

Checker

2750 words

Marlene said she had a few minutes and grabbed her towel and sat down, and Pete guessed she didn't have to be anywhere even in a few *minutes*, if she was floating around in a pool, noontime on a Monday.

Pete said *boy*, this has been some day already, and opened up a section of the LA Times that was laying there.

"If you're asking me to react to something," Marlene said, "would you mind completing a thought?"

"I don't mind at all. In fact I'd suggest filling you in over dinner . . . except it's a little early, but we can make it work."

Marlene said, "Something tells me you've made that parlay before, to various people."

"Oh most definitely," Pete said. "That's one of my signature moves . . . Create unfinished business, which is so intriguing that the person can't resist joining me."

"Pret-ty sleazy," she said.

“Or,” he said, “hows about let’s cut out the bullshit and go have a drink?”

Marlene opened up a section of the newspaper now too.

“You’re right,” Pete said. “What I’ll do in that case, I’ll pick up some ribs, we’ll have a little barbeque . . . Around 5 okay?”

She thought about it and said, “We’re allowed to barbeque here?”

“I’ve never tried it, no. How would you work it? Throw out some lava rocks or something? On the cement?”

“Now you’re playing with me,” she said. “But . . . I suppose I can buy *you* dinner. If you like pizza. I have a coupon.”

“Sheesh,” Pete said. “All the moves I save up, trying to use on individuals--that’s a first.”

“You don’t like the tables being turned.”

“Not at all. I need to be in control. I know . . . it’s a weakness.’

“Not always,” she said.

In that case Pete had a small project he figured he could squeeze in, but it screwed him up--not the project itself, but *getting* there, since these two drivers got into it on one of the residential cross-streets and were out of their cars blocking traffic . . . and Pete tried to be a peacemaker but it didn't play out great.

Marlene said, "Golly . . . unless you took a dip in the ocean, or got tangled up in a hose . . . you're sweating pretty profusely."

"Well I have a thing about being late," he said. "I get ticked off at people when they keep me waiting . . . sometimes drop 'em . . . so the pressure's *on* me, I have to keep producing."

Marlene looked at her watch and didn't say anything.

They were back by the pool, and she was reading a book, using another chair as a footrest. Her hair was pinned up and she had on a long cotton dress. There were subtle suggestions of the curvaceousness Pete had admired earlier, but everything tasteful.

“I’m going to jump past that for a second, the timing part,” he said. “You have more freckles than you did mid-day. It must be the light.”

Marlene ignored it and said, “Were you serious when you said you’ve dropped people for being tardy?”

“*Consistently* tardy, yeah. There comes a point.”

“I generally run late,” she said. “You were in luck tonight, since I already live here.”

“Well you’ll probably get dropped pretty soon then,” Pete said.

“In that case,” she said, “shall we even bother?”

“It depends how hungry you are.”

“Not a good line, honestly.”

“Well I was telling someone recently, I can’t remember the circumstance . . . but that my mom would lecture me, make sure you marry someone who can get ready fast and eats a lot.”

She said, “Interesting. So you’re advancing the marriage card. Why not.”

“Nah,” Pete said. “You’re only halfway there . . . If you have a good appetite, that is. Otherwise you’re zero of the way there.”

Marlene reacted funny for the first time, like she doesn't mind playing along *some*, but this is ridiculous.

Pete said, "You have to forgive me, I'm a little punch drunk, and I can blurt stuff out . . . which comes from being preoccupied . . . which I am more of lately."

Marlene said, "Well it's not the worst thing to have a lot on your plate. Though fiction can help." Holding up her book, something by Robin Cook, a medical thriller.

"You mean it distorts your *real* world, a good story?"

"Possibly . . . or removes you from it entirely. I gave in and bought myself a Kindle. It's wonderful."

"I can't read on those things," Pete said.

"Oh there's an adjustment, but then you're off and running. Now I have a Kindle Unlimited membership, so I'm a full-fledged devotee."

"The problem," Pete said, "I look around at those books on Amazon, that I assume you're talking about, and they have this *Look Inside* feature where you can read the first 10 percent?"

"Exactly."

"And when I try that, most of them I cringe."

“Well you’re a tough critic,” she said. “Maybe that’s part of your problem.”

“Jeez . . . you know me, what, three hours, and you’re already diagnosing a problem.”

“I *am* pretty hungry,” she said.

Marlene’s coupon was for the pizza place in Hermosa that Pete liked, and he hadn’t been there in a while. Hole in a wall a block from the beach. The owner was friendly, liked to talk.

Tonight he came by the table pretty quick, but it was busy and he didn’t linger. Pete said, “That guy, he told me his life story. I could barely eat, though I didn’t mind, it was entertaining.”

“I like when people wear their emotions on their sleeve,” Marlene said.

“That’s kind of a strange comment,” Pete said.

“Really? I was merely following up what you just *said*.”

“I don’t know, you shifted it a little, you kind of killed any momentum I had going.”

Marlene took a swig of her beer and didn't say anything, and Pete was thinking that's good, hopefully she's not too big a boozier, since beer over wine is a decent sign.

She said, "You're kind of a whack job. First I thought you were the rugged type, like the Marlboro Man. But you're needy."

"But see? You're not particularly bent out shape about it."

"What about your friends?"

"You mean, do any of 'em share your view?"

Marlene said to take it how he wanted, but she had to use the ladies' room.

Pete decided he liked this place all around. It was cozy, the prices were fair . . . plus with the coupon, there were no complications, just *2nd entree free*. Often you run across these things, other places, where there's fine print.

He noticed now the paper place mat, *that* was full of coupons too . . . and you might as well take a look.

No more food though, these were all outside businesses, and not the fancy ones around here but the ones that looked like they needed a little help.

Several of them up on Sepulveda . . . a muffler place, a tax preparer, nail salon, surf shop . . . and couple further down on Artesia toward the Redondo Beach mall--a music store and a Verizon phone place.

Then there was one more, for a service way over in Santa Monica:

Skilled Family Counselor. 10 Years Experience.

Crisis intervention-caring and compassionate-traditional solo practice-relationships-diversity.

Free 45-minute evaluation.

Hmm. Pete figured since his eye had wandered there anyway . . . what would it *hurt*, to save the darn thing?

So he moved his calzone off the place mat and casually made a couple creases and tore off the small counseling service item and stuck it in his pocket, and Marlene came back and they finished up, seeing things a little more eye to eye, Pete was thinking, the second half of the meal.

And he debated suggesting going somewhere else, since it was still early . . . when the waiter took away the dishes and Marlene asked what he'd torn off.

Pete hesitated and she put 2 and 2 together and checked her own place mat against the missing part of his, and she looked at him.

Pete said, "What? You think I'm going too far?"

"I really don't know enough to comment," she said, "but it is *sweet* of you to consider."

And this was real weird . . . her point being, apparently, Pete taking her seriously when she called him a nut case and deciding to address it.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “No *forget* that, wrong line of questioning . . . Do you like bars?”

“I can,” she said. “I have to get up early though.”

So far neither one had poked into the other’s business, the *how they made a living* part, and that was fine.

Pete said, “So, let’s head to *my* place for a while . . . The good thing, you can even wear your robe and slippers, since you have a built in escape if you’re worried I’m not going to behave myself.”

“Are you?”

“Of course.” Which was accurate, he wasn’t planning to make any moves, that wasn’t the thought process, at least he didn’t *think*.

So they went back and Marlene didn’t stop in her apartment and change to the robe and slippers but she made herself comfortable on the couch and Pete put on coffee and asked if she wanted to play cards, or how about a board game.

She said she felt like some old-fashioned TV, and Pete handed her the changer--no idea what *typical* TV

was any more, the lines blurred between the networks and the hundreds of spin-off channels.

There *was* one show he heard about that he was interested in, no idea when it was on, but he ran it by Marlene. The premise was a guy puts on a disguise one day and robs a bowling alley. He only clears a couple hundred bucks, and he never gets caught, but the psychological weight is heavy-duty, and he pays the price on some level every day.

Marlene nodded and said she'd never heard of it, and put on the Rachel Maddow Show.

“You’re kidding,” Pete said.

“I like to stay informed, if you don’t mind.”

“Fine. Except you wanted old-*fashioned* television, I thought.”

She wasn’t listening. A guest was talking about a looming government shutdown, if Washington didn’t get its act together pronto.

“Meanwhile,” Pete said, “have you ever thought about living in Florida?”

“Huh?” Marlene said.

“Should be a basic question, not seeing the confusion.”

“Have you ever *been* to Florida?” she said. “Why would you put yourself in those extreme conditions?”

“I’m thinking . . . if you were going to re-invent yourself somewhere . . . it might be an option. No, obviously.”

“I spent a winter there once,” she said. “That was in Gainesville. By the time the heat and humidity and bugs roll around, you’re thrilled you’ve vacated.”

“Wait a second. Gainesville, that’s barely *real* Florida. You’re in more like Georgia there.”

“Real Florida’s worse . . . what’s so bad about here?”

Pete had to admit, there was nothing bad about it, in many ways Manhattan Beach was the best place he’d ever lived.

“That’s another angle I’m exploring,” he said. “You want to go in on buying a house together? How would that be?”

“A what?”

“The thing people live in, with the driveway and roof. We’d need about 8 more people, and we could pull it off.”

“I’m going to say this gently,” she said, “but are you on some medication?”

Pete was trying to distract her from the dumb political talk show, and obviously falling flat.

“I’m not,” he said. “But I’ll break the ice and ask *you*. What’s your story?”

“I’m a school teacher,” she said. “K through 8.”

“Oh . . . Except not at the moment. Or, wait a second, is school out for Christmas vacation then?”

“I believe they get out on Wednesday. But you were right, I’m looking for a job.”

“Jeez. Well, how’s that going?”

“It’s a process, is the best I can say.”

“So just like that, *boom*, you’re here?” Pete said. “I mean where’d you teach before?”

“Appleton, Wisconsin.”

“Holy Smokes. Big change.”

“I felt I needed one, yes.” There we go, now we’re getting to it, the standard scenario, a relationship gone sour and someone needs a fresh start.

He said, “You don’t seem *that* difficult to be around. The guy had bad judgment then . . . went gay on you? . . . what?”

“It’s a she,” Marlene said. “And if you don’t mind, we can dispense with the comedy please. It’s still delicate.”

“Ah . . . Well, see? . . . This is what I was thinking earlier, going back to the pizzeria . . . why it’s better to *not* ask too many questions.”

“A bit late *now*,” she said, and it was clear she *was* still sensitive, and her voice was quieter.

“That’s my fault all the way then,” Pete said. “I should have trusted my instincts . . . but . . . seeing how the damage is done . . . just to clarify, you’re a lesbian then?”

“I’m not sure,” Marlene said, and there was a knock on the door, and Jeez, some guy had the wrong apartment, but it kind of broke the mood. So Pete asked how her job search was going.

“It sucks, honestly,” she said.

“Okay that’s no problem,” he said. “You just need to think outside the box.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well the key, you find out what the *doofuses* are doing--and do the opposite.”

“Interesting. And the doofuses being the other teacher applicants?”

“Your competitors, yeah, who do you *think*? . . . I was almost going to bring up an old story, where the guy *deals* with his competitors . . . I don’t want to bore you.”

“It won’t,” she said. “How did your friend address it?”

“Not my *friend*, some guy in a *book*. Made-up. And the guy’s a sociopathic case . . . but my point is, there’s some logic to the principle.”

“Which is what?”

“Okay . . . there’s a job available, very specific, a dying industry, paper mills . . . there’s only a handful of people qualified for the particular position. So first, the guy puts an ad in the industry newsletter.”

“Hmm.”

“The ad is for a similar job but a fake one. He takes out a PO box and requires the applicants’ resumes to be mailed there.”

Marlene said, “So he’s going to figure out how many others are going to apply for the real job.”

“That . . . plus get their addresses. Once he obtains all that information, he kills them off, one by one . . . It was *do-able*, because as I said it was so specialized, you only had, like a half dozen qualified applicants.”

“My God, you can’t be serious.”

“What’d I just *say*? . . . This didn’t really *happen*. This is a *story*.”

“I know, but just the concept.”

“In his demented brain, what’s *wrong* with the concept? He’s the last man standing, so he’s the only one who applies for the job.”

“Does he get it then?”

“Pretty sure he does, yeah, but then something happens that throws in a monkeywrench I think . . . That’s irrelevant though. You’re missing the big picture, asking a question like that.”

“Well excuse *me*, then,” she said.

“So the trick is, how that applies to you, getting hired by the LA Unified School District. Is that what they call it?”

“In Los Angeles proper yes. At this point I’ll settle for any number of districts.”

“Well like I said, that’s just an *example* of going outside the box . . . Maybe someone else will have a 360 degree different recommendation.

“I like yours, actually,” she said.

“Oh. So I’m not the whack job as much now.”

“If I did the same thing--hypothetically--faked a job listing, and collected resumes, how would I . . .”

“Discourage . . . the other applicants, without killing them?”

“Unh-huh.”

Pete said, “That’d be tougher. Admittedly. But hey.”

