

Snail Mail

1600 words

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“I got a guy,” Pete was saying to Chandler between sets on the bench at Polliwogg Park, “I should have thanked. Back in high school. Guy gave our graduation speech.”

“A kid you mean?” Chandler said.

“No, teacher. I never had him. It was heartfelt. He was choking up at the end.”

“What did he talk about, that got to him so bad?”

Pete had the bottoms of his feet together, head going forward trying to stretch out the groin. Chandler had beat him 6-1 the first set and seemed to let up at 5-0 to give him the one game. Pete said, “You know something? You’re not a sentimental person. I actually feel sorry for you.”

“I’m only trying to understand it,” Chandler said.

“My high school deal--way before yours of course--I didn’t show up for. No idea who spoke.”

“Now why is that?”

“Well, I was seeing this JC gal. Our senior picnic, I brought her on the chartered bus. They suspended me

for 3 days, which overlapped the graduation proceedings.”

“Gee, have to say, pretty harsh, they usually let stuff go at the end . . . But a JC person. Dang.”

“My old man,” Chandler said, “he storms into the school and challenges it. He got stood up to by the old guy principal we had. It was good to see, that didn’t happen a lot.”

“So you were rooting against your dad. Who was going to bat for you.”

“Sure.”

“Like I say,” Pete said, “you’re kind of an unpredictable ass. It started early.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t like, crash the graduation? Didn’t you want to say goodbye to people?”

“No I didn’t. Jerri and I, we went out to the dam we had, took a picnic and otherwise messed around out there. No people anywhere, just prune orchards.”

“Sheesh. Well I’m not ashamed to admit it, you were light years ahead of me.”

“Meaning what?”

“I finally had a girlfriend at the end there, but I couldn’t get through to her, we were on different planes.”

“Meaning couldn’t persuade her.”

“Yeah that too. Which now I can sort of respect. I get a job that summer in Reno, delivering donuts. She sends me old-fashioned letters, hand-written, this tiny tight cursive. Pages of the shit. I could barely understand her.”

“She’s professing her love for you--or carrying on about unrelated matters?”

“I couldn’t tell. I mean was there a hidden message in there I was supposed to pick up on.”

“What happened to her?”

“She went back east to college. She was smart. Smith, in western Massachusetts.”

“That’s a good school. Gay one as well.”

“Yeah she turned lesbian.”

“Doesn’t work that way exactly.”

Pete said, “Hey, what are you gonna do. How’d your JC business conclude? Or did it.”

“It did, but interestingly enough, I met her years later in a courtroom.”

“Ah.”

“Friend of hers got into it with a neighbor, Jerri was testifying on her behalf. One of those tree issues people go to war over. We were representing the other side, both of them pretty big players, this is Newport Beach.”

“Yeah?”

“So nothing. We had coffee.”

“During the thing you mean?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Aren’t you supposed to not do that stuff? Someone on the other side?”

“Wasn’t worried about it.”

“So how was it? I mean any of the old flame still burning?”

“Not at first but then it picked up. I told Margaret, figuring come clean that I’ve had lunch with someone a few times.”

“The limited version,” Pete said. “That work though?”

“I think so. This is like five years ago. I still bump into her occasionally.”

“Uh-oh.”

“That’s the other thing--you mention your letters--she ended it with a postcard.”

“Now or back then?”

“Then obviously, you don’t listen?”

“Keep going.”

“She’s in Europe backpacking. This is . . . what are we talking, 1982. She said she got in some trouble, and hopefully she can fill me in when she gets home.”

“What was it?”

“Never found out. I didn’t see her again.”

“Just like that? I mean you didn’t call her when she came back? You weren’t curious?”

“Not really.”

“You’re saying . . . her sticking the something else on your plate’s what ended it?”

“I guess.”

“Jeez man, that’s too weird. What about now? That you’re . . . back in touch.”

“Have I asked her about it? Why?”

Pete said, “No reason, obviously.”

Chandler said, “You gotta be careful what you commit to. Y’ever go slot car racing as a kid? You remember that?”

“Never went. You needed the car, plus the accessories. You had to pay for track time.”

“So think of the brain as a bunch of parallel slots. You want to leave most of them free. Otherwise you dilute the little that you do need to retain.”

“Good hard science. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Yeah especially when it comes to women. 95 percent unimportant.”

“What about the 5 percent?”

“Ridiculous conversation,” Chandler said, “but the answer is it’ll rise to the surface, if need be.”

Getting his ass kicked on the court didn't require him to run around that much, but Pete was sweating, and when he got back to the apartment he took a little rinse-off and jumped in the pool.

The 4th of July was coming up and you thought about old summers, and he started wondering about a guy named Gabe.

He and Gabe were counselors at an adventure camp in Colorado. Gabe talked about his girlfriend and showed off her photo--Pete still remembered her name, Ava--and it sounded pretty darn perfect. Then, the last week, Gabe gets a final letter from her and he’s not looking too good the rest of the way.

Pete's plan tonight was to google around for that teacher, but it seemed more interesting to look for Gabe.

It took about ten minutes and then he found him, he was pretty sure, living in Prescott, Arizona. Gabe called himself an epoxy artist and there was a website. Stuff Pete would never buy, but impressive work--hand-built furniture with old English trolley car memorabilia sealed into the epoxy finishes. Looked like Gabe had a decent following, and he'd been profiled once in the Albuquerque Journal. There was a phone number to his studio.

Gabe picked up and Pete said, "You work later than I would have predicted, back in the day, in the Rocky Mountains."

Gabe paused and said, "Son of a bitch. Is this who I think?"

"I guess it is," Pete said. "The voice hasn't matured much then."

"How are you my friend?"

"Good. Listen, you remember getting those old fashioned snail mail letters? From that girl?"

"Man, you get right down to business. What are you even doing these days?"

“Tying up loose ends, would be the most accurate. I’ve blown it a few times, then regretted it. I kind of made a policy, don’t let things go too long.”

“Such as what?”

“Oh, a lot. One would be my 8th-grade counselor, she encouraged me to get out of my shell, run for student body president. Even though I lost. I never thanked her later. I always meant to. Then I hear she had a slip and fall in her house in Daly City, and didn’t make it.”

“I have a few of those,” Gabe said. “You’re getting me thinking now.”

“Yeah? What do you have?”

“I guess one’d be a gentleman in Mississippi who helped me avoid the cops once. There was nothing in it for him, that I could figure.”

“Yeah, well, you lived dangerously. I remember you climbing up the top of that falls and jumping off.”

“That was nuts, I admit.”

“When I looked for you just now it occurred to me you might be one of those guys, for whatever reason . . .”

“Who might not be around?”

“Possibly, yeah.”

“No see I’ve settled in. I got a 7 and a 10-year old. You bring up those letters, we ended up getting hitched.”

“Wait, Ava?”

“Eva, but yes. She’s in the other room.”

“Ho-ly smokes . . . the way you played the victim there . . . she’s jerking you around something fierce . . . two-timing right to your face, and enjoying telling you.”

“She was. Big flowery penmanship. Rubbing it in.”

Pete said, “You’re the second person today that’s pissing me off.”

“What’s that my friend?”

“I should have trusted my instincts and looked for a different guy. Stuck with Plan A . . . How’s Eva holding up? Physically?”

Gabe said, “Ah, you know . . . Listen, you take care.”

Pete made a cup of tea and started poking around for that graduation teacher. The guy’s name was something like Andriessen, though Pete tried spelling it a few different ways and had no luck.

He could see there’d be another step or two required, you’ve have to interact with the school or class representative and that may or may not lead directly to the guy.

And then what, what do you say?

The part Pete remembered the guy getting choked up at, it was the typical *Go forth into the world with gusto* deal, that there will be plenty of miscues but miscues are good, because there's a learning in every one.

Pete felt bad now for Mr. Andriessen, hoped he was still around and so on . . . but you weren't everyone's keeper here, Jeez.