami was in town and his friend Ed scored an extra ticket but a little late unfortunately. Pete didn’t like to break his commitments, plus he was hoping to maybe get somewhere with Rory.

“You’re full of shit, you know that?” he said. “Anyway, I’m starving. Let’s eat somewhere.”

There was an Indian place he remembered in the Tenderloin, a run-down hole in the wall, but cheap and authentic. He knew the gals would be vegans, so he made sure to order himself the meatiest dish he could.

“This is really tasty,” Joanne said. “We have some of these in Berkeley, but this place is even better.”

“You guys roommates, old friends, in a relationship, what?” Pete said.

“Yes, roommates,” Rory said. “Two white girls in the flatlands. We live like a half block up from San Pablo Avenue.”

“We have a male roommate though too,” Joanne said. “He’s black, and most people know him in the neighborhood, so that helps a lot. Henry.”

“Oh,” Pete said, trying to figure it out, but deciding it wasn’t worth it.

“And you?” Rory said.

“No particular excitement. That’s why you ran into me at the coffee shop in Mill Valley, I like to hike by myself on Mount Tam.”

“Is that what you had just done?”

“Not that day actually.”

“That’s what I mean, I could tell right away you were struggling with something. You still are.”

“I am, but I feel better now that I ate. Let’s get out of here.”

Pete walked them down to the bottom of Powell to get the BART train back to Berkeley.

“Well, it was fun,” he said. “Thanks for meeting me.”

Joanne announced that actually she was going to Jill and Tabitha’s party in the Haight. “You want to come, Ror? You too Pete, it might be weird, but they don’t care.”

“Hmm . . . maybe what I’ll do then,” Rory said, “is hang out with Pete a little longer.” Looking at him. “If that’s all right. I feel like you’re a tour guide.”

He said fine with him, he didn't mind.

“Joanne gay?” he asked, when she’d left.

“Not really. She’s into women, but she appreciates men too.”

“Well, there’s a couple options,” he said. “We can go up to Nob Hill, get a cappuccino somewhere, take the Cable Car back down. The other would be the longer effort, here to Chestnut Street. I could buy you a drink and then my car’s near there so I’d drive you back to Berkeley. You don't want to be taking BART too late.”

“I like Plan B,” she said. She had put on a woolen hat that covered the tops of her ears, with straps that hung loose. She looked cute.

“Okay then. I enjoy pointing stuff out. If it gets over the top, tell me to shut up.”

A mile or so into it, when they got to Polk Street, she said, “This makes me realize I don’t plain *walk* nearly enough. We need those positive ions.” Pete didn’t say anything and kept moving.

They took Broadway to Fillmore, and then down the steep hill with the classic view of the bridge, everything sparkly across the bay tonight.

Sunday night at Weatherby's it was a little quieter than the rest of the weekend but not much. They sat at a corner table and had lemon drops. When Mitch came over, Pete introduced him to Rory and gave him the not-what-you-think look, though he could feel it maybe happening, you never knew.

As they were walking to his place he said, "I'm trying to picture the set-up. Pardon me being out-of-line, but the liquor's got me curious . . . You guys bang your roommate Henry, or it's nothing like that?"

"Joanne does, on a semi-regular basis," Rory said. "I tried it once, when I first moved in, but it didn't work for me."

"Oh."

"Do you have a guitar?"

"I do, as a matter of fact."

"Can I play a couple of songs for you, originals? Then you can take me home. I'd love to know what you think."

He told her be my guest, and they turned down Broderick, crossed Bay, and when they got to his

building there was his old friend Helen unfortunately, waiting on the bench in the alcove.

“You have to be kidding me,” he said.

“Pete, I just need to speak to you briefly,” Helen said, giving Rory a weak smile.

He introduced them. “Tell you what,” he said, pointing upstairs. “I’m going to set her up and I’ll be down in a couple minutes.”

“So who’s Helen?” Rory said in the apartment.

“Helen is someone I used to work with,” he said. “She’s really pissing me off.”

“And you’re hooked up with her?”

“We were at one time. Not any more.

“She’s attractive. She takes care of herself.”

Pete did have to admit Helen looked pretty good tonight, her hair a little different, and wearing a skirt, suede.

“Okay, let me handle this real quick,” he said. “The guitar’s hanging on the wall in the bedroom, and there’s not a lot in the kitchen, but whatever you can find . . . I’ll be right back.”

“No problem,” she said. “It’s nice here.”

Back downstairs, Helen said, “I’m really sorry to keep showing up unannounced. But you didn’t call me back all weekend. Can we talk somewhere private, just for a second?”

They went in the garage. There was only one car there, his, no one around.

“Pete, we had a Walk-a-Thon at school yesterday morning. The police came by and talked to me.”

“They did?”

“I mean, they talked to all of us, whatever faculty and administrators were there, so I know it was just routine. But I lied to them, which scares the daylights out of me.”

“What do you mean, lied?”

“They asked me could I think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Matt Morrison, and I said I couldn’t.”

“That’s perfect then. And that’s the truth.”

“It’s not,” she said. “And something else.”

“What?”

“I’ve been horny for you. I can’t get beyond it . . . Ever since what I think you might have had something to do with.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind, you know that?”

“I’m not wearing any underwear at the moment,” she said.

Fuck.

A few minutes later, her back up against the side of the car, she said, “Didn’t know doctors’ secretaries . . . had nose rings these days.”

He had no idea what she was talking about, then put it together that she thought Rory was somehow bizarrely his doctor’s secretary . . . and he thought about correcting her, but figured what was the harm.

“Everything good?” Rory said, when he was back.

“I’m very sorry about that,” Pete said. “There was an accident involving a former colleague, up where she teaches. She’s having trouble rationalizing it.”

Rory was sitting cross-legged on the couch strumming the guitar, a cup of tea steaming on the coffee table.

“Well,” she said, “do you want to make love *first*, or should we go through the songs?”

Jesus Christ Almighty.

He said why not try the songs.

She had a good voice. Not a trained voice, but expressive, with plenty of range. She ran through three. They were pretty much folk, with a little pop-hip-hop element thrown in. The lyrics were off, corny, with too many words, but the melodies weren't bad.

When she finished, she laid down the guitar and waited for his reaction.

“For me, the second was the weakest,” he said. “It sounded too much like something else, that I can't place. But the other two were good. Not great yet, they need a little help, but both pretty catchy actually.”

“Wow, that means a lot,” she said. “Thank you.”

They talked music for a while. She told him she'd been going to open mics, and that a friend who had Pro Tools was helping her put together a demo. Pete said he was in a couple of bands back in college but rarely picked up an instrument these days, and that it was nice to feel her energy.

“Welp,” she said. “This turned out to be one of the best evenings I had since I moved here. You sure you don't mind driving me?”

“Of course not,” he lied. “That's the idea.”

When he dropped her, she said, “You're a pretty nice guy. Maybe you can come to one of my gigs.”

“Well, yeah, you never know,” he said.

And that was that, but meanwhile he realized he was starved out of his mind and when he got back to the city he thought of Mel’s on Geary. There were other places open at 3:30 in the morning but you knew Mel’s did the job. Pete felt a lot better halfway through his Reuben sandwich and strawberry shake.

“We’re a little scattered tonight, *are* we?” the guy next to him at the counter said.

Pete knew the type, an old San Franciscan, a straight shooter. Who started off in the Mission District, went to Catholic school if the parents could afford it, still hit you with bits and pieces of the original San Francisco accent. Pete’s dad had told him more than once that when these guys pass away, that’s it.

Pete had a few teachers who reminded him of this guy, and there was a comfort zone.

He said, “Not so much scattered, as befuddled.”

The guy smiled. “Does frustrated cover it?”

“Man,” Pete said, “I’d be a terrible actor then. Even at the soap opera level.”

“Hey, what are you gonna do,” the guy said.