

Circumstance

2450 words

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Steve was having second thoughts about the reunion, so he stopped off first at a bar down the street from the thing and put away a couple shots.

The 10-year had been different. He didn't have any career he could talk about, but people seemed to admire that, that here was a guy sampling the world, having adventures, while they were getting locked into shit.

But the 20-year, you were going to get judged, and Steve hoped no one pressed him for details. His main objective was to say hello to a few of the football guys he could tolerate and scan the room for unattached women who hadn't let themselves go too badly.

The band was playing by the time Steve walked in, and it was top-heavy 1995, your TLCs, your Mariah Careys, your Boyz II Men. The lights were low and it was hard to recognize people, and Steve kept checking name tags, which had everyone's high school yearbook photo on them though kind of grainy.

The open bar was on the other side of the dance floor so he angled across it, bumping into someone who

was dancing out of control. A guy gave him a look but Steve ignored him and set himself up with a drink.

And then, sitting at a corner table, holding court to seven or eight people, Kevin Mooney. You couldn't miss him. He had glasses now, some gray in the sideburns, an extra fifteen pounds, but the same booming voice and laugh.

Steve despised Mooney. There'd been an incident at practice one day, and it never went away. Now you had three couples listening to him run his mouth, and Steve recognized Mitch Watters and Jay Mohr. There was another guy with a girl he could sort of place from a class, and then, next to Mooney, Janine Goetz.

Steve tried to remember how many times he'd seen Janine since high school, and he came up with three. Once at the zoo of all places when they were maybe twenty-two, at the 10-year where she dropped it on him that she'd been married and divorced, and a couple years later in line for garlic fries at a Giants game.

Each time one thing led to another and they ended up hooking up for the night, for old times' sake was how Steve looked at it, and it was what it was.

But right now, could she actually be *with* Mooney, or just sitting next to him?

Steve worked his drink and waited for it to play out, and soon enough Mooney stopped talking and he and Janine got up and started dancing. They were smiling and it was hard to tell if things were developing on the fly, or if they'd come here together. Either way, they were sure nestled in close as the music slowed down.

Steve had seen it in the movies but had never done it until now, cutting in on Mooney, tapping him on the shoulder and when he turned, taking hold of Janine's lower back and pressing in toward her. Steve said, "Good to see you Kevin, you don't mind do you?"

"I do, as a matter of fact," Mooney said, but Steve pivoted Janine into the center of the herd, which hopefully was enough to deter the idiot.

Steve said, "Tell me I was imagining it."

Janine said, "Gosh, that's how you greet me?"

"So what's up?" he said.

"Well it's good to see you too . . . You look good."

Steve realized he did look okay, after surveying the pretty motley competition. He hadn't lost much hair, he worked out every day and he got a lot of sun.

"Cause if you're involved with that guy," Steve said, "that would seriously taint the old memories."

“Really? Well I guess I’m flattered, because you never struck me as the sentimental type.”

“I’m not . . . but once in a blue moon, when I’m having an exceptionally bad day . . . I might bring ‘em out.”

“So do I, if you must know . . . And no, I’m not dating Kevin.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Okay . . . all that happened, there was a party at Lynn Bacalao’s last summer. In Orinda. Kevin showed up, and said to stay in touch.”

“And then what, a couple weeks ago he called and said if you didn’t have anything better to do, come to the reunion with him?”

“Sort of. He messaged me on Facebook. He lives in Arizona now.”

Steve said, “Let’s get out of here.”

Janine stopped dancing. “You’re still the same piece of work, aren’t you Steven.”

“What you do,” he said, “seeing as how your purse is hanging off the chair next to Kevin? Tell him and his clan you’ll be back in a minute . . . I’ll be outside.”

Steve walked a half block down Sloat Boulevard smoking a cigarette and when he got back to the hall Janine was standing out front with her coat on.

“Why do I do this?” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re doing the right thing,” Steve said. “You have to admit, that was pretty lame in there. A whole lot less energy than the 10th.”

“Did you even say hello to anyone?”

“I did, Tommy Surano, on the way out. Good guy.”

“Is that so. You play golf with him, right?”

“Where’d you get that?”

“I hear bits and pieces. Is he your only friend from back then?”

“Come on, knock it off,” Steve said, but he really couldn’t think of anyone else.

There’d been the hot tub and a fire and now they were in the master bedroom holding each other in the dark, a little piano jazz playing soft.

Janine said, “That was nice . . . I don’t want to say I needed it, but maybe I did.”

“Well your instincts have always been good,” Steve said.

Janine was rubbing his chest. “So . . . I’ll see you in another 7 or 8 years?”

“Now why do you have to tweak the mood with something like that?”

“I don’t know . . . I guess I wouldn’t mind it being a little more often.”

“We’ve been down this road . . . can we leave it alone for now?”

“We can,” she said, and after a few minutes she grew restless and it was okay.

Two weeks later Steve was peeling off his wetsuit in the parking lot at Ocean Beach when he checked his phone, and it was Janine wanting to see him, the tone of her message serious.

Steve made the one dish he was confident about, gnocchi al pesto, which he learned from one of the kitchen guys when he worked briefly as a waiter in North Beach. He served it up with a loaf of sourdough and a couple large glasses of full-bodied red wine.

“Okay, take it easy,” Steve said. “Let’s back up and go through it again.”

“It’s not complicated,” Janine said. “Kevin’s been bothering me. I feel it could be nothing, but I’m also a little scared.”

Mooney had figured out Janine left the reunion with him, which admittedly wasn't rocket science. Steve wondered if the prick had followed them back to his place that night. Either way, not the ideal development, though he didn't want to convey any concern to Janine.

“Well guys’ll do that sometimes,” he said. “Even clowns like Kevin, they’re just marking their territory. Letting you know they know.”

“Hopefully,” Janine said.

“Wait a second, I thought you said he lived in Arizona.”

“That’s it, he’s been not only calling me, but ringing my bell. Not sure why he’d still be hanging around.”

“Well, maybe he has business . . . or is taking some time, visiting his folks and what not.” But Steve didn't like this either, the local aspect definitely on the radar now.

“I don't know,” she said.

“I’ll be honest, I’m a little surprised he would show that much interest--if all it was, you were meeting him at the reunion fresh, no other history in play.”

Janine didn't say anything, and Steve left it alone.

"Are you thinking, there's a chance he might know you're here tonight?" Steve said, tempted to turn off the lights and take a peek outside.

Janine picked up her wine and came around the table and sat on Steve's lap and kissed him hard on the lips.

"Jesus," he said. "What was that?"

"It's nice here. I meant to ask you last time, how do you afford it?"

Steve had inherited a sum from his grandmother's sister who lived in Presidio Heights. He'd paid cash for a split-level ranch in the hills in back of Pacifica in 2006, getting lucky with the timing of the market. The previous owner had converted the lower floor to a recording studio, and Steve re-configured it to a 2-bedroom apartment which he currently rented for \$2800.

"Two roommates," Steve said. "Excellent tenants."

"I shouldn't ask," she said, "but females?"

"They are." Steve knew where Janine was going, and okay he had connected with one of them, Cathy, when they first moved in, but that had resolved itself into a working landlord-tenant relationship.

“Anyhow,” Janine said, “my dad and brother, they’re going to talk to Kevin.”

“Wow,” Steve said, trying to picture how that would go. Her dad, Mr. Goetz, was an old longshoreman, a tough customer, and Jonah, the brother, was an easy-going guy but strong, and either played football or wrestled somewhere in college if Steve had it right.

He said, “That actually may not be the worst thing, you know it? It should put you at ease.”

“It doesn’t,” she said. “I’m feeling it might escalate the problem.”

“Well that’s not rational.”

“I know . . . Should I . . . stay over?”

“Jeez . . .”

“I mean I’m thinking that could be the best remedy . . . make this whole bad dream go away . . . Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not sure,” Steve said, “but I’m going to pass.”

Four or five days went by and Steve didn’t hear anything further, and he didn’t feel like contacting Janine to find out. He hated Facebook, but he went on it

and searched around for Mooney, he supposed the way Mooney had searched for Janine.

It didn't take long to find the guy, living in Gilbert, Arizona. Under *status* it said 'in a relationship'. Steve couldn't find any contact info, but you learned Mooney was a builder down there and there was a website.

Steve reluctantly sent the guy an email, not saying anything, just asking to give him a call. While he was online he searched a couple Arizona newspapers, in the unlikely event there was a report of a guy getting beat up around Gilbert, but he couldn't find anything.

Steve had the Thursday night football game on, alternating his view between that and the lower deck out the window to the right, where his tenants Cathy and Lorraine were in the hot tub. The phone rang and it was Mooney.

"You're the last guy I would have expected to be leaving me a message," Kevin said. "Whadya need?"

"Well I appreciate you getting back," Steve said, "but I don't *need* anything . . . You okay?"

"The fuck you mean by that?"

Steve wanted to get on a plane and mess the guy up himself, if Janine's dad and brother hadn't. He said, "It

says you're in a relationship. So why the bs with Janine?"

"None of your business there pal . . . Other than I come up and bang her when I feel like it, and she comes down and sees me when she feels like it . . . We good now?"

Steve felt like he'd been slapped on the side of the head. He tried to keep his composure. "How's she doing?" was his best effort.

"She's fine, she's in the pool actually. Anything else?"

Janine's brother Jonah lived in Berkeley on the south side of campus. Steve found *him* on Facebook as well, and saw that he was back in school getting a PhD in environmental science. The address was in the online white pages.

Jonah let him in. He said, "Bud, another circumstance I'd offer you some coffee . . . but I have to tell you--you've got some real balls showing up here."

Steve said, "I do?"

"Okay dude, now you're playing . . . don't insult me."

Steve liked the kid the few times he met him. He remembered once in high school Janine having Jonah

take pictures of the two of them on the front lawn of the house on Clay Street. Steve said, "I'm sorry Jonah, but I'm just not following you."

"My sister?" Jonah said, "I'm not about to let her take crap from anyone. What's your fucking problem?"

Outrageous as it seemed, Steve was putting it together. "So you and your dad," he said, "you were going to rough me up?"

"We still are," Jonah said.

Steve took a moment.

"Janine," he said, "does she have any . . . recurring issues at all . . . that you know of?"

"You'd best be watching your step there pal."

"Medications, maybe . . . that type of thing?"

"I mean it--you got about a quarter second to shut the *fuck* up."

"Okay now Jonah, listen to me . . . I can tell you have a good heart, but you've got it all wrong . . . I recorded Janine saying something you need to hear. My phone's in the car, I'll be right back."

Steve opened the trunk and took out a black zippered bag. His friend Surano was a Daly City cop, 17 years on the job, not that far off from retiring, which was hard to believe. A few years ago Steve got into it with

another driver, and he told Surano about it and Surano gave him a taser.

Steve went back inside, unzipped the bag, and shot Jonah in the chest with it.

That night Cathy and Lorraine were in the hot tub again. Steve invited them for an impromptu dinner. He said no need to change, that a nice fire would do the trick.

When they were sitting around after dessert and Steve had brought out the liqueur, Lorraine said, “You’re kind of a weird landlord. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“All the time,” Steve said.