

TV Tray

2100 words

“Listen,” Pete said to Gloria, “you doing anything special today?”

They were in her kitchen, she had the griddle working, the middle of the stove, hot cakes on there, and naturally with Gloria they weren’t your run of the mill Bisquick flapjacks.

“*Un*-believable,” Pete said, stuffing in the first bite after saturating the beauties with both the real Vermont maple syrup and an amazing blackberry jam from some farm.

“Oh you always say that,” she said. “You’re my best fan.”

“I’m thinking not necessarily,” Pete said, “because *whatever* you concoct--unless the guest in question was born tastebud-less--is going to leave them dripping in a state of orgiastic delight.”

Ooh. Not only did that come out wrong, he meant orgasmic, didn’t he? . . . not sure what the other word

even was--but why use *any* analogy remotely in the ballpark?

Pete remembered his dad once, at a dinner party, making a comment like that to an attractive guest, who lived down the block and was pretty tight with his mom, and who had gone through about five husbands.

His dad's reference point wasn't food, it was literature, and everyone had loosened up by then and his dad was quoting the woman a passage from Dostoevsky . . . Maybe that *wasn't* it, the literature part, maybe his dad was relating another experience he liked to bring up, an archaeology trip he'd been a part of before Pete was born . . . either way, there was the 'orgasms of delight' summation.

In the dinner party case, Pete wondered if his dad was making it with the woman, or might in the future--and she was one of those society people who attended the opening night of the opera in full formal get-up, but otherwise wore awfully tight skirts and could swing the heck out of her hips when she walked past you.

So if you weren't trying to lead someone on, why on earth would you, in the middle of a stack of pancakes, angle your reaction like that?

Pete said, "That popped out. Terrible faux pas, on my part. Very sorry about it."

"So you're not trying to seduce me?" Gloria said.

"Wasn't planning on it, no."

"I'm glad then . . . I mean, in a next lifetime, who knows."

She refilled and re-stacked everything, and Pete said he's going to have to walk about 20 miles to work this off . . . and the awkward moment had passed, and they were back joking around . . . and you really did need the Glorias of the world, where stuff didn't invariably have to lead to *other* stuff. Much better.

"At any rate," Pete said, "what I was starting you off with there, would you want to come with me and visit an old teacher?"

"Which school?" And yeah, he was forgetting obviously he could mean someone from high school, Lowell, who they *both* knew.

"No, this is Marina we're talking."

“Middle school?”

“If you need to. We still called it junior high. Much stronger.”

“Who’s your teacher?”

“Mr. Gullickson. PE. Very tough customer, might be in jail today, or at least bankrupt from all the lawsuits. I mean if you weren’t paying attention, he’d physically smack you . . . He’s not doing well, I heard.”

“Where did you find this out?”

“You’re giving me the 3rd degree . . . From one of those dumb Facebook groups I don’t like admitting to being in, something like *We went to junior high school in San Francisco*.

“I’ve seen that one. We have our own though, Giannini. Our alumni class is pretty organized.”

“What a surprise . . . This guy lives in Walnut Creek, Mr. Gullickson.”

“But you’re saying underneath it, you had a fondness for him?”

“Are you kidding?” Pete said. “Like I was getting to, he kicked our asses for three years.”

“So you want to resolve things,” she said.

“One more point about my dad,” Pete said, easing the Chevy Malibu rental off 680 onto Ygnacio Valley Road, “he said when he was a kid, my grandparents brought them over here on Sundays, and they swam in the creek.”

Of course there was no sign of any creek now, *or* walnut orchards . . . the dummkopfs on these planning boards cheerleading every move that could transform the town into as faceless a one as possible. You had 10-story steel and glass buildings sitting where any chance for a walnut or a creek were buried long ago. Even now there was a crane doing something right where you came off the exit.

“You sure about that time frame, your dad?” Gloria said, and admittedly Pete was not, maybe it was too late already if his dad was a kid in the 1940s . . . but the story had a little pop to it.

A few miles and a big assisted living complex was coming up on the right, and Gloria looked at Pete and he shook his head, don't worry I'm not dragging you into one of these places today.

You hit a T at the base of the open hills and turned into a residential neighborhood that had seen better days.

The houses were early tracts, 50's and 60's, looking like 2 bedroom jobs, with one-car garages sticking off the front, where folks convert the thing to another room. Sprinkled in you did have some houses that were renovated or built fresh.

Mr. Gullickson's wasn't one of the new variety. Yes the outside had been painted in the last 20 years and the roof had been maintained, but that may have been it. Everything looked pretty dang original, including the windows with those metal awnings hanging over them that you'd see in the old days in real hot places like Modesto.

Pete decided here goes nothing, and he rang the bell, and a pleasant woman greeted them. She was no spring chicken herself, probably as old as Gullickson, but she had energy and still moved fine.

"I'm Peter," he said, and he almost never used that name but that's what he was back in junior high. He introduced Gloria, and the woman, Dolly, said, "It's very

thoughtful of you to come . . . He has his good days and bad, naturally.” And she ushered them in.

You expected it, but it was tough to take anyway, Mr. Gullickson looking so diminished. He’d been a towering figure back then, was supposedly in the San Francisco high school sports hall of fame, and he’d played college basketball somewhere too. Pete had been placing it . . . if he was 12, 13 back then, and Mr. Gullickson was in his 50’s, which seemed about right, that’d put him mid-80s now. He was sitting on the couch watching a sporting event, Jeez, it looked like an English soccer match, the sound up pretty loud, and he was eating a sandwich on a folding TV table. He had on slippers and a robe, never the greatest sign in the middle of the day.

“Hello sir,” Pete said. “You probably don’t remember me, but I started telling Gloria here on the way over, how you used to challenge the whole class with those shots from half court.”

This razed a bit of a smile out of Gullickson, and he was looking Gloria over, not worrying about Pete, but fair enough, maybe the guy was trying to place her,

thinking he might have taught *her* one time too. Though Pete realized that back then, no, male PE teachers didn't teach any girls.

"Ronald was always *proud* of those mid court shots," Dolly, the wife was saying. "Weren't you dear?"

"Never missed one I guess," Gullickson mumbled.

"Before we get to that," Pete said, "I have to ask you --you always hated soccer. You made us play it for punishment."

"I still do," Gullickson said. "But my grandkids play. Have to join the fun."

"Anyways," Pete said to Gloria, "so of course on rainy days we'd be stuck in the gym. All three years, there was one day, same scenario. He'd grab a ball, announce if he missed from half court, he'd buy the whole class milkshakes . . . But if he made it, we'd have to run Funston . . . he gave us the option, up front."

"Course I did," Gullickson said. "That was the fun of it."

"Meaning, you asked for a show of hands, who was in, on the bet. We all went for it every time, except maybe a couple kids who were in the chess club, where a

milkshake wasn't worth the risk of having to run. Unlikely as it would be."

"How'd I do?" Gullickson said.

"Well, like I'm building up to sir . . . son of a gun, but you drained the shot, all three years. Nothing but net."

This got a laugh out of the old man, though it was a slightly aggressive one, and the truth was he did hit the shots the first *two* years, but the third year's one clunked off the front rim. And Gullickson had been good to his word, sort of, with the rewards, though he sent a couple kids to the soft serve place around the corner and had them come back with cones, and not shakes.

"I must say," Gloria said, "we never had something like *that* happen, at our school."

"Which one?" Gullickson said.

"Giannini? In the Sunset."

"I started off there," he said. "Marina was a better fit."

"That's interesting," Gloria said, "may I ask how so?"

You didn't necessarily want him to get started with this, and odds were it boiled down to his discipline style enjoying more free rein at Marina . . . and Pete figured he should bring up the one thing that had been bugging him for 30 years, before Mr. Gullickson might suddenly fade and need to to take a nap.

"Sir," Pete said, "I'm wondering if you really *remember* me. There was a baseball game against Denman. Playoff game. Jeb Caruso and Matt Fliker and Dave Horn were on that team too. You remember *those* guys, right?"

Gullickson was squinting at Pete now, and you couldn't tell if this was good or bad . . . but Pete went forward with it.

"I was playing second, they had one guy on, their final at-bat, we were up by two runs. I make the play, I go wide and backhand it, which wasn't routine . . . but the throw to first, it kinda slipped . . . You might remember, it pulled Caruso off the bag for a second, and then he stomped around trying to find it, and wasn't able to, and the guy was safe."

Gullikson was squinting worse, if that was possible. He said, “Yep. We get that *one*, there’s two down, we nurse it home. Instead of the flood gates opening.”

“Yeah, well,” Pete said.

Mr. Gullickson did start to stand up now, though he couldn’t quite make it on his own, and Dolly helped him. He said to Pete, “The fuck you coming in here with *that?*”

Pete didn’t have a good answer, and it did seem like time to leave, and Gullickson was working his walker, you saw the back of him heading down the hall and disappearing, and Gloria and Dolly embraced, and Dolly thanked them so much for coming.

Gloria waited a few minutes, until they were on 24 and passing Lafayette on the left, and she said, “What *did* you bring that up for?”

Pete drove a little longer before addressing it. “No good reason.”

“Except that,” she said, “you were hoping he had let it go.”

“I guess either that,” he said, “or was senile enough where he didn’t even remember coaching baseball.”

“You’re trying to make a joke, the senility--but there’s truth to it. Correct?”

“You carry stuff around,” Pete said, a little catch in his throat, which he hadn’t expected.

Gloria reached over to him, said she admired him for trying . . . and traffic was light back into the city and after a while Pete said that was good, they'd lucked out with the traffic.