

## **Penthouse**

### **3200 words**

Molly had gotten used to exercising at night. It was crowded in the apartment, six roommates in a three-bedroom, a fact of life in today's insanely-priced Marina district.

The idea was to spend as little time in the apartment as possible, so when she got off the bus her first stop was Peet's Coffee, where she could unwind for an hour and take care of incidental business. Then she'd mix it up, normally either the Cross Fit place on Chestnut or Soul Cycle up on Union.

Or if Harrison was up for it, like tonight, she'd meet him at his place and they'd run up and down the Pacific Heights hills together. Harrison preferred Divisadero because it was the steepest, but Molly liked Scott, still a great workout, seven challenging hills from Greenwich to Jackson. They'd normally try to repeat the whole thing three times.

Tonight she wasn't feeling great, and in the middle of the second set she told Harrison she was going to have to walk for a while. He said they should forget it then, but Molly insisted, so he went ahead.

It was pleasant walking the hills for a change, the crisp night air mixed with wood smoke from people's fireplaces, and it was nice to look into the houses all lit up. At Jackson she crossed the street into Alta Plaza park. It was around eight and there were plenty of people out, most of them walking dogs. From this vantage point the city really did sparkle, and Molly was glad she was able to move here.

For a second, she thought she saw a figure falling off the far side of a building, the large apartment house on Steiner near Pacific.

Harrison soon appeared, having completed his third set. Molly said, "Honey, I think someone may have just committed suicide."

Pointing in the direction of the building.

"You're not serious," Harrison said. "What, you saw something?"

"I don't know . . . it sure seemed like . . . a person . . . hurling down."

"Well did you . . . hear anything?"

"You mean, a scream or something? No." She wondered about a thud. Her friend Kate, in the freshmen dorms at U Mass, had someone jump off the

roof. Kate said it sounded like when you hit the bottom bone of your hands together.

Harrison said, “Should we go over there and make sure . . . you think?”

“We shouldn’t,” she said. “Hopefully, it was just something in the distance.”

“More than likely -- something superimposed in your sight line,” he said. “The night sky is tricky . . . One time driving down to Arizona, Hank and I, we saw something in the Nevada desert. Certainly looked UFO-ish, for want of a better explanation.”

“Was it?”

“Mol of course not.”

They walked back down to the Marina, grabbed a hamburger at Barney’s, and when Harrison suggested it Molly didn’t feel like spending the night tonight. There’d been a siren in the direction of the building a few minutes after the incident, but sirens were always going off in the city so you couldn’t tell.

There was nothing on the news or in the paper or online the next day, which was a slight relief, though Molly did wonder about the priority of such things. She’d heard the Golden Gate Bridge was the number one

suicide location in the country, and you rarely heard about those. There was a documentary a few years back, where a camera filmed the pedestrian walkway for an entire year, and it had given her the chills.

Finally on the third day there was an item in the *Chronicle*. Preston Parmenter (the third), 42, had leapt to his death from the balcony of his family's 12th story penthouse at 1142 Steiner. The building was known as the Greystone Arms. There was a photo of Preston, in shorts and a t-shirt, looking like he was on a hike somewhere, with a wide-open panorama in the background. The article said that according to family members Preston suffered from depression and most recently had been living as a transient.

Molly called Harrison but it went to voicemail. There was something familiar about the guy's face, even though he couldn't have been more than twenty-five in the photo. He was half-smiling, had his right hand up in the air and looked camera shy.

Where she might have seen this man bothered Molly, and she had trouble focusing at work. It was like those situations where you can't remember a name or title, or can't place a timeline, and you don't relax until you come up with it. She was folding clothes on her bed,

two of her roommates Anna and Valerie doing yoga in the living room, when she zeroed in on the painting on her wall and then it fell into place and she was pretty sure.

The scene was San Francisco Bay, with Alcatraz off to the right and Marin and Mount Tam in back. She had painted it in Alta Plaza a couple of months ago on a Saturday afternoon, lugging her equipment up there, working some extra texture into the piece with a palette knife, joking to her friends on Facebook when she posted the painting that she was finally putting her Dartmouth art minor to good use. She got thirty-seven likes on it overnight, though only two or three people commented and no one asked her if it was for sale.

A homeless guy stopped at her easel that day and admired the painting. She had it only blocked in, but he studied it carefully, told her she'd chosen the composition well, and had the perspective right. He returned over the next two hours, one of his comments being she'd left the correct things out of the scene, that that was the trickiest element.

“Even though they are there?” Molly said. “And this is plein air painting?”

“Yes it is, from life,” the man said. “Which by definition takes on many interpretations, aesthetics being one. And you either have that sense or you don’t, it can’t be taught.” Molly wanted to hug this man.

He had introduced himself as Pedro. A white guy. He was walking a cruiser bicycle, stuff draped all over the frame and handlebars, with a trailer hitched up in back, the kind with the dome shaped canvas cover that could tow a little kid. Pedro had a big beard and was wearing a decorative Rastafarian head wrap.

They talked a bit about great artists and eventually Molly asked him about himself. He said he slept in the parks, either here, Lafayette or if he chanced it, Golden Gate.

“Oh,” Molly said. “By chance it, you mean . . .?”

“There’s a bad element there,” Pedro said. “You don’t see it, but it lurks below the surface.”

Molly left it alone. Pedro looked awfully skinny. “What about food?” she said.

“I’m good, I can handle a couple days on snacks. When I’m real hungry I go to Chinatown. There’s a few restaurants, they don’t want me sitting down, but they fix me up with take-out. They don’t charge me.”

Molly didn't want to, but she had to wrap up the session. Harrison's boss was having a party at his house in Belvedere, live band, catered, the whole nine yards, plenty of movers and shakers and, she supposed, networking opportunities.

Pedro was sitting on a nearby bench. She said, "I'm going to try to resolve it at home . . . or do you think I should come back to the spot once more?"

Pedro got up and took a long look. He said, "It were me, I'd leave it right where it's at. You don't want to lose it, the freshness."

"Really?"

"Yep. It rings true. Wish I could the say the same for most works."

Molly decided what the hell and put down her brush and went up to Pedro and gave him that hug. She was in no rush, she let her arms linger around his back, her head wedged in against his. When she pulled away Pedro was crying.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen," she said.

"Well you made my day," he said.

Molly began collapsing her easel and putting her paints away. She was going to tell Pedro she hoped to

see him again, but when she looked around he was walking his bike toward the Washington Street side of the park, talking loudly to himself, and she watched until he passed behind a stand of junipers and was gone.

That night, when she pieced it together, she told Harrison the story.

“If it is him, I feel bad for you,” he said. “. . . but a guy like that, I don’t know, you ever think he might be better off?”

“You’re kidding,” Molly said.

“I mean let’s face it, most of those guys are bi-polar. And off their meds, which is what puts them on the street. That’s no way to live.”

Molly said, “I’m thinking I’d like to ring the bell.”

“Ah Mol . . . at that apartment? Now what’s that going to accomplish?”

“Well, aside from finding out for sure, probably not much . . . but I’d feel better telling someone that I knew him. And the circumstances. Can you come with me?”

“Babe I’m sorry, I can’t deal with that . . . Just be careful, you’re crossing into awkward territory.”



Molly stopped by the building after work the next day. There was a doorman, rare for the neighborhood, and she told him she was a friend of Pedro Parmenter's.

The doorman conversed with someone on the house phone and said to go on up to twelve.

The elevator opened directly into the apartment, which occupied the entire top floor, and there were floor-to-ceiling windows on all four sides and some of the greatest views she'd ever seen. A man and a woman greeted her and welcomed her in, and they identified themselves as Sarah, Preston's older sister, and Patrick, his younger brother.

Sarah fixed Molly a drink and did most of the talking. "Your experience, it doesn't surprise me," she said. "He had a critical eye, and loved to participate when he was comfortable."

Molly felt herself stumbling for something more to say. "Will there be . . . any service? Did he have many friends?"

"Dozens, at one time," Sarah said. "We're an old time Bay Area family, as you may have guessed, fourth-generation. But no, we're not planning anything."

Patrick spoke up. “I thought it would be nice. Print out some of his poems, have people say a few words, but I got out-voted.”

“He was a poet?” Molly said.

“Not a legitimate one, but he was quite the creative person,” Sarah said. “He was trained in art history, which you probably knew.”

Molly didn’t know this, but it didn’t surprise her, and she vowed to never get rid of that painting. She finished her drink and thanked them for opening their home to her, and told them she felt better now.

“I’ll let you out,” Patrick said, and he got into the elevator with her.

When they were on the sidewalk Molly said, “Please forgive me if I’m overstepping . . . but how did this happen?”

“You mean physically happen?” Patrick said. “Or mentally?”

“Gosh. Well, both things, I guess.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “There’s a taqueria. You wouldn’t think it’d be any good, right on Fillmore, but it’s okay.”

Molly was supposed to meet Harrison later, it was a hill-workout night, but it wasn’t the end of the world.

Patrick looked a lot like his brother, Molly thought, if not at the end, certainly from the newspaper photo. She couldn't rationalize how one sibling could be so normal while the other encounters such difficulty, both of them shaped from the same mold, though you saw it all the time obviously.

"The short answer to the first one," Patrick was saying, "is he hoisted himself over the rail and jumped off the balcony."

Molly said, "Were you . . . there?"

"We were. My sister and I both. He'd show up about once a month, out of the blue, stick around for maybe an hour . . . The night it happened, Sarah was in the kitchen and I was in the living room, with a game on that I wasn't paying attention to. I saw him go."

"Oh no," Molly said.

"You asked me . . . The other part, the first signs of it, he was home from UCLA for Christmas. I was just a kid, but you could tell something was off. Around then was when he started going by Pedro instead of Preston."

"I see," she said. "But medicine, and therapy and whatever else . . . ?"

Patrick shook his head. He said, “It’s hard to process, I know . . . him out there, us right nearby, his room waiting for him all safe and secure.”

“It’s your apartment, or Sarah’s, or what?”

“We inherited it from our parents, so we share it. God knows there’s enough space. If you can believe it, growing up in Atherton, it was our family’s pied-a-terre.”

“Wow . . . So what do you do?”

“I’m a clinical psychologist,” he said, smiling for the first time. “Don’t laugh.”

Despite his matter-of-fact attitude, this guy had just lost his brother, and Molly was concerned. “You’re doing okay, though?” she said.

Patrick put his fork down and dabbed his lips with a napkin. “You’re sweet. I see why my brother connected with you.”

Molly felt herself blushing. Not knowing where she was going with it, she said what popped into her head. “Well, I can say the same for you.”

When they finished eating, Patrick hailed her a cab and gave her a peck on the cheek and told her not to be a stranger.

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Harrison said, “You’re a grown woman obviously, but don’t you think that’s a little odd?”

“What,” she said, “my spending an hour with a family member?”

“Well, were you into him -- aside from the condolences routine?”

“You know what? . . . Fuck you . . . I can’t believe your mind would work like that.”

“I’m a guy, what can I say. We’re not complicated. That includes the grieving brother, is my guess.”

“Okay then, for your information . . . in the interest of full disclosure . . . I’m going to see him once more. He’s printing out a book of Pedro’s poetry.”

“Je-sus Christ.”

“Saturday. Come with me.”

“You’re on your own there kiddo.”

“You mean . . . period?” she said.

“No, not period,” he said. “Not quite.”

This time Molly tried the south side of the park, setting up at the top of the steps near the children’s playground. The view was completely different, no water, grittier buildings, some old churches. There were three staggered sets of stone steps that led down to Clay

Street, and the first time she was here a woman walking a dog told her they wrecked them in the 70's for a stunt in a movie, *What's Up Doc* with Barbra Streisand and Ryan O'Neal, by driving cars down them. Molly could see where someone had tried to repair the cracks.

She remembered Pedro's words of encouragement, especially the part about aesthetics and the importance of what you leave out, but after an hour and a half it wasn't working. Her colors felt all wrong, and she couldn't finesse the shadows, or the light on the buildings. Not to mention the kids wailing in the playground were getting to her, and she called it a day and headed over to Steiner Street.

Patrick said it may be a little early, but how about a cognac. "And, in my family, not just any cognac," he said. "which you're getting the idea of by now."

He brought out the finished collection of Pedro's poems, nicely put together in a presentation type binder, with a glossy cover and a family photo that was taken, Molly assumed, at the family spread in Atherton. Pedro was probably in his early thirties and was clean-shaven and wearing a button down shirt.

Patrick sat closer and held one side of the book while Molly turned the pages. She said, "Just so you

know, in case you're thinking about . . . making a move or something--"

"I wasn't," Patrick said.

"Where's Sarah, by the way?"

"Out. Specifically, she's in Indian Wells. There's a pro tournament down there. She's a big fan."

"Me too. I played USTA junior tennis. Even a little bit in college. I made the team but never got off the bench."

"Where?"

"Dartmouth. In New Hampshire."

"I went to Wesleyan," Patrick said. "D-3. We weren't very good, but I got to play every match, all four years."

"Man. More than once, I've thought that's what I should have done. Go to a less competitive school, where I could have had all that fun."

"My brother taught me to play," Patrick said. "We had a court . . . He had better things to do, but he always had room for me."

"You must have idolized him."

"When I'd make a mistake, it was always positive. Never negative, not once."

"I can picture it."

Patrick said, "I threw him off."

For a moment, Molly thought he meant he was a challenge for his brother, or took up too much of his time. Then she realized that wasn't it.

Patrick met her eyes and nodded.

“How . . . could you?” she said.

“I don't know,” Patrick said. “I just did.”

They'd found a weekend retreat on Airbnb, a little green cabin on a bluff a few miles south of Mendocino.

It was tight quarters, but they fit in the standup shower together, and Harrison lathered her up and down and took his time rubbing her shoulders. Later, when they were laying back, her head on his chest, the windows open with the sound of the ocean, she said, “I've been thinking about it, and you might have been correct. About that homeless guy.”

“I was?”

“Yeah. The manic episodes, the drugs, the degradation. You're right, it was unfair.”

“Okay, but I'm not sure about unfair . . . Difficult, obviously, and brutal at times, yes . . . But there's a point where you have to man up, and deal with the hand you're dealt.”



Molly straightened up. “This isn’t how you felt before.”

“Please don’t be putting words in my mouth Babe,” Harrison said. “You know I hate that.”

“What you said, right after, was no one should have to live like that.”

“So? You turn it around. You don’t necessarily jump off a building.”

Molly was silent for a while. “Maybe Pedro didn’t want to jump,” she said, “but it just happened.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Harrison said. “We don’t always know what we want, do we? . . . But come here.”