

Ice Rink

2700 words

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I start talking to a guy in Starbucks on Chestnut Street. He's happy to talk. I'm putting him mid-30s, a little younger than me. He's staying with his wife in a motel a couple blocks over on Lombard. Not the touristy part with the famous curvy downhill but the 101 approach, lots of noise and fumes and cement.

The guy tells me that was the first point of contention when they arrived, that it reminded him of Saw Mill Run Boulevard in Pittsburgh, which they just came from.

He says his wife told him to calm down, that's not why they're here.

I ask why and he says she booked a tennis vacation. I say in March? In San Francisco? That's kinda rolling the dice.

He says he agrees with that totally, but the thing is indoors, it's an instructional workshop deal, 9 to 3 all week, starting tomorrow.

I'm questioning that part, where would you go indoors in the city and didn't the place on Brannan close, but maybe they did get it back running.

He says he's in the middle of taking a little walk right now, blowing off some steam.

I say the motel location part, or something else since?

The guy moves over to my table, I'm assuming so he can talk quieter.

He says things picked up, they followed a recommendation in the in-flight magazine, had dinner at this bistro on Russian Hill. Coming out of there she takes his arm, he says, he figures they might be on vacation after all, and he suggests forgetting the cab or Uber but walking back, and stopping in somewhere for a nightcap.

She says that would be fine under other circumstances but we have to be up early for the workshop.

He says for God sakes, alls they're going to do, they give it the *little higher follow through on the forehand*, *Mr. Boatright*.

We're not winning Wimbledon here, he tells her.

She explains that the workshop is much more comprehensive than *just* tennis, there are pilates and wellness components too.

Ah, I say. So I'm guessing not just the nightcap but the leisurely stroll were off the table.

Yeah we get back in the room, he says, and of course she's texting right away, even before she gets her coat off. Most likely her sister, they go at it every day. Then she takes a shower, and she's sitting on the bed not a stitch on. I take a little inventory.

Hmm.

And I have to admit, not bad. I mean the legs and arms are scary thin, not a lot of rear end, but the boobies are nice. Rich and full. Not much alteration at all, or lowering either, since we had the kids.

But wait, I say, you just had a normal dinner?

We did. Not scary thin like an anno-job. I'm just saying *too* thin. Like get out of your yoga pants once in a while and let loose . . . I don't mean to be putting this on your plate.

No that's fine, I say, I don't mind if you keep going.

That's kind of funny.

More interesting than my relationships for sure.

What's the story with those?

They're non-existent at the moment. Good opportunity to find yourself, people tell me. Which is nonsense.

Yeah if you gave me a lie detector I'd confess I made a mistake here, can't undo it though.

Only reason I ask this, and stop me if I'm too personal, I got a lady in the neighborhood, you see her walking the dog, say hi. Stick figure. I know nothing about her but my old girlfriend comes home from the gym one day, says she saw that person there, in the locker room, and the person's chest was surprisingly humongous. We're talking way out of proportion, is my impression.

That can happen, the guy says.

So when I see the person in the neighborhood, even now, I try to get a sense of that, but there's no way. She dresses modest and must strap that stuff in.

Yeah I get you, if she does have a disorder they could make her feel fat.

Jeez, is *that* it then . . . that seems logical, I never thought of it. I was she's more, doesn't want to get stared at.

Could be that angle as well, he says. My wife, she's the opposite.

Oh really? I say.

Yeah she flaunts her situation. At least sometimes. Goes low-cut. Not tonight, but I'm just saying.

Oh.

He lowers his voice a little more. I've asked her if it intrigues her at all, he says, getting looks from other guys.

I say I've asked women that too.

And honestly at this point, he says, I'd be fine with that. What did yours say?

Ah it always backfired, I wrecked the mood. They wanted to like slap me upside the head.

Me too, I brought it up tonight when she was sitting on the bed. She says I have an obsession and I need to get my head out of the gutter. She called me by my formal name which I can't stand, Hubert.

Yeah you hate it when they do that, I say. So dramatic, when they deliver the lecture. Like it's a summit meeting.

The guy nods. Staving off a nuclear threat, he says.

I toss something around in my head and say, Well listen. How long are you here for?

We go back Sunday night. If I don't disappear before that.

Nah don't do that.

I'm not kidding I'm thinking about it. I met a kid at the cream and sugar station, before you came in here? Not a real kid but young. She sees me pick up the sports section and starts talking about Spring Training, her dad took the whole family every year for a while. Then her parents split and it dried up.

I say you're not telling me you're thinking of escaping to Spring Training?

While my wife completes the tennis activities, I was, he says. This kid, says the same thing as you--why would you come to Frisco for a tennis vacation?

I'll admit, at least southern California would be better right now.

That's what *she* said. And even better Palm Springs, and even better Arizona. Which tied in with the notion of Spring Training. I've never been there, it's always been on my list. Have you?

I went once, the A's. I ran into an old junior high PE teacher who we were scared of. Seemed like he mellowed some, but I gave him a wide berth.

I even checked the flights, the guy says, a few minutes ago. Too late for SFO, but Southwest has a connecting out of Oakland. How far is that?

Okay now take it easy. I mean Jesus, you were just gonna leave from here? No bag even?

Yeah, it's warm down there. Anything I need I pick it up.

And what, let your wife know first? Or en route? Or not at all?

Didn't get that far, the guy says. Push comes to shove I probably can't pull the trigger. All talk no action. My wife has characterized me that way on occasion.

Yeah I've gotten that too, I say. Where I was going--how long are you here--your tennis ends Friday but you were gonna sight-see a couple more days?

That's the plan, the guy says.

So . . . what I'm thinking, I got a time share at Stinson Beach. This's my weekend. Maybe come out there instead.

Awful generous of you. I mean that. Jeez. No issue with the accommodations?

No. There's a granny unit in back. Gets rented in the summer but not now. Everything's all made up, there's a service. Nothing like a little ocean time to reinvigorate stuff.

Man . . . just dump the motel early? Even if we're prepaid?

Yeah why not, it won't cost you anything at Stinson . . . Sounds out of left field but I've done it once before. I struck up a conversation with someone on a bench at Chrissy Field, my morning loop, and ended up inviting her out for the weekend. Of course I was hoping to put the moves on, but she brought a friend.

Well, he says, this is certainly an interesting twist. I *will* run it by the wife. You never know.

I say good, you're not going to the Oakland Airport at least. Not worth losing your mind over.

I didn't see it that way, he says, but anyhow.

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The guy calls me on Wednesday. Camp's not bad, he says.

I say what happened to the workshop?

More like a boot camp, how they're tailoring it, he says. So listen, yes we'd love to, if we're not putting you out.

Not a bit. I'll text you the directions, and I'll see you Friday night.

The guy doesn't say anything right away and I realize they don't have a rental car, and don't make them deal with finding one for the weekend . . . so we

arrange it I pick them up at the tennis thing Friday afternoon when it ends.

Which kind of screws *me* up now, I like to get squared away at Stinson around noon when it's my weekend.

But it's an okay drive, they're both a little giddy from the final day, they tell me about awards and speeches and new friends they made. I'm thinking Jeez what a turnaround for this guy.

The wife Evelyn is very polite, very respectful. Not my type, if she were on the loose, but I can't help it, I glance in the rear view mirror a couple times because of the endowment situation this guy described, though I can't tell much.

Guy says he goes by Anson. He's from Pittsburgh born and raised, she's from a small town in western Ohio. He has a plumbing heating business, she sells pharmaceuticals, has a chemistry background and MBA, sounds high end. She likes horses she says, she used to compete. I say equestrian? and she says no, barrel racing, rodeo. This's a long time ago though she says.

They're happy with the granny unit. It is a pretty sweet set-up.

We're not right on the beach but it's the good side of Highway One, no roads to cross, a 3 minute walk on a sandy trail and you're at the ocean.

I'm having my coffee Saturday morning and I see them headed that way. They're holding hands. I'm envious of that, I've hardly ever done that with anyone since going to the movies in high school.

I intercept them later, I tell them I'm making dinner tonight, no discussion, and to come around 6 and please don't try to bring anything, I have it under control.

I like to cook. Tonight I'm thinking spaghetti carbonara with sauteed Brussels sprouts. Not complicated. I have it all except for the bacon and extra garlic, and the local market takes care of it.

I invite Mallory to join us. She's one of the neighbors and lives here full time, gardens the hell out of her little back yard plot and walks about two hours a day on the beach. Doesn't volunteer much backstory. I asked her once does it get lonely out here middle of the week when there's no action and she looks at me deadpan like I'm an idiot.

Anson and Evelyn bring not one but three bottles of wine. Good quality stuff, they shelled out some bucks.

Mallory brings sour dough French bread, one of those round loaves, which I should have thought of, it compliments everything perfectly.

A couple bottles of wine in the books Anson says, Well needless to say Ralph, you kinda saved me here, you really did. Steered me good on two fronts. When you're in Pittsburgh I'm gonna reciprocate royal.

What were the two fronts? Mallory says.

Oh this guy, Anson says, first of all sets me straight in Starbucks. I'm just some random slob, thinking of doing something stupid. Then here. I mean this is like a best kept secret.

A little slice of paradise, I agree, Mallory says.

Don't tell anyone, I say, which is ridiculous of course but Anson gets a kick out of it.

Evelyn says, What something stupid were you contemplating in Starbucks?

Doll you're getting that edge, Anson says. Not contemplating for *real*, I just was gonna suggest cutting the tennis vacation short by a couple days and heading to Arizona for the tail end.

But Ralph talked you out of it, she says. Of having those thoughts.

Most definitely, he says . . . Again not *thoughts*, just shooting the shit a little.

Well like you say, it's all good, I say. In fact the tennis part you weren't crazy about, right, and now you seem all fired up.

No doubt, he says.

Evelyn says, It's not his fault but Anson has a problem with me earning more than he does. A secondary issue is his two best workers are Salvadoran. Both without paperwork. I don't approve of that.

This throws a definite wrench into the conversation. I start clearing the table and Mallory says she'll help and we bring out dessert and coffee.

This pie's amazing, Anson says, and Evelyn agrees.

I say, There's a gal up the hill toward the Audubon ranch who sells them off her front porch.

That's why then, Anson says. Evelyn won't give me credit for this either but I umpire baseball in the summer. American Legion ball, which is teenagers. One game there's a tag play at the plate, it's close, and I call the kid out and it ends the game. That kid's dad follows me to my car. He's been drinking and I'm nervous and he gets too close and I slug him. He goes down and

doesn't move for a while. EMS shows up, the whole works. His kid is crying.

Jeez, I say.

You did the right thing, absolutely, Mallory says.

Anson says, So at Christmas I see the kid and his mom at the ice rink. I want to say something but I don't know what. I follow the kid's progress, rooting for him to do well.

In baseball you mean, I say. And to get away from the dad.

Maybe that too. He ends up at a junior college in Maryland, I'm thinking that's great, but there's an incident on a road trip and a bunch of kids get thrown off the team.

Gosh, so including him, Mallory says. Is there more? It's kind of riveting actually.

I let it go after that, Anson says.

Which I can see, I say.

I'd want to follow up further, Mallory says, that's just me.

I'm not sure why I subjected you all to that story, Anson says.

We don't need a reason to tell a story, Mallory says.

I bring out the dominoes, and cards, and I get a nice fire going in the wood stove. The wind's picking up outside and it's cozy in here. It's after midnight when Anson and Evelyn say good night.

I watch them go back to the granny unit and close the door.

What did you think? I ask Mallory.

They were nice people, they each had their qualities, she says. Anson, he played a bit of a victim, wouldn't you say?

No, I *wouldn't* say, I say.

What was the real story there at Starbucks? she says.

Guy was a little moody, I say, into ditching her for the week. Wouldn't had the balls, so moot point.

The wife, Mallory says, I couldn't get a handle at first on what her story was, what was with the outfit.

I know. I tried not to stare but if she showed any more skin I was gonna have to like put on the air conditioning.

I asked her, Mallory says, when you guys were out on the deck.

What the deal was, you mean?

Yes.

Wow, you're pretty direct. What did Evelyn say to that?

Mind you we're a ways into the liquor by now. She said she enjoys it when other people notice her. That she didn't always use to be that way.

I say dang, and Mallory says indeed . . . and throws it out there that she could sleep in tomorrow.

No idea what that means, but I figure at least put on some fresh coffee.