

Deficiency

3000 words

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“What was your other thing?” Chandler said. “Come on, I’m getting stiff here.”

We were on the tennis court bench at Polliwog Park, in between sets.

“Ah stupid,” I said. “But I’ve been subletting my place up north, my one-bedroom in the Marina. 4 grand a month.”

“Ho-ly Mackerel.”

“Yeah, the market’s insane. Does include parking, which is tricky to find. Anyhow, the mope stopped paying.”

“You’re screwed.”

“Jeez, and you’re a lawyer? Just like that?”

“Big time. Especially Frisco. Liberal landlord-tenant courts, takes you forever to evict, and they can put in a simple bogus defense. Hamstringing the process bad.”

“Now I’m in a very foul mood,” I said. “So let’s play. Though again . . . thank you on the first thing.”

This was getting uncomfortable, having to keep appreciating the guy, but the fact was you were getting

free legal advice just by letting him kick your ass on the court . . . and unfortunately the tenant assessment was right on target, wasn't it.

I headed down to the Crowe's Nest for a little cocktail hour, and it only took a second before Ned Mancuso spotted me and was up and coming over, big strides, like we were long lost friends.

My relationship with Ned was a work in progress. I enjoyed the guy, probably actually liked him, but I didn't trust him.

Then again Ned had helped me out, couple of jams, and hadn't asked for anything in return, at least yet.

"What's shaking, my man?" he said.

Before I could answer, Ned signaled for drinks.

"What," he said, "you seem uncertain."

"Nah, it's all good, I just don't want to overdo it."

Which is typically what happened when Ned took charge, it turned into a long night.

"Come on. Relax, take a load off. You need me to later, I'll give you a lift."

"Well that's one good thing," I said, "I can always walk."

“Oh yeah,” Ned said, “you got a sweet set-up there. Smart. You're not automobile-dependent.”

“I won't argue with you, though it's a little far. Even two, three blocks, that changes it.”

“So get a bike.”

“Yeah I thought of that. What holds me back, is not wanting to fly off the thing, negotiating the odd hill on the way into town.”

“So you get a helmet.”

“Nah, you can't. I haven't seen anybody with one since I've lived here.”

“You know you're right . . . How about that one guy, you ever run into him up in the hills, always got a white t-shirt?”

“I know who you mean, that guy's something else. He's doing interval work on his one-speed cruiser. He's got to be in his 70's.”

“Cindy's grandfather,” Ned said, leaving it at that, and Cindy was the waitress who'd just set down our Sunset Punches . . . and it was a reminder that when you stripped it away, Manhattan Beach was a small town.

I asked Ned what he had going, and he said something about getting a little lucky this week . . . and you sort of wanted to know, but you probably didn't.

“Not your fault,” I said, “you didn’t remind me of this--intentionally--but I got a guy not paying rent.”

“You *own* rental shit, you mean?”

“No, no, I learned my lesson with that. This, is I sublet my place in the Bay Area when I moved down here in October.”

“So you didn’t learn your lesson.”

“Okay, you wanna nitpick it, fair enough.”

“It seems to me,” Ned said, “you make up your mind, you make a clean break. Don’t half-ass it.”

He had a point of course. The only reason I was doing this, hanging onto the place on Broderick Street, was if it didn’t work out in southern California you’d never be able to afford an apartment in that neighborhood again, coming in cold.

“At any rate,” I said. “I have to go up there. I fear. Sooner rather than later.”

“I feel for you,” he said. “Tenants hold all the cards. Nothing worse. No easy solution.” And actually shaking his head . . . This wasn’t a good sign, I decided, if *Ned* thought it was going to be difficult.

I said, “This is out of left field, but when you hear about someone jumping off a hotel balcony into a pool--

like one of those college fraternity spring break deals down in Cabo--how high is too high?”

“That’s a good point. Where does it switch from novelty to suicidal.”

“Yeah . . . You ever read the one about the trick high-diver? The guy who climbs the ridiculous tower and dives into a little tank? Like they used to do in the circus?”

“I know where you're going, that was good. Gave you a feel for it. The guy looking down at the tank, seeing it the size of a silver dollar.”

I said, “Then, he’s up there on his perch, getting ready to do a test dive, no one around except the assistant who just finished rigging the scaffold . . . and the two guys come around the corner and shoot *that* guy. Then as they’re running off, one of them takes a glance back and sees the diver up there watching.”

“Yeah, great start . . . See now, that scene was New Orleans, I’m pretty sure.”

“The rest of the story didn’t quite match the beginning. They got into some Civil War re-enactment nonsense. Just stick with the diver.”

“I don’t remember the rest,” Ned said, “so I get what you’re saying. . . Anyhow, didn’t mean to rain on your parade, your landlord-tenant business.”

“Okay, then do me a favor please and don’t keep bringing it up?” I was starting to get a little indigestion, an acid-reflux type thing, probably from skipping any actual food and going straight to the booze, and it did turn into a long evening, and I did walk home, and I didn’t solve anything, that’s for sure.

The San Francisco apartment was two flights up, and when I got to the top of the stairs the door was open a crack and I was going to say something but instead I tapped lightly, and a moment later there the guy was.

A little bigger than I remembered, and he had on baggy basketball shorts and those Adidas rubber slippers that you see soccer players wear when they take off their cleats.

“Dixson? Matt Grady.”

“I know who you are,” the guy said.

His full name was Dixson Herbel. He seemed to be what you’d want in a subletter. A friendly guy from North Carolina who got recruited by a start-up in the

city, fired up about the job and pulling down plenty of salary to afford the apartment.

My instinct was that a guy from North Carolina was less likely to screw you than someone from, say, Brooklyn.

Right now the guy didn't offer to shake hands or invite me in, and I could see through the partially-opened door a pair of bare feet moving around in the kitchen, female ones.

I said, "You look like you're a workout person. That's good. You'd fit right in down south."

"Where's that?" he said, and for a moment it looked we might be headed toward a civilized conversation.

"West LA. Manhattan, Hermosa, Redondo. You ever been?"

He didn't respond, but said, "What--you call *me*? Harass me that way--not once but twice--and that's not good enough?"

"Excuse me there?"

The guy continued. "Now you have to present yourself unannounced? During my quiet time? . . . Is that the way you were raised?"

"Huh?"

“Listen to yourself, you fat fuck. You know exactly what I’m talking about. You provide me sub-standard conditions, I go along with it based on your assurances that you will address the 8 items we agreed upon. And on your end? You didn’t care enough to do crap . . . So, you stop getting paid.”

For a second I wondered if there really had been a discussion about 8 items in the apartment that needed upgrade or replacement? I couldn’t recall anything, unless I was truly losing my brain.

All I could remember was handing him the keys, and the guy telling me he was the luckiest man in San Francisco today because the apartment was killer and the price was right on . . . and thank you so much for this opportunity.

I hated that expression ‘killer’, especially when there was no direct noun connected to it, which at least the guy did do, connect it to ‘apartment’.

But back to this developing mother-*fucker* now . . .

I said, “Are you serious? I mean I’m willing to work with you, believe me . . . if you’re in a jam . . . those things happen.”

“You haven’t been *listening*,” Dixson said, “on account of you don’t want to . . . So you’d best be moving

on, would be my advice, unless you enjoy being in more hot water than you already are.”

I tried to process this, and I couldn't understand how I'd be in any hot water . . . and the guy pulled out his phone, which he'd been holding behind his back, and explained that he'd documented the conversation, as part of his ongoing case, and that he'd see me in court, or the police precinct--whichever came first.

And before I could conjure up a comeback, Dixon closed the door in my face.

Someone turned up the music in the apartment, some aggressive hip-hop . . . and I didn't sleep well that night, though I did come up with one idea around 4 in the morning, why not visit the guy at work.

Dixon Herbel worked at Sonic Boomers, which occupied the top two floors of an industrial building on Howard Street between 4th and 5th. Twitter, Dropbox and a few other household names were in the neighborhood.

The guy inside the front door couldn't have been nicer, except he told me I wasn't allowed in without a badge, and I had to wait until he got distracted by a UPS delivery to walk in.

No idea if Dixson was actually here, since you figured he worked remotely too . . . but I poked around and spotted him in the employee cafeteria, having coffee with a co-worker.

And Gee, you didn't have to pay for anything, so I helped myself to a slice of pie, grabbed a fork, and sat down with them.

"I am not . . . believing this," Dixson said.

"What?" I said, shoving in a large chunk of pie. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Mona, will you excuse us?" Dixson said to the co-worker, and when she left he said, "I'm going to call security on you in a second."

"Do me a favor and let me finish this first," I said. "Didn't know the perks were so sweet."

"You interrupted me," he said.

"I got ya . . . you'll be throwing me out in a second, but first you want to teach me a lesson."

"That too. But I want to keep you around for a minute so I can understand how someone can have a death wish, and not be worrying about the consequences."

“Dang . . . I know you’re exaggerating, you’re going for the dramatic effect . . . Still, those are fighting words. It’s a good thing I’m a pacifist.”

“I see. Meaning what now? Otherwise *I’d* have to watch out? You’d be kicking my ass?” The guy applying an ugly sneer to the delivery.

“No, the opposite. If I weren’t a pacifist I’d be getting *my* ass kicked.”

“Okay, good to hear we’ve got that straight.”

“What about the rent?” I said. “Not sure if this is the definition of business booming, but something tells me the joint isn’t teetering on bankruptcy either.”

“You would have gotten it, if you’d addressed the issues I’ve outlined multiple times . . . But keep your shirt on. Once the lawsuit resolves itself, there will no doubt be an arrangement.”

I said, “You remind me of my dad. I miss him pretty bad. Not you personally, but the expression *keep your shirt on*. He loved that one, could apply it at will . . . but he especially loved using it on entitled scumbag *momma’s boys*.”

“Fuck YOU there, friend. I’ll give you 5 seconds to be on your way.”

I got up, and of course the guy tells me calmly and quietly that I better watch my back.

I had picked up some mace last year from a guy on Douglas Street, in the Castro district.

The guy was a computer hacker, that's what I was seeing him about, but on the way out he hands me the can of mace *for good measure*, was how he put it, explaining that someone laid a case on him, and it was supposedly some Russian military-grade stuff, though maybe not . . . and I threw it in the trunk and had pretty much forgotten about it.

I still had the keys to my old building, but that might be messy, so I sat across the street in the car and waited for the guy to hopefully come home at a reasonable hour.

It took a while, but there was Dixson now, opening the bottom door, and I knew I was a little lucky, considering all the options these guys have after work.

Dixson hesitated inside the alcove, which was normal, that's where the mailboxes were . . . and when he got to the top of the staircase I was halfway up it behind him . . . and the guy turned around and said, "Well what a surprise."

“I was back in the neighborhood,” I said, climbing another couple steps.

Dixon said, “I was right then. You do have a death wish.”

He had a bag slung over his shoulder and he pulled it off and dropped it, and stood at the top of the stairs, pretty formidable arms slightly spread like a gorilla, getting ready to attack as I approached.

“Hi,” I said, and I shot off the mace in the guy’s face.

It only then occurred to me that I’d neglected to wear a mask, and I could feel the stuff right away, my eyes tearing, my throat having trouble.

But nothing like what the guy was going through.

I said, “How about some fresh air, would that help?” and Dixon moaned, high-pitched like a baby-pig squeal, and I marched him into the emergency stairwell and up to the roof.

I couldn’t help thinking that up here you did have an amazing view of the bridge, the Golden Gate . . . and I should have spent more time on the roof when I lived here.

Though you had to be careful, there was no rail. If you were drunk, stupid, or otherwise stumbling around in the dark--like now--you could step right off.

Dixson was in a weird squat at the moment, seriously addressing his respiration, and I reached down and grabbed him by the ankles, surprising him, and he was straining to resist but I had the leverage and the momentum . . . the only problem being, as we got close to the edge, how do you swing him around . . . so I maced him again and he wasn't showing a whole lot of fight and I had him by the shoulder and dangled half of him off the side of the roof.

I intended to ask a few *Are we good* type questions, but when I adjusted my grip I lost my angle, and the guy's body was too far over the dang edge.

I started to panic and decided the easiest way to bring him back was grab one foot, with both hands, and really pull . . . and there you go, that started to work . . . except then HOLY SHIT . . . the guy's shoe came off in my hand.

I grabbed at his calf, and there was a brief instant where I thought I had it . . . and then I didn't.

And Dixson disappeared over the side.

I let a beat go by, and approached, and looked down.

The guy had landed on the fire escape railing for the apartment below, and thankfully he toppled to the left,

and onto the landing. If he'd toppled to the right, he would have met the sidewalk.

Dixson did get to his feet, and this was a big relief, because for a moment I wondered if the guy might have broken his neck . . . and he hightailed it down the steel ladder of the fire escape, making that little jump at the end, the last six feet . . . and the son of a gun hit the ground and was flying toward Marina Boulevard . . . the guy looking back and up at the roof one more time, like he was truly spooked, and that I was going to be chasing after him.

Which was ridiculous of course.

You never knew if you'd completely made your point, but I had a decent feeling about this one.

Home Depot was still open and I picked up a new lock for the apartment door, but unfortunately I got to a point of no return, where I had the old one out but couldn't get the dang new one to sit right.

Nothing more frustrating than battling a job and not getting it, but what could you do.

So I walked over to Weatherbee's, and my favorite bartender Mitch was there, and after a while I mentioned the unfinished business with the lock, and

Mitch said no problem, he could take care of it for me right now if I liked.

I said, “Really?”, and Mitch said it was a slow night and they had it under control, plus he enjoyed doing stuff like this, it got him out of the bar.