

The Pete McGirk Stories



Ted Gross

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Unless

The third day down there, Pete taking it slow, enjoying the bikini offerings along The Strand, some guy on a bicycle almost runs him over.

Pete didn't care for this but had pretty much forgotten about it by the time he reached the Manhattan Beach Pier and wandered out to the end, except the same guy happened to be perched on one of the benches, the pier apparently being his turnaround point. He was watching the late-afternoon surfers down below.

Pete took a seat next to the idiot and said, "I really look that old to you?"

The guy squinted at him. "Come again, Bud?"

"What were you doing, about 25 back there? I almost had to adjust my power-walk to avoid you."

"That's pretty funny," the guy said, placing it now.

Pete said, "It wasn't the 'get out of the way, old man', specifically, that hit a nerve."

"Let me guess. You didn't like the tone."

Pete said, "But forget that for a second . . . I'm really an old man, is your impression?"

"You're asking me for an honest answer?" the guy said, amused. "Well compared to the studly population we got around here . . . what do *you* think?"

Pete had to admit he could see his point. It was a little intimidating exercising here, a much more intense vibe than his old stomping grounds, the Marina Green in San Francisco. Everyone looked great. Even the legitimate old guys seemed fitter and moved better than he did.

Either way, there was the guy's bicycle leaning up against the railing. It looked like a fancy hybrid bike, with about 80 gears, and bells and whistles up the wazoo.

Then again, it could have been a knock-off version from the rack at Target.

Pete watched the surfers for a minute. Only medium-sized waves today, short rides, but a lot of skill down there.

He got off the bench and picked up the guy's bike and threw it over the side of the pier into the ocean.

The guy popped up and looked over the railing, and turned to Pete with a wide-open mouth, and started racing to the front end of the pier where the stairs took you down to the beach.

Pete realized there was one surfer close to the pier who he hadn't seen when he flung the thing over. Luckily the guy wasn't aware of the bicycle plunging into the water nearby, and more importantly it didn't hit him.

It did seem like the right time to start moving and to probably re-blend into the throng, so he headed back to The Strand and turned south toward Hermosa, and by this time the bike guy had taken off his shoes and was wading into the water, his head swiveling around like a bird.

More interesting to Pete was the beach volleyball game taking shape right in front of him, four gals who knew what they were doing, the serving and the diving and the spiking all at a high level, and the outfits micro-swimsuits, at best.

"You're probably wondering," someone said, "how they don't burn their feet."

Pete was hoping the person wasn't talking to him, but he was, a pleasant-enough-looking guy with a backwards Dodgers cap and a newspaper under his arm.

"They still read papers in L.A. then," Pete said.

"Not sure," the guy said. "I pick up the leftovers at The Coffee Bean. Not much bite to them anymore though."

"You got that right, I was in the business once," Pete said, thinking about running into Rich Tomlinson that time at the Booker Lounge in Cow Hollow, comparing notes on what they were doing these days, neither one of them quite able to replace the excitement of the newsroom when a story was breaking.

“What interested me,” the guy said, “was you tossed it, and then you took your time. Nothing that urgent bothering you, where you had to hightail it out of there.”

Pete said, “Jeez . . . I was that obvious then?” A little alarmed that he hadn’t blended back in after all.

The guy said, “I’m watching a couple Mexican kids reeling in a pretty big fish. Something I always wanted to try, but never committed myself to.”

“I know . . . you have to be willing to get a little dirty, plus all that *time*.”

“And then you gotta filet it, I guess, or some other shit,” the guy said. “So I look to the left and there’s this strange scene playing out, the metal going up and over . . . I can’t help wondering, are they having some kind of logical beef, or is it just some dude off his rocker.”

“So you followed me to find out,” Pete said. “Answer your original question, I wasn’t wondering how they don’t burn their feet . . . but how do the outfits stay in place?”

“They don’t always.”

“Oh. Not a big deal. Just something to be curious about, I guess.”

“You sound like me,” the guy said. “Let’s get a drink.”

There was a three-block stretch on Manhattan Beach Boulevard, coming up the hill from the water, where you could zig-zag bar to bar and they all felt pretty much the same. Cozy establishments, partial views of the Pacific, just beat-up enough without overdoing it.

“If you go local,” the guy was saying, who’d introduced himself as Ned, “you need to be wearing flip-flops. Take a look around.”

Pete said, “When I was a kid, on vacation, we used to call them zorries. The strap though, it digs into my foot between the toes.”

They were in the *Crow’s Nest*, not quite 4 o’clock, a little table in back, sipping whiskey sours. Ned seemed to know everyone, and introduced him to Cindy, the waitress.

“Are you new?” she said, friendly.

“You mean, as opposed to passing through?” Pete said. “I think so, yeah.”

“Well it looks like you’re in good hands already with Neddy,” she said, and left them alone.

“The e after your name,” Pete said. “Sounds like there’s some depth there.”

“Yeah, well,” Ned said. “Where you holing up at, anyway?”

“Ah, I got an apartment. Month-to-month. Kinda re-inventing myself a tad.”

“Yeah? . . . What’s so important you gotta reinvent yourself *from*?”

The correct answer of course would be: *From expending a lot of time and energy and stress trying to avoid damaging a couple people . . . Or along those lines.*

Obviously you couldn’t put it that way, so Pete said, “Up north. I had a medical scare . . . I think I’m out of the woods, but something like that, it makes you act different.”

“You’re out of the woods, how?” The guy not dancing around it, which Pete could appreciate.

“Well I go in, figuring they’re going to give me a couple Alka-Seltzers--the doctor, he’s an old friend of mine, the whole thing no big deal . . . I come out, I’m driving down to Colma pricing burial plots . . . You know where that is?”

“Is that like, Daly City? You see that shit from the freeway going to the airport, no?”

“No, that’s 280, a veterans’ cemetery. Different. But back to my deal, a few days later, when you get yourself half-way stabilized, you start thinking funny thoughts.”

“I can imagine. What kind of thoughts? . . . You want another?”

Pete said he wouldn’t mind.

“One of my goals coming down here,” he said, “cut back on the hard liquor. And the free radicals. Someone lectured me on those too. I’m off to a flying start.”

“Your lecture-person needs an update,” Ned said, signalling Cindy with two fingers. Pete remembered Allison with the unusual massage, along with

examining his tongue and telling him what he needed to work on to improve himself. She was looking at a chart, and he asked her which organs she could tune up. She'd been pretty bossy, but still.

That was back near the beginning, which seemed like a long time ago. Pete counted it off on his fingers, and said, "Right around the end of football, the regular season, is when they death-sentenced me."

"So we're talking, what, mid-January?" Ned said.

Pete said, "Dang, coming up on nine months now. That's good." Though at the same time, thinking, *Is that actually very long?*

"So . . . you're saying, the chemo took hold then? You beat it?"

Pete said, "Your name really Ned?"

"No, Lou," the guy said.

"Cause I'm hearing a touch of New York. And you look pretty Italian, if you pinned me down."

"Well I'll stop short of calling you a genius for those observations . . . I lost most of the accent. Acting classes out here. Even then, I had to work at it."

"It surface sometimes though, where you revert back?"

"It's been known to."

Pete had no idea where he was going with this Lou, but he supposed it wasn't the worst way to be closing out the day, especially when he didn't have a whole lot else going on. "The acting *work?*" he said.

"Nah, not great . . . I thought I could come out here and kinda take over the industry. It ain't that simple."

Pete said, "You're reminding me of the guy in *Get Shorty* now . . . The book was a lot better than the movie."

"Actually," Lou said, "*The Sopranos* is what you might say triggered my interest in Hollywood. They kind of shift gears there, remember where the nephew writes a script? And they fly out to get that actor to entertain it."

"I know who you're talking about. The half-Indian guy who played Ghandi. He's not that interested, and they send him a message."

Lou said, "I can't remember what the final outcome was, did they ever get it into production . . . or was it one of those loose ends they never dealt with."

Pete said, "That's something I appreciated about the show . . . They didn't need to tie everything up into a neat package."

"You're right. Like the loose Russian down the Pine Barrens. You always wonder, is it gonna come back and bite 'em in the ass."

"When you brought up *The Sopranos* as your motivation," Pete said, "I thought it was going to be where Tony has the dream that he's the traveling salesman, and is at the convention at that hotel in L.A."

"After he gets shot," Lou said. "But I thought that was the midwest."

"Ever shot anyone?" Pete said, the second whiskey sour starting to kick in good.

"Funny," Lou said, "something I had in mind to ask *you*."

The place was filling up. Cindy was joined now by another waitress, a platinum-blonde, petite, with her hair up, and some of the regulars were putting their hands on the two of them here and there, friendly and probably harmless in a casual beach town, though maybe not somewhere else.

Pete said, "So what kind of business are you in now? Since the movie-star career bombed, apparently."

Lou said, "You know . . . a little of this, little of that . . . *business* business."

"And you're looking for assistance . . . in some way, shape or form."

"You tell *me*," Lou said. Deadpan now, eyes a little colder, and Pete could picture him leaning against the stoop outside a three-family house in East Yonkers, which if that wasn't the exact neighborhood was close enough.

Pete took his time, still amused by this guy but also wondering what line he might be crossing, or already had.

Lou got a call and stuck his hand out like *sorry about this* and he plugged one ear and stood up and went outside. Cindy the waitress came over and said, "I see you boys have hit it off already."

Pete thought of asking Cindy what she was doing later. The diagnosis he was telling Ned/Lou about made him bolder, impulsive . . . even after he didn't

show any symptoms and it started looking like someone could have made a mistake in the lab and maybe there never *had* been anything to worry about.

But he remembered he was supposed to grab a bite with Emma, who he'd met by the pool yesterday in his little apartment complex. So he said to Cindy, "The guy ever act? I mean that was really part of the deal?"

"Ned?" she said.

"Yeah. As a stepping stone to roughing people up? Or whatever?"

"You're funny," she said, and she put a fresh cocktail napkin under his drink and moved on . . . and Ned was still outside and Chris took in the scene, decided the *Crowe's Nest* wasn't a bad vibe, and he thought cultivate your *own* damn garden, how about.

Trifle

There was a complex south of Market called *The Rialto* that played off-beat, artsy films which didn't make it into the mainstream theaters. Pete picked the one titled "A Graceful Exit", not knowing anything about it.

He'd met someone a few days ago at a Starbucks, Rory, and she showed up on time at six, but she had a friend with her, Joanne.

"Good choice," said Rory. "This got really good reviews."

It was a documentary about a dance troupe in Egypt that was able to perform freely finally, after the overthrow of Mubarak. Pete didn't think the liberated dancing was much better or that different than the restricted dancing, but the dancers were so joyous that you couldn't help root for them. Naturally, it ended with a performance in New York.

"What did you think?" Pete said.

"I cried," Joanne said.

"I did too," Rory said. "I can relate."

"Wait a second," Pete said. "You relate to them, *how*?"

"I'm an artist as *well*. A musician. Depending on circumstances, it can be very inhibiting."

Pete was thinking about the Warriors game he was missing. Miami was in town and his friend Ed scored an extra ticket but a little late unfortunately. Pete didn't like to break his commitments, plus he was hoping to maybe get somewhere with Rory.

"You're full of shit, you know that?" he said. "Anyway, I'm starving. Let's eat somewhere."

There was an Indian place he remembered in the Tenderloin, a run-down hole in the wall, but cheap and authentic. He knew the gals would be vegans, so he made sure to order himself the meatiest dish he could.

"This is really tasty," Joanne said. "We have some of these in Berkeley, but this place is even better."

"You guys roommates, old friends, in a relationship, what?" Pete said.

"Yes, roommates," Rory said. "Two white girls in the flatlands. We live like a half block up from San Pablo Avenue."

“We have a male roommate though too,” Joanne said. “He’s black, and most people know him in the neighborhood, so that helps a lot. Henry.”

“Oh,” Pete said, trying to figure it out, but deciding it wasn’t worth it.

“And you?” Rory said.

“No particular excitement. That’s why you ran into me at the coffee shop in Mill Valley, I like to hike by myself on Mount Tam.”

“Is that what you had just done?”

“Not that day actually.”

“That’s what I mean, I could tell right away you were struggling with something. You still are.”

“I am, but I feel better now that I ate. Let’s get out of here.”

Pete walked them down to the bottom of Powell to get the BART train back to Berkeley.

“Well, it was fun,” he said. “Thanks for meeting me.”

Joanne announced that actually she was going to Jill and Tabitha’s party in the Haight. “You want to come, Ror? You too Pete, it might be weird, but they don’t care.”

“Hmm . . . maybe what I’ll do then,” Rory said, “is hang out with Pete a little longer.” Looking at him. “If that’s all right. I feel like you’re a tour guide.”

He said fine with him, he didn't mind.

“Joanne gay?” he asked, when she’d left.

“Not really. She’s into women, but she appreciates men too.”

“Well, there’s a couple options,” he said. “We can go up to Nob Hill, get a cappuccino somewhere, take the Cable Car back down. The other would be the longer effort, here to Chestnut Street. I could buy you a drink and then my car’s near there so I’d drive you back to Berkeley. You don't want to be taking BART too late.”

“I like Plan B,” she said. She had put on a woolen hat that covered the tops of her ears, with straps that hung loose. She looked cute.

“Okay then. I enjoy pointing stuff out. If it gets over the top, tell me to shut up.”

A mile or so into it, when they got to Polk Street, she said, “This makes me realize I don’t plain *walk* nearly enough. We need those positive ions.” Pete didn’t say anything and kept moving.

They took Broadway to Fillmore, and then down the steep hill with the classic view of the bridge, everything sparkly across the bay tonight.

Sunday night at Weatherby's it was a little quieter than the rest of the weekend but not much. They sat at a corner table and had lemon drops. When Mitch came over, Pete introduced him to Rory and gave him the not-what-you-think look, though he could feel it maybe happening, you never knew.

As they were walking to his place he said, "I'm trying to picture the set-up. Pardon me being out-of-line, but the liquor's got me curious . . . You guys bang your roommate Henry, or it's nothing like that?"

"Joanne does, on a semi-regular basis," Rory said. "I tried it once, when I first moved in, but it didn't work for me."

"Oh."

"Do you have a guitar?"

"I do, as a matter of fact."

"Can I play a couple of songs for you, originals? Then you can take me home. I'd love to know what you think."

He told her be my guest, and they turned down Broderick, crossed Bay, and when they got to his building there was his old friend Helen unfortunately, waiting on the bench in the alcove.

"You have to be kidding me," he said.

"Pete, I just need to speak to you briefly," Helen said, giving Rory a weak smile.

He introduced them. "Tell you what," he said, pointing upstairs. "I'm going to set her up and I'll be down in a couple minutes."

"So who's Helen?" Rory said in the apartment.

"Helen is someone I used to work with," he said. "She's really pissing me off."

"And you're hooked up with her?"

"We were at one time. Not any more.

"She's attractive. She takes care of herself."

Pete did have to admit Helen looked pretty good tonight, her hair a little different, and wearing a skirt, suede.

“Okay, let me handle this real quick,” he said. “The guitar’s hanging on the wall in the bedroom, and there’s not a lot in the kitchen, but whatever you can find . . . I’ll be right back.”

“No problem,” she said. “It’s nice here.”

Back downstairs, Helen said, “I’m really sorry to keep showing up unannounced. But you didn’t call me back all weekend. Can we talk somewhere private, just for a second?”

They went in the garage. There was only one car there, his, no one around.

“Pete, we had a Walk-a-Thon at school yesterday morning. The police came by and talked to me.”

“They did?”

“I mean, they talked to all of us, whatever faculty and administrators were there, so I know it was just routine. But I lied to them, which scares the daylights out of me.”

“What do you mean, lied?”

“They asked me could I think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Matt Morrison, and I said I couldn’t.”

“That’s perfect then. And that’s the truth.”

“It’s not,” she said. “And something else.”

“What?”

“I’ve been horny for you. I can’t get beyond it . . . Ever since what I think you might have had something to do with.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind, you know that?”

“I’m not wearing any underwear at the moment,” she said.

Fuck.

A few minutes later, her back up against the side of the car, she said, “Didn’t know doctors’ secretaries . . . had nose rings these days.”

He had no idea what she was talking about, then put it together that she thought Rory was somehow bizarrely his doctor’s secretary . . . and he thought about correcting her, but figured what was the harm.

“Everything good?” Rory said, when he was back.

“I’m very sorry about that,” Pete said. “There was an accident involving a former colleague, up where she teaches. She’s having trouble rationalizing it.”

Rory was sitting cross-legged on the couch strumming the guitar, a cup of tea steaming on the coffee table.

“Well,” she said, “do you want to make love *first*, or should we go through the songs?”

Jesus Christ Almighty.

He said why not try the songs.

She had a good voice. Not a trained voice, but expressive, with plenty of range. She ran through three. They were pretty much folk, with a little pop-hip-hop element thrown in. The lyrics were off, corny, with too many words, but the melodies weren't bad.

When she finished, she laid down the guitar and waited for his reaction.

“For me, the second was the weakest,” he said. “It sounded too much like something else, that I can’t place. But the other two were good. Not great yet, they need a little help, but both pretty catchy actually.”

“Wow, that means a lot,” she said. “Thank you.”

They talked music for a while. She told him she’d been going to open mics, and that a friend who had Pro Tools was helping her put together a demo. Pete said he was in a couple of bands back in college but rarely picked up an instrument these days, and that it was nice to feel her energy.

“Welp,” she said. “This turned out to be one of the best evenings I had since I moved here. You sure you don’t mind driving me?”

“Of course not,” he lied. “That’s the idea.”

When he dropped her, she said, “You're a pretty nice guy. Maybe you can come to one of my gigs.”

“Well, yeah, you never know,” he said.

And that was that, but meanwhile he realized he was starved out of his mind and when he got back to the city he thought of Mel’s on Geary. There were other places open at 3:30 in the morning but you knew Mel’s did the job. Pete felt a lot better halfway through his Reuben sandwich and strawberry shake.

“We’re a little scattered tonight, *are* we?” the guy next to him at the counter said.

Pete knew the type, an old San Franciscan, a straight shooter. Who started off in the Mission District, went to Catholic school if the parents could afford it, still hit you with bits and pieces of the original San Francisco accent. Pete's dad had told him more than once that when these guys pass away, that's it.

Pete had had a few teachers who reminded him of this guy, and there was a comfort zone.

He said, "Not so much scattered, as befuddled."

The guy smiled. "Does frustrated cover it?"

"Man," Pete said, "I'd be a terrible actor then. Even at the soap opera level."

"It's early," the guy said.

Day Shift

Pete was a week into his loose attempt to reinvent himself in southern California.

At the Starbucks on Manhattan Beach Boulevard you could sit outside on this ledge and there was the ocean right there, down the hill, and you had assorted people coming out of the water, some carrying surfboards which nowadays were about the size of bath mats.

There were also the open-water distance swimmers, who'd been *way* out there circling around some buoy you could barely see, wearing these orange caps so they could find each *other* apparently, and Pete decided that was a questionable one, with the sharks and God knows what else lurking below.

Inside Starbucks was a mixed bag. There were the usual folks fooling around on their phones, but also a core element of locals apparently doing actual work, most of them wearing flip-flops and seeming casual, except for the occasional furrowed brow.

Pete assumed there was some legitimate money changing hands in there-- otherwise how could they hunch over the computer for a couple hours and then blow off the rest of the day, while supporting themselves in Manhattan Beach? . . . but what did he know.

There was one guy along the side wall reading an old-fashioned physical book and Pete liked that, so when he went inside for a refill he sat down in the empty chair at the guy's table.

"Morning to you too," the guy said, Pete figuring he was getting any obligatory conversation out of the way as fast as possible.

"You wouldn't have stood out ten years ago," Pete said, "maybe even five, but you do now."

The guy smiled and turned the book over and looked at it. It was a hardback with a clear library cover but seeming brand new, titled *How The Hell*

Did This Happen?, and Pete saw the word *election* in smaller print along with some recognizable cartoon faces.

“Well I hope you’re not a fan of Trump,” the guy said. “Not that I’d hold it against you, but I’m learning a lot.”

“That you don’t really want to know,” Pete said.

“Unh-huh. Kind of like a disturbingly gory movie . . . you shouldn’t look, but you still do.”

“What kills *me*,” Pete said, “is we got what, 300 million people in this country now? The best we can come up with is two clowns going head-to-head?”

“The book dives into that, actually.”

“Yeah? What’s the conclusion?”

“Haven’t gotten there, but you become acutely aware of not just individuals pulling strings behind the scenes, but mega-conglomerates, many of them nameless and faceless . . . though we suspected that already, I suppose.”

That was enough politics for now. This guy looked mid-50’s, maybe 10 years older than Pete.

Pete said, “You retired then, working part-time, or what? You don’t strike me as particularly concerned you’re going to be late for an appointment.”

The guy laughed. “My old firm, I hear from them sometimes, they want me to do some consulting. Litigation work. That’s not going to happen.”

“I get where you’re coming from there,” Pete said. “They’ve still got me on the list, to sub, up where I taught school once. Every so often I get a call, even though they’re out of their mind if they think I’m coming back.”

“Where’s that?”

“Terra Linda . . . But addressing what you were saying . . . so you’re a lawyer?”

“That in Sonoma County?”

“Below it. Marin.”

“Well *was*, would be not the *technical* answer to your question, but the *right* one . . . Too many circumstances you frankly don’t care about, and it beats you down.”

Pete figured what the hay, and lowered his voice a notch and said, “You ever run across a guy named Ned Mancuso?”

The guy looked at Pete more squarely than he had been. “I have, as a matter of fact. I take it you know him then.”

Pete said, “I met him a few days ago in the bar down the street, the one with the anchors and nautical nets and shit. Colorful character . . . So not so much *know* him, as trying to figure him out.” Waiting on the guy now.

The guy stuck a bookmark in and closed the book. “I wouldn’t be able to go there,” he said.

“Hmm. Attorney-client, and all that, undoubtedly.”

“You got it . . . Speaking of appointments, I do have to meet the wife. The excitement of the weekday half-price bargain matinee.” The guy shrugged like he was apologizing and got up.

Pete said, “Criminal, or civil, your firm . . . Or what?”

“All of it,” the guy said.

He walked home. The lawyer guy’d handed him a card and it said *Chandler Sweeney* and the words *Tennis Partner* on it, not a bad idea actually. Pete had said something about the guy’s *Indian Wells Open* t-shirt, which must have triggered him digging into his wallet.

So Pete called him the next day, and they played and Chandler was good, and sneaky with his tactics too, and he kicked Pete’s ass.

“Is that what I’m going to run into?” Pete said, after getting hammered again in set number three. “All you guys better down here . . . or you’re an exception?”

They were in the city park on the other side of Sepulveda, down toward Hawthorne where it got more modest, Pete figuring the space you needed for a couple of courts didn’t exist closer in.

Chandler said, “You’re not bad. A few things you do well, a few not as well . . . I got a pro I can give you, it’ll help . . . Me, I played at UCLA, a *long* time ago. Back when you could play more than one sport.”

“Oh yeah?” Pete said. “What was your other one?”

“Basketball. I had an okay outside shot, but I was too slow, couldn’t defend my man effectively . . . They let me stay on the team because I hustled, but I didn’t see much playing time.”

Pete was looking at this Chandler thinking, Let’s see, John Wooden, he coached there for about a hundred years, didn’t he? This guy actually played for *Wooden?*

“Who was the coach?” he said.

“Gary Cunningham.”

Pete had heard the name, one of the revolving door of guys *after* Wooden, so Chandler wasn’t quite that old . . .

But no way this guy played basketball at UCLA.

Which it would be easy enough and maybe even fun to confirm, but why waste the time.

He suspected the college tennis part was a stretch too. Club ball or intramurals, but not varsity D-1, even back then.

He was pretty sure his friend Jenna Lee, the pro at Golden Gate Park, would make mince-meat out of this guy, but that didn’t matter at the moment. Chandler was giddy from his dominating performance and talking like a chatterbox, standing up to demonstrate a technique, and applying it to Pete’s game.

Pete figured, the guy feeling so good, he might as well pick his brain, since he didn’t think he was lying about being a *lawyer* too.

He said, “Let me jump around on you for a second. If you were going to kill someone and live to tell about it, what would be the best way?”

The guy laughed, not unlike his friend Rich had, when Pete posed the same ballpark question one lazy afternoon in the *Booker Lounge* up in San Francisco.

“That’s part of the human condition,” Chandler said.

“Hunh,” Pete said, not sure he should have asked.

Chandler said, “Answer is, it’s harder. We go for technicalities, mostly.”

“Meaning . . . you’re saying, they *have* these guys? Generally? The police?”

“Indeed. DNA is an absolute killer. Altered the whole playing field . . . Once upon a time, we could put a witness on the stand and trench it, try to *re-establish* the so-called facts . . . Now with someone in a white coat up there, yep, they’ve *got* you.”

“What about O.J. Simpson?” Pete said. “His blood was all *over* the place, no?”

“It was. We did some consulting work for Johnnie Cochran before the trial . . . You might say that was the beginning of the era we’re in now . . . where you’re largely reduced to two things. Procedural abnormalities and character defects.”

“Who might have had reason to plant evidence, you mean.”

“Yeah, put together enough *okay fine, the blood’s all over the place but what if’s* to screw up their case.”

“Ah,” Pete said. This was interesting, and the guy obviously knew his stuff, but no way you *yourself* could let it come to that.

“Of course the home run,” Chandler said, starting to get worked up again, like he was a minute ago with the tennis, “we were facing Clark and Darden. Both of them idiots . . . You don’t always *get* that.”

“Allowing the gloves to not fit . . .”

“Unh-huh, it goes on and on. What was your *original* question though?”

“I guess just . . . what would be the key *these* days, someone being successful?”

“You mean, making it look like someone *else* did it?”

Pete hadn’t thought of that, not really, and it seemed basic. Jeez . . . Things *had* sort of evolved that way, luckily, the one he’d found himself getting caught up in . . . But setting out up-*front* to *structure* it like that, it could make sense.

“*Or* are you asking,” Chandler said, “how would someone commit the perfect crime? Where they wash their hands of it, and then put on a tuxedo and have dinner at a fine restaurant.” He laughed.

“More or less,” Pete said. “Yeah . . . how could they handle their business--still be walking around--and stay *the fuck* out of your office.”

“Oh . . . Well I have one theory which sounds simple, but I don’t think I’m that far off . . . You want to play another though? You have to *be* somewhere?”

Pete said no he didn’t want to play another, and he didn’t have to be anywhere either.

Chandler said, “I’ve thought more than once, these guys, if they simply run and hide long enough, keep a low profile, law enforcement tends to forget about them.”

“Interesting,” Pete said. “And don’t get drunk and brag to the guy on the stool next to you, I guess.”

“Of course, all that. But if you go out-of-state, especially, you’ve just upped your odds substantially.”

“Despite everything you hear about the master databases and whatnot?”

“Right. Don’t forget, AG’s and DA’s and mayors are human like anyone else. They want to get re-elected . . . Extradition can be a mess, not to mention the public perception--why are they bringing more garbage back *here* and putting manpower on it, when some guy’s breaking into houses right in the neighborhood and you can’t even catch *him*.”

That reminded Pete of a pot farm shooting up north a couple years ago that still bothered him, and he told Chandler the story, that the local cops focused so hard on the search warrant business that they ended up losing the guys.

Chandler shook his head. “There are plenty of bright folks on the good side, but every move has to be documented now. It handcuffs them . . . Why, do you have something in mind?”

It shouldn’t have, but it caught Pete off guard, strictly hypotheticals flowing up to this point.

“Because I wouldn’t hold it against you,” Chandler said. “You’d have your reasons. We all do.”

“What do you mean, *we all do*?”

“I’m saying we all have skeletons in our closet. If we’re honest with ourselves.”

“Oh yeah? . . . That mean *you* have a hidden list somewhere?”

Might as well have a little fun with it, push the guy’s buttons.

“I do. Not for official consumption, but I’ve got it filed away.” Pointing at his temple.

Pete couldn’t believe he hadn’t cut it off with this guy yet . . . maybe the fresh start down here had loosened him up . . . someone said that might happen, the blue skies, the warm nights, the ocean air.

He said, “And? If you had a terminal disease, for example--not much to lose--you might act on it?”

The guy took off his tennis hat and played around with his hair and looked at Pete. “I’m surmising *you* could conceivably have a terminal disease, and it could be something you’re considering.”

Not asking him, and not judging. Which Pete appreciated.

He said, “I *had* one, yeah . . . I think I’m good now. Meanwhile, there is a list, and in my case I’ve got it written down.”

“So Ned Mancuso is on it?” Chandler said. “That’s why you brought his name up in Starbucks?”

Wow, where did *that* come from?

“Because you might have to get in *line*, there,” the guy said.

“Oh . . . Attorney-client privilege out the window for a moment.”

“Most definitely . . . So . . . if I’m understanding you correctly, you *had* an issue, developed a unique mindset as a result, and now that the issue’s possibly resolved itself, you’re having trouble letting go.”

Pete said, “How much do you charge? Or *did* you, by the hour?”

“When I retired it was at \$1500,” Chandler said.

“Well that’s good and bad. The refreshing part, you gave a figure right away.”

The guy didn’t say anything.

“You’re good, is why I’m asking,” Pete said. “You actually got me figured out better than I have *myself* figured out.”

“So . . .” Chandler said. “You want to play tomorrow?”

“That *it?*” Pete said. “I give you enough where *I* almost have to run out-of-state now, and you’re booking tennis courts.”

Chandler said, “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll see you here tomorrow at 1 . . . We can do some drills first, if you want.”

Heading back to the apartment, Pete was thinking . . . that wasn’t exactly how he pictured it playing out today, hitting a few balls in the town park with a retired guy.

The next day Chandler wasn’t kidding when he said he had some drills. He started Pete off running a lap around the perimeter of the park, and then stuck him halfway between the baseline and the net and fired balls at him, explaining that mid-court play was one of Pete’s weak points.

It didn’t make any sense to Pete, thinking you don’t even want to *be* in mid-court when you’re actually playing, that you already did something wrong just to end *up* there, but he went along with it.

Chandler had a basket of balls today, the kind of set-up a teaching pro would use, and it was clear he wasn’t getting anything out of it himself, that the drills were strictly for Pete’s benefit, so how could you get mad at the guy.

Finally he moved him to the baseline, the right corner, and set up some plastic cones in the opposite court and had Pete try to hit them.

“You’re turning it over,” Chandler called out. “That’s *old*-school. It’s all in the pronation of the forearm now.”

Pete had no idea what he was talking about but he was afraid to ask any questions and risk triggering a major clarification so he kept his mouth shut and tried his best, and after twenty minutes Chandler let him switch to the backhand side and finally they took a water break.

“You might not think so, in the short run,” Chandler said, “but I saw some progress out there . . . Shall we play a couple sets, put it to use?”

Pete said, “Listen, I appreciate what you’re doing.”

Chandler said, “Meaning as opposed to yesterday, where I was kind of a wise-ass?”

“Yeah, okay,” Pete said. “You have a good side, I’m seeing it now. Pretty sure I came across like a jerk too, in fact I probably still do.”

“Well . . . not the worst way to be. Our old man used to tell us that--the old adage, speak your mind--they may not like you but they might at least respect you.”

“I guess you can apply that to everyday situations,” Pete said. “I had one this morning, sort of a variation on the theme. It’s a good thing I’m learning to relax . . . pick my spots.”

“What *kind* of variation?” Chandler said.

Pete told him about an email from a CraigsList viewer, regarding a painting he was trying to sell. By a graffiti artist named Scott Bird. The guy essentially accused him of art fraud.

Chandler digested it a moment, his face scrunched up. “You have it on you? The exact thing?”

Pete dug out his phone and pulled up the message. He said, “I didn’t answer the guy. Do you think I should have?”

It read:

Hey There Bro

Yo I don’t even like Bird’s work but I can tell a fake ass picture when I see 1 a hundred miles away

Got a lot a nerve, don’t you?

2500 fuck your mother.

Chandler read it a couple times and handed the phone back and said, “I can’t speak for you, but if this were *me* it would be hitting a nerve. Big-time.”

“It sort of did, at breakfast, but I think I moved past it. Only reason I mentioned maybe responding to the guy, I’m thinking--you ignore the assholic negotiating style, he actually *could* be a potential *buyer*.”

“What category did you list it in?”

“Collectibles . . . That’s what I mean, he’s probably some doofus who collects art, and wants to be convinced it’s not a fake. Which admittedly, on CraigsList, there is a lot of.”

“Could be,” Chandler said. “But at this point I’d kill that guy before I sold it to him.”

The words hung there and Pete took a good look at this guy standing there in his baggy tennis shorts, and wow, it sure seemed like he was dead serious.

“Take it from me,” Pete said, “that type of level, no way is it worth it.”

“That’s your opinion,” Chandler said. “I had a CraigsList experience that *I* tried not to think about *too*. But finally it got the better of me.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

“This is four, five years ago now . . . I put a motorcycle on there.”

“Not to interrupt you, but you don’t seem like a bike guy. Not at all.”

Chandler cleared his throat. “As I was saying, I listed it, an ‘89 Honda GB500. Book said \$3400 to 45, so I split the difference and made it 43.”

Pete said, “That’s not quite splitting the difference, but I get the idea. You’re not going to tell me some guy accused you of faking a *bike*?”

“If we could cut the comedy,” Chandler said. “That night someone calls about it. He asks a few questions and then states that the maximum budget he has is \$3000. I say fine, thank you for inquiring, and then he proceeds to fire off several more questions about the condition of the motorcycle. I say, and perfectly politely I thought, that I’m not sure of the point in going into more detail, since it’s outside your price range . . . The guy slams down the phone, but that wasn’t the end of it.”

“So he went and filed a complaint with CraigsList, and they suspended you?”

“Much worse. This guy downloads the photo of my bike and then posts it as his own listing, for \$500. With my phone number.”

“Ah.”

“So the phone starts ringing off the hook, and then people are accusing me of baiting and switching them, and I finally figure it out but I can’t get the ad

down because it's *his* listing, and it's a Friday afternoon and we're into the weekend . . . and finally on Monday I reach someone at CraigsList and they take it down, but I'm the *bad* guy now. Meanwhile the phone's still ringing every twenty minutes."

"So that was it? . . . Or you did something beyond that?" Pete remembering Chandler in the beginning, that the experience *got the better of him*.

"I did. And I know you're a stand-up individual . . . and *again*--this is not for public consumption."

Pete was thinking, Jeez, could this guy actually be *dangerous*? This mild-mannered retiree from Starbucks whose schedule that first day revolved around timing the bargain matinee?

"Down below Torrance," Chandler was saying, "there's a relatively deserted open area, used to be a military installation. I told the guy to meet me there, that it would be a good place to test-drive the bike, since it wasn't currently street-legal."

"Wait a second, you jumped way ahead here. You called him back?"

"Darn right I did. I didn't let on that I'd been receiving the dozens of calls on his *own* ad. I merely told him I might reconsider the three thousand dollars, but that it would have to be cash."

"You're not going to tell me . . ." Pete said, lowering his voice. "You did the guy *in*? . . . I mean I'm joking, but still."

"I *should* have. Which is something that pulls at me whenever I replay it in detail . . . No, what I did was I brought a couple of fellows with me. One of whom we'd done some work for, got him out of a tight spot. There were no blows exchanged, or anything like that. But the three thousand did change hands."

"So in the end . . . you sold the bike. The revenge was, you forced the guy into buying it? Whether he exactly *wanted* to or not?"

"Yes. And I kept the bike."

"You're shitting me . . . You *robbed* a guy?"

“That would be a question of semantics,” Chandler said. “Naturally my interpretation is different . . . Okay, that’s off my chest. C’mon, let’s play, serve ‘em up!”

Pete got off the bench even though he didn’t feel like it and they played two sets, and Chandler beat him worse than yesterday.

“I think I’m regressing,” Pete said after the last ball--a down-the-line winner from Chandler that beat Pete by ten feet--had been struck. “Let’s forget any more drills, from now on.”

“You were fine,” Chandler said. “The difference was *I* was on fire. You notice? I couldn’t miss . . . I suppose it had to do with rehashing that little episode.”

“Raising your adrenaline,” Pete said. “You weren’t worried though . . . the guy reporting you, or something?”

“I was prepared for the consequences, which would have been a ‘he said, she said’ situation. We did ask him to surrender his phone, on the outside chance he intended to document the encounter.”

Pete said, “I don’t know why I had this crazy thought. That you were going to tell me you brought Ned Mancuso with you.”

“Oh *Gosh* no, that would have been entirely impractical. *These* two fellows, they got their point across, both for that day and going forward. Plus I gave them the three grand to split, on top of their fee.”

Pete almost asked what kind of a fee would be *standard* for something like that, but that may be going too far.

He said, “Well that’s a good story. And, fine, you did get your point across . . . But you ever wonder, did he *really* learn his lesson? I mean do you think he changed?” Jacking the guy’s chain a little, why not.

Chandler thought about that one. “Doubtful,” he said. “But you can’t just sit around and let people blatantly disrespect you. You have to do *something*.”

And he was giving Pete a hard look now.

“I really wish,” Pete said, “we didn’t have this conversation.”

“You know I’m right. You knew that before you showed me the email.”

“Either way,” Pete said, “going forward, I’d appreciate you not volunteering information unless I ask for it.”

“You asked me.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

Pete had been letting a young guy spend a couple nights on his couch. The guy lived in one of the apartments downstairs with a roommate but something happened with the rent and they moved out pretty quick, and then Pete noticed him sleeping in his car around the corner, which was no good.

There was a tap on the door now and it was the guy, Ken.

“Sorry to bother you,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure . . . is it okay to stay *one* more night?”

Pete said, “It is. In fact didn’t I already *say*, until you get a *handle* on your stuff?”

“Oh. Okay then. That’s very kind of you . . . Cause I do have a handle on it, technically.”

“What, you’re out of your car?”

“Not that, no, but everything else is fine.”

“Shut up and come inside,” Pete said. “I see the problem, I’m going to make you a key.”

Ken sat down in the recliner. “Man, this thing is sweet,” he said. “That might be problematic though, seeing as how the landlord tossed me out of here once already.”

“Don’t worry about *him*,” Pete said. “He’ll understand.”

“Not sure about that one, though if you *say* so . . . You getting ready to play tennis, it looks like?”

“You might say that. I got some guy, s’pissing me off. You want to come? You ever play?”

“Not in a while. I played in high school . . . But where’s it at?”

“What are those, skater shoes or something?” Pete said.

“I guess,” Ken said.

“So they’ll work. Let’s go.”

Chandler was already warming up, not with a racquet and ball, but laying there in one of the service boxes doing these weird, contorted stretches, and already sweating pretty good.

“It’s all about the core now,” he said, getting up to say hi. “I see you brought some new blood, a fresh victim.” Winking at Ken.

Chandler’s attitude was grating on Pete already, the *all about the core* BS reminding him of a tennis partner up north who also stuck in the needle about his supreme fitness.

The last he heard, *that* idiot had re-settled in Europe. Pete was never sure if the guy had something going that backfired on him . . . but Pete did make the rounds briefly with the left-behind ex-wife, and then his brother Floyd took over. That was a circus there for a while . . . god dang.

Chandler was asking Ken if he played much, and where, and Ken was low-keying his answers, the way a guy might, Pete was thinking, when he was pretty *good* at something.

“You know what?” Pete said. “You guys start off, but don’t worry, I’m here if you need me.”

From the first couple balls it was obvious Ken was a player, and *he* was starting to tick Pete off now as well, with the implication that he hadn’t played since high school.

Chandler hadn’t expected this, and after the first set he ran out of water, which was never the case against Pete, and it was amusing to watch him have to walk a fair distance to the rest rooms to fill his fancy container back up, since the water fountain outside the courts didn’t work and looked like it hadn’t since about 1950.

They played another one, Ken toying with the guy, who suddenly looked pretty dang old, and Ken now and then cutting loose and really *crushing* a ball, and Chandler having to stand there and watch, though Pete did give him *some*

credit, he at least clapped on his racquet a couple times like you see them do when they're saluting the opponent.

"Where'd you come up with *this* guy?" Chandler said, back at the bench after the second set, looking pretty white and changing his shirt, which wasn't the greatest sight.

Ken was wrapped up in his phone, which of course they always were when they had a spare second, barely a drop of sweat on him.

"He's a good kid," Pete said. "Kind of like with *you*, I wasn't sure of it at first. Yeah, he played high school ball, apparently."

"No, no--*Kid*," Chandler said, interrupting Ken. "Pardon my French, but high school ain't gonna produce the kind of display you just laid on me out there."

"What does *that* mean?" Pete said.

"That high school tennis is a glorified PE class. Most of the elite kids don't bother with it."

"I played some USTA juniors as well," Ken was saying now. "Thank you so much for this though. It was very inspiring."

"See what I mean?" Pete said. And to Ken, "Chandler played high-calibre tennis himself. At UCLA."

"Really!" Ken said.

"Nah," Chandler said, "he's making a big deal about that. It wasn't much, not at all."

"Still . . . UCLA," Ken said. "That's huge."

"At any rate," Chandler said, happy to change the subject, "this guy happen to tell you about his encounter with the guy interested in the picture?"

"He hasn't," Ken said. "That sounds interesting though." Polite, and undoubtedly hoping not to have to hear about it.

"Oh yeah," Chandler said, smiling a little, looking at Pete. "He has some unfinished business *there*, that's for sure."

"Okay, let's knock it off," Pete said.

“You may not always realize it,” Chandler said to Ken, “but just like they’re two sides to a story? The same goes for people.” Winking again at Ken, which was starting to really piss Pete off. Was this guy referring to *himself*, for instance?

“What I’m putting together here,” Pete said, “is you’re a bad loser. Which must be triggering you running your mouth unnecessarily.”

“*Just* having a little fun,” Chandler said, smiling bigger and more irritatingly. “Okay, coming back to it, have you decided to follow through?”

Pete said to Ken: “What he’s referring to, is just a small-potatoes nuisance. One of those things you can’t do anything about, so you move on.”

“Even though it *kills* you though, right?” Chandler said. “Kenny, mark my words, something’s going to blow. Your friend has more of a temper than he lets on, is my guess.” *Kenny* now.

Ken said, “Having a temper--I mean when you think it’s justified--isn’t that human nature?”

This kid was something else, everything’s a positive, and Pete wished *he* were more that way, but it wasn’t going to happen.

“Either of you watch *Friday Night Lights*?” he said.

“Sorry, no,” Ken said.

“I don’t think so. It was a movie, right?” Chandler said.

Jeez, where have these guys been?

“Not the movie,” Pete said. “The TV series. Went downhill over time, but pretty compelling those first couple seasons . . . The reason I mention it, one of the characters reminds me of Ken here, his personality.”

Chandler said, “You’ve set the stage, and you have us pinned, so get to the point.”

“There’s these couple of scenes,” Pete said, “I even looked for them again on *YouTube* but couldn’t find ‘em. One of the players, his name’s Riggins, he ends up at a party where the coach’s daughter also happens to be. She’s getting ready to make a bad decision with some guy and Riggins--they mostly called him

Tim--gets her out of there and takes her home, only the coach walks in at the wrong moment and thinks Riggins was putting the moves on his daughter.”

“Jeeminy,” Chandler said. “All that . . . and you’re trying to relate it to Kenny?”

“Yeah, right,” Ken said.

Pete said, “So here’s the rub. Coach is out-of-his mind angry, reads Riggins the riot act, throws him out of the house--he’s been staying at their house temporarily, I remember now there’s another storyline there--but Riggins takes it and never says a word.”

“Meaning,” Chandler said, “he doesn’t speak ill of the daughter, even though it’s *she* that caused it . . . I see what you mean, I admire that.”

Ken said, “Does it end like that, or is there a follow up?”

“There is,” Pete said. “Great scene. A couple weeks later, the daughter finally tells her dad what happened, and that Tim saved her. Coach goes to Tim’s house, Tim opens the door fearing more of the worst, and Coach looks him in the eye and tells him he has character, and he respects him . . . and then you see Coach walking back across the lawn to his car, and there’s Tim reacting to it, Coach on some level a father-figure to him . . . TV doesn’t get a *whole* lot better than that.”

“You keep going, you’re going to have me tearing up,” Chandler said.

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” Pete said.

“Not normally, but I’m a sucker for certain things.” Chandler waited to see if there was more, which there wasn’t. He said, “See you tomorrow then? Same time, same channel? . . . If I can get out of bed,” looking at Ken and rolling his neck around.

Pete said, “Actually, let me take a rain check on that. I have an event up the Bay Area next weekend, I should start preparing for it.”

“How ‘bout you Kenny?” Chandler said. “You work, or are you independently wealthy like the rest of us around here?”

“I wish,” Ken said. “But sure, that’d be fine.”

Chandler said, “What *kind* of event?”

Pete said a 25th reunion he got railroaded into, and Chandler asked did he need the whole week to get ready for *that*?

“I wasn’t intending to go into it,” Pete said, “but since you’re badgering me, I’ve also got one more nuisance on my plate . . . Not the art guy.”

“Oh?” Chandler said.

“There’s a guy, won’t get out of a motel room. And won’t pay up.”

“That could almost be me,” Ken said. “We got *out*, but we still owe the landlords for last month.”

“Different deal,” Pete said. “This guy lifts weights in the middle of the night, lets ‘em drop. Second-story room. The owner made the mistake of entering without permission.”

“Wait a minute,” Chandler said. “This is *you*, the owner? Some kind of rental property you have, you’re calling a motel?”

“No, a friend of mine. A real motel. Against my better judgment I’m trying to help him.”

“Well . . . I know what *I* would do,” Chandler said.

“What?” Ken said.

“In a perfect world, at least,” Chandler said. “Problem these days, your hands are tied. Tenants have all the rights, landlords are the scum on the bottom of the pond.”

Pete said, “So far, all I could come up with was call the guy, tell him I’d be stopping by. Or technically a *Mr. Wiggins* would.”

“That shake him up at all?” Chandler said.

“No, he was fine with the Mr. Wiggins, seemed to be looking forward to it.”

“So . . . what are you doing wasting time with *that* approach?”

“I’m afraid I agree,” Ken said.

“Anyhow . . .” Pete said. “I’ve got *that*, and then maybe this gal coming with me up north, and I may have to get there a little early . . . Bottom line, my week looks shot, on the tennis front.”

“Why would you have to get there early?” Ken said.

“Jeez, you’re sounding like *this* guy now,” Pete said. “Just a tweak in the itinerary. Not sure if I need to address it before, or after the main event.”

“Plus,” Chandler said, “you just *moved* here, right? The air-conditioning hasn’t even recovered from driving over The Grapevine, and you’re piling on activities back up north?”

Pete couldn’t disagree with him. “My air-conditioning hasn’t worked since about Missouri, on the way to Boston,” he said. “But break a leg while I’m gone.”

Ken said, “That was fun today. Thanks for including me.”

They were back at the apartment, by the pool, this time a take-out spread from a place called *California Kitchen*, which set Pete back a few bucks but wasn’t bad. Ken said he had money and he’d grab himself some Taco Bell, but Pete wasn’t going to let him, and the truth was he enjoyed the company.

“You think Chandler really played at UCLA?” Pete said. “Even back *then*, in the dark ages, when almost no one else played tennis?”

“What do you mean?” Ken said.

No point getting all cynical and corrupting the kid. “We finish here, remind me we need to find a hardware store that’s still open, make that other key.”

“Maybe let’s don’t go that far,” Ken said. “Again, Mr. Zaman, it didn’t end well there.”

“Okay listen to me. You keep bringing that up. That’s who I’m helping *out*. With the motel business.”

“Oh . . . Wow . . . The surprises keep piling up, I guess.”

“Not as much of a stretch as you think. I got on his bad side as *well* there for a bit, but it kind of morphed into me making a few suggestions. He’s a decent guy, doesn’t know what to do . . . Nothing worse than a tenant from hell, they can ruin you.”

Ken said, “*Break a leg*. Is that an actors’ expression?”

“I don’t know about that. Personally I was telling Chandler to go ahead and break one because he’s a bit too full of himself. Don’t you think?”

“Hmm.”

“Nah, you’re right of course. It’s *bad* luck to wish a performer *good* luck. So they use the ironic version. You’d actually think Hollywood could get more creative than that.”

“And where’s this motel person live?”

Pete picked up a napkin and wiped his hands. “Excuse me?”

“I was just curious.”

“*What?*”

“Nothing.”

“A, it’s none of your business . . . B, even if it *were*, it’s not child’s play.”

“Okay sorry,” Ken said.

Pete said, “I didn’t mean it like *that*. Okay? . . . All I’m saying, you got a nice clean slate ahead of you . . . you’ve never been in any trouble, right? I mean beyond stiffing-a-landlord type stuff?”

“Luckily I don’t think so.”

“So there you go. Don’t butcher it up, sticking your nose where it’s not required.”

“All's I was thinking, *I* could talk to the person. Maybe help out.”

“I tried that. No dice.”

“Fine then . . . You tell good stories, by the way. I enjoy listening to them.”

Dang. “You don’t think I’m a blabbermouth? I catch myself, a lot of times, pretty sure I’m over-doing it.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned.”

“No?”

“No.”

Road

"See this is the thing," Rory said, when he arrived in Berkeley at close to eleven.

"There's nothing to talk about," Pete said. "I'm not even going to say I'm sorry, because it won't matter."

"Did you bring your guitar at least?" she said.

"I did, and that's part of what slowed me down. I was somewhere else and had to go back and get it."

"I can see how that would slow a person down by six *hours*," Joanne said. She had joined Rory on the front porch and had a suitcase next to her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Pete said.

"I wasn't planning on it originally," Joanne said. "But with all this extra time this morning to think it over, a road trip could be fun."

And the deal here was he needed to check on something in Idaho. He'd thrown it out there to Rory, playful--why not ride along--not expecting anything, and frankly not sure he actually *wanted* her along--and surprisingly she said yes on the spot. So he said, *oh . . . what are you going to do out there . . .* and she said *have an adventure*, like it was obvious.

So fine, Pete supposed you could deal with it, except now the added bonus of maybe something stirring between them was off the table, since Joanne was apparently joining the fun.

There'd been a previous situation that got similarly monkey-wrenched where he thought he had it set up with Rory, but this one was his own damn fault. He'd insisted she be ready at 5:00 am *sharp*, so they could straight-shot it to eastern Idaho, 13 hours and change . . . and Rory told him he was being a drill

sergeant--she may have even used the word nazi--but she obviously *had* upheld her end of the bargain and Pete screwed up his.

What got him in trouble, the car all packed up last night, the essential details checked off the list, was getting fancy . . . and instead of responsibly watching a little TV and hitting the sack, he decided it would be a good time to inform his tennis partner's wife that the guy was cheating on her.

Part of the reason it made sense was Pete knew the guy was presently out of town, on a supposed business trip.

So he went over there and the wife invited him in and there was drama and hand-holding and soul-searching--which admittedly got a bit melodramatic, but ultimately distracted Pete from what time it was getting to be and whether he had anything on the agenda for the morning.

"It won't be," Pete said now, answering Joanne's declaration that a road trip could be fun. "But whatever. Whoever's in the car the next thirty seconds, I'm going."

A half hour into it on Highway 80 he realized he was starving and pulled off at a truck stop in Fairfield. Rory said, "That wasn't the *longest* first leg of a trip. But I like stopping places."

The service sure felt slow and Pete wondered Jeez, did one of them complicate something with her order, like a vegan item, and he hadn't paid attention and thought about asking them, but finally the food came and everything was good. He said, "I feel better now, getting something in there, stabilized . . . Incidentally, the towns along here--your Vallejos, your Fairfields, your Vacavilles--they used to be like old middle-America. You'd hear pieces of Oklahoma accents, as remnants of the dust bowl migration. Now it's gangs and oxycontin."

Rory and Joanne were caught up in their phones, but they both looked up for a second--and then curiously out the window. Pete assumed they at least acknowledged that he had said something.

When they were past Sacramento into the foothills of the Sierras, he said, "Something I neglected to ask you all last time. What do you *do*, that you can take off without worrying about it?"

"Temp work," Joanne said.

"Not a bad idea actually. That pay the bills?"

"Usually," Rory said. "And Henry understands our situation, so if we're short he works with us."

"Good old Henry," Pete said. Henry was apparently a local black dude who was their roommate in the not particularly gentrified flatlands section of Berkeley. Pete tried to get a handle on it a few times, mentally, what the heck exactly *was* going on there. The opposite end of the spectrum being--he wasn't *entirely* sure the girls weren't a gay couple either . . . but you rolled with it.

It was starting to get dark past Reno and he asked if anyone could drive a stick. Joanne said they couldn't and what was the problem, he was doing just fine. The two of them were sprawled out in the back seat, half asleep.

"That's it," he said when they got to Winnemucca. "Unfortunately."

They checked into the Frontier 8 Motel a couple blocks off the main drag. "You guys get the better room," he said. "Two beds, no doubt all kinds of amenities."

"Thank you for getting two rooms," Rory said. "You don't have to."

"Oh yes I do," Pete said. "Here's a few dollars for some dinner, have fun, and don't bother me until the morning."

"Meaning 5 am," Joanne said. "Sharp." She sort of smiled.

Pete got cleaned up and walked over to the strip of casinos they had seen coming off the Interstate. He picked Stan's Lucky Buck and sat down at the lounge bar. A guy was up front on a little riser, playing guitar and singing Toby Keith with synthesized backup. It was a nice place, it had a homegrown feel to it, very different than the unpleasant corporate atmosphere that had taken over Vegas and most of Reno too.

The cocktail waitresses were jammed into shiny blue and gold outfits. After a few minutes of watching them Pete asked the bartender, a friendly young

guy wearing a long-sleeved western shirt, "There any of those legal ranches around that you hear about in Nevada?"

"You mean like the old Mustang?" the bartender said.

"Yeah."

"Well, we got a few of those places in town. Pretty basic stuff, not really ranches anymore for the most part."

"Is there one you . . . recommend?"

"That'd be the *semi*-legal one, the Tumbleweed J. There you *do* have a ranch. It's about six miles east on Jungo Road, which is State 49. You just go out the main door, go up the corner and hang a left at Burger King."

"When you say 'semi-legal', I mean I wouldn't want to be breaking the law or anything."

"Not a concern. They got technicalities with code and shit. Maybe once every couple years they'll haul in a few of the gals, couple patrons, hold 'em for an hour. It's all for show."

"Anyone in particular there?"

"Well what are you, late 30s, early 40s?"

"Yeah."

"I'd go with Sandra. She's lived a little bit. Very compassionate lady."

Pete thanked him for the tips, finished his beer, and headed out to try to find the place.

It was definitely a ranch, there were barns and corrals and you could smell the animals and feed. The parking area was crowded, and Pete remembered it was a Saturday night.

There were four or five guys standing around in the entry parlor and two of the working women were sitting on couches, one smoking and staring into space, the other on a device.

An older woman in jeans and a starched white blouse appeared and said she was Daisy and could she help him, and Pete asked if Sandra was available.

"Sandy's here tonight," Daisy said, "but she's booked up through her shift. You've visited her before?"

"No, I got a referral."

"Okay let's see. I'm thinking Nanette might be a good fit then. She's newer here but she's one of our more mature girls, like Sandy."

Pete said that'd be fine, signed something, took care of the credit card and Daisy walked him to Nanette's room, which had an outside entrance.

A movie with Robert De Niro was on with the sound off. Nanette said, "How *are* you?"

"Hard to say," Pete said. "I always anticipated this moment, but now that I'm here, it's an odd vibe."

"Do you mean me?"

"No, that part's fine. Just not sure I want to do anything about it."

"Okay, fair enough," Nanette said. "There's no need to announce anything, should you change your mind."

"Do you . . . get there . . . ever?"

"You mean when I'm working?"

"Yeah."

"Not during the act. Occasionally from foreplay. Doesn't mean I don't enjoy it all though." She took off her top, everything bounding forward.

"I see," Pete said. "Well, maybe I can give it a go at that."

When they were laying back, Nanette said, "I'm really glad you relaxed your guard. It's just a sense, but I feel you're hiding from something. Or running."

"I *am* wrestling with my mid-life direction," he said. "Which makes you perceptive."

"You learn to size people up," she said. "If I can distract you for an hour, I've spread a tiny bit of goodness out into the world."

They had lunch in Twin Falls and got into Pocatello before three. A guy at the gas station mini-mart recommended a motel on 5th Street, so they went with it. Pete showered and took a little walk out the front door, and just up the block was the beginning of Idaho State University, which he didn't expect.

At dinner he said, “You know something? If I was going to do it all over, you could do worse than go to school here. I mean did you get a load of the campus?”

“No,” Rory said, and Joanne shook her head.

“The scope of the thing, it threw me off,” he said. “It would rival any Ivy League institution. And the buildings all match. They got that light yellow brick Prairie style out here. You come out of class and there’re the dang *mountains*. And Jeez, the lawns, sprawling. They manicure ‘em like a putting green.”

“That’s cause there’s no drought here,” Rory said.

“Like we have to be mindful of in California,” Joanne said.

“How do you know that?” Pete said.

“*Tim* mentioned it,” Rory said. “From the motel. Joanne had asked if potatoes were as big in Idaho as one hears.”

Pete didn’t need to know about Tim, but they told him anyway. He was from Albuquerque but they flew him in for two weeks at a time. Amtrak. Tim was a welder. He serviced what he called *rolling stock*.

“Did you know,” Rory said, “that the Pocatello train yard was once the largest west of the Mississippi?”

Pete didn’t and admitted that was interesting, and Rory said one of the old railroad buildings is now a brew pub, and Tim invited all three of us to meet him there later.

“Oh,” Pete said.

“This happens to be really good Pete,” Joanne said, chewing. “I’m glad I tagged along.”

They were in a local steakhouse on Yellowstone Boulevard. When they walked into the place Pete had told them, “I’d highly recommend suspending the vegan act for tonight . . . If you insist though there’s always the chef’s salad, if they hold the hardboiled egg and ham.”

To his surprise, Rory and Joanne ordered house specials with fourteen ounce rib eyes. Rory said something about carnivores and this environment. It came out strange but you got the gist.

“Well,” Pete said now, “I do give you credit in one department. You’re good travelers. Not much whining or complaining so far. Even last night, little town in the middle of the desert, you were upbeat.”

“I forgot to ask, what’d *you* do last night?” Rory said.

“I went to a brothel.”

“*What?*” Joanne said.

“Wow. What was that *like?*” Rory said.

“It was pretty much the stereotype you would expect.”

Joanne said, “Meaning *what?* Come on, you have to tell us about it.”

“Everything was handled reasonably professionally. You check in and they match you and farm you out.”

“And were the women attractive?” Rory said.

“I didn’t see many of them, but mine was. She was a few pounds overweight, but I tend to like that.”

“And . . . ?” Joanne said.

“Well there’s a mind-body connection obviously. It took me a while to ‘relax my guard’, was the way she put it.”

“And did she orgasm?” Rory said.

“*Jesus*, not so loud . . . No.”

Joanne said, “Can we go with you next time? Just to take a look?”

“On the way back, you want, I’ll drop you off. But I’ll wait in the parking lot.”

“Seriously Pete,” Joanne said, “have you ever been married?”

“Once, when I was about your age. What are you, twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Gosh, you really think we’re that young?” Rory said. “We’re both *twenty-four*.”

“Okay then, sorry. Bottom line, it went south fast.”

“But do you still keep in touch?” she said.

“No. I wouldn’t even recognize her.”

“So who are you closest to in the world?”

“Man, you’re grilling me. You mean if I was in a big jam, who would I turn to?”

“Yes, who?”

“No one particularly jumps out, to be honest.”

Rory said, “This is what I’m driving at. I’m sorry if I’m overstepping.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I mean, I’m having trouble getting why you would need to visit a brothel. Even though it *is* interesting to hear about.”

“Let me shift gears on you for a minute,” he said. “If I’m trying to find someone, and I’ve got a name, Jeff Jones, and I want to make sure it’s not the *wrong* Jeff Jones, what do I do?”

“Are they a professional?” Joanne said.

“Probably be considered one, yeah.”

“Did you try Linkedin yet?”

“No.”

“It’s a giant business networking site. People list their past work experience, that sort of thing. You might be able to narrow it down.”

“*We’re* on there,” Rory said.

“It helps in the temp world,” Joanne said.

“Okay thanks,” Pete said, and he did know about it but it was good to change the subject.

Pete tagged along to the brew pub and Tim turned out to be a nice kid. Polite, clean-cut. Respectful of an older guy like Pete, at least to his face, which was good enough.

Pete asked about welding and Tim said it’s one of those trades that’s going to be around a while, that the 4 core processes haven’t changed and still require a human. Tim said he spent a couple years in a shipyard in Bath, Maine, and that it was boring up there on weekends but he helped a guy on a lobster boat.

They started talking about sports and Rory and Joanne were getting edgy and Pete said it's been fun all around but he was heading back. An acoustic combo was setting up and the three of them told Pete to have a nice rest of the evening.

It was quiet at the motel. Minimal signs of human activity. The room had basic cable, not the full shebang that everyone was used to now, and it was amazing that even with sixty channels there was nothing to watch. One station was twenty-four hour LDS Church stuff, and the Mormon Tabernacle was singing out of the huge temple in Salt Lake City. It was different at least, so he left it on.

Rory knocked on the door close to midnight. "Pete, I'm not sure if I'm going to need to leave the room. Are you still good with it though if I do?"

Unless he was losing his mind, Pete couldn't recall any previous raising of this scenario from Rory, where *still good* applied. What she was getting at--he assumed--was Joanne and Tim might require some privacy, meaning Rory might need to come into his room for a while.

"I can deal with it, but you're not sure *because*?"

"Joanne may not be that into her friend."

"Tim?"

"Pete . . . who *else*?"

Pete thought why not just name the guy then, but whatever. "That's surprising," he said, "seemed harmless enough after I left y'all. Hard to see it going *too* far south from there."

Rory said, "Either way, can we have breakfast?"

"I can probably fit it in," he said.

Voices and laughter and banging around woke him up, coming from their room. His first thought was, this place is half empty, why was I stupid enough to get two rooms *next* to each other? The activity continued unabated for a couple hours, with one or two lapses, until he couldn't take it anymore, and he bundled up and went for a walk. It was five-thirty in the morning.

A block into it he decided if you were out walking around *anyway* . . . you might as well re-check out the guy who you had the interest in out here's house.

This took some energy. First several blocks heading south, past the little zoo they had, then across the railroad tracks and up into the hills. It was Pete's understanding this was one of the two or three high-end developments in town. Doctors and lawyers lived up here. Pete heard that when it snowed it was the first neighborhood to get plowed.

When he got to the house it was close to 7, though it did feel good to be getting some exercise in the crisp mountain air.

Lights were on in the kitchen and Pete could see the guy at the counter. Pete continued a little ways to where it dead-ended at a dirt parking area, and when he got back the lights were off and the house seemed quiet. It appeared to be garbage day; most of the neighbors had cans and recycling containers out near the road.

He heard a garbage truck nearby and followed the sound. What he deduced pretty quickly was some of the residents went with the deluxe service, where the sanitation guys had to go up the driveway and get the cans out of the backyard or garage. He went back to *his* guy's house, walked around the side of the garage and sure enough, there was a keypad mounted inconspicuously in the back corner above the hose spigot.

He'd spent a year in Teaneck, New Jersey, once, and his apartment complex installed a gate and tenants were always forgetting the code. The cops came by a couple times and one of them told him because of safety regulations you could often get in those things by punching in 911 or 1234.

This was different of course, a private setup, but Pete figured what the heck and picked up a twig out of the guy's yard, tried 911 with it and nothing happened, so he tried 1234, and there was the hum of the garage door in action, and he walked down the driveway, took one more look in case it case it came down to something like this, and began the long trek back to the motel.

They were at Inez's Country Kitchen, the noon-time crowd filtering in, and Rory and Joanne were having bacon and eggs with sides of pancakes.

"All that activity apparently," Pete said, sipping his coffee. "It took it out of you."

Joanne said, "Not right now, Pete, okay? We're not feeling that great."

"At times," he said, "it sounded like a couple battleships pitching around on the high seas. Do you think anyone else noticed, or just me?"

No one said anything.

"The good thing though," he said, "was it got me out early. You can't beat going for a walk when it's twenty degrees and dark. You get perspective."

Rory put her fork down. "I'm sorry that it played out differently than we thought," she said.

Joanne said, "Tim had a friend. Matt."

"Good then, you resolved the uneven relationship with Tim," Pete said.

"No, I got together with Matt. Tim and Rory hooked up."

"Ah."

"But Pete?" Rory said. "We're going have to go take a nap. After that can you help me with the songs?"

"Songs?"

"Yes. The open *mic* Tuesday night, at the brew pub."

"She's taking a big step, being an out-of-towner and all," Joanne said. "I'm proud of her."

"We'll still *be* here and everything then, right?" Rory said.

Pete was trying to picture things. "We should," he said.

"Then . . . so?" she said.

Pete felt bad, he should of remembered, there'd been a situation when she'd run a few original songs by him, asking for feedback.

"I guess if I have to," he said. "But I'll tell you up-front, you need to thin out the lyrics. You're trying to do too much. You're jumbling up the listeners. Put yourself in their shoes."

Rory sat there a moment and then, dang, she looked like she might cry, and Pete wondered was I *that* out of line, and is she *faking* this or something . . . but she said, “Is that right. Thank you very much then, for being a royal horse’s ass . . . Your true colors showing through, I’m afraid.”

“Totally,” Joanne said.

Distance

Pete's brother Floyd lived in a tract house in Mesa. Not only did the houses look the same but the neighborhoods got you mixed up too. The people next door to Floyd had a giant Winnebago in the driveway with a flag flying off it, so Pete figured Floyd could use that as a landmark to find his house.

The inside smelled like fresh paint. "I'm drawing a blank on when you were down here last," Floyd said. "Pretty sure though I was still in that first condo."

"Big spread with a couple pools," Pete said, "bikinis walking around, the whole nine yards."

"That's right, downtown. Then I had another one in Tempe. I got a sweet deal on this place though. You know, the housing downturn. No pool, but I joined a club to cool off and shit. It works."

They were having cocktails at the little kitchen table. Rory said, "You don't *look* that much like Pete, but you kind of *talk* the same."

Floyd said, "Not sure I want to hear, but how did you all get together for this adventure?"

"I met Pete at a coffee place," Rory said. "He was having a difficult day, and I asked him if he wanted to go do something."

"A little shaky on the details, but it doesn't matter," Pete said.

Floyd freshened everyone's drink. "And we took a lovely, long stroll through San Francisco at night," Rory said.

"I was there too," Joanne said. "We had that really good Indian dinner, remember?"

"Oh that's right," Rory said. "Then you went to the lesbian party."

"You're a lesbian?" Floyd said.

"No."

"She sort of is," Rory said. "She brings girls home sometimes."

"Interesting," Floyd said. "Could you see yourself in a long term relationship with a woman, or is it just for pleasure?"

Joanne said, "The second thing. You're worse with the direct questions than Pete."

"So Floyd, what do you do, like for your job?" Rory said.

"I scramble a little bit, no set thing. I teach some golf at a resort, you get the snowbirds coming down from Chicago and New York, and the money can be good . . . I've been a little lucky in real estate also."

"Doing what?" Pete said.

"Actually the same type stuff I was doing for Chip. Distressed houses, flipping them. He screwed me, but then again he taught me the ropes."

Joanne said, "Who's Chip?"

"Guy in Las Vegas, sort of a player," Floyd said. "Smart, but sleazy. I told Pete he got murdered a few weeks ago."

"My God," Rory said. "What happened?"

Floyd said, "He'd moved out to L.A. and someone got into his office and killed him. At first I was kind of celebrating because Chip owed me money and he didn't care. Then I started thinking he wasn't that bad of a guy."

"But they think it's mob-related, right?" Pete said.

"They thought so, but now they don't know. I hear bits and pieces from my buddy in Vegas. They're pretty sure someone used a baseball bat on him though."

"Well," Pete said. "Anyone hungry? Whatever's your restaurant of choice, it's on me."

"Nah, I got steaks and burgers ready to go on the grill. That's how we do it here in Arizona in March."

The girls went for a walk and Floyd and Pete hovered around the backyard barbeque. Floyd said, "Still not clear on how you pulled it off my big brother, but those are two righteously foxy women."

"They have their moments. They can be impulsive though, which you have to roll with."

"Are you currently hitting on either one of them, or what?"

"No."

"You're sure."

"I'm sure. Almost happened once, Helen got in the way. Never re-ignited itself after that."

"Jesus, Helen. What happened to *her*?"

"She's around, we're on good terms."

"Little more *subtle* with her, but she was one hot number too."

"Yeah, well, what can you do."

"I know it . . . How'd she get in the way though?"

"Rory came over to my apartment. Helen shows up unannounced to ask a question, broke up the whole flow. I was already irritated because I had a chance to see someone *else* that night."

"Did you follow through with the someone else?"

"I did. A very warm lady. She says she's got an ex-husband messing with her mind, holding her back. Physically."

"You buy that?"

"I go back and forth. I'm tempted to talk to the guy though."

"Now why would you want to fool with something like that, man?"

"I know, there are other opportunities, without the baggage. Just something that's been bothering me, that's all."

"Okay whatever. At least coming down here, you can put all your concerns behind you for a few days."

Pete was drinking his morning coffee in the kitchen, the patio sliding door open, birds chirping, sunshine flooding in, when Joanne appeared wearing an Idaho State University tee shirt that only covered half of her turquoise thong.

"You've got to be kidding," he said.

"Good morning to you too. What?"

"To be laying that on someone this early, that's unfair." Not taking his eyes off her as she opened a cabinet and reached for a cup.

"Pete, we're in Arizona," she said. "It has to be seventy-five degrees out already."

"Fine, not to change the subject, but you sleep okay?"

"Like a baby. I had the window open. The air here . . ."

"Dry, right? I'm going take a run, you want to come?"

"Hmm. Okay, I'll try. I feel like I've been gaining weight on this road trip."

"I wouldn't worry about it, honestly," he said.

Everything outside was cement. Even the high school, a few blocks away, had a fake grass football field with a fake dirt track surrounding it. Pete ran laps on the track so Joanne could go at her own pace, but she didn't last long and ended up sitting in the bleachers.

"You have a fluid stride," she said when they were walking back. "It must make jogging easier."

"Pain in the ass is what it is," he said. "The best thing, find a sport. Then you don't have to *know* you're exercising."

Pete's phone rang. He stopped walking and took the call.

He said: "Fair to middling,"

He said: "Steve? Have you stopped doing your thing?"

Pete hung up and called someone else.

He said: "Everything still good?"

He said: "Except your voice is sing-songing on me . . . I don't *think* it's still good."

He said: "One more time . . . the Stinson Beach house is off-limits, *why?*"

He said: "*Okay* then."

He waved Joanne away as he plugged one ear and dialed someone else. "*Damn* it," he said. "No answer. What time is it in California?"

"I think 12:20," she said, "the same as here, now that it's Daylight Savings? You seem upset."

"Ah, I got a friend I can't reach. It's Saturday, he's probably getting dialysis as we *speak*."

Joanne waited a moment and said, "Honestly? Some of that sounded bizarre. Someone's voice quality, a beach house. Jesus, and dialysis? What's *up* with all that?"

"Hard to say. Hopefully it's just me putting my nose where it doesn't belong."

"Pete you're on a *holiday*, okay? You have to eliminate these projections. Stay in the here and now, let yourself have fun."

She was standing close to him, concerned. He bent down, grabbed her behind the knees, and when he straightened up she was upside down over his shoulder. "Wait . . . what are you doing . . . don't," she said, but she was giggling sufficiently and he kept her up there dangling and jostling around until they got to Floyd's house.

"I see what you mean about that weight gain," he said. "I could only carry you two blocks."

"You're *not* funny," she said.

Floyd and Rory were next to each other on the couch, Floyd flipping pages of a photo album. "Hey, *morning* Petie, Joanne," he said. "Remember the summer mom and dad dragged us to that lake in Wisconsin?"

Pete said, "You guys bang each other already?"

"No," Floyd said. "We're hitting it off okay, but it's not like *that*. Jeez."

"They did," Joanne said.

"Long as everyone's having fun," Pete said. "I'm going to look around Anthem this afternoon. You guys feel safe being left with my brother?"

"I thought I'd take them over to Scottsdale, find a little action," Floyd said.

"Actually, why don't I go with Pete," Joanne said.

Pete had been carrying the address for Kyle Lamb around in his wallet since he pulled it off the computer at the Funston library a few weeks ago. No idea how it might play out--or *if*--but it did seem the responsible thing all around to at least say hi.

Traffic was light. They passed various planned communities on both sides of the freeway, extensions of north Phoenix. "Think you could ever live in one of these?" Pete asked Joanne.

"I'm not sure, what about you?"

"There's an artificial feel, no doubt . . . *But* . . . there'd be redeeming aspects . . . All your needs within five minutes, everything bright-spanking clean, no crime to worry about. A giant year-round pool in your complex."

"Probably I could," she said. "Not now, it'd be a tad slow, but when I settle down to have kids."

"Hold on, you're leaning that direction?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've wanted to be a mother since I can't remember . . . You're laughing."

"I'm not laughing at you, you could have fooled me is all. I'm happy that's your goal."

"Your brother is red hot, incidentally," Joanne said.

"You think so?"

"Totally. Look at Rory getting her hands on him right away. I love her, but what a single-minded little bitch."

"The way things have been playing out, pretty good odds you'll get your chance."

"You'd be fun too though," she said.

"Oh," he said.

There were two similar developments that made up Anthem it turned out, one a little fancier with a golf course and requiring you to deal with a guard booth. Luckily Kyle lived in the more modest section you could drive right into, and when they got to the address, there he apparently was, a thin guy with a backwards baseball cap and a goatee shooting baskets with his kids in the driveway.

Pete said, "Something could be off, but there's a chance that's the person."

"What person again now?" Joanne said.

The guy glanced toward the car and they kept going and turned the corner. Pete said, "Okay. Don't tell Floyd or anyone else about this . . . A friend in San Francisco, I'm trying to help her get on with her life. She says her ex-husband is essentially mind-fucking her."

"Interesting," Joanne said, "though the man playing basketball back there, he doesn't seem the type frankly."

Pete had to agree, based on first impressions. And it seemed like a bogus-enough claim to start with, from his friend Evelyn--that the reason she hadn't been able to progress with Pete, or apparently anyone else, was her ex holding her back, from 800 miles away.

It was also debatable at this point if she still fit the *friend* designation, and for *sure* she'd explode if she found out about this little visit . . . but what are you gonna do.

Pete said, "Bottom line, this stuff can surprise you . . . Hey, would you want to talk to him?"

"Me?"

"Yeah . . . How 'bout . . . tell him you're looking around, considering moving into the area. Pick his brain, see how he is."

"Well I guess I *could*. If you really need me to play detective."

"Just walk back there right now before he goes anywhere. Make sure you introduce yourself so he gives you his name too. My guy is Kyle."

It took her twenty minutes. "That was kind of a trip," she said.

"What'd you get?"

"I got that those are his step kids, he's lived here eight years . . . let's see what else . . . the quality of life is great except for July and August, but it's a bear if you have to commute . . . And his name is Kyle."

"Dang. You are good."

"And also, last thing . . ."

"Yep?"

"I'm having a drink with him. At six."

"Oh my *God*."

"He's actually really nice."

"I'm not believing this . . . What about his step-family obligations?"

"He didn't mention that. What else should I ask him?"

"Wow . . . ooh boy . . . Well, the main thing we're trying to determine, is he purposely sticking it to my friend, or is she feeding me a line of baloney."

"Okay don't worry, I should be able to get you that. It might take a couple of drinks."

"Try to make it 7-Up or something, on your end."

"Pete, I can take care of myself."

The place was called Jackson's Hole And Bistro. It was in a shopping center near Safeway, a short drive from Kyle's house. Pete said, "What I'm wondering, what kind of guy cheats on his wife right in his own backyard? At least put some distance on the situation."

"He's not cheating on his wife."

"You know what I mean. He's either a dumb shit, or just as likely, he wants to show off his new prize."

They were on the far side of the parking lot, and Joanne got out. "I'll be right here," Pete said. He watched her walk over there and disappear inside.

It occurred to Pete he'd been spending way too much time lately sitting in parking lots. Finally, nearly 8:30, he spotted Joanne in front of Jackson's Hole mingling with the doofus. Pete waited for the obligatory hug and peck on the cheek so he could thankfully get the hell out of there . . . but no, she follows Kyle to his car, gets *in*, and they drive away.

He followed them as they jumped on the freeway toward Phoenix and got off fifteen minutes later, turned into a Holiday Inn Express and went inside. Pete sat there with the engine running, trying to digest this. He sent Joanne a text, and went home to Floyd's.

"You're back," his brother said.

"Sort of," Rory said. She was sitting on Floyd's lap, in the kitchen, beverages in front of them.

"She's having dinner with someone," Pete said. "I have to go pick her up later."

"Yeah, right," Rory said, playing with Floyd's hair. "Now you're getting to know Joanne, Pete. She's not particularly complicated."

"Well, hey, how's everything going otherwise?" Floyd said.

"You know," Pete said. "Could be worse. Took a look around Anthem. Nice to see all that red rock. People there seemed reasonably cheerful."

"That, or they're a bunch of zombies," Floyd said. "A little bit too controlled up there for my taste."

"Could be," Pete said. "Plus I got one or two issues that are dogging me, on the back end."

Floyd said, "I already *told* you, you go *away*, check that shit at the *door*."

"That used to be easier," Pete said. "You went somewhere, you wanted to address something back home, you needed to find a pay phone and come up with about ten dollars in change--so you said forget it and had a good time . . . Now you're held hostage by modern technology."

"So turn it off, and lock it in the trunk," Floyd said.

"Don't quite have enough discipline to. Speaking of which, I have to go outside and make a couple calls. After that I want to ask you something."

He walked to the corner, no luck reaching any humans, so he went back inside. There was no one in the kitchen and there was music on now in Floyd's bedroom, some new guy trying to sound like Marvin Gaye.

Pete went over to the counter and helped himself to what was left in the shaker, a sweet, citrusy vodka mix that wasn't bad, and when he turned around he had an angle through the living room into the bedroom, where the door was slightly open and Rory was riding Floyd.

He watched for a few minutes, sipping his drink. Rory mostly had her hands clasped behind her head, her back slightly arched. She would occasionally bring them down and say something to Floyd.

Pete went back outside and checked his messages, nothing from Joanne, so he went over to the high school and walked around the track for an hour.

When he came back, Floyd and Rory were showered and sitting on the couch watching a comedy special on HBO.

"Took you a long time," Floyd said. "What was *that*, you wanted to ask me?"

"Whether you know of any strip clubs in the greater Phoenix area," Pete said. "I thought I'd go to one."

"Hey, can I go too?" Rory said.

Floyd said, "There's a couple that come to mind. Your best bet consistency-wise is Judy's Rendezvous. It's in Tempe, not too far from ASU."

"Babe, I'm serious, can you take me?" Rory said. "I've never been to one of those."

"Jesus, *babe* already," Pete said.

"You wouldn't feel awkward?" Floyd said.

"I'm with you and Pete," Rory said, "why would I?"

Pete took his own car in case he had to go get Joanne. It was a relatively small place, three women dancing at a time on a runway in the middle of a circular bar. Whatever song was playing, even something light out of the '70s, it had a heavy rhythm section engineered into it. There were strobe lights that kept changing the setting to different colors, but mostly the women looked slightly purple up there.

Floyd was right, the majority of the performers were attractive and the bodies were tight and supple. "One thing I'll give this place," Pete said, "no poles. This you can get into easier."

"I must say, they're good dancers," Rory said. "More professional than I expected."

Floyd said, "With this place, a lot of the girls are supposedly from Brazil. Doesn't seem logical, but I heard that."

"Actually, I can see it," Rory said.

"Wait a second," Pete said, "*what* can you see? Who's Brazilian up there now?"

"The middle girl for one," she said, "I mean look how exquisitely she moves."

Pete studied that one for a moment. He said, "Take away the lighting, she's white as a sheet. My guess is she hails from Rapid City, South Dakota."

His phone rang, Joanne. He excused himself. "Yeah," he said.

"Pete, please . . . Can you at least say something?"

"What time is it?"

"It's ten to one."

"Okay, just be in the lobby."

He told Floyd and Rory to continue having fun and took his time, stopping for a donut and coffee on the way. Joanne was reading a paperback when he got there.

"Well?" he said.

"I think I have some stuff for you, but can it wait until tomorrow Pete?"

"It can, absolutely. In fact *never* is fine too."

"You know what? It wasn't quite what you thought."

They got home to a dark house, Floyd and Rory were still out, and Pete went straight to bed and barely moved until noon.

He went in the kitchen, where someone had been frying bacon. "One of you looks relatively fresh," he said, "while the two late arrivals look like shit."

Joanne said, "You didn't tell me they were watching strippers. We could have met them."

"You didn't ask," Pete said.

Rory said, "It was pretty amazing. When I feel better I'm going to try to write a song about the experience."

Floyd said, "The *pace* that you're all setting, it's a little heavy for me."

"Is there a Starbucks nearby?" Joanne said. "I have to go over a few things with Pete."

Floyd gave them directions and headed back to bed. Pete said, "Might as well walk it then. Give you time to gather your thoughts."

The Starbucks was a mile or so down Seneca Avenue, everything pretty quiet on a Sunday afternoon. Half way there, Joanne took his arm.

"Now that," Pete said, "is an error."

"It makes me feel good. You can't lighten up and leave it at that?"

"Fuck, I forgot all *about* something," he said, and he stopped walking and made a phone call.

You heard Pete say, "Okay fine, but what about the Croatian tennis pro?"

And then: "But she seemed . . . the same? As when we went to Booker's?"

And: "They curious at all why you happened to stop by the pool party?"

And: "Okay, now something like that, that would be *me*, you have to take my word for it . . ."

And concluding with: "Hopefully soon. This trip has gone 180 degrees different than I expected."

When he put the phone away and they'd picked their pace back up Joanne said, "Are you a secret agent or something? I'm not kidding, you have a secondary life."

He looked at her and said, "Okay, hundred percent confidential? What it *really* is? . . . I'm one of those people you read about, who the medical experts give a year to live. I'm trying to cram in what I can in the time I have left."

Joanne stopped walking and let go of his arm, her mouth half open, looking up at him.

"Jiminy Christmas," he said. "I'm joking."

She hit him hard on the shoulder. "Don't play around like that, I'm serious. You almost gave me a heart attack."

"That's my fault then. But you better start smiling again, get rid of that crinkled up face."

"Why should I, you piss me off."

Pete gave her a minute. Hard to tell if it helped, but he said, "There you go, back to your cheerful self."

She said, "Maybe temporarily. 'Til you start cross-examining me about Kyle."

He waited until they had their tall skinny white chocolate mochas or whatever it was she'd ordered. "Just start me off with the bottom line," he said.

"Well, he does have a wife in California. They're still technically married."

"Did he strike you as someone who could get violent?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so, but then he got really angry when he couldn't get it up."

"He couldn't?"

"No. He tried for an hour and left. He didn't even say goodbye."

"*Wait* a second, you got there at nine. What took you so long then?"

"They had one of those fancy bathtubs, with the jacuzzi jets? I wanted to try it. Then I turned on the TV and fell asleep."

"You *gotta* be kidding me . . . What else did he say about the California wife?"

"Only that they see each other every so often. They spend most of the time making love. *Supposedly*."

"Anything else?"

"He said he wants a divorce so he can marry his girlfriend but your friend isn't being cooperative. That he tells her she needs to get on with her life."

"You tell him your name was Joanne?"

"Of course, I'm not a sneaky person."

Pete took a moment. "I guess that covers it then," he said. "What else is going on with you?"

"Pete, please do me a favor? Can we drop the whole thing now?"

"We can," he said. "It's nice to finally have some closure."

In a *perfect* world, or a Netflix series, the simplest thing would be to kill Kyle, because he was a piece of scum that no one would miss. What the real dope was between Evelyn and the guy was irrelevant.

Anyhow . . . Rory was sleeping when they got home and Floyd was in the kitchen reading a Sports Illustrated. Pete said, "Thought I'd take a little personal

time this afternoon." Floyd didn't look up and Joanne said that sounds good and plopped down in the living room.

As Pete started to drive away he noticed some red rocks in Floyd's front yard, framing a scraggly piece of cactus. Hmm. He found one that felt good and headed back up the interstate to Anthem.

He passed the house and parked around the corner again and walked back and rang the prick's bell.

Kyle answered, chewing, a beer in his hand. "Whoops," Pete said, "I might have the wrong address. I'm looking for Joanne?"

Kyle flinched. Pete could see a pretty, strawberry-blonde woman, pregnant, down the hall at the kitchen sink. "I guess not, then," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

There was nothing to do but walk around the neighborhood and pass by the house every twenty minutes, hoping Kyle's girlfriend went somewhere. On the fourth pass, one car was gone and Kyle's was still there. Pete looked around, was satisfied there were no neighbors in the way, and rang the bell.

This time when the door opened Pete hit Kyle in the mouth with the rock. Kyle went to his knees and held his face, and there was blood all over and Pete was pretty sure he'd eliminated several of the guy's teeth. There was kids' laughter coming from an upstairs room, not a huge concern.

Kyle was lying on the floor now, sobbing like a child. Pete said, "What you *take* from this, Kyle? You bothering Joanne again, that would be an error."

Kyle nodded just barely.

"Oh, and on a related topic," Pete said. "*Evelyn*. The thing there is, she needs her privacy. I find out you're ever in her presence--rest of your life--sorry, but."

Kyle covered his head with his arms looking like he expected to get hit again. Pete said, "We good then Kyle?"

Kyle moved slightly indicating they were.

Pete walked back to the car, moving fast but not rushing it to where he was conspicuous. The asshole could call the police of course, which would be a mess, but looking at the big picture it didn't seem likely.

Rory and Joanne tried to talk Floyd into coming to California with them. Floyd said the idea had potential, but he couldn't right now. They were out front, the car packed, a perfect blue-sky morning.

Pete said to Floyd, "Next time I come visit, I'll give you more notice. I feel like we kind of turned you upside down there."

Floyd said, "Yeah you did, but it was good for me."

Pete gave him a quick salute and got in the car. No hug or handshake or big thank you, he didn't feel like going there, even though you never knew.

They stopped for coffee at a rest area on I-10 an hour into the trip, and then pretty much drove straight through. As they approached the Ashby Avenue exit for Berkeley, Pete said to Rory, "You haven't said squat since about Needles."

"She thinks she's lovesick," Joanne said. "Give her until Wednesday."

Pete said, "You notice how my brother was less animated as the weekend wore on?"

"Ror does that to people," Joanne said.

Rory said, "It happened so fast. I'm not sure I'll meet anyone as interesting, or fun."

"You mean cute," Joanne said.

"You think what you want," she said. "But Pete? Thank you for taking us. I mean it."

"Well, I guess it wasn't the worst way to spend a few days," he said. "There won't be a part two though."

"Hey, it's not even *nine* yet," Joanne said. "Why don't we go into the city and do something?"

"Yeah, right," Pete said.

Adjacent

"You look like you're into this match," someone said.

Pete looked up. A woman with a San Francisco Bay Club name tag was smiling at him.

"It does get the hooks into you," he said. "Especially this angle through the glass back wall."

"So I take it you don't play then, yourself," she said. "How come?" She was petite, early 30's, no mistaking her enthusiasm.

"Why should I?" Pete said. "I'm fine just watching my friend."

"Which one?"

"The one waiting for the serve."

"Evelyn. *She's* great. Not at squash so much, but a lot of fun to talk to when I'm working the front desk."

"You working it right now?"

"I'm on a break. Today's my *long* day--noon to close."

Pete stood up. "I'm Pete, by the way . . . Would you want to, get a coffee or something, afterward?" Evelyn was real red in the face now, and looked increasingly frustrated. She appeared to be losing most of the points.

"Golly. Could we be a little more forward, how about?" Hard to read, but at least seeming amused.

Since his diagnosis, Pete was all *about* being forward. "So what time?" he said.

"Well, we shut the doors at midnight, and I'm off at 12:30. It's up to you if you'd like to circle back, but I'm thinking probably not. It's Peggy though."

The reason Pete was here was Evelyn invited him to watch the match and then grab a bite after . . . and Pete was game, you never knew how it might play

out, though it became clear when Evelyn had showered and changed that the grabbing a bite part included her teammates, who'd been playing their own apparently connected squash matches on adjacent courts.

They went to the Big Horn around the corner on Sansome. Pete thought the place was only so-so, the menu a cross between New Jersey diner and California fusion, and pricey.

He sipped his beer. He had some issues going, the main one being a guy who he was pretty sure had started following him. Not all the time, sporadically, but enough. So admittedly a little socialization was nice, despite the bit of a curve ball.

The team was discussing the matches. Evelyn had lost hers and kind of stormed off the court there, and someone said she was a bad loser but it only lasted an hour.

It did seem like she was coming around now, laughing at certain things. People named Jeff and Margo and Roy were doing most of the talking, with Phyllis and John chiming in.

"I had my guy 9-6 in the fifth," Roy said. "Then I don't know what happened."

"What *happened* was you hit the tin four times in the last five points," Jeff said. "If you'd just kept your poise there, we would have won the overall match."

"*Hold* on Jeff," John said. "You lost three-*zip* to *your* guy. Let's not be too critical."

"Okay, but I was playing number one," Jeff said. "I wouldn't have let that guy off the hook two points away, is all I'm saying."

Margo said, "Pete, we're sounding quite foolish here, *aren't* we?"

"No, the shop talk doesn't bother me a bit. Makes me wish *I* had something as exciting going on."

"Well, you certainly look fit," she said. "What do you do?"

"Mostly just run, which is boring. When I lived back east I enjoyed playing tennis, until my partner got mad at me."

"What happened?" Phyllis said.

"Oh, I got in his business where I probably shouldn't have. He beat me five sets in a row one day and I thought he was making bad line calls on top of it. I said you were handling me straight up, why'd you need to make shaky calls?"

Steve said, "So you got in his business by questioning his on-court character?"

"No, I got in his business by offering my opinion of his personal life. He had a really nice, devoted girlfriend who would come to the courts sometimes. He was cheating on her with his ex-wife." Pete noticed Evelyn--and Jeez, Jeff too--shifting around.

"How did you know that?" Phyllis said.

"He'd bring it up, brag about it. Though he put it on the ex-wife, that she couldn't get past him."

"What a son of a *bitch*," Margo said.

"Yeah, that's a crock of horseshit," John said. "It's not like someone was putting a gun to his head, making him participate."

Phyllis said, "So what did you tell him?"

"That if he wasn't going to stop doing it, then stop talking about it. Evidently that hit a nerve, because the guy never spoke to me again."

"Well good for you," Margo said. "That is scum of the earth behavior. He should be shot, and the ex-wife too for that matter."

"I agree," Phyllis said. "But just find another partner then."

"Oh, I still play once in a while. But the other day I was watching some hackers, and it was embarrassing. I realized that's how *I* look too. On the other hand, *you* guys all look good out there."

"That's very kind of you," Margo said. "But really?"

"Absolutely. You're giving it your all, running around like chickens with your heads cut off. What can I say, you look like athletes."

"Gosh, just hearing it put like that is amazing," Phyllis said.

"Totally," Roy said. "That's over the top, Pete, but we'll take it."

"We will," Evelyn said, glaring at Pete.

"So where do you like to run?" John said.

"The Marina usually, down to Fort Point and back." Pete said. "The scenery helps."

"And that's what you did today?" Margo said.

"Yeah . . . Although today I actually repeated it twice. I was looking for a little extra."

"How far?" John said.

"I'd say maybe seven, eight total. I'm feeling it now, that's for sure."

Evelyn said, "*Jesus Christ*, Pete. Do you really think you should be out there trying to run eight miles?"

Jeff said, "E, take it *easy*, what's the big deal?"

"Exactly," Phyllis said. "Why not?"

Evelyn said, "It's just . . . I don't know, increasing your intensity like that, without building up to it . . . it seems unwise."

"I'll keep it in mind next time," Pete said.

They were at their cars, and Evelyn had said goodnight to everyone, including Jeff. She said, "Pete, what got into you? You certainly know how to humiliate someone."

For better or worse he'd confided to Evelyn that he had a health scare, but it wasn't the running she was upset about now, it was the sticking the needle in with the guy and the ex-wife, touching Evelyn's not identical but in the ballpark situation.

"What do you mean?" Pete said. "The only one who might have raised an eyebrow was Jeff. My educated guess is he's the only teammate you're schtupping."

"My God, do you have to be so crude."

"While we're on the subject, it work out any better with him?"

"Jeff? . . . No."

"So, one more time--it's not me, or my prognosis."

"It isn't . . . In fact, since we're being so honest here, Jeff wants to go to have a talk with . . . my ex."

Pete was digesting this.

Evelyn said, "What?"

"No, I was trying to visualize how that'd go. I wouldn't mind being on hand to find out."

"Believe me, it couldn't go well. Jeff might get hurt, and I'd probably lose him as a friend."

"The ex a tough guy then?"

"I already told you. Scary."

"He have a new wife, kids, anything?"

"A girlfriend, and I think she's expecting."

"Hmm. He ever ask you for an official divorce?"

"No. . . Can we please change the subject? You're welcome to come over for a while, if you'd like."

"Tell you the truth I'm pretty worn out. That eight miles you scolded me for, it's starting to kick in."

"All right, then."

"I were you, I'd tell Jeff to sit tight. Little baby coming into the picture, your old man could get his priorities straight. Wouldn't surprise me if you didn't hear much from him going forward."

"Pete," Evelyn said, "you have no idea what you're talking about."

He checked his watch and it was 12:10, and the Bay Club would be locked up, but he thought he may as well see what happens. Peggy and another employee were straightening up the lobby, and Peggy saw Pete and let him in.

"What happened to Evelyn?" she said.

"We had a group meal, plenty of laughs. I'm on the outside looking in though."

Peggy worked it around. "So I assume you're full then."

"Yeah, but I love to eat, I can always force it."

Peggy smiled. "In that case, I was thinking Vesuvio's. If that appeals to you."

"On Columbus?"

"Yes. They're open until two."

"Nah, doesn't sound good. I'm gonna call it a night."

"Oh. Okay."

"Jeez, I'm kidding."

Peggy was eating like a horse, which motivated Pete, and he almost finished his beef braciolo.

"Dang," he said, "small individual like you."

Peggy said, "I'm always famished when I get off work. It drives my family crazy, everyone's constantly on diets."

"Can't beat a healthy metabolism."

"I know, I've never had a weight problem. I feel guilty sometimes."

"So what's your *story*?" Pete said.

"Nothing dramatic, if that's where you're going. I grew up in the city, and except for college in Northridge, I've been here my whole life."

"I grew up here too. My guess is, you take most of your restaurants in the city, it's not that common to find two native San Franciscans at the same table."

"Tell me about it. I love working at the gym, but no one's *from* here. Where'd you go to school?"

"Chestnut Street's the same way. It has its moments, but if you polled a hundred people, maybe two would know the 49ers used to play at Kezar . . . Lowell."

"So did I! What year?"

"'94."

"Get *out* of here, my *sister* was '94."

"Oh no."

"Did you know Leslie Stemphill?"

"Jesus . . . That's your sister?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"What were you?"

"I was class of 2003."

"Wow . . . you had another sister, right? In between."

"Margie. She was three years behind Les."

"I remember her. That means you were like, eight years old then . . . Ah man . . . I actually remember you *too*. I'm not believing this."

"My God, I remember you also! When you'd drop Leslie off, Margie and I were all over her, wanting to hear everything."

"Well that puts a damper on things, to say the least," Pete said. "Serves me right for being truthful. What an idiot."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was going to try to maneuver you back to *my* place. Except for a small detail emerges, that you're my high school girlfriend's little *sister*. Unreal."

Peggy grimaced, taking it in. She said, "I must say, that wasn't an answer I was expecting."

Pete said, "That's my fault then. And I didn't mean I'm not enjoying your company. You're a good kid, that's obvious."

"You say *kid*, but would it occur to you I worry about my biological clock ticking? . . . You mean *that* kind of kid?"

"No, not that kind."

No one spoke for a while.

"You know what?" Peggy said. "If we hadn't made this connection there'd be no way I'd go home with you tonight."

"Oh."

"Now I *can*. If you want me to."

"You mean fire up the scrabble board? Since you don't have to worry about any moves being put on you?"

"You're funny," she said.

Pete made coffee and they sat on the couch and flipped around late-night TV. *Carnal Knowledge* was on, where Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel swap girlfriends, Ann Margret being one and the other a familiar actress Pete couldn't place, all of them so young.

He muted the sound and said, "I ask a few questions but you do most of the talking, okay? And if I start falling asleep, elbow me."

Peggy tucked her feet under herself and got comfortable. "I'll ask the first one *for you*," she said, "What's Leslie doing?"

"That was number two. The first one, are your parents still alive? I really liked them."

"Mom passed away, but Dad's hanging in there. Leslie lives in Walnut Creek."

"Yeah?"

"She has two teenage sons. They've both been in a little trouble. Les has had a fair number of men in and out."

"Who's the father?"

"Two different guys. The first, you probably knew, Tim Boglou."

"Holy Toledo, the basketball player? She ended up with *that* guy?"

"Seems like everyone knew that. You must be out of the loop entirely."

Pete said, "I am until they ask for those alumni donations. When I give them something they don't acknowledge it, but they do solicit me earlier the next year."

"Well you have your 25th reunion coming up. You should *go*, Leslie's been talking about it."

"To be honest, on my list of things to do, that's off the bottom."

"I could go *with* you, it would be so much fun." She moved next to him and without thinking too hard he put his arm around her.

Pete said, "Your dad still in the same house?"

"No, a retirement complex on Van Ness. They had something bad happen and sold the house in '04."

"Something bad . . . what?"

"Oh, I would always ask them not to, but they were driving up to visit Margie, she lived in Seattle at the time. My dad was stubborn, he insisted on driving straight through and sleeping at rest stops. They got robbed and beaten up pretty badly at one in the middle of the night, near Bend, Oregon."

"Fuck."

"It was touch-and-go for a while, especially with my mom. When they recovered they put the house on the market and moved to an apartment. It wasn't rational, but they felt vulnerable."

"*God* damn it."

"On a brighter subject," Peggy said, "how come you're not involved with anyone? Or are you?"

"What happened to the guy that beat them up?"

"There were two. They caught them the next day trying to use my dad's credit card. There was no way my parents were going back up there to testify, so they pled guilty to a watered-down charge and served 90 days in the county jail."

Pete took a deep breath. "What *else*, besides the house?"

"Only that Mom seemed a little slower, mentally. We never knew if it was early dementia setting in, or the incident."

Pete said, "Well now I probably can't sleep. Which isn't the worst thing."

Peggy said, "You know what Pete? You look absolutely exhausted. Please go in, and I'll leave."

"I'm good right here. I'm actually afraid of having a bad dream tonight."

"A *serious* bad dream, or one because it didn't work out with Evelyn?"

"She leave the squash club with various guys, in your experience, besides that guy Jeff?"

"Oh yes, she's very much out there."

"That's what I figured. Lot of mystery to her."

"Made more complicated no doubt by that body, which you were studying carefully during the match."

"Don't you think most of them hit the ball too low on the front wall, though? She got mad when I told her that."

"Probably. So are you involved with anyone Pete? Or you just fool around."

"No. You?"

"I've broken up with some nice guys. I can't put my finger on it."

"Let me tell you something," Pete said. "You're never going to find that perfect package. Something's always a little *off*. You accept that, you move forward."

"Interesting, Dr. Phil," she said. "So how come you aren't settled down?"

Pete said, "Those two guys, anyone ever follow up what happened to them? After they got out of jail?"

"No, that wouldn't make sense. Why would we want to?"

Kim began tidying up the apartment a bit, starting with the kitchen. He had to admit, she had a nice style, good instincts.

Meanwhile he opened the laptop and took a quick look. It was amazing what you could sometimes find, and how quick. Pete could never completely wrap his head around modern technology.

Sure enough, you had a couple articles, a local Oregon paper, telling you the *who* and *how* of what happened to the Stempfills up there . . . and the names of the two mutants. One of them, it wasn't clear, but the other sure looked like he was living in Chico now, employed by the State of California, doing maintenance work at the college there. If that *was* the guy.

Pete knew Chico a little bit. It was 3 and a half hours away. You picked up 505 past Vacaville, 5 at Dunnigan and 32 at Orland. 32 was two-lane, parts of it a little dicey, you had to concentrate, and then you were in town, the west side. It wasn't a bad place. You could typically smell the farm fields in the afternoon, when the wind picked up.

He closed the computer, wondering could you let it go like Kim and her family did . . . and if you couldn't, well, dang.

Straight

Pete was in the car bright and early Saturday driving to Sebastopol for the spring parade and festival. Around Sausalito he called Helen.

"Sheesh, nothing like a little notice," she said.

He said, "If you're *up* for it . . . I'll be standing near the post office. If you miss the parade, the thing overflows into the park down the street, is my understanding."

"I'm just curious, what's the big deal?"

"I'm thinking of making a change actually. Maybe buy something up there . . . Nothing gives you an honest feel for a place like an old-fashioned parade down Main Street. You get what I'm saying?"

"Well I'll do my best," Helen said.

What Pete was here for--the only thing--was get a feel not for the town but for this guy Jerry Smith, who'd apparently made a bit of a name for himself in Sebastopol.

When Pete was growing up there'd been a kid on the block named Blair Mossey, not a close friend but a pleasant-enough guy, and when he was seventeen Mossey was driving to Eureka to visit his sister and on Highway 20 north of Ukiah a drunk driver crossed over and obliterated him.

That was Smith. He survived the accident with a broken arm. The lawyers took over, and he did a little time back then, not much. It had never sat right with Pete, the guy enjoying himself like nothing happened. There were circumstances recently, Pete was more impulsive . . . and here you were.

They had you detour off Gravenstein Highway in front of the parade route and he had to park a mile away, but it was a perfect day for a walk. Royal-blue sky, temperature in the high 70's, cute little houses overflowing with flowers in the front yards. Pete thought maybe he *should* move here at that.

The parade kicked off with the local war veterans, followed by the high school band, all the student musicians wearing fedoras and sunglasses, which, that part, Pete thought looked ridiculous.

Next was a chain of open convertibles, the dignitaries sitting up high with their feet on the back seats. The prick Smith was third, he and his wife, and they were waving and throwing candy that kids were scrambling to collect. On the side of the car it said: 'The Rotary Club Thanks Jerry and Annette Smith'.

There was a heavy-set woman standing next to Pete with a 2013 Apple Blossom Festival T-Shirt on. Pete said, "What'd that guy *do*, that they're thanking him for?"

The woman said, "Jerry Smith. He helped save the pool when the finances were kaput. Defibrillators for the police, computers in the schools, all that."

"He a nice man then, as far as you know?"

"Of course he is," the woman said. "You give your heart and soul to the community, how could you not be?"

A older guy overhearing the conversation butted in. "Smith had a term on the city council. Pro-development, helped push through the business park up by Hurlbut. They razed an apple orchard that had been there forever, and now we have asphalt and a bunch of buildings that are half-empty."

"How did he make his money?" Pete said.

"Video games," the main said. "It was during the '90's, when everyone was getting bought out there for a while."

"And he was a small piece of the puzzle, for one of the big boys."

"You got it, his timing was fortunate," the man said.

Pete found himself absorbed in the parade. There were musical combos on floats and Little League teams and a dachshund club and horses performing and a hot rod club and several 4-H groups, including the Future Farmers of America. There were more elements of a rural small town than Pete would have expected, just fifty-five miles from San Francisco.

Halfway through it Helen tapped him on the shoulder. "This is nice," she said. "We have our Jubilee coming up in Terra Linda, but this one's more connected." Whatever that meant.

"How's school?" he said.

"It's good," Helen said. "We've made some real headway on blocking the Lonny baseball dugout naming."

Lonny was a one-time student of Helen's who got in some trouble a couple years after he graduated and ended up disappearing. Pete taught at the same high school for a while and knew the kid peripherally, good athlete. Now the school was trying to honor him with the dugout business.

The flip side being, there was an ugly underbelly to the story, and Helen felt the guy got what he deserved, and she was quite outspoken about it. Pete tended to agree, though he kept his mouth shut publicly.

Helen brought it *up* once, curious, that crazy as it sounds, could he--Pete--have had anything to do with it.

Pete said of *course* not, you're out of your goddang *mind* . . . but he figured still, why draw *attention* to the thing, just let 'em *name* the stupid dugout after the kid, and that's that.

Except Helen was fighting it, she'd apparently formed a committee and so forth.

Pete was thinking now, son of a bitch, can you just let it *go*?

There was an electric vehicle company in town and their display was passing by. They had decked-out funny-cars running on batteries driving in circles, including two guys sitting on a couch that looked like it was floating. Next was a women's dance troupe called West County Samba, where everyone had on silver beaded bikinis that flashed as they danced to a lively horn and drum section that brought up the rear.

"Get a load of *this*," Pete said.

"I know," Helen said.

Some of the women had classically voluptuous bodies, others not so great. One or two might have actually been South American, but the rest were

white and fleshy. They were putting considerable energy into it and seemed to be having fun shaking themselves at the crowd.

Pete said, "I'm seeing a combination of salsa and belly dancing here. Not bad, actually."

Helen grabbed his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "It makes me horny."

Pete looked at her and shook his head, but he had to admit he was feeling it himself. The parade ended and they walked over to Ives Park where the festival was getting started. There were games and bands and wine tasting and food, and around the perimeter there were canopied booths. One of them was for the Rotary Club, and Smith was sitting in back, gnawing on a barbequed turkey leg that Sebastopol was apparently known for. He was easy to spot, big guy about six-three, thick red hair, freckles.

To be a *hundred percent* sure he had the right Jerry Smith, he would have to fine-tune a few more details . . . but meanwhile what could it hurt to say hello?

Helen was absorbed in a quilting demonstration a few booths away. Pete walked into the Rotary Club booth and said to Smith, "I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what you all are doing."

Smith finished chewing, swallowed and wiped his lips. "Thank you for that, we aim to please."

"So what's on *tap*, going forward?" Pete said.

"Well, we'd like to re-sod the soccer field at Brookhaven. And adjust the lighting angles if possible. Neighbors are complaining they shine in their living rooms."

"You can't win, can you? You do the right thing, there's always a wise guy has problem with it."

"Ain't it so."

"I'm sorry," Pete said, "what was your name again?"

"Jerry. Smith."

"Joe Mossey," Pete said, extending his hand. Smith's left eye twitched, very slightly, but it was him.

Smith shifted his turkey leg into his left hand, wiped his right palm on a napkin and shook hands with Pete, getting grease all over him.

"Anyhow, I'll let you go," Pete said, "You guys have been appreciated for years in *our* family, I'm glad I finally said something. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"You too," Smith said.

Pete found a bathroom and washed his hands thoroughly. He looked around the rest of the festival and hooked back up with up Helen. He said, "I appreciate the skill level, don't get me wrong, but if all the arts and crafts booths disappeared *tomorrow*, would we be any worse off?"

"You mean as a society?" Helen said.

"Okay, yeah."

"That's a *terrible* thing to say, and frankly I'm surprised at you Pete. How about if all the tall buildings in downtown San Francisco disappeared?"

"That'd be fine. I've never understood it, what they could be needing to do in all those offices."

"The difference is, the crafters are people, expressing themselves. The buildings are corporations."

"Fine, I'm not saying get rid of any *people* . . . They still liking Bruce by the way? Far as you know? For the Lonny thing?"

Bruce had been one of Helen's recent boyfriends.

When Lonny disappeared the police didn't seem to have much, and they latched onto this guy Bruce as a person of interest. He'd owned a strip club at one time on Santa Rosa Avenue it turned out, and the cops labeled him difficult to deal with.

It was complicated, why they thought Bruce was a possible in the Lonny deal. You figured it had something to do with Helen opening her big mouth, that Lonny *deserved* to disappear . . . and Bruce having wanted to please her. Either way, you had to admit it was a heck of a reach.

Helen said, "I haven't had any communication with Bruce, but I don't think so. Lonny seems like a dead topic around town these days, except for the baseball dugout part."

They were back on Main Street, in front of a taqueria that looked busy. "I could eat," Pete said. "I got stuck talking to some slob who was stuffing his face, and it made me hungry."

Helen said Mexican sounded great but she wanted a real drink with it, which the taqueria didn't offer, so how about taking it out and going back to her place?

Pete said, "A couple Dos X's doesn't do it for you?"

"It's Saturday."

"The *new* dude, where's *he* fit in the picture exactly?"

"He has his mom tonight. They have a routine."

"So you're telling me . . . go in and get two super burritos and meet you at your house?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

+++

Helen had a small Victorian on Uppelt Street on the west side of Terra Linda. Not something you could afford today on a teacher's salary, but she'd picked it up at the right time. Her brother Lew, pretty nice guy actually, had renovated it for her.

One of the touches that Lew came up with was a low built-in bureau in Helen's bedroom closet. He had used redwood, to match the mouldings throughout the house, and finished it off with several coats of high gloss lacquer.

Right now, Helen was sitting on the bureau facing Pete, whose shorts were at his ankles, and they were going to town.

Helen said, "The *atmosphere* today . . . there was an intensity."

Pete said, "Not at *first* so much. But I'm seeing your point."

Helen said, "When I make love to someone else . . . you know what I think about Pete?"

"No."

"The time in your garage . . . against the car . . ."

Someone said, "Is that so."

Pete froze and Helen slid away from him and said, "*Goddamn it Doug.*
What on earth are you doing here?"

"Have you been screwing other people just lately, or the whole time?"
Doug said. He asked it pleasantly enough, a guy about thirty with an earring,
wearing a pullover sweater and a Cal hat.

"You know what?" Helen said. She'd put on a robe, and had her hands on
her hips, though she apparently didn't realize it was open down below. "Anyone
who puts his mother first has *no* say in what I *do* or *don't* choose to do. Do you
understand that?"

"Just a *minute*," Doug said, "We've had an understanding all along, I
thought."

"Well you can take your understanding and shove it," Helen said. "Give
me the key."

When Doug had driven away Helen said, "Don't even *go* there Pete."

"About the coast not being clear after all?"

"Yes. I'm really sorry."

"Forget that. The main thing, I'm glad he wasn't some psychopath about
to pull a gun."

"No, he's a whole different animal than Bruce, if that's what you're
concerned with. Anyhow . . . do you want to eat?"

"I'm thinking not yet."

Helen said, "What I wanted to add, to the garage part . . . it turns me on
that we were keeping someone waiting upstairs."

"You've touched on that before," Pete said.

"Even so," Helen said, "we were rudely interrupted before I could
complete my thought."

Monday morning Pete was outside doing a calf-stretch against the front of his building, about to go for his run, when a black Ford with extra antennas drove up and parked across the street. Pete felt himself hyperventilating slightly--it was human nature--and Detective Cousins from Marin County got out. He'd spoken to Pete once before, when he was canvassing anyone who might have an idea what happened to Lonny. Just throwing shit out there, hoping something stuck, was Pete's impression.

"Your name came up again," Cousins said, not shaking hands.

Pete said, "It did?"

Whoa . . . No idea there'd been a *first* time. This was scary now.

"How well do you know Helen Eriksson?"

"I'm pretty sure I told you, no way in the world Helen would be capable of anything like that."

"Wasn't my question."

"Well, like I said, she's a good friend. We get together on and off."

"You talk about various topics when you're banging her?"

"Uh, okay, well yeah . . . the usual stuff that comes out spur-of-the moment, I guess."

"What'd you say about Lon Doolittle? When you were wedged into her closet Saturday."

"I don't remember saying *anything* about that person."

"How about her, what'd *she* say about him?"

"Nothing. The only time his name came up was earlier in the day."

"Where?"

"Sebastopol."

"Fuck you doing up *there*?"

"I *like* it there. They had a festival."

"Doolittle came up *how*?"

"Ah, they want to name the high school baseball field after him. Not the *field*, the dugout. Helen is trying to stop that from happening. She said they're making progress."

"And you said what?"

"I told her to let it go. Even though I agree it's wrong."

Cousins took off his sunglasses and started flipping through a notebook.

"This goddamn case," he said.

"Yeah?" Pete said.

"Your friend Eriksson, she's gotta pick not one but two pricks."

"Oh."

"I don't mean you. Necessarily. Gilbright, the one owned the strip joint--and this Doug piece of horseshit. We're spending a hundred hours trying to clear the two of 'em."

"Wait a second, Doug just came in the picture recently I thought."

"No, she was doing 'em both at the same time. In theory, either of them could have whacked the idiot, and neither one's got a great alibi . . . What do you think of this Doug?"

"I don't know . . . he seemed *level*-headed enough, considering the circumstances I met him in."

"Yeah, well you're contrasting him with the first a-hole. Did you know the guy lives with his mother?"

"Helen said that."

"The reason I'm here, he called in yesterday and said someone Helen referred to as Pete was talking about Doolittle like he knew something."

"Well I wasn't. And I don't."

"In fairness, we've already established he's a lying piece of shit. Whether he's a homicidal liar, or just a momma's-boy pathological one, that's the problem."

"I see."

"What are you doing, exercising?"

"Most mornings, yeah."

"That help the plumbing and everything?"

"I haven't thought of it that way, but it probably doesn't hurt."

"McGirk, let me ask you something," Cousins said. "If someone came to you cold and asked what happened to Lon Doolittle, what would you say?"

Pete said, "Wow . . . I'd tell them my best guess . . . is someone who despised Lonny might have gone off the deep end. Be hard to go too far away from *that*."

"That's how we've been working it to this point. Now one of my partners is floating a theory it could have been random because there was a similar disappearance in Lake County. You think?"

"I don't know, common sense would say it wasn't random. Other than maybe a random *person* who didn't like Lonny."

"One other one. A kid played ball with Doolittle down in San Diego. One of the JC's. Mexican-American kid. Doolittle was a pitcher, this kid was a catcher, until he dropped out of school. They found him six months ago in Ensenada, the victim of an execution."

"Jesus . . . So could Lonny have been in the drug trade? Anything's possible, I suppose . . . Though I'm remembering I did see the guy once after he got out of high school, and that was in line at a deli and he seemed normal."

"Which deli?"

"Macci's, on Sarkesian."

Cousins said, "Okay. Well I thank you for your time there, pal."

"How's your father?" Pete said. Cousins had mentioned the other time that he was in a facility in the Sunset District.

"The fuck you have to bring *that* up for? Not good. I'm going over there now, since I'm down here. It doesn't help that my lieutenant's kicking my ass every day on Doolittle."

"I apologize."

"Nah, it ain't your fault. Soon as I can take early retirement, I'm out of this racket."

Pete watched Detective Cousins drive off. The last thing he felt like doing now was running, but he figured he better go through with it in case Cousins

circled back to check on him. Declaring yourself more impulsive . . . that carried its own set of problems, Pete was learning.

Copious

Pete was driving cross country and he was close, a Red Roof Inn in Elmore, Ohio, 24 miles east of Toledo, Sandusky County.

You forgot how you could shoot through states quick back here. A big day tomorrow--the rest of Ohio, corner of Pennsylvania, the meat of New York, crossing the Hudson River below Albany--then into Western Mass, through the Berkshires and bringing it on home to Boston.

Cambridge, technically.

It was 11 hours but Pete remembered a bad experience once with rush hour traffic in the Boston corridor, which seemed to extend about 200 miles, so he played it safe and left at 2 in the morning, and rolled up early afternoon at his sister Bonnie's.

After the formalities he said, "Have I *aged* much since that time in Vermont?"

"To be honest," Bonnie said, "I don't have a clear image of what you *looked* like then."

Pete said, "This wasn't the worst drive, actually. What always blows my mind is just how much of the country is farms . . . What about work and stuff, how is it?"

"I'm on the computer," she said. "Grant writing, some management consulting, the occasional freelance project. It's good, because I can work around Bert."

"That *is* good, because whenever I hear someone say *management consulting* I have no idea what they're talking about. But hey, that's my problem."

Bonnie looked at her watch. "Before you get comfortable I have to pick up Bert. You want to come?"

"Do you think . . . he'll have any idea who I am?"

"He didn't this morning, but I filled him in."

"Ah."

Bonnie had the middle floor in a squared-off three family house that Pete remembered they called a triple-decker back here. It felt like a working class neighborhood, but there were some fancy cars parked on the street, though Bonnie's was a beat-up Corolla.

"What do you pay for your place?" he said.

"Twenty-three hundred a month. Why?"

"I don't know, you could do a lot better in Phoenix. Floyd's neighborhood, you get a whole house for seventeen, eighteen. You can park in your driveway, and you don't need an ice scraper for the windshield."

She said, "I don't think I'm Phoenix material. Bert's not either."

"You don't know that. I'll talk to him and feel him out."

"Pete, don't be confusing him, okay?"

"You know what? At his age, you can turn everything upside down and he's fine."

"Well his dad moved to Florida. So that part's not fine."

Pete said, "No. That wouldn't be."

They waited outside in a lineup with the other parents, everyone idling, Pete thinking turn off the damn engines and relax. It was clearly a private school, but he hoped Bonnie wouldn't get into the curriculum with him, and whether it was a charter, Waldorf, alternative or other.

Bert was coming. He was a smiling kid with curly hair that came down in his eyes. He was shorter than most of the others and had on a backpack that looked way too big.

Pete got out of the car with Bonnie, and without saying anything Bert came up to him and hugged him around the waist, and for a moment Pete felt his throat tighten. "Hey man," he said. "You're not supposed to know me."

"You're my uncle," Bert said. "Are you staying over at our house tonight?"

"I'd like to. If you can handle me being on the couch."

Bert said, "Hey, *I'll* sleep on the couch. You go in *my* room."

Pete said, "No, I'm not kicking you out of your room. But can you show it to me? See what we got going *on* in there?"

"Yeah!" Bert said.

Bonnie said since it was a special occasion why not go for ice cream, and they went to a place in Harvard Square that was full of college kids putting away big sundaes. Bert dug into his for the first few bites and then started to struggle, and Pete finished it off for him.

"That's good, you'll never be a fat guy," Pete said.

"I'm small though," Bert said. "I'm a shrimp."

Pete said, "Maybe now, but I was noticing something. You got big feet."

"He does," Bonnie said.

Pete said, "I'm telling you, you're going to be tall."

"Well my *dad's* pretty tall," Bert said. Pete was picturing Wayne, and he wasn't huge, maybe 5'10 but so what.

"There was a kid in my school," Pete said. "Peter Figg. He towered over everyone until about sixth grade. In *eighth* grade when we graduated, he was the shortest one in the class."

"Wow," Bert said.

"Another guy, Andy Hokapp, little back-up point guard on the freshmen team in high school? His junior year, he was dunking the ball. He grew like a foot. He had real big feet when he was young, just like you."

"Man!" Bert said.

"Just don't dunk on me though," Pete said. "When you come out to San Francisco."

Bonnie stared at him. Bert slid over and put his head on Pete's shoulder, and there didn't seem to be any rush to go anywhere.

Bonnie told Bert to go in his room and take care of his homework, and she and Pete sat at the dining room table drinking red wine. Pete said quietly, "So what's the story with Wayne?"

"He met someone, she's from down there, and he moved in with her. About a year now. He's in a stepdad situation."

"Ah, Jeez."

"Not sure if I ever told you, but Wayne was married once before me. He has a couple of teenage kids of his own."

"Christ."

"It's a mess. The sad thing is, he has a good heart. I see a lot of that in Bert . . . How about you Petie?"

He said, "Well I don't want to jinx myself, but I feel like I've got something picking up steam in the right direction."

"Someone you could actually settle down with?"

"A few wildcards that need to pan *out*, but yeah, not inconceivable."

"I'm happy for you," she said. "And what about Floyd?"

"Nah, that'll never happen."

Bert came into the dining room. "That was a little quick," Bonnie said. "You sure?"

"*Pretty* sure," Bert said. "Can't I play some hockey with Uncle Pete?"

Pete said, "Bert, I have to draw the line at hockey."

"He has a table-top game," Bonnie said. "He's pretty into it."

The hockey set was in the center of Bert's room, on a low stand with two dedicated chairs. One team was the Boston Bruins and the other was the Chicago Blackhawks. Bert had given every player a name right off the NHL rosters, and he announced the action as they played. He kept getting the puck to his center forward, who would ram it into the net before Pete could find the handle for his goalie.

"Two things this proves," Pete said, after he lost 10-1. "First, mechanical games are much better than electronic ones. *Second*, if you don't grow enough to dunk, you can always make it as a play-by-play man. You're amazing."

"Can we go again?" Bert said.

"We can. In fact we can keep going until your mom drags me out of here."

Bert called into the other room, "Mom, me and Uncle Pete are busy. Please don't bother us."

"And even if she drags me out of here," Pete said, "I might sneak back in."

They had breakfast together, and on the way to school Pete told Bert he was leaving today and Bert started crying.

"You know what?" Pete said. "You're the best nine-year old I've ever met in my life. It's not even close."

"Are you coming back?" Bert said.

"Either that, or what I'm hoping, you can come out and see *me*. Soon."

"Yeah! Mom, *can* we?"

"We'll talk about it," Bonnie said. "Right now you have to say goodbye, or you'll be late."

"Bye, Uncle Pete," Bert said, and he ran over to a friend who was being dropped off, and Pete was relieved to see them joking around as they disappeared into the school.

"It's a defense mechanism," Bonnie said. "That's how he says good-bye to his dad . . . Petie, you okay?"

Pete didn't say anything.

Bonnie said, "Well this visit, it's been good for *all* of us. Clearly."

After a minute, Pete said, "Okay I'm going to lay this out there. One of those *life's too short* ones . . . Can you and Bert move to San Francisco?"

"Pete, you have to be real. How would we undertake something of that magnitude?"

He said, "*How?* . . . You got what, a month, month-and-a-half left of school? Then you pack two suitcases, you get on the fucking *plane*, and I meet you at the other end. *That's* how you do it."

"Well you are certainly animated. I didn't see this coming."

"Neither did I. But sometimes, you just have to *do* shit."

"Okay, don't talk about it any further. I won't ignore what you've said, and we have to leave it at that right now."

"You and Bert, you can have my apartment. I've got a place to stay."

"Petie, what the hell did I just tell you?"

"I'm just saying."

He had to see about something in Virginia, which was the purpose of the trip, and it took a week and it sure felt good to be back on the open road.

He decided to drop it down to Highway 40 on the return trip, not quite the deep south but something different.

One observation, as he rolled through Arkansas, Oklahoma and now north Texas: The portions were bigger in the truck stops than off Highway 80, and the food was better.

At a gas station near Amarillo he called Bonnie.

"How's the little man?" Pete said.

"He's fine," Bonnie said.

"But what?"

"I talked to him about coming out and visiting. We might."

"Wow . . . that's great *news*. But for how long?"

"I thought a week would be about right. Then maybe go see Floyd too."

"Jeeminy Christmas, a week? Just *stay*."

"No Petie, that's not going to work."

"You know what? At least stay for the summer. Develop a little routine, get a bead on the city. There's day camps up the wazoo that Bert will love. On the weekends I'll take him bodysurfing at Stinson Beach."

"He's not that great a swimmer."

"God *damn* it . . . Now why is *that*?"

"He's just never taken to it very well."

"Okay, *forget* the camps. We'll get him lessons every day, and at night I'll take him to the Family Swim and help him."

"I feel like you're overpowering me here."

"That's because you *need* to be overpowered . . . I love you though."

"Love you too," Bonnie said.

Friday he had lunch at a Coco's in Barstow, and he sat at the counter and watched the short-order chefs work. He remembered a family trip to the Grand Canyon once where they also stopped in Barstow, not at a restaurant but a drive-in, and everyone got slushes.

He remembered it because something went wrong with the slush machine and they all came out funny, and his dad would bring it up over the years and embellish the story.

Pete was never real close to his dad, but he could picture him on those road trips, getting out of the car whistling, his shirt stuck to his back, and telling everyone to order whatever they wanted, that the price didn't matter.

Pete missed him now.

Spiked

Pete was looking something up at the Manhattan Beach library. On the upper level you had a panoramic view of the ocean. It was a pretty dang terrific design, if you were in the mood to absorb it, which today he wasn't.

Someone said, "Is everything all right? Are you finding what you need?"

It was one of the librarians, an attractive enough woman, her name tag telling you she was Emma K.

Pete said, "I look that discombobulated?" He was thinking maybe he'd been moving his lips when he read, which he did do sometimes when he was stressing over something.

Emma said, "I didn't mean to imply that. The internet *can* have a mind of its own, naturally." She had a nice smile.

"So you weren't trying to get in my business," he said, "so much as you were concerned about my mental state." Joking, but who knows, maybe she *was* concerned.

Emma cleared her throat. "Well, if there's nothing else."

"There *is* something else," Pete said. "How come everyone talks so loud in the library these days? It used to be, you didn't talk at *all*, even the troublemakers knew enough to keep their mouth shut . . . And here *we* go, doing the same thing."

"Are you typically this observant?"

"You're ducking my question."

"I believe it's a complicated answer actually. Reflective of a deeper societal shift."

"Oh boy . . . How about 'cause you *let* 'em? Does that work?"

She laughed. "That's part of it."

"So you can tell me the other part at dinner," Pete said.

Emma studied him for a moment and then continued circling through the aisles, stopping occasionally if someone needed help. When she returned to Pete's cubicle, she handed him a slip of paper, with her phone number and a comment: 'You're not going to try anything, are you?'

She waited for his reaction and he looked up poker-faced and scissored his hands, the safe sign in baseball, and she went away again, and soon he'd had his fill of the computer. He went outside and smoked one of the cigarettes he'd bummed off this guy Ned last night at the bar down by the pier that he'd gotten kind of comfortable with, and phoned Emma.

She said that was quick, and he said no point giving her time to re-think it, plus he wanted to see if she'd break a rule and answer her cell at work . . . and she didn't address that but they settled that he'd see her at 5:30.

Pete hadn't used the car much since he moved here, besides going to the tennis courts, and he wasn't a big fan of picking people up, but he was a little embarrassed having her meet him at his apartment, and of course they could meet at the restaurant except he wasn't sure *what* restaurant, so there you were.

He'd been thinking maybe he should get a bike. A doofus almost ran him down with one on The Strand, early on, but that was beside the point. It seemed practical and that would kind of cement the local stamp on you.

You saw a lot of them parked on the actual beach, simple fat-tire jobs leaning up against each other, and one advantage was you could expand your territory, see what El Segundo, Marina del Rey, Venice, even Santa Monica were all about.

One thing holding him back was not wanting to disturb the minimalist vibe he had going in the apartment, but he supposed he could leave the bicycle outside on the railing, probably not even having to lock it up around here, doubtful anyone would bother with it . . . and if they *happened* to, well, you'd probably let it go at that, depending.

Either way, you couldn't ride a dinner date around on the end of a bike, and Pete hoofed it back up the hills to the apartment, detouring slightly to get a *torta* at the little stand on Sepulveda since you never knew how these dinner

things were going to work out, and showered and figured why not lie down for a minute and was out like a light.

“I was reasonably convinced you stood me up,” Emma said. “You did strike me as a bit of prankster.”

“Well I wouldn’t mind being called a *playboy*, in the *good* sense, if that’s where you’re going,” Pete said. “*Sorry* about that though.”

It was 10 to 6. He’d screwed up by over-sleeping and then the traffic was a little confusing, there’d been a one-way situation on Ardmore which you wouldn’t have expected around here. But Emma had waited patiently out front, her hands folded around her purse.

“Playboys are jerks, generally,” she said.

“I know what you mean, but I’m thinking more James *Bond* . . . Never off-balance in a social situation, always delivers the right line, and treats women with respect.”

“You *think* that? He treats women like *dirt*.”

“Hmm,” Pete said. “Well where to?”

Emma ran four or five restaurants by him and he hadn’t heard of any of them, but he liked the sound of *Big Wok*, except he was a little suspicious of Chinese food down here after coming from San Francisco, but she told him it was Mongolian and that’s where they went.

It was a bustling place, one huge room, and you stood in line at first collecting raw meat and vegetables and noodles and sauces in a bowl and the guy went to town with what you gave him and handed it back to you all cooked and combined beautifully, and you sat down.

“Solid choice,” Pete said when they were squared away. “Although I see what the regulars are doing. *Two* bowls, and go easy on the noodles. Much higher percentage of meat.”

“You can go back,” Emma said, “it’s all-you-can eat.”

“This’ll do the job. I notice you’re wearing a ring . . . That to send a message, then?”

She said, "I'm still married. However, we're separated. One would think."

Pete said, "There was a young gal used to work at a coffee place on Union Street. She had a ring on, big rock right in your face, but she flirted with a lot of guys. Finally one day I butted in and asked what her husband thought about it. She said she was single, but had to add the ring after her first day working at the place because she kept getting hit on."

"Well that's interesting, though not that original--but your point is?"

"I don't know."

"So why'd you bother bringing it up?" You could see she enjoyed dishing it out a bit.

Pete said, "Okay forget that . . . I guess the *one would think* part, is what a rational human would find noteworthy."

Emma dabbed her mouth with the napkin and took a healthy sip of white wine. "He and I are quite different," she said. "When the girls both made it out of the house, we re-assessed our priorities . . . We still live together, and plan to look after each other when we're old."

"I see . . . But meanwhile, you both screw around with other people . . . Sorry, I didn't mean it exactly *like* that, but you get my drift . . . and Jeez, the *girls out of the house*? How old are you?"

Emma didn't answer right away, and Pete wondered if he'd been too upfront and she might walk out of here and call a cab.

That was one thing for sure about his diagnosis--the impulsiveness factor. You tended to just blurt stuff out. Not always with a lot of decorum behind it.

Now it was looking more like he might be sticking around *after* all, but it felt good to be winging shit, no need to change.

Emma said, "In response to your second concern, I'm forty-three."

"Dang," Pete said.

"Is there a problem with *that* now, as well?"

Her being only a couple years older than him, in the ballpark, seemed logical on one level, but man, grown daughters on the loose and grandkids around the corner then.

He said, "You *look* great, that's not it."

"I'm not sure how I should take that," she said. "Especially when I see old pictures, where I've been included on someone's Facebook."

"I know. Tagged. And the reverse too . . . Some guy stuck me on his timeline, a kids' birthday party, sixth grade, we're at an Oakland Seals hockey game. I'm chubby with a bad haircut, and of course I'm stuffing my face."

Emma laughed. "So tell him to remove it, or you'll un-friend him."

"Nah, you roll with that stuff," Pete said. "But you know for a fact your husband-guy's not screwing around on you? . . . Or it's part of the *equation*."

"I don't *care*, is the correct answer," she said. "It's complicated."

"These type things though, when you strip 'em down, usually aren't . . . but hey the *good* thing, you're not paying a double mortgage."

"Let's change gears, if we may," she said, and Pete happened to scan the room, absent-minded, and sitting off to the right about eight tables away, yukking it up with another guy, was the kid from the apartments who'd apparently beat up his girlfriend.

There'd been an incident, middle of the night, the police came, took them both in, separate squad cars. The gal screamed *You Pig* a bunch of times at the boyfriend. She didn't look good. They lived in 7-a, three doors over. Pete hadn't seen either of them in a week.

"This is a popular place," he said, still looking the kid's direction.

"Oh very much so," Emma said. "Perhaps the best value in MB, when you factor in quantity and quality together."

Pete said, "Good for *young* people too, I suppose, money being tight, and so forth." Thinking money couldn't be *that* tight, if the guy'd been coming up with half the rent on the apartment . . . But more importantly, how would you handle this?

"Naturally I can't afford it here, on a municipal salary," Emma was saying. "Nor can my husband, he's a teacher. So we settled on Torrance."

“Is that right . . . where’s he teach?” Pete said, not caring about the answer, wondering would this kid have to get up and take a leak or something, or was his youthful bladder just too strong.

He did notice the kid and his buddy drinking tea, which was included with the meal but Pete had waved off because *he* didn’t want to be up all night with his not-so-young one, and Emma opted out as well and was working on her white wine seconds now.

She said, “He’s at Orange Coast. A bit of a commute, but you work around it.”

“Unh,” Pete said. “That a JC?”

“A community college, yes, he teaches Chemistry,” she said, and son of a bitch, the *other* kid got up and went back toward the right corner of the place where Pete assumed the restrooms were. You couldn’t see for sure from here, but what else would he be doing?

You Pig of course puts down his fork and whips out his phone right away, and starts rifling around. Why’d they always have to do that, what was wrong with staring into space once in a while, even for a *moment*? Especially when you’re right in the middle of an excellent meal.

The other kid isn’t gone long, and they continue eating, the kid-of-interest eventually getting up once, but with his plate, going back for another helping.

The booze, or maybe some MSG in the food, or a nerve that got triggered *somewhere* has Emma rambling on now about the departmental dysfunction that academics universally endure, which trickles down to the families and invariable screws them up in a substantial way.

Whatever . . .

You Pig came back to the table loaded up, and then *whoa*, before he sits back down he heads to the bathroom.

Pete told Emma excuse me for a moment and headed back there too.

It was a decent layout because there was a urinal and a stall, plenty of room, and a half wall that gave everyone privacy when a new person opened the outside door, so there was no need to lock it when you went in.

Though it was conveniently possible *to* lock it if you wanted, which Pete did, turning the little latch.

The kid was finishing up at the urinal and Pete waited for him to wash his hands before saying, “How’s Stace coming along?” Pete knew her name, Stacey.

“Oh fine,” the kid said, sharp enough, placing Pete right away. “Thank you for asking.”

Pete would have said you’re welcome but the kids today seemed to favor *not a problem*, which was a cringe-worthy expression--you felt like telling the waiter, *wait a second, did I bring up a potential problem here, where I needed a ruling?* Though it wasn’t the waiter’s fault, he was just acting normal.

Anyhow, that’s how Pete answered the guy here, “not a problem”, and when the guy’d finished washing up and was looking in the mirror rubbing the corner of one eye Pete grabbed him by the jean jacket and spun him around and marched him head first into the stall.

Fortunately the guy wasn’t very strong and couldn’t do much, though Pete felt he had enough adrenaline going tonight where he could have handled someone tougher. Though maybe not. His main concern, replaying some of the gangster movies in his head, was did you put the seat *up* for maximum effect or not worry about it?

He tried with his foot to lift it but that didn’t work so he decided forget it and rammed *You Pig’s* face into the bowl.

He let him swim for a moment, and then lifted him out by the back of the hair, like they worked it.

Then boom, back down.

You had to hand it to the kid, he wasn’t crying out or saying anything, and Pete initiated the treatment one final time, prolonging it slightly, not enough to drown the guy for God sake’s, but to complete the point.

The kid gulped and gasped for a while and then looked for a towel, but you only had the blower, so he used a half roll of toilet paper to do what he could, and he told Pete, “Not what you think,” and went back out in the restaurant.

Pete took his time, hoping the kid and his friend wouldn't hang around at this point, and when he did emerge he was right, though *Jesus*, Emma was working on a *third* glass of wine now without missing a beat.

"You're kind of sweating," she said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, well," he said, "I think it's more humid down here, than what I'm used to."

"Absolutely. You'll find that our coastal conditions, they're deceptive. One rarely requires underwear to keep warm."

Pete looking at her, in her modest librarian's dress, thinking *what the heck*.

"I'll qualify that," Emma said, slurring her words slightly. "You, as a man, you won't need that extended t-shirt too often."

She had a point there, Pete had trouble keeping his shirts tucked in, and the t-shirt was usually hanging out the bottom somewhere.

"Dessert?" he said.

"There's a Baskin-Robbins," she said. "Though you do take your life in your hands crossing Sepulveda."

"Maybe a little walk then? Brave the humidity?"

"Do you live nearby?" she said.

Emma suggested stopping off first at Sampson's, one of those high-end supermarkets that affluent communities have for when Safeway doesn't quite cut it. Though in Manhattan Beach your high-end places tended to be over the top.

Little 6-ounce jar of imported tuna from Italy for instance, which Pete noticed heading back to the liquor section, \$10.19.

"The after-dinner drink is a bit of a lost art," Emma was saying. "Do you have a blender?"

Pete did not, he essentially had *no* kitchen items, so when they got out of there they had to make a second stop at Target, before finally pulling in at the *Cheater Five Apartments*.

Emma got to work right away, efficient, and Pete turned on the TV and took a look at Thursday Night Football, though it was only Houston and Cincinnati, so he tried House Hunters but it was the international version he didn't care for, so he opened the door for a little cross-breeze and said, "You didn't comment on my digs here."

Emma was measuring, getting things just right, and soon the blender was fired up and she was coming around the counter with two Jungle Birds, naming the drink, a pretty darn nice presentation given what she had to work with.

They touched glasses and she said, "I like it. Except for the couch."

Pete said, "I lived in Teaneck, New Jersey, for a year. No AC. From about May to September, no way you could wear a shirt in the apartment. I had a couch similar to this and your back was always sticking to it, coming away with little fibers."

"How are they?" Emma said.

"Really *good*. I see why it took so long picking out just the right version of black-strap rum."

"Don't forget the Campari," she said, moving a little closer to him on the couch in question.

Pete said, "I was telling some guy the other night--Jeez, I guess it was just *last* night--that part of my objective coming down here was to turn over a new leaf."

"I see. Let me guess. No more late-night shenanigans."

"Very funny." Coincidentally there was some laughter coming from the pool now, people splashing around.

"Do they ever skinny-dip?" Emma said. "I noticed it's reasonably dark out there."

Hmm. Pete was picturing Emma back at the reference desk, letting her hair down.

He said, "Not that I'm aware of, in my admittedly limited experience . . . Any particular preferences?"

“Yes. I like to look at men, who are . . . you know, in shape, and all that goes with it. Women as well.”

Holy Smokes. “Well I give you credit for honesty . . . never the worst quality.”

“You know what?” she said, back at the counter, giving the blender a short poke and refilling her glass.

She sat down again on the couch and left her hand on his leg this time.

Pete said, “You didn’t answer your own question.”

“Have *you* ever been married?” she said.

“Me? No.” Which was technically a lie, though it had been a flash in the pan and she’d bounced back quick with the Nascar mechanic in Pensacola, Florida, or it might have been Gainesville.

“*My* husband,” she said, “sometimes I think, if I had a howitzer . . .”

“Take it easy,” Pete said. He had to admit the blended booze was going down nice at the moment, things were loose, so he said, “I messed up some guy tonight. In fact on account of an incident right here, couple doors over.”

Emma surprised him, by-passing the logical follow-up questions, saying, “So you’re more of a mystery man than I would have expected.”

“Whatever,” he said, flipping channels again and leaving it on *regular* House Hunters, this one in Portland, Maine.

Emma said, “I did that too, once. I killed someone. When I was 12. At summer camp.”

Pete was ready to say, ‘And I kind of feel bad about it now, flying off the handle . . . which is what I resolved to *not* be doing.’

“Come again?” he said.

Emma was nodding, looking right at him. She’d been slurring more than in the restaurant, but she’d kept it reasonably together, *didn’t seem out of her mind*, and she started to cry.

No idea what the woman could *possibly* be talking about . . . and it was a strange way to handle it, but Pete put his arm around her and brought her in.

There was no more splashing at the pool, whoever'd been frolicking out there had enough. "Dang, is that crickets?" he said.

"It is," Emma said. "Until we get our first chill."

"All the cement around here, who would think," Pete said.

High School

Pete's reunion was Saturday night, suddenly looming very real. He better get off his ass.

For starters, his new friend Emma. She was being wishy washy on how she'd even *get* here from L.A., and when. Not to mention the *if* part--that wasn't totally clarified.

But assuming she shows up, where would they stay, and how well did he know her.

He needed these complications like a hole in the head and wanted to be ticked off at *someone*, but he wasn't even sure who talked him into this, it was a big blur.

One call he better make right now, Gloria Johansen, the reunion chairperson, it being Thursday already, in case you unfortunately had to stop by a school office or something tomorrow.

Gloria was happy to hear from him, one of those glass-half-full people back in high school and probably still the same way, her name showing up consistently over the years in Class of '94 announcements.

There was some social noise in the background, but she was in no rush to get off, and she had questions for him, the usual catching up, and Pete answered a few of them but said, "Lemme jump you here. I might have a date, for the big event? Which was a late development. How do I get her in?"

"Well . . . you obviously didn't read the fine print, did you?" Gloria said.

"With all due respect," Pete said, "no. And if that optional bus ride picnic thing to Half Moon Bay--in the *large* print--was mandatory, you wouldn't have seen me for *sure*, for *another* 25 years."

"You're more *amusing* than you used to be," she said.

What did *that* mean? . . . He'd *tried* back then, and *fell flat*? Or he'd just walked around pissed off?

"What's in the fine print?" he said.

“You can bring a spouse, guest, whatever you like. *Everyone* can. It’s included.”

“Oh,” he said. “Okay then. Good to hear.”

Gloria said--the din in the background louder for a second and then calming back down--“What are you doing now?”

“*Right* now?”

“We’re having a little thingy. You’re welcome to come over.”

Pete considered his other prospects for the evening, and admittedly there weren’t a whole lot of them.

Which again, was pretty dang sad. Him being *from* here and barely away long enough so far to let the paint dry.

He was on the outside looking in, wasn’t he, no sugarcoating it, and the same would be true at Gloria’s get-together . . . but he got the address and said he’d see what he could do.

Traffic crawled back into the city from Marin County, the opposite direction of what you’d expect, and Pete found the jazz station he liked but they were in the middle of a pledge drive and only playing big band when they did play something. Bottom line, the Bay Area had become as screwed up traffic-wise as southern California.

Mercifully you had the far right lane exit at the toll plaza, into the Presidio, and Pete couldn’t help it, he remembered a guy following him once, starting right here . . . and when Pete got to his destination the guy parked up the block and got out and watched him, making no bones about it.

Nothing further came of it, as far as he knew, but you didn’t need to live like that.

Gloria’s place was on Jackson, two blocks east of Arguello. Presidio Heights. Blue-chip neighborhood in a market gone berserk. Pete was thinking, just by *living* in one of these things, placeholder, everyone up and down the block made minimum a hundred grand in equity this year.

Gloria opened the door and seemed shocked that he actually showed up, and a little embarrassed. Pete figured it was something with her appearance,

though she looked fine. There were about 15 people, most of them standing in the kitchen, the rest sitting in the family room off of it.

Gloria introduced him around, tugging him by the arm a couple times when he didn't need to meet anyone else, and pretty much as he expected, it was a small prelude to the main event Saturday night. Several of them had come from out of town or out of state for the weekend and they were getting right to it, the old spirit, the red and white.

When there was a slight lull in the conversation, which wasn't often, someone would inject, "*Hey*, how about the time when . . . !"

One guy Pete remembered, Steve Proctor, from freshmen football, didn't have a clue who *he* was, and that was fine . . . Pete picking up that he was in Atlanta now, separated but for the best, and running software for the transit authority. It was hard to tell if he and Gloria were an item tonight but it looked that way. Tough to gauge *her* story as well . . . did she earn, inherit or *divorce* her way into this 5 million dollar spread.

It was dessert time. There'd been trays of likely pretty gourmet appetizers, but those were scavenged. Someone was having a birthday that overlapped the reunion, Jeannie Battaglia, so you had a cake and a few people raised their hand and said kind things about her, a little shaky from the booze . . . and the toasts continued and gravitated toward high school and friendship and life.

The final toaster, some guy Pete couldn't place but who insisted remembered *him*, got all choked up and could barely finish, the gist of it being, we'll never replace those days, but we can keep them alive in spirit forever.

Pete started to feel a little nauseous, probably his imagination, though it could have been the apple fritter from a donut place in San Rafael mixing with the champagne . . . mixing with the bullshit.

He went out in back and sat down, a small yard but impeccable, everything red brick, and he could still hear as much from inside as he needed to. He checked his messages, nothing there at all, Emma the main one he was wondering about.

Then he had a thought, *Jeez*, not a bad one at all . . . Why not let this be *it*, on the reunion business. He'd caught up sufficiently, admittedly had a few laughs, and had the *idea* now.

"*There* you are," came Gloria's voice, closing the screen door behind her. "That's a relief, I thought something might have offended you."

"Are you kidding?" Pete lied. "I wouldn't have *missed* this tonight, really glad you invited me, all that emotion in there . . . What it is right now, I kind of haven't slept much." Which was true, he wasn't all that convinced he'd be able to get out of this chair.

"Yes," she said, "I could tell when I saw you, you don't look great."

"I *don't*?" he said, always wary of a development in that regard.

"I mean you look handsome, that's not it," she said, Pete thinking, *oh no*, too much to drink, plus what about the other guy in there, Proctor.

Gloria continued, "You're welcome to stay right here if you like." She excused herself for a moment.

Now what did *that* mean? Before he wasted too much energy trying to figure it out, she re-surfaced, Proctor with her, the party inside winding down, and he had his arm around her.

Pete said, "Didn't really dawn on me until now, but man you got a fair amount of smoke down *here* too." It was wildfire season, and it had gotten worse the last couple years.

The Steve Proctor guy from freshmen football said, "You say *too*. I take it you live in the north bay then?"

"I don't, but I was up there today. Then coming back through Marin it seemed okay."

"Ours is from the *east* bay, the outer perimeter," Steve explained. "Different flow systems. The marine layer is a factor."

For sure you didn't want to extend this into a meteorology lecture, but Pete said, "What about in closer, the Berkeley hills? There any threat *there*?"

"Always," Steve said. "We all remember what happened in Oakland, in the 90's. It's supposed to rain soon though."

Pete's only interest in the status of the Berkeley hills was an event this Sunday at Tilden Park, the day after the reunion, the guy he'd been checking out in Marin today supposedly involved with it.

Gloria said, "On a funner note, Steve and I are going out for dinner. Would you like to join us?"

"Well where're you going?" he said, always interested in the restaurant scene, though didn't everyone just eat? But you figured that was irrelevant.

"We thought Tadich's," Gloria said.

"Wow, old time San Francisco," Pete said.

"Appropriate this weekend," Steve said.

Pete considered it for a second and said thanks but he can't quite handle it tonight, and to have a great time and he'd see them at the reunion.

Gloria asked where he *was* staying, and he said he was all set, but she didn't believe him and now she insisted he stay here. He protested but there wasn't a lot of oomph behind it, and soon enough she was ushering him into an upstairs guest room, which was as big as a master suite.

That bed sure looked good. He thought he better ask one final question, that he's not going to be *surprising* anybody is he, and she said definitely not, it was her daughter's week at her ex's, and he could sleep here all day tomorrow too and no one would notice--and she closed the door and he barely made it past the click.

It felt real quiet when he woke up, and Pete was pretty sure it was the middle of the night, but he checked the time and *wow*, it was 10:47 in the morning.

The room was still pitch black so it must be the shades, everything in this house the best apparently, and he'd have to remember to ask Gloria about those, since it would be great to work something like that into the mix back in the apartment in southern California.

He showered and dressed and made a little noise to let anyone know he was in motion, but there was no response and when he came down to the

kitchen there was a note from Gloria, big flowing decorative strokes to her cursive, that they'd gone out, but there are fresh scones in the bag and all he has to do is push the button on the coffee.

Gee.

It was hard to know *what* to do today. You were a tourist in your old home town, so you could sight-see. Go out to the Cliff House, check if they were hang gliding at Fort Funston. Stop in the park on the way back, the DeYoung, catch the tail end of the Summer of Love show, Haight Ashbury 1967, that must have been a scene.

Pete stuffed down the second scone, and man this coffee was good, he'd need to ask Gloria about *that* too . . . and he decided the neighborhood public library on Sacramento Street was simpler, and you could check on a few things.

The branch had added more computers, which seemed silly since everyone *had* computers. Pete figured other than the homeless, it was a few guys like him who were paranoid about leaving keystrokes on their personal devices, that needed the library ones, but whatever.

Late afternoon there was a text from Gloria. She and Steve were going out for Chinese noodles, and did he want to come.

That sounded tempting and he called her back, saying he'd be glad to, as long as he wasn't wearing out his welcome around here.

Gloria said you're kidding right, you just *got* here.

There were certain people where you simply felt like you were in good hands. Even if they were sugarcoating it. Which Gloria wasn't.

They met at Noodle Kingdom on Irving Street. Big portions, piping hot. They split a plate of garlic greens, and gobbling it all up Pete realized he'd been eating pretty bad, not just up here on the road but down in L.A. too, and he better clean up his act.

Gloria said, "Well how was your day? Good to be back in the old stomping grounds?"

"It is," Pete said. "One thing I can't believe, how far I went every day to get to school. I rode my bike sometimes. I looked it up, Jeez, 16 miles round trip."

“We lived at 44th and Taraval,” Steve said. “Pretty foggy, but yeah different animal getting there.”

“We lived close too,” Gloria said, “West Portal.”

“So . . . without getting too nosy,” Pete said, “how’d you end up on Jackson and Cherry?”

“My husband. He’s done exceedingly well for himself. He does of course come from Connecticut family money.”

“Pardon my two cents on this,” Steve said, “but haven’t you been over-using that expression, you think?”

“Which one?” Gloria said.

“The *exceedingly well* one.”

“Okay, then, I apologize,” she said. “What he’s referring to, Pete, I assume, is other events these last couple of days. Cocktail parties and so forth.”

“Reunion related,” Steve said.

Gloria said, “And I guess I’ve naturally been asked that question a fair amount, you know, the *how’s your family* thingy.”

“Unh-huh,” Steve said. “And always answering ‘em the same way.”

Pete could see the guy’s point. If she kept bragging about the ex-husband, why didn’t she just get back together with the guy, he was so perfect?

To deflect things slightly, Pete said, “So that’s the story then, people checked in at various hotel locations, you making the rounds?”

“We’re trying to,” she said. “Some of them are spread out, and quite a few have already checked into the Marriott.”

“Kind of reminds me of those UFC fight nights,” Pete said. “They give you the *pre-lims* on TV for free. In the end they’re probably as good if not better than the main event you’re paying the big bucks for.”

“That’s an interesting analogy,” Steve said.

“But the Marriott,” Pete said. “The airport one, right?”

Gloria rolled her eyes and smiled. “Correct. I suppose you were going to double-check *that* tomorrow night about 6:45, where the reunion might actually be taking *place*.”

“No need,” Pete said, “since you just confirmed it . . . I’m sure there’s a logical answer, but that’s *Burlingame*, correct? You’d think everyone would want to re-une inside the city limits.”

“Good point,” Steve said. “Are you bringing a date, or--I’m sorry if you told me, but I don’t have it straight--are you married?”

“Hopefully,” Pete said, “I mean a date. We had a little falling out there, right at the end, and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Gloria said. “If she hasn’t officially backed out though, I’d call it a hopeful sign.”

“Right at the end of *what?*” Steve said.

“That came out wrong. When I was getting ready to drive up from Manhattan Beach, is what I meant.”

“Sweet,” Steve said. “What do you do there?”

“To be honest . . . walk around. There was a guy my *dad* used to talk about, he knew from the chess tables in Golden Gate Park. When people would ask the guy what he did, he said, completely serious, *I walk* . . . That was always a funny story, but now I understand it.”

“I envy you then,” Steve said. “The location, and the occupation both.”

“Hey, come and visit any time,” Pete said. “I got a guy sleeping on my couch, temporarily, but I’ll just kick him out.” Steve was turning into an okay guy, and he meant it.

Gloria said, “So Pete . . . you *were* married briefly, though, correct?”

“Right out of the gate, yeah. She’s done *exceedingly well* for herself, post-me.”

Pete meant it as a joke, figuring they were getting along pretty well, the mood had lightened up, but it backfired, and Steve seized on it again and Gloria got defensive . . . and then she threw in a couple habits she didn’t like about *him* these past few days either.

Pete said, “Hey, I got a place, over on Chestnut . . . can I set us all up with some after-dinner beverages?”

“Works for me, I suppose,” Steve said.

“That would be fine,” Gloria said, neither of them smiling.

It was the same old Weatherby’s, things heating up on a Friday night, though Pete felt increasingly like a stranger in here. Not just because he’d moved away, but because there was no one in the various herds of Millennials he could relate to.

Until he got a seat at the bar, and Mitch came by. Then it was good.

“Yo, baby, my brother,” Mitch said. “You been hiding yourself in the white sand, or what?”

Pete introduced him to Gloria and Steve, and they went with Brandy Alexanders, and everything seemed better, the two of them agreeing this was a great place, and what a colorful bartender--but a few sips in they started arguing again and told Pete to please excuse them, they were moving to a back table.

When Mitch came back he said, “Nice folks, your friends. There an occasion, connected to it?”

“There always is,” Pete said. “Listen, I can see you’re busy, so let me ask you about one *thing*, in case we don’t catch up much tonight.”

“You know you’re a funny guy . . . You put that to me every time, a variation. Always something real important.”

“I do?”

Mitch was waiting on someone and Pete was thinking, that therapist gal in Bel Air, with the large chest, did she help me any, and is it worth trying again, or was I too damn distracted and juvenile to accomplish anything?

No one was in shape to drive when they exited the Booker Lounge an hour and a half later, the second stop of the night in the Marina district.

Instead of calling a service, Pete suggested why not walk it?

Gloria and Steve shrugged their shoulders and said fine, and the three of them crossed Lombard and started up Pierce Street.

Steve limped a little, you could see now, while Gloria was powering along like a mountain goat.

Pete said to Steve, “You’re reminding me of *me*, your stride. A little short. It the shoes, or something deeper-rooted?”

“Deeper. I tried rugby in college. Nothing fancy, club ball, up at Whitman. But a mistake.”

“Walla-walla, Washington,” Gloria said. “Fwhittman.”

“Huh?” Pete said.

“I had a girlfriend at work, older,” Gloria said, “she’d gone there too. She always called it Phwhittman. An f or ph in there at the beginning.”

“She from down south then, your friend?” Pete said.

“She was from Alameda. If you listen carefully, you can hear Steve pronouncing it the same way.”

“Oh,” Steve said, “the implication being, I’m talking down to you then, via my delivery?”

“What’d you guys think of the Booker Lounge?” Pete said. “As compared to the first place, Weatherby’s.”

“I think I’m going to crash at my cousin’s tonight,” Steve said.

They walked in silence for a few blocks, and luckily around Lyon Street the endorphins started to kick in, and Steve brought up a movie he saw on the plane and Gloria chimed in, and by the time they got to her place any disaster seemed averted.

They sat around for a while and Gloria announced she was exhausted and heading upstairs, and when she’d gone Pete asked Steve if he was in the way, sleeping here another night.

“Because *I* can always go to your cousin’s,” Pete said.

“A,” Steve said, “stay right here . . . B, you’re all right. I *get* you.”

“Well you’re a good man too,” Pete said. “Tonight was fun.” He didn’t want to go all *kumbaya* here, but maybe there *was* something about people you went to high school with. By now, you’d been through at least some of the same shit, and on the same timetable.

“What’s it run you,” Steve said, “living down there?”

“A lot, but it’s relative . . . One time when I was there on vacation, there’s two guys making a deal in Starbucks. The way I read it, the one guy was an investor from back east, looking at the guy out here’s company. Or idea. I got to talking to the investor after, bringing up local real estate prices, and he made a good point . . . How much do you *need*, because you’re not gonna be spending any time inside *anyway*.”

“Well I won’t lie to you,” Steve said, “that’s a mindset I could embrace.”

“So go for it,” Pete said. “The gusto.”

“I remember that. An old beer commercial.”

“This thing with Gloria, that gonna continue after the weekend? Or you have it limited to a reunion-only effort.”

“Why? Are you into her?”

“I don’t think so. She’s too nice. I mean okay she was ribbing you tonight, but man, what a good heart.”

“I know . . . So *you* prefer the ones who keep you guessing whether they’re going to show.”

“Yeah . . . I lived here all my life. A *few* years other places, but forget that . . . I come back, day before yesterday, I’m trying to think, who do I want to see? And conversely, who might want to see *me*? . . . I come up with one person, a guy who beat me up 30 years ago. How pathetic is *that*?”

Steve was listening carefully. “I think I see where you’re headed,” he said, “how it could apply to your taste in women.”

“I’m cynical,” Pete continued, “and I can be an ass, that’s for sure.”

“More fun though, that way,” Steve said.

“It is, yeah.”

“Something you don’t learn overnight. You need to live a little first.”

“You do.”

Saturday morning Pete was thinking maybe it’s the mattress too, in addition to those blackout shades, why he was sleeping so perfect, and that he’d have to flip it over and check the label before he moved out of here for good.

No one else was up yet and the Presidio was close, and he decided to jog there, up to the end of Jackson and then a right turn through the Arguello Gate.

He would have continued down the hill toward the main base, and then the left toward Baker Beach, then the figure-eight through the old officers' quarters that was now pricey housing.

That brought you back along the golf course, a neat little 5-miler. Pete knew it well from the old days, it was one of the great runs in the city.

Today once he got inside the gate he could barely move, his fasciitis kicking in bad, and it was a tough trek back to Gloria's.

She and Steve were having coffee and they both seemed kind of stressed. Not necessarily a carryover from last night, but the actual event looming, and stuff you needed to do.

Gloria was getting her hair done, and she had taken on some decoration obligations, and Steve said he had to see his dad who he didn't get along with too well, and he'd been putting it off since he got here.

Then they'd both be checking in at the Marriott, like the sensible attendees. Which was logical, wasn't it, if you were a team player. There'd be plenty of carry-over after the main event, all right there.

"I'll see you tonight then," Pete said, after downing a second cup of that award-winning coffee brew. "This has been . . . beyond the call of duty, honestly."

"Here," Gloria said, handing him a set of keys. "Since you're a party pooper and aren't staying at the hotel."

"Jeez," Pete said. "You're embarrassing me now. You sure?"

"She's right," Steve said. "*Stay* there, we'll be getting some late poker going. I plan to get back at a few people."

"Steve has carried around some grudges, all these years," Gloria said. "I've heard all about them the last few days. The hows and whys."

"Well . . . grudges *can* be overrated," Pete said. "People change. It could end up, *you're* still ticked off about something, *they* don't even remember it happening."

Steve said, "I hear you, but *I'm* remembering them the way they were, I can't help it. No benefit of the doubt."

"At any rate," Gloria said to Pete, "what's on *your* agenda today?"

"I thought I'd wander over to Berkeley," he said.

"Oh terrific idea, always one of my favorite places."

"Wow, the second *one* now," Steve said. He was on his iPad, the morning news.

"What?" Gloria said.

"Mountain lion. Same guy's property, upper Broadway. They come out of the Presidio." He held up the device, and there was a 10 second black-and-white surveillance video of a pretty big looking cat walking across a driveway at night.

"Those things," Pete said, "they ever finish *off* people? Or is that like a one-in-a-million shot?"

"Oh they absolutely can," Steve said. "The lucky part, they don't like conflict. So you *see* one, make sure you stand up to him. That should take care of it, unless something goes haywire."

Pete was thinking *Jeez*, one *more* news tid-bit the world didn't need.

It was tight getting around Berkeley, there was a football game he hadn't anticipated, Cal playing Oregon State.

He found a spot on Hillegass and was crossing Derby headed toward campus when Emma called.

"Dang," he said.

Emma said, "Pete, I'm hoping you can lighten up. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"You're . . . *here*, you mean? Or looking forward to it when I come back?"

"I'm at the airport. Bob Hope. We're getting ready to board, I should be in Oakland at 3:15."

"Oh."

"No need to trouble yourself picking me up. I'll call you when I've reached San Francisco."

“No no, I got it.”

“Fine, do you want my flight number?”

“I’ll find you,” he said.

Wow. Though Gloria’d been right, don’t overthink things, they tend to work out.

What he was scratching his head about, Bob Hope Airport.

You had what, two, even three that were closer to Manhattan Beach? LAX, Long Beach, even John Wayne, out in Burbank--all more convenient than Bob Hope.

She was mysterious, and no point asking her. The main thing, he had a date tonight, which he was starting to get used to the idea of *not* having, but it’d be for the best. Less awkward in the end . . . And you put a gun to his head, he supposed he missed her otherwise, too.

Which was another thing, you better reserve something *after* all, so he called the Marriott, too late for the group rate which expired a month ago, which the desk gal enjoyed explaining to him, but at least a room was available and he booked it.

He could have saved the \$279 and brought Emma back to Gloria’s, pretty positive Gloria wouldn’t have a problem with it, but it was done.

He had to hustle now, the hot dog place on Durant was in his head when she called, and that might screw up the timing with the airport, but it worked out and the plane was right on time.

Emma was traveling light, just a carry-on, and a reasonably big smile, and, boom, she planted a nice wet kiss on him, on the lips.

“So here we are,” Pete said, throwing her stuff in the trunk. “Back to normal I guess. Or even a little beyond it.”

“Let’s go somewhere,” she said.

“We can, anywhere you want. We have a post card day, and fortunately you got a native in the driver’s seat.”

“No,” she said, “I mean let’s *go* somewhere.”

Pete looked at her and she was staring forward out the window but nodding just enough, and he was able to absorb the whole package--a bit of a serious element apparently . . . in fact an urgency . . . even a frustration, if you put it in perspective.

The blouse open three or four buttons didn't help, nor did the fact that she kept shifting around . . . *What can you do?*

The Marriott was a good call, it turned out. One of the best features was the robes, thick, plush terrycloth, two folded up waiting for you right in your room, and unlimited ones down by the pool if those weren't enough.

They were laying back, making use of the robes and both beds at this point, the sky nearly dark outside, only airplanes visible out there, specifically the landing procession dropping into SFO from the south.

"This is worth the price of admission, you know it?" Pete said. "I love watching 'em. I wouldn't get tired of it."

"You," Emma said. "You're goofy. Come back over here." There was a slight dreamy edge behind it.

"I might actually consider it," Pete said, "if I didn't have to pace myself, save some energy for tonight."

"Now you make me mad," she said. "But thank you for inviting me."

Jeez. Pete figured fine, this was one way to work it before a 25th reunion.

The band was in full swing when they walked in, a three-piece job but sounding like more, with how they synthesized everything these days. They were playing current hits you recognized--your Ed Sheerans, your Ariana Grandes, your Taylor Swifts--but of course sprinkling in stuff from 1994.

Pete introduced Emma to a few people he remembered, without overdoing it.

"I'll say this," he said, "the Asians in our class have held up a little better than the whites. I mean there are exceptions."

Emma looked at him funny and said, "Who's *that* person?"

It took Pete a moment to place him, Aaron Dreue, unfortunately. Out there dancing with Nadine Wallace.

There'd been a party at someone's house, one of those stupid sophomore year ones where you don't know what you're doing and Pete and that guy had words.

Over something trivial no doubt. But it stuck.

"Him?" Pete said, pointing with his head. "Guy named Dreue. Why?"

"He looks interesting," Emma said. "The way he moves. I wouldn't be surprised if he were some kind of creative artist."

"Well . . . why don't you ask him?" he said, a little more edge than he intended.

Emma didn't say anything back, but a couple minutes later, the band taking a break and a reunion committee person announcing a big raffle coming up momentarily and Pete in the middle of saying hello to someone who tapped him on the shoulder . . . and son of a *bitch*, there she is, over by the bar, talking to Dreue.

Gloria happened to stop by then, first time tonight.

"I'm so glad it's working out for you," she said. "Not to mention how attractive your date is."

"She is," Nadine said, standing there too. "Is that a serious relationship?"

Gloria had moved on, continuing her rounds, permanent smile plastered on her face. Pete said to Nadine, "Do you want to dance?"

She was good with it and he said, "Do you remember Mr. Peterson's class at Marina? Where you sat?" He and Nadine went back to junior high school.

"That's an extremely odd question," she said. "But yes I do."

"Someone brought it up recently, how Mr. Peterson configured his seating chart . . . How *did* he?"

"How would *I* know?"

"Well I'm going to take note of your answer, because I'm pretty sure that's the first question you *didn't* get right since 7th grade."

She smiled. "*You* didn't answer *my* earlier question," she said.

“I will in a second . . . one more observation first--not only do you *talk* more than you did, but you’re direct as well . . . No, I don’t think it’s a serious relationship. I might have answered you differently a few *minutes* ago.”

They looked over there and Emma and Dreue were leaning in pretty tight, engaged apparently in a fascinating discussion.

Nadine said, “Well how have you been otherwise? Do you stay in contact with people?”

“No, but I *should*, I realize. An occasion like this, it gives you perspective.”

“It does . . . There’s a quirky dynamic to it. My husband, for example, he wasn’t interested in attending.”

“*That* I can understand,” Pete said. “He’s the odd man out, it’s *your* deal.”

“Except he was in our class. Marty Heath.”

“*Sheesh*, I remember him . . . you went out with him back *then*?”

“No, we got together later . . . Speaking of which, didn’t you go with Leslie Stemphill?”

“Yeah?”

“I said hello to her. She seems good.”

The way Nadine said it, the good part might be a question mark. Pete had heard Leslie had some ups and downs.

“I *did* see her when we walked in,” he said. “But with my friend Emma and all, no need to pile on any awkwardness.”

“As you say, that might not be such a big issue now,” Nadine said.

“You know something? You’re a little devilish, aren’t you? You stick in the needle.”

“Only when appropriate.”

“I still like you.”

“I like you too,” she said. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Leslie was at a table that included, if he was recognizing people correctly, Pam Stallings, Susie Hennigan, Drake Andruss and Eddie Salz, plus their husbands, wives, partners, whatever.

Nadine had been right of course, her implication that Leslie'd be someone you'd at least want to bump into. So fine . . . he went over there.

"Well, what's up?" he said, to the collective unit.

Pete felt a few sets of eyes squinting up at him, *some* recognition but not exactly unbridled enthusiasm, though Susie did stand up and give him a hug, and Eddie responded with a *where you been dog*.

Leslie reacted more slowly, got up a little booze-unbalanced and hugged him as well, and introduced him to Adriano, and Pete pulled up a chair from another table.

"Well it's great to see you," he said.

"Good to see you too, Petie," she said. "I've tried to keep up with you through the grapevine. Though there have been gaps."

"Oh," Pete said.

"Do you still live in San Francisco?" Adriano said, very polite, and a lot younger than Leslie, he was noticing.

"Mostly I have, yes. It's tricky though. I wonder if you polled the room, how many of 'em still do."

"You almost have to inherit something," Leslie said. "And my parents--you remember the house--they sold it quite some time ago."

He *had* heard this, they sold it because they got a *scare*, not something you wanted to think about tonight.

"We're in Walnut Creek," she continued, "a bit pasteurized but it has its moments. Funny to think, my dad used to tell stories, that when he was a very young child, the family would come over from the city and they'd go swimming in the actual creek."

Pete felt like he'd heard that one before too, maybe from his own dad.

"Well," he said, "family outings are different today. The one living across from me, the Marina, they're out front packing for Tahoe, and I ask the mom where, and she says some new zip line they have up there."

"And that's a good one," Adriano said, "if it's the one *I* tried, near Heavenly. A little hairy in a couple spots too."

Pete took another glance over at Emma by the bar, and this time she wasn't there, and Dreue wasn't either.

Leslie said, "People are different at the 25th, have you noticed?"

"Different than in real life?" Pete said. "Or than the other reunions?"

"Both probably, but yes, the other ones."

"Well your earlier variety," he said, "there's more pressure to explain what you *do*."

"That's an interesting way to look at it," Adriano said.

"You're saying," Leslie said, "they're done judging you by now?"

"We're into that second stage I guess," Pete said.

"You mean, like *work*?" she said, a little louder than you wanted. "If we're talking boob jobs, I'm detecting plenty of *those* in this room."

Pete said, "Adriano, I'm sorry I haven't asked you, where'd *you* go to high school?"

Adriano said up in Portland.

"What happened to your gal friend?" Leslie said. "You two look like a nice couple."

Pete scanned the room again. He said, "Looks like it may be a no go."

"Which can happen," Adriano said.

"What are you gonna do," Pete said.

"Yeah, really," Leslie said.

The thing wound down at 11, the band finishing it off with 'I Swear', by All-4-One, which you figured was either the number 1 song of 1994 or close.

There were a few final announcements and the committee members went up front and led a rendition of the school hymn. Pete never learned the words but you weren't going to be a jerk and not at least stand there for it.

People were saying be sure to come by the 7th floor, and Pete went outside and got a little air. There was a small section off the parking lot that opened up to the edge of the bay, and planes were taking off and landing, real loud.

One thought was go back to Gloria's, since he still had the keys, and if Emma *did* turn up later she'd have the room to herself and there wouldn't be any strain.

The other thing though, he was curious how Steve might be making out in that poker game he'd been carrying on about. He'd only talked to the guy for a minute tonight, but Steve made sure to remind him.

So Pete gave it a half hour and went back inside, and the 7th floor really *was* where it was at, the doors wide open and music coming out of most of them, along with ice cracking and glasses clinking.

One of the rooms, the whole bed was flipped up on edge against the wall and a real poker table had replaced it, the green felt and everything. Steve's game.

Steve didn't look too good. He was slumped forward and he kept fingering his chips, and there weren't all that many of them.

Cleaning up so far looked to be a guy named Calhoun. Big guy, huge forearms. Wrestled. Kind of happy-go-lucky in high school, but applied himself later and became an ER doc.

Also Wayne Ho, big stack, quietly doing the job.

Pete wondered who at this table, if any, were the ones Steve was going to get *payback* on.

Steve noticed Pete and motioned for him to take a seat and join the fun, but it was a half-hearted gesture.

Pete put his hands up, like not just yet, and he watched a little longer and got out of there and went down to the bar, where the guy next to him, who he'd learn was a salesman from Cincinnati, went into a thing about why the college football playoff system was screwed up, and Pete listened to him ramble, and it was okay.

A Little Knowledge

The Sam person and his wife lived a couple miles from campus down a leafy little dead end lane at the base of Bidwell Park.

“Something like this for instance,” Pete said as they pulled up, “what do you think it would run me?”

Miranda said, “I’m not sure. We can ask *them*. I know Sam got in at the right time.”

“Before we say hello and all . . . you guys were going to town on each other at one point? Or it wasn’t like that.”

“Goodness, do you have to be so crude . . . It *was* essentially, what you just said. Yes.”

“Because I was going to wait,” Pete said, “let that part clarify itself on its own.”

“But you lack discipline,” she said.

“That’s for sure . . . That’s why I like to binge-watch stuff. I can jump ahead, eliminate the suspense, then go *back* and fill in the blanks, but only if I need to.”

“I *hate* jumping ahead,” she said, “it ruins the experience.”

Pete turned off the engine but they didn't get out yet.

He said, “Did you ever watch *The Affair*? Or *do* you? It’s still on.”

“No, sorry.”

“*That* show, you had a good premise. A guy on summer vacation with his family, out at Montauk, the end of Long Island . . . He hooks up with a married local gal who’s suffered an awful tragedy.”

“Okay I did read about that one. They’re both British right? The actors? Playing Americans?”

“Yeah but that’s not important. The affair part is semi-credible. You can understand their motivations, even though you don't approve . . . The *other* way

they hook you, there's a backstory where you don't know who it was that hit-and-ran someone, killed 'em off."

"It sounds interesting. Maybe I'll check it out."

"Nah don't bother. By about the fifth episode I stopped watching. It was like they thought the set-up wasn't *enough*, so they screwed around with it, had the simple wide-eyed local gal running drugs off fishing boats, making deliveries on her bicycle, la-di-da, and the whole town oblivious."

"Why do they *do* that? I know what you mean."

"So I took a look again just for kicks, now the whole gang lives in Brooklyn and it's a full blown Millennial soap opera. Same tropes as in your daytime ones."

"So . . . what are you saying?"

"I'm *saying*, all that *time* I saved."

"Hmm . . . which applies how?"

"Just jump me to the bottom line on you and Sam. Skip the *blanks*."

"I feel like you're ticked off . . . I heard what happened, your lady friend from your high school reunion, but I didn't think it was appropriate to bring up."

"The *other* point you made," Pete said, trying to keep it moving, "that *was* a logical one, don't rush things on that front."

"For heaven's sakes, you don't have to *apologize* . . . but what point was that?"

This gal processed statements funny, but whatever.

"The rental house business. You're right, too deep a dive, too quick. Forget that for now."

Which is what he was hoping--quietly address the *main* reason he was here without having to fake being here for some *other* reason.

But Miranda said, "Oh, don't be silly. I'm looking forward to it, exploring some properties. I mean you don't have to *buy* anything this trip, is all I was getting at."

So you were back to square one, and they got out and rang the bell.

The wife, Laurel, answered the door, and she seemed genuinely happy to see Miranda and she gave Pete a big hug as well, though unfortunately she weighed about 300 pounds.

Sam came around the corner out of the kitchen, a normal skinny guy, a chef's apron on, and something did smell pretty good, and he was equally effusive with the hellos.

Right away he said to Pete, "Hey, I really appreciate you bringing Mandy. It's just too few and far between, these days." Shaking Pete's hand, and the ordinary way fortunately, not trying to make a point by crunching your knuckles like some guys in this situation might.

Entirely none of his business, but Pete couldn't help wondering, was Laurel huge when they met and got married, or did that element surface later on.

At any rate, they sat in the living room, and Jeez, Pete was already being handed a cocktail, a Bloody Mary, and when he hesitated for a second Sam cheerfully reminded him it was a *food*, and that hopefully it would hold him for a couple hours until the *real* mccooy was ready.

It was small talk, energetic and pleasant enough . . . the kids, the pros and cons of the Bay Area versus Butte County, and what was wrong with the Raiders, which Pete kept out of but surprisingly all three had an opinion on.

Laurel and Sam butted heads, Laurel insisting you need to be patient which is why you gave the coach a 5-year contract and Sam countering *Babe are you nuts* and why.

This led to a discussion of head injuries, and the grim stuff popping up in the news.

Sam said he was going to have a real hard time if Hardy--that was their 9-year-old--wanted to play high school football.

"Is he big?" Pete said, curious, he couldn't help it, which side of the family the kid took after.

"He's average for his class, but that might come later," Sam said. "He's strong, likes to mix it up, wrestle you."

“Well, it’ll work itself out, these things do,” Pete said, knowing it might not, and Sam said hopefully you’re right and he got up and told Miranda to come take a look at what he’d done in the garden since last time.

They disappeared out the side door and Laurel said, “I’m sure you can tell, it’s pretty darn obvious, he still has a thing for her.”

Pete looked at her, not exactly what he expected her to be dropping on him, even if she *did* think that.

He hoped she was amused, nothing deeper, but her voice cracked when she said, “They talk to each other online too.”

And she went in the kitchen and fixed him another Bloody Mary, which he *really* didn’t want because the checking-out of someone in town was still on the agenda.

But you weren't going to be impolite, so he thanked her for the refill, and she sat back down and was quiet, and he felt like she was dangling in no-man’s land and he should offer *something*.

“My *general* opinion on the subject?” he said. “Good to give ‘em some rope. You’re not interfering with human nature.”

“Well you put it so eloquently,” she said. “And I know, intellectually, you are correct.”

Pete wanted to add something but couldn’t think of the right thing, and might easily inject the *wrong* thing.

Sam and Miranda stuck their heads in the side door, and Sam announced they were going for a short walk, and they’d be back.

When they were gone Laurel said, “There are other women too. I know it’s my fault.”

What Pete *wanted* to say--but he knew you never *could* because that was the *worst* thing for their psyche--was Dang It, go with some *soup* for a year . . . close the fridge at 5pm . . . *something*.

What he said was, “Fine, you’re overweight. But you’re an attractive woman.”

Which she could *be*. She had a classically beautiful face.

Other aspects of her too, were becoming more attractive than Miranda at this point.

“Thank you,” Laurel said. “I really needed to hear that . . . Even though I know you’re pulling my leg.”

Pete said, “I’ll hit you with one quick story, and then I gotta get going.”

“What do you mean get going? You’re not staying for dinner?”

“No, I’ll be back, thank you . . . This one I read in the *New Yorker*, not something I’d pay for but people leave them lying around, coffee places where I live.”

“This is true, or no?”

“Fiction. But it could be . . . What happens, a guy responds to an internet dating thing, connects with a woman, then travels all the way out to meet her, someplace like Missoula, Montana.”

“I can feel where you’re going with this I think.”

“She used a phony picture of herself, is the rub. He’s mad, but at least has the decency to finish the meal, pay the check, walk her to her car . . . Then he dumps her.”

“He did the right thing, then.”

“The way he sees it, since he wasted a trip out there, he might as well stick around a few days, explore the night life scene. He meets a woman he’s interested in, goes home with her, but *her* thing is she wants him to make repairs to her apartment, right then, since she found out he’s a plumber.”

“Gosh, what a bitch. He didn’t deserve that.”

“There’s a final scene though, they’re watching a local baseball game together. The guy and the *original* woman, who falsified the photo.”

“Wow . . . So they come full circle?”

“Sort of. You get the impression there may not be romance there, but at least they’re friends.”

The detail Pete skipped, which let’s face it Laurel probably figured out, was the fictitious woman was 300 pounds too.

“I like that story,” she said.

“But let me ask you this,” Pete said. “When someone takes a *little walk down the street* around here, where do they go?”

“See? You’re jumpy too.”

“I mean . . . they couldn’t be *doing* something, could they? . . . Somehow? That’d be *too far-fetched* . . . right?”

“They could,” she said.

“Well,” he said, “this has been . . . I’m not sure the best word is *different*, but we can leave it at that.”

“But you need to *go*, you’re saying . . . Can I drop you someplace? I have to pick up the kids anyway. No problem at all to swing back and get you later.”

Pete said he appreciated her hospitality, that it was borderline embarrassing considering they’d just met--but he should be fine.

When he got back, there was more action in the house than just Sam, Laurel and Miranda, and salsa music was playing, not the modern hybrid stuff but the authentic Tito Puente sound.

Sam seemed happy to see Pete again, and he shut the volume and introduced him to Shelly and Lee, who lived down the block. Shelly explained there was a babysitter involved tonight, her kids and Sam and Laurel’s lumped together, so reduced stress all around.

Everyone had eaten, things were casual, not all the plates had been cleaned up, and no one seemed bothered that Pete showed up late, though Miranda told him privately when they were out in the side yard where Sam had shown her the gardening progress earlier, that she took care of it.

“Well that was nice of you,” Pete said. “I was afraid I was the bad guy, there. What’d you say?”

“The truth. You’re looking around at real estate and you lose track of time because you’re not very responsible.”

“Ah. Concluding with a *So let’s eat*, then.”

“You’re amusing. Sort of.”

“And you’re . . . interesting as well. It doesn’t matter to *me*--at least maybe--but are you *still* banging Sam?”

Without missing a beat, Miranda said, “He wanted to today. But we didn’t.”

The good part here, Pete supposed, at least this confirmed that Laurel wasn’t a whack-job.

There was commotion in the kitchen, and then it was over, and you heard a door close and Pete and Miranda stayed where they were, until Lee poked his head out in the yard and said that Laurel had hit Sam in the head with a pan.

Miranda rushed back inside and Pete thought *maybe not*, actually, on the Laurel deal, his conclusion there.

At any rate, he figured there was nothing he could help out with, he’d just be in the way, so he found a patio chair, and then you heard voices outside and a car start up, and then another, and it seemed quiet in the house so he went back in.

There was a college basketball game on TV, they were playing in Maui, and they kept showing you shots of palm trees swaying and people surfing and bikini-ing and stand-up paddleboarding . . . and Chris thought now *would* be a nice time to simply get in the car and go back to Manhattan Beach. Except of course you'd brought Miranda.

There was some rustling outside and people were coming back. Sam walked in and said, “Pete I’m sorry about that. Did you find everything you need?”

He had a prominent white bandage high on his forehead, with tape around the sides and draping down behind his ears.

Pete said, “Don’t even think about it. Y’all *right* though?”

“Oh absolutely,” Sam said, waving his hand, not all that convincingly, and he lowered his voice a notch. “Every two, three years--sometimes more often--there’s a little blow up . . . *Sounds* a lot worse than it is.”

“Part of the routine, then,” Pete said.

“You *got* it. Listen, can I fix you another drink?”

Pete said fine, and Sam disappeared into the kitchen and so far that was it, no one else back in the picture yet.

Sam handing him the beverage and they clinked glasses and Sam said, "They're on their way. Then hopefully we'll be all *set*, starting it up where we left off."

Pete said, "You and Miranda schtupp each other today?"

Sam was in the middle of a big gulp of alcohol, and his eyes got bigger and he cleared his throat and said, "Now something like *that*, with all due respect . . . you *couldn't* be more off-target."

Pete didn't say anything, and Sam said, "Not sure I asked you before, but did you actually *eat*? I know you had errands to run, did anyone take care of you when you got here?"

"You're a good host," Pete said. "What about the emergency room though, they didn't ask questions, who might have assaulted whom?"

"Ah . . . Well you *are* correct there, I'm afraid, no point getting into the system, even on the periphery."

"Databases and such," Pete said.

"Exactly."

"In case it might happen again, or some variation. And on top it, you might have a *he-said she-said* thing going." Pushing him a little.

"Yes. So, being prudent . . . we went the alternate route. Shelly knows someone, an athletic trainer at the university."

"Huh . . . so they took care of it then." Pete was thinking that wasn't a bad idea, actually. "You needed a couple stitches?"

"Oh Gosh yes, it took 12, I'm told, to close it up."

"Whoa. She hit you with . . . like a *frying* pan?"

"Yep, you got it. *Small* one, 4-incher. But heavy. Cast iron."

Pete took a moment. "Don't screw around on her anymore. She doesn't deserve it."

"Pete . . . for Heaven's sakes . . . if you're still dwelling on Miranda, I can assure you, you're barking up entirely the wrong tree . . . Laurel and I, we've

been at odds for some time, it ebbs and flows, it's complicated. We're in counseling."

"Fine. So ebb and flow your way into keeping your hands off other people."

"Pete, you're not hearing me."

"Your *thoughts* too, I forgot to add. Keep *those* off other people too."

Sam studied him for a second and picked up both drinks and went back in the kitchen, Pete figuring either he's getting rid of me, the most likely, or bringing me a refill, which he gave 10 percent odds . . . but you could hear the microwave going and the fridge opening and Sam came back with fresh drinks and a plate of bite-sized triangular things that you'd see at those sample stands in Costco.

"Let's back it up, if we might," Sam said, but right about then the others came trudging in.

Laurel . . . and then the neighbors again, Lee and Shelly, the three of them laughing about something, and then Miranda bringing up the rear, carrying a bag and pulling out a couple half gallons of ice cream.

Pete wondered Jeez, what about the kids, wasn't it past their bedtime, and a school night too, but Shelly said because of this *event* that happened they were all four sleeping at *their* house tonight, and the babysitter was gone but her older daughter had it under control.

And the music came back on, though more mellow this time, piano jazz, and they were combining after-dinner beverages with ice cream, and Pete thought he caught one or two subtle looks between Sam and *Shelly*, indicating *they* maybe had something going, past or present, as well.

Though admittedly . . . he could have been projecting the histories and who had an ax to grind, and maybe nobody was screwing *anybody* and Sam and Laurel *did* have a separate beef, and for a second she saw red and lost it.

Someone brought out a deck of cards and they gravitated to the dining room table, and something on the news swung the conversation to gun control, Sam throwing in that a state like Utah, *loose* with the regulations, has very few murders.

“That’s the same argument you hear about pit bulls, Lee said. “It’s the *owners* not the dogs.”

“In Utah,” Shelly said, “more people get killed from guns than car crashes. You need to inform yourself.”

“I know a Mormon couple,” Miranda said. “Slightly off-topic, but *their* thing was they swung.”

“*Wow*,” Shelly said, “you mean . . . they traded partners, is that part of it?”

“That’s *all* of it,” Sam said, “I can see it, they’re repressed, and eventually can’t take it and they react the *other* way.”

“Well how does it work though?” Shelly said.

“The way I understood it,” Miranda said, “on the weekends they went to Las Vegas, and there was an organization they were part of.”

“Yeah right,” Lee said, “more like a glorified whore house sounds more accurate.”

“But what would the *justification* be?” Shelly said. “I mean wouldn’t that ruin their marriage, effectively?”

Lee was laughing. “I was going to comment on the justification requirement, but I won’t . . . Bad taste.”

“To the contrary,” Sam said, “something like that, it may serve to *strengthen* their marriage. Who knows?”

Miranda said, “Yes, that was my impression, *these* folks, that they saw it as a positive.”

“What happened to them?” Sam said.

“They left the church two years ago, and moved out here, the Bay Area. It’s been a bit of rollercoaster, as most of their old friends disowned them.”

“Not the Vegas ones though,” Lee said.

“Well are they attractive?” Shelly said. “Do they still participate?”

“Okay I’m joking around,” Lee said, “but I think that’s about enough, we should change the subject.”

“Or not,” Sam said, “this is all pretty interesting . . . the precarious nature of the human condition.”

Meanwhile Laurel, over on the couch next to Pete, said to him, “Can you believe this *bullshit*?”

Pete tried to open an eye and said he heard some of it but wasn’t paying too much attention.

Laurel said, “You poor thing, I’m forgetting what a long day it’s been for you. Come on, I’m going to set you up.”

He followed her into a small room off the garage, that was packed with all manner of crafty stuff.

“It’s my workroom,” Laurel explained. “But right in the middle, just give me a moment, I’ll clear some things, and we’re going to put a Japanese futon down, and I have a comfy quilt for you, and you’ll see, it’ll work really nicely.”

She left to get the supplies and Pete checked his messages, nothing there, fine of course that there was nothing *bad*, but also confirming he really didn’t have a whole lot going these days.

Laurel returned with her arms full and organized everything and she was right, it didn’t matter the pad was on the floor, it was thick and plush and plenty wide, and she told him to get down there and try it and see what he thinks.

So he did, slipping off his shoes, and she reached down to cover him up with the comfy quilt, and Pete looked up and saw coming toward him one of the more monstrous units of cleavage a typical human would encounter.

Laurel had either changed to something a lot looser, or taken something off period . . . and Pete was thinking this wasn’t how he expected the day to play out, her continuing to dangle above him, asking how it was, and what else could get she him.

Pete eased sideways, not wanting to blatantly embarrass her that he was trying to escape, but still . . . and there was a kiss on the cheek and she lifted up and said don’t be polite, if there’s anything later.

It was loud out there, not clear if they were playing cards anymore but they sure were carrying on, and Laurel's voice was in the mix as well, and they’d roar with laughter and then it would tone down but you didn't know when another one might erupt.

Pete sat up on an elbow and tried Facebook.

That window across the room had potential. He'd gone through this already, why you *couldn't* just take off--but what the hay.

Micro

Pete said to the guy next to him, “The difference, in your opinion? Between her and the ones in the record stores?”

“First of all, my friend,” the guy said. “There *are* no more record stores.”

“That’s a point well taken,” Pete said, “so forget that. I guess I just mean *talent-wise*.”

“I’d give her a B-plus,” the guy said. “Great range though, I’m hearing two octaves.”

The guy finished his beer and picked up his plastic cup of quarters and headed back to the slot machines.

Pete could tell the man did know a little something about music, from a couple of comments he made . . . but then how could you only give her a B-plus if her range is so impressive?

The band performed two more and took a break. The four of them coming down from the little stage into the bar area . . . a guitar player, keys guy, drummer and the female vocalist. And of course these days the keyboard person could synthesize the heck out of nearly any sound they were trying to emulate, from a bluegrass banjo on down to a line of tubas in a marching band, to a dang full orchestra.

They were called *Luella and the Capris* on the electronic sign at the entrance to the lounge, though you had to be quick to read it because there was other stuff rotated in . . . Texas Hold-em seats open, progressive slots jackpot updates, the blackjack tournament taking final entries, the all-you-can-eat king crab legs tonight in the buffet.

Luella was at a table with the drummer, both of them roaming around their phones.

Pete thought should he or shouldn’t he a couple times, and went over there and sat down.

The drummer didn't pay attention, his thumbs continuing to work the phone, and Luella finished up her business too before she looked up and said, "Well, *that's* direct . . . we don't mind, as long as you're a fan." Following it with a nice-enough smile.

"You're really Luella?" Pete said.

"No, Terri," she said, deadpan. "Why?"

Pete said, "So once people get past that voice . . . you have some spunk as well."

Terri said, "That's what my husband said when we met. Not in those exact words."

Oh boy, the husband card right away.

"He one of the band guys then?" Pete said.

"My hubby? No, no. That would never work."

"Either way, I didn't mean to be cozying up to you, if you got the wrong impression . . . you've been kind of blowing me away up there though. Echoing a *few* great voices. Karen Carpenter, the main one."

Terri gave Pete her full attention for the first time and said, "Well now I'm impressed . . . Not everyone comes up to me and picks that out. She's an idol of mine."

"She had that calm, clear voice," Pete said. "Straight and pure and angelic. The exact opposite of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, who never sang a straight note."

"Wow," Terri said, "you are so right . . . So I might as well ask, what *other* great voices did I remind you of."

"Two others. Harder to pinpoint, just bits and pieces jumping out, but I was thinking Patsy Cline, and Linda Ronstadt."

"Well I'll take both of those," Terri said. "The problem now, are you going to stick around for the third set?"

"Why? I shouldn't?"

"No, it's just that you've raised the bar on me. The pressure's on."

Pete appreciated the humor, and she seemed like a good-natured person, but what did you really know.

Pete said, “A couple things I always wonder, when I hear a terrific lounge act like yours. The first thing, dumb question, but you can’t all *live* here, right?”

“No, Reno.”

“You’re kidding. That’s like, 4 hours.”

“They put us up for the gig. We do three-night minimums. We’re headed to Wendover next. Then Tonopah. What was the other question?”

“What the difference is . . . you, and the big stars.”

“You mean you can’t tell?”

“No.”

“That’s very nice of you . . . The answer is, the backstory, for one.”

Pete asked what that meant and she said they had to tune up but stick around and she might get into it.

He decided he didn’t have any other pressing engagements tonight, so why not?

What he was doing here unfortunately, in Bingham, Nevada, three-quarters of the way across the state, was hiding out.

Though he liked to think of it as keeping a low profile--temporarily--which was less dramatic.

Pete was residing currently at the Quality Inn next door to the casino. He’d started off at the Super 8, but rational or not, he felt more exposed out there on 227, so day before yesterday he switched it up.

From the Quality Inn you hopped out your door, crossed the parking lot about eight steps and right into the The Palermo, through the side entrance where they spun the big wheel of fortune, which they called the Wizard Of Odds.

You kept going and you were in good hands, he had to admit.

Five restaurants, a 24-hour Starbucks, an observation area on the mezzanine level where you could sit under a massive glass dome and look out at the wide open spaces and mountains in the distance.

The lounge every evening, kicking off the live music at 4, with a couple late shows after that, one of which was Terri's Luella and the Capris act.

You had cocktail waitresses scurrying around at all hours in what Pete figured were supposed to be lacey Roman tunics, though there wasn't a whole lot to them, political correctness not a factor inside the casino.

In keeping with the theme of the place, there were fountains and a hanging garden and a fake Roman column you could bump into about every two feet, everything oversized. You even had a bowling alley and an indoor mini-golf setup and a mechanical bull, if you were a fan of that stuff.

But essentially, you could spend all day in here, and all night too if you wanted or couldn't sleep. You could eat and drink almost for free, between the bargain buffet and the complimentary appetizers they came around with in the lounge, which were pretty darn tasty, and honestly, the place was worth it for the people-watching alone.

Pete had always liked casinos, and The Palermo had a different feel than most of the Reno and Vegas ones, a little cozier, despite it being pretty huge and going all out with the glitzy Roman element.

Of course the one thing Pete *wasn't* interested in was gambling, which every last detail in the place was engineered to have you *do*, but that didn't matter, you could enjoy all the perks without participating and nobody ever bothered you.

It had been kind of snap decision there, back in Manhattan Beach, that disappearing for a while might not be the worst idea.

It was the middle of the night and there weren't a lot of options, and at the depot on 7th Street in downtown L.A. he bought a one-way ticket to Chicago.

And actually, the Greyhound experience wasn't as terrible as Pete anticipated, mainly because the snow was so beautiful in the Sierras.

One of the passengers said they'd had a fresh two feet, and you could see snowplows all over the side roads.

Pete had no idea what he'd do in Chicago, but then someone got sick halfway across Nevada and the bus pulled onto the shoulder and people started helping a woman.

The gal rallied apparently, and the bus started up again but later you heard the driver on the CB radio, a medical emergency, and when they pulled into Bingham there was an ambulance waiting and an announcement that everyone could get off for a few minutes.

Pete walked around, maybe a three-block radius, and when he got back the bus was gone.

He considered talking to someone at the counter, but the town seemed okay and he let it go and stuck around.

That was two weeks ago . . . and here you were, in the main lounge of *The Palermo*, the third and final set winding down from *Luella and the Capris*.

And yeah, you really could pick out the Karen Carpenter in Terri's voice.

They finished it off with a country song Pete didn't recognize but the audience did, and they gave them a nice ovation by casino lounge standards, and a few minutes later Terri was back in the bar area, same table, same guy with her, the drummer, both fooling with their devices. Terri had changed into jeans and a sweatshirt.

She saw Pete coming and held up her hand like *just give me a second* and wrapped up whatever electronic business was so urgent, and said, "You sat through it. My impression was you wouldn't be. So did I maintain my standard?"

"Honestly?" Pete said. "I kept waiting for you to drop *down* a notch, but you never did."

"Well it's a gig," she said, giving it a playful shrug . . . which Pete interpreted as no, it wasn't New York City or even the Vegas strip, but one does one's best.

"Why'd you think I wouldn't stick it out though?" he said.

"Because no one stays put for the whole show. Unless they're real drunk and can't move."

“That’s a fair point I guess, given the distractions in here . . . what about that backstory though?”

“What *about* it?”

“Well, I was asking you a question . . . and now I realize it was a little sensitive, so that’s my fault.”

“No, I’m fooling with you,” she said. “There’s breaks in this business . . . and there’s luck, there’s timing, there’s who you sleep with.” Pete thinking Jeez, this may be a little *too* much information now.

“In my particular case,” Terri continued, “I did have a recording deal once. Capitol Records, the old round tower building you still see from the freeway passing through Hollywood . . . Re-hab got in the way.”

Pete wasn’t surprised to hear any of it, including the last part.

“Well the good thing about that, then,” he said, “and this’ll come *out* wrong . . . but it justifies my judgment. I mean I must have a pretty dang good ear after all.”

Terri shook her head and said, “You’re starting to emerge as a little irritating. What’s *your* backstory?”

Pete wasn’t quite ready for this, and realized he should have had a standard answer prepared . . . but honestly in the couple weeks he’d been holed up here no one asked him that.

There was plenty of *how’s your day going?* and *having any luck at the tables?* type of stuff, but no one diving deeper. Which was kind of refreshing.

He said, “I don’t *have* any good backstory. I’m trying to re-invent myself.”

“From what?”

“Well first thing,” Pete said, making it up on the fly, “from living in New Jersey.”

“What *part?*” the drummer-guy said, the first time he’d opened his mouth, Pete assuming he hadn’t been listening.

“Teaneck . . . are you from back there too?”

“Down the shore, yeah,” the guy said. “Not *from* there, but spent a lot of years . . . You remember when AC first opened?”

He was referring to Atlantic City of course, which Pete had only been to once, no idea when it opened but he nodded yeah.

“Those days,” the guy said, “the music business, you had the Philly, New York, AC triangle . . . All dried up now.”

“You wouldn’t know it by looking at him,” Terri said, “but Carl played with some big names. Michael Jackson, for one.”

“Ho-ly Toledo,” Pete said.

“Not *with* him,” Carl said. “Everything was overdubbed. I never met the man.”

“That was *Bad* though, right? The album?” Terri said.

Carl shook his head. “After that. *Dangerous*. Two tracks. That’s when drum machines were taking over, but they wanted studio guys in addition.”

Pete said, “Jeez, I’m in rarified company, I’m not kidding.”

“What’d you do in Teaneck?” Terri said.

“Okay that’s enough about me,” Pete said.

“I get where he’s coming from,” Carl said, “Jersey’s not that exciting.”

“So are you passing through then, live here, what?” Terri said.

“I’m running,” Pete said.

“Now that’s a pretty unsatisfying answer,” Terri said. “Not much depth to it at all.”

“It’s a *good* answer,” Carl said. “Let’s play some cards.”

So Pete followed them to the tables, and Terri and Carl weren’t good gamblers, and pretty soon they were both buying more chips, never a good sign.

He thought about saying something to them, like how about we get a cup of coffee and let me make a couple suggestions . . . but he didn’t, he said goodnight and cashed in the 20 dollars of chips he’d been pushing around and went across the parking lot to his room at the Quality Inn.

Differential

The guy disappeared for a minute and when he came back he was carrying a fireplace log, and Pete's first reaction was, so they *do* allow fireplaces in new construction?

Or, was the guy holding some sort of *pellet*-stove job, something that fit the energy-efficient criteria and that was okay.

But no . . . it looked pretty organic and had old-fashioned bark and some yellow fibrous stuff clinging to it, and Pete was trying to figure out exactly what *was* going on when the guy reared back and hit him in the head with the log.

Later on he remembered falling backward, and then that was about it.

He didn't remember the neighbors starting to gather, the ambulance arriving or the squad car pulling up as they were loading him in.

He remembered waking up when the ambulance was nearing the side entrance to the hospital, because there was a speed bump you had to go over . . . and why the heck would they have one of those?

Either way, they got his attention, but it was strange, he was acutely aware of *not* being real alive.

At least those were the tricks his mind was playing on him.

They wheeled him in, there were some people in scrubs waiting, they transferred him to a table, which hurt like hell, and they cut off his shirt and started checking him out.

Even not feeling real good Pete wondered, Gee, you can't take a little longer and *unbutton* the thing and not wreck it?

Then they went to work on the side of his forehead, there was bleeding that hadn't stopped, and they wheeled him away for a CAT scan and brought him back and stitched him up.

The whole time, in his mind, he was going in and out of where he was. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to die at least. The ER doc and the nurses had

given him the impression he *might* at first. They were in a scramble, move-quick mode, with the doctor calling out stuff to the others.

Now Pete was in a side cubicle off the main ER, and he figured this was a temporary intensive care type deal, since you were right there where they could watch you, no door and even the side wall had a big glass window.

After a half hour in that little room he felt things stabilizing in his brain . . . to an extent.

He could remember back to being a kid, and he could mostly remember moving to Manhattan Beach, but his short term memory was erratic, which scared the hell out of him.

For instance he remembered debating ringing that guy's doorbell, but nothing after that until he woke up bouncing over the speed bump.

The worst break in the chain--he had no idea, until he asked a nurse, where he was currently. What town, region, part of the *country* . . . and he couldn't remember where he'd come here *from*.

Eventually the doctor came in. "Mr. Holmes, I didn't have a chance to introduce myself earlier, but I'm Dr. Wolfe," the guy said. "Our evaluation, besides the laceration, is you've sustained a class 4 concussion."

"Oh," Pete said. The Holmes part wasn't quite making sense, but he put it together . . . that they asked him his name at some point and he must have given them his old friend Ray's.

"So," the doctor was saying, "considering the possible lingering severity of the head injury, and in light of the fact that it resulted from an apparent assault, we're going to admit you overnight."

"Okay hold on there," Pete said. "If I could get a couple things straight . . . Did I speak to the police?"

"You might have, at the scene. We have no information on that."

"How about here?"

"Generally, an incident like this, an officer will take a statement from you within the hour."

"*What* hour?"

The doctor said, "You'll be here for a while, so no worries. May I ask why you're so concerned?"

"Well," Pete said. "I can't remember what happened *anyway*, I'm mostly going by what you told me . . . so what would I be able to *add* for the police?"

"I wouldn't stress over that, Mr. Holmes," the doctor said. "it's routine."

"Ah . . . let me ask you this, then. What's my first name?"

The doctor didn't react funny. He dealt with this stuff, no doubt. "Ken," he said.

Pete said, "Okay good then . . . At least my noggin, it's got that part right."

"Indeed," the doc said. "And again, rest is the optimum remedy, so please don't concern yourself with anything beyond that scope."

"You admit me . . . that mean a *room* and everything?"

"Yes. You'll be right upstairs. The neurologist will be by tomorrow, and you'll be re-evaluated."

Pete said, "Well thank you. Would you have another shirt or something?"

"We really don't, I'm sorry. But you can talk to our in-patient services coordinator when it is deemed appropriate to facilitate your release."

Pete said, "You guys always talk like that?"

The doc at least had a sense of humor. "Depends on the med school. Some more formal than others."

"Where'd *you* go?"

"I went to Vanderbilt."

"Where is that--Nashville?"

"You got it."

"Let me ask you this then . . . how is it living down there?"

The doctor said, "I can see you're a spirited individual. My answer would be complicated, and would take more time than we have right now."

"I'm looking to reinvent myself," Pete said. "What happens though, I gotta keep *re-reinventing* from the last effort . . . if that makes sense."

"Not at all," the doctor said. "We'll check on you in an hour though."

"Sounds good," Pete said, and he tried his best to size things up.

First of all, it was interesting--and a good idea--that he apparently combined two of his favorite people's names, Ray's and Ken's . . . as opposed to laying a Pete McGirk on them.

Since the smart move at this point was leave yourself out of it.

Even though here you were on the theoretically innocent *receiving* end . . . why up the radar quotient?

Pete's mind was starting to un-fog itself a bit more. Could they have checked his ID in the ambulance? Taken his wallet out of his pants pocket, looked inside, and put it back?

He decided that was unlikely because this doc kept calling him Mr. Holmes. Maybe there was some civil rights deal where they *couldn't* pull your ID without your permission . . . though probably not . . . and that'd be another discussion.

Bottom line . . . the thing now, would be to get *the fuck* out of here . . . if only he felt a little more up for it.

They left him in the cubicle for what seemed like forever, and the doc was good for his word, he did check back every hour, but a couple things Pete was worried about happened.

First, a petite gal with a Texas accent shows up with a clipboard and a folder full of forms she's going to fill out in Pete's presence. Pete gave her his name, Ken Holmes, and she began the process by writing that on the first line of the first form. Then Pete said, "Beyond that I can't give you anything, but I'm pretty sure I'll have it all straight by tomorrow, can you come back then?"

"That's not ideal," the woman said, "but we at least need your insurance carrier tonight."

Pete told her to come back in 90 minutes in that case, that he was doing the brain exercises the doctor gave him and should be clearer on everything by then.

It was pretty obvious the lady knew when he was full of baloney, but she picked up the paperwork and left.

A few minutes later a policeman comes in. An older guy, uniform, no hat, not looking in a good mood, like he'd just completed his shift and was getting ready to go home and then this pops up.

"Sorry for your situation," the officer said, no formalities, getting right to it.

"Well I appreciate you coming by," Pete lied.

"Now we have a Robert Jordan," the cop said, flipping open a notepad, "involved in a confrontation with you. Not much to go on past that, other than what a resident said they saw."

"What'd they see?" Pete said.

"How bout you tell *me*."

"If I had it clear upstairs in my frontal lobe I would," Pete said. "I believe I was looking for an address . . . and I might of rang the wrong bell. What'd that guy hit me with anyway?"

"So *that* you do remember," the cop said. "A piece of wood."

"Either way . . . let's just wrap it up, how about . . . I'm not interested in pursuing anything. So can we do that?"

"No," the cop said. "There was an alleged assault. I'm required to make a report. Otherwise, I got better places to be wiping my ass." Though Pete was pretty sure the guy didn't *have* to make *any* report if he wasn't pressing charges, but the guy had his attitude.

"But see?" Pete said. "That's what I was just *thinking* when you walked in, this guy's *already* pissed off, he's had enough for one day."

"Well you're a genius then . . . You got some ID on you there pal?"

Pete said, "Nah, not *on* me, no."

The guy stopped with the pad and gave Pete his full attention. He said, "You some kind of prick now? I ain't got time for this."

And of course in the old days of police work a guy with this kind of chip on his shoulder would make sure no one was looking, and close a curtain if they had one, and stand Pete up and spin him around and pull out his wallet.

Pete was thinking overall, the big picture, that was probably the best way to conduct police work. A little force, when someone who should have been cooperating wasn't. Yeah, there'd be mistakes made and some people jerked around unfairly . . . but you'd avoid a lot of legal red tape and solve more crimes.

But right now his concern was how not to cooperate.

He said, "Welp, I feel bad you had to make the trip out here. I'm fine though . . . no harm, no foul. Does that make sense?"

"No," the cop said, putting his notebook away. "I'm rolling it over to my lieutenant. His name's Selby. He'll be in touch. You'll find out, he's not as patient a man as I am."

They never bothered taking his trousers off when they treated him and when the cop left he checked his pockets, which he should have before now but wasn't thinking great.

Back to back inside his wallet were two drivers' licenses. Peter H. McGirk on one, and *Jeffrey Masters* the other--and dang, some guy really did do a job--not remembering who that guy *was*, who obviously faked the second ID for him--but you couldn't tell them apart.

In his other pocket was a bus ticket, Reno to Spokane, Washington.

Ooh boy. Now what would *that* be all about?

Meanwhile the wall clock in his cubicle sure wasn't wasn't very hi tech, and it was pissing him off because you could heard a click when the hands moved.

Finally the doctor showed up again and with a nurse this time, and they took his blood pressure and vital signs . . . and something else occurred to Pete.

"Doc, let me ask you this," he said, after they'd made notes on his chart, and of course a handheld device was in play now too, the nurse typing God knows what into *that*, and she finished and left the room.

"Certainly," the doctor said.

"Okay, well . . . how am I overall? I mean pretty good *shape* and everything?"

"Excuse me?"

“No, I mean ignoring my head thingamajig . . . if I walked in here cold and you examined me . . . what would you have?”

“That’s a strange concern right now, I must admit,” the doctor said. “But your basics seem fine. Especially for a patient who’s endured a significant trauma.”

“Okay fine, but what do we have *beyond* the basics?”

“Mr. Holmes, I’m afraid you’ll need to be more specific.”

“Okay here’s the deal . . . A lab in San Francisco death-sentenced me, let’s see what it was . . .” and Pete started counting it off on his fingers, “Jeez, going on 10 months ago now. At any rate, it was supposedly a stage-4 deal, and grim.”

“I see,” the doc said. “And you’ve been undergoing treatment?”

“Nah. They couldn’t come up with one victim like me, who they cured with the treatment they wanted to hammer me with . . . So I said screw that bullshit . . . Sorry about my language.”

“Uh-huh,” the doctor said. “Well naturally we’d need more information.”

“You think I’m full of crap, don’t you?”

The doctor didn’t say anything.

Pete said, “My doc back then, he’s a friend of mine I grew up with. He had a voluptuous receptionist I was pretty sure he was banging on the side, and that strained our old relationship. Once he conveyed my news, I never went back.”

Pete knew he was talking kind of funny, shooting from the hip, figuring they probably shot him up with multiple meds when he was groggy or even before he woke up. But it was good to at least get some positive feedback from this guy.

Whether he believed him or not the doctor politely said, “What you point to is why we recommend against engaging practitioners who you have an outside relationship with.”

“Fine,” Pete said, “ignoring that--do I look to you like a guy *on the way out?*”

“Head injuries are tricky,” the doctor said, “I’m going to level with you on that. We’re just scratching the surface, I’m afraid, of understanding the long term residuals. At the moment, you appear stable and relatively coherent.”

“*Forget* the head business,” Pete said, “could someone have fouled up my sample? Looked into the wrong microscope? Got distracted by a text message when they’re entering my name into a data bank . . . and mixed me up with someone else?”

“It *can* happen, I suppose,” the doctor said. “We’re all human. If you’re concerned--and you really *are not* concocting this--your test sequence can be easily repeated.”

“Yeah . . . so I’ve heard,” Pete said, and he said thanks and the guy left.

So, putting it all together . . . he’d had a rudimentary physical tonight, and nothing jumped out that moved the needle haywire.

Which you’d have to call not a *win*, maybe, but at least a positive. Just too bad it required getting hit over the head to obtain that information . . . but it was what it was.

Pete was rolling it around again, could you simply get up--a little wobbly admittedly--and walk out of here . . . but before he could commit himself to the concept two orderlies appeared with a new doctor, and the doc said they were *officially* admitting him now and moving him to the third floor, and to take it easy.

Everyone kept telling him to rest, like a broken record . . . but wasn’t there something he’d heard, when you have a concussion you try to stay *awake*? Whatever.

There were two beds, the other one empty, and a nurse or assistant nurse came in--that was another thing, you couldn’t tell what anyone *was* in this place. The orderlies were wearing the same scrubs as the doctors, but maybe that was the idea, keep you confused so you give up and don’t act difficult.

The nurse or assistant was cute, bubbly personality, big mop of blonde hair piled up high on her head.

As she was straightening out his pillows and showing him how to adjust the bed and work the TV changer Pete said, "I'm gonna say something, and you tell me if I'm wrong . . . your name is Kay, and you have rosy cheeks."

Kay smiled and said, "That's very perceptive of you Mr. Holmes. You read my name tag well."

"How'd I figure out the cheeks?"

"That would be a mystery," she said.

"Because my cognitive abilities, they're supposed to be impaired. But this just shows, I'm fine."

Kay kept going about her business and said, "Well you seem like a person who wouldn't get into a fight. What *happened* to you?"

Pete said, "Are you asking me from a medical standpoint? Or just from the couch, unofficially, like someone watching Dr. Phil?"

"The second one," Kay said.

"So . . . let me out of here, and I'll buy you dinner and tell you."

"Very funny."

Pete said, "What you're saying is . . . that might make *sense*, except it's breakfast time at the moment . . . The answer to your question, I don't *know* what happened."

"See then? That's why we need to keep an eye on you." She wiggled her finger, pretend-scolding him.

"How about *this* then?" Pete said. "We go out the back door, down the emergency stairwell, we get in your car and you drive me to California . . . What would you charge me to do that?"

Kay said, "You're a nut."

"You just tell 'em you had a little situation, and you needed a few days off, spur of the moment . . . How about two thousand dollars?"

"Yeah, right," she said.

"Make it three. Take you about 18 hours total, there and back."

"I must say," Kay said, "this discussion, it would be considered an *atypical* interaction with a patient."

“I know what you mean,” Pete said. “Four.”

“This is outrageous,” Kay said. “And I can’t believe you’re half serious.”

You could tell now, whether she was *sure* he was serious or not, the wheels were at least turning, and on some level she was addressing the possibility.

“What kind of car do you have?” Pete said.

“None of your business,” Kay said, and Pete enjoyed this defiant side surfacing.

He said, “Because I might up my price, depending how comfortable the ride would be.”

“You’re *very* strange.”

“You know how they conduct auctions?” he said. “Though not as much that way any *more*, they’re pasteurizing the spirit out of them now . . . I went to a real estate auction, condos that didn’t sell and got repossessed?”

“And your point?” Kay said.

“The auctioneer, he didn’t put on any act. That used to be the best *part*. The: *Do I hear TWO, diddy-diddy* . . . a good auction presentation is an art form, like a top-notch horse race announcer when they’re thundering down the stretch.”

“Hmm,” Kay said.

“What I’m getting to,” Pete said, “at the end, the *going once, going twice* . . . *Sold*.”

“They’ve gotten rid of that part too?”

“No, that’s still there. So here’s your chance . . . *Five* thousand . . . Going once . . . going twice . . . *oh*, sorry, time’s up.”

“I can’t think it over at least?” Kay said.

“No. You gotta act quick, when an opportunity presents itself . . . Keep that in mind in the future, from an old guy who’s lived a little bit. I’m not joking.”

“You don’t look that old.”

“I turned 42.”

“Yeah, well, that’s about right.”

“Jeez, you’re supposed to phrase that a little different . . . I’ll spot you though, just tell me how to get out of here, where I’d be causing the least disruption.”

Kay looked at Pete and waited for more, and Pete kept his mouth shut and waited too.

She said, “You’re serious, aren’t you? Something tells me you *were* serious before too.”

“Indeed. That part, you blew.”

“Mr. Holmes . . . let me ask you this . . .”

“Call me Ken.”

“Ken, is it you’re worried, someone . . . might be looking for you?”

Pete hadn’t thought of that angle, but that was good. He said, “That’s the way it works, yeah. Unfinished business.”

“Well Gosh,” she said, starting to actually *look* concerned now, “are you sure?”

“No I’m not,” he said. “But I have a bad feeling . . . This IV, can you pull it out, for starters?”

Kay took a moment and said, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that.”

“Okay thanks anyway, you’re a good sport,” Pete said, and Kay was near the door, and he said, “You happen to have an extra set of scrubs or something?”

And Kay said she didn’t . . . but as she was leaving the room she added over her shoulder that they kept them in the closet past the water fountain . . . and to be sure and get some rest, and she’d check on him in an hour.

A few minutes later Pete was down the hall and into the nearest stairwell, and he’d gotten the dang IV out of his forearm no problem, he’d been overthinking it, and he had the scrubs on, which were at least an improvement over the hospital gown they’d forced on him . . . no idea where his trousers went but luckily he had his shoes . . . as well as his wallet, so what more did you need really?

When you got to the bottom of the stairs you could exit on the ground level or go another flight down to the parking garage.

That seemed like a good option, keep going . . . and what it let you do was walk *up* the ramp, nice and civilized, if a little awkward, and then you were on the street, not having to cross the hospital grounds in full view of anyone to get there.

The only obstacle was the parking attendant, likely not used to seeing too many humans walking the ramp, but Pete gave the guy a smile and a little salute like they knew each other, and the guy seemed to react okay, and then Pete was in the middle of the street you fed into, Staggs Boulevard, making sure he didn't get hit by a car since it wasn't that light out yet--and Jeez, wouldn't *that* be something.

Quasi

Pete was taking a surfing lesson today, and halfway through he was thinking this was the dumbest idea I ever had.

The concept was shaky to start with, trying to learn a somewhat hairy water sport at age 42, but he'd let a couple people talk him into it, that something *fresh* and *in nature* would be good for him . . . and okay fine, they meant well.

His big mistake though was booking Tammy as the instructor.

Tammy could surf her head off and she seemed to have a nice personality--until now--and she looked perfectly presentable in her shorts and tanktop as well, when the waitress had introduced them officially in the *Crow's Nest* last night.

So Pete got duped, and here he was.

There were probably other instructors if you researched it, but the two most visible ones were an old guy like him, and a kid who was probably in high school.

Neither one seemed as appealing to spend 90 minutes with as Tammy, but Pete was re-thinking that entirely at the moment.

They were 45 minutes into the lesson and Tammy had him on the sand, they hadn't gone *near* the water yet, and Pete was on his chest on top of an old-style huge surfboard and she was making him stand up and lie back down.

Going on like 500 times now.

His stomach muscles were in spasm and his knees where all chaffed up and his wrists felt like they'd both been sprained, and even his chin was taking a beating from repeatedly having to contact the board.

Pete said, "I'm starting to think of it a different way."

"Well that's your *first* mistake," Tammy said, "Trying to apply *thought* to the core fundamental of the sport."

“Yeah, well,” Pete said. “*My* thought, was do you have a bikini on underneath that stuff? If you did--or maybe it doesn’t even matter, you can leave on your full attire--but how about I watch *you* demonstrate for a while?”

“You’re wasting time,” Tammy said. “We’ll never get into the water today at this rate.”

“Is that what those are? *Yoga* pants? Or is that a pre and post-surfing kind of garb?”

She said, “You sure ask a lot of questions. You need to be more single-minded if you expect to prosper in a new pursuit.”

“You’re getting formal on me,” Pete said. “Which tips your hand, that you’re not local. Originally.”

“That’s an interesting take. If I was going to place *you*, I’d say you’re from Tarzana.”

“I don’t even know where that is,” he said. “But I’ll make you a deal. Let’s knock this stuff off, and go have lunch.”

Tammy said, “And? . . . I’m waiting to hear how that’s a *deal*.”

“I’ll figure it out on the way up there,” Pete said. “Then you’ll see.”

Tammy said, “Well you’re becoming uncooperative, that much is obvious.”

“That’s *your* interpretation. I’m *shot* here. I haven’t been worked this hard since junior high school.”

Tammy suggested finishing off the session with some easy jogging in that case, pointing out that Pete could lose a few pounds in the mid-section, which would definitely help with the standing up and maintaining your balance on a surfboard.

Pete said, “I like that place halfway up to Peet’s. *King’s Highway Grill*, I think it is?”

“The fusion one?”

“See, you didn’t change the subject, so I can tell you’re interested. When’s your next lesson?”

Tammy said she didn't have another one today so she supposed she couldn't back out of it, the offer, and they thankfully left the beach and headed up the hill, though walking on cement, he felt *different* body parts hurting now.

They started with a couple of tropical drinks with the little umbrellas sticking out of the glasses and Pete said *Cheers* and thanks for putting up with a poor student.

Tammy said he wasn't a poor student, just an indifferent one.

"What happened to the surfboard though?" Pete said. "You just leave it there?"

"Yeah."

"Too big and heavy, you mean? No one'll steal it?"

Tammy laughed. "That's the hope. Though I do lock my door at night."

"You're saying," Pete said, "don't underestimate the wealthy? They're unpredictable like the rest of us?"

"I'm *saying*," Tammy said, "you don't *hear* of a lot around here, but I make it a policy to watch my back, *wherever* I am."

"Oh yeah? Where's that *been*, you're referring to?"

"I was born and raised in Cleveland," she said. "But getting back to what you were saying--what did they *do* to you in junior high, that you pretend to be so traumatized by?"

"Ah, we had this PE teacher. Not worth going into the specifics. Bottom line, he tortured us for three years. And every day you were afraid he was going to embarrass you, on top of it."

"We had one of those too."

"Nah, not *this* guy you didn't. He'd be in jail today, probably. Or at the minimum, bankrupt from all the lawsuits."

"Gosh."

"Times were different, and it wasn't the worst thing to make it through that stuff. Even my friend Ray, who was very defiant back then, he says kids today have it too easy."

Tammy said, "How did *Ray* turn out?"

“Not great. Ray’s on hemodialysis.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But he’s had an eventful life, is my impression. I think he was in some trouble at one point. Kind of matured his way out of it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Good *old-fashioned* trouble . . . Not the light version.”

“And the *light* version? Are you saying addiction-related? That grouping?”

“Yeah, none of *that*. The real thing . . . He got me a gun once.”

Pete watched for Tammy’s reaction, and he figured that should bring her down a notch, more to his level and hopefully lose some of the surf-instructor attitude.

Tammy said, “Wow . . . Tell me about it.”

And this was the thing. When something stalls or isn’t proceeding as smoothly as you like, throw in a gun.

Pete picked that tip up from a movie director, who made action-thriller type films. Pete saw the guy featured on TV, the local news.

He remembered where he was too--in a motel in West Lafayette, Indiana, when he was driving cross-country.

The director was a hometown boy made good and he was giving a talk that night at Purdue University, in town, and Pete didn’t have anything better to do so he went, and the guy was pretty entertaining.

And yep, his little gun philosophy made sense, and Pete figured you could apply variations of that to plenty of situations. You didn’t necessarily need to bring a gun *seriously* into it, you just needed some shock value.

“Just that he *got* me one,” Pete said to Tammy. “Nothing real interesting beyond that.”

“Well . . . did anything . . . like, *happen*?” she said.

“Not a big deal. It seemed like a sensible idea, but I didn’t ending up requiring it.”

“Then that’s not a good end to the story at all,” Tammy said.

She was expressing some frustration now, and Pete couldn't help wondering, in a more intimate setting, did she bring a similar approach to the table that needed to be resolved . . .

Pete was daydreaming, gravitating from Tammy to some unresolved business up in San Francisco that he'd been dodging, and she started looking at him funny.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I was re-arranging a few things in my head . . . What was your question?"

Tammy said, "It was more of a statement. That your story petered out."

Pete said, "When it comes down to it, I'm a chicken."

"But *something* must have precipitated it. People don't go up to their friends--as a routine matter--and say, 'Oh by the way, let me borrow your gun for a while'."

"*Now* you're loosening up," Pete said. "If I asked you to go home with me tonight, what would you say?"

What the *hell* was wrong with him, why *was* he blurting this out, after reminding himself he was being an idiot?

"I'd say no," Tammy said.

"Well, that's good then . . . In fact I respect you for that."

"You seem slightly off," she said.

"Not in the *worst* way though?"

"I don't know. You're interesting at least. And a little mysterious."

"I just remembered something," Pete said. "It wouldn't work anyway."

"*What* wouldn't?"

"You coming back with me. I gave up my bedroom."

"Now you're losing me," Tammy said. "But the gun business . . . that really *did* just peter out?"

"Pretty much. Yep."

"Hmm. Do you still have it?"

"It's possible . . ."

"Can you please at least give me a clue?"

Pete said, "Do you like dangerous guys?"

"Now you're all over the place," she said. "But maybe I do."

"How about Lou or Ned Mancuso? He fit in there too?"

This was a guy, admittedly a colorful character, who Pete had met a few times now and didn't trust.

Tammy hesitated a second. "I think I know who you're referring to. I've seen him at the *Crow's Nest*."

Meaning, she knew him pretty well, would be Pete's guess, but no point pursuing that.

"Anyhow," he said, "*my* deal, yeah, there's a guy and a gal, a bit down on their luck. I kind of underestimated their relationship, thought it was a negative, but now I see there's something there. So I gave 'em the bedroom."

"I'm not following you," Tammy said. "But it sounds kind of you, although that's quite a jump. You're saying you're on the couch?"

"Yeah, that or the recliner . . . Amazing how easily you fall asleep in those things. You know what I'm talking about, those huge Costco jobs?"

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes to recharge the batteries. After what you put me through today, I'm gonna need extra."

"I meant how long have you had the sleeping arrangement, letting the two people take over."

"Oh. Just a couple days so far . . . But so I have it straight, *why* couldn't we go in the ocean? Isn't that what you do when you surf?"

"I think I explained it *pretty* clearly," Tammy said. "Would you want to be Van Halen on stage before you learned your basic scales?"

"That's a terrible example," Pete said. "You need to come up with a better one."

"Maybe next time."

"See? I roped you in. At least enough to have lunch with me again."

"We'll see."

Pete said, “You have a good gig. And you do a conscientious job with it. It’s nice to be an authority figure.”

“What’s *your* deal?” she said.

And here you were again, in undefined territory.

He said, “I’m mostly a journalist, if you pin me down . . . and I pull out the fancy terminology to back it up.”

“Gosh,” she said. “Now *I’m* impressed. I’m trying to get a blog off the ground. On women’s surfing. I’m looking for advertising, the whole nine yards. Do you think you could take a look at it, and give me some feedback?”

“Honestly, blogs may have peaked,” he said, “but we’ll see.”

It was better to finish things off with the upper hand if you could, so Pete was glad he regained control there at the end.

The throwing in the gun business, that was a lot more dicey these days, the political climate . . . you had to be careful and use that card selectively.

Some women *were* drawn to dangerous guys, that was a fact. You took that into account, rolled with it, and sometimes it worked.

More fun being a fake journalist though, you could make stuff up, embellish it. The hard-nosed act, you were limited, and you’d set the bar high.

Visuals

A guy sat down next to Pete outside Starbucks, young guy, good shape, surfer-type bleach-blonde thick head of hair.

“I *recognize* you,” Pete said, “but I don’t *know* you.”

“Dave,” the guy said, shaking hands.

“From the bar, correct?” Pete said, placing him now from last night, and probably a few others, at the *Crowe’s Nest*, down the hill near the pier.

“You got *that* right,” Dave said. “My go-to venue. I tend to keep a low profile.”

“That’s the way to do it. We all unwind at a different pace.”

“I couldn’t help notice you talking to Ned Mancuso,” Dave said.

Pete wasn’t quite sure what to do with that one. He said, “You’re like *me*, it looks like. You don’t *work*.”

Dave smiled. “I can appreciate your answer,” he said. “Since I might have ruined your soy latte by bringing that guy up too early in the day.”

Pete said, “Never drink soy *anything*. Under any circumstances . . . *Real* fat, that’s the one and only way to go.”

Dave said, “The a-hole owes me 8 grand. Plus royalties.”

“I know the feeling,” Pete said, not surprised at a development like this, and figuring no need to ask. You sit here a few minutes, it should come out.

“But what you said before,” Dave said, “you’re retired? That’s the gig *I* want.”

“I get that reaction. My comeback is, a work in progress. Give it a try, and *then* see.”

“I wish,” Dave said. “I’m a beach lifeguard, but I got no seniority, and it’s seasonal. So I personal-train, the fitness game.”

Pete said, “A lot people say that, and I never quite pin it down . . . You go to a *gym*, administer sets on the *Cybex* machine, make sure their *form* is sound? Or is it an *at-home* deal, with yoga mats?”

“Those are two ways. I work with them *outdoors*, public places. The pier was perfect, but then this other guy comes along--he had knee surgery but he’s back--and that’s kind of his territory.”

“Yeah I’ve seen that guy,” Pete said.

“So right now I’m at Dockweiler, by El Segundo . . . It’s nothing fancy, my sessions. Like . . . see that curb over there? Step up and down on it a hundred times alternating your feet, and then crab walk backwards to where I’m standing at.”

“They obey, then, no problem?”

“Oh yeah. It helps that they think I played college football, that makes ‘em like to show off.” Dave spoke a little quieter. “I didn’t really play, but I kind of maneuvered it onto my Facebook.”

“You mean . . . you faked a college?”

“No, real college, Southern Miss. D-1 and everything. I was what they call an invited walk-on. They redshirted me a year, but I didn’t make it past spring camp. Never got on the field. White guy wide receiver down in Mississippi.”

Pete thought about it and said, “I can see where you’re coming from. Okay you lied, but the end result is the clients get a better workout.”

“Well I like your outlook,” Dave said.

“That’s not Ole Miss, right? Two different places?”

“Oh yeah. Ole Miss is in Oxford. Southern Miss is Hattiesburg.”

Pete said, “If I had to take a wild guess, you don’t sound like you’re *from* there.”

“Not at all, La Jolla . . . They swallow their words, very different . . . though I’m a fan of the accent, and I liked it there . . . What fucked me in the end was there was one of the assistant coaches, an older guy, he had a daughter. I had a class with her and started dating her, and even though I was already cut from the team by then, that was off-limits and they threw me out of school.”

“*Good* old boys.”

“No kidding.”

Pete said, “Those two towns though, Oxford and the other one . . . how would they be if someone wanted to . . . *hang out* for a while, lay low?”

“You mean *you*?” Dave said laughing.

“Jeez,” Pete said. “Quite a projection on your part.”

“Just a hunch. You know Ned, for one.”

Dave not smiling as much now, because he’d come full circle back to his own situation.

And no point asking if Dave knew Tammy, who’d given Pete a surfing lesson, and was supposedly a personal trainer herself. He would, but so what.

“So that’s it?” Pete said. “You don’t run around at night doing Amway or something? . . . I’m joking, you sound *plenty* busy, like you’re hustling.”

“*Amway*? What’s that?”

“Forget it, I’m dating myself. Multi-level marketing. Biodegradable cleaning products. My uncle and cousin tried it, teamed up, had a falling out, and *still* aren’t speaking.”

“I gotcha. Passive income, on the side. That’s not bad. If you have a better suggestion than Amway--it sounds like--let me know.”

“Anyhow . . .” Pete said. “How’re the rescues? You get a lot of those?”

“We can. Usually someone who we already warned, ignoring a rip current . . . Sometimes the surfers and boogie boarders get too close, and you have to watch for some guy getting hit in the head . . . The other thing, the European tourists in the summer, they’re oblivious to the conditions.”

“Not a lot of waves to contend with in the Mediterranean.”

“I guess not,” Dave said. “You know Mancuso got pinched, right?”

“I did hear that,” Pete said.

“You guys being engaged in conversation last night, I figured you did.”

“He didn’t bring it up. But you know Ellen, the waitress, right? She mentioned it.”

“She took the hit *with* him,” Dave said. “A couple others too.”

“Oh . . . that part she left out.”

“Surprises,” Dave said.

“So . . . like . . . an *escort* thing then?” Pete said, trying hard to wrap his mind around *Ellen* now.

“That and more,” Dave said. “Yeah they got nailed on the *first* thing. The second one is where he screwed *me*.”

Pete lowered his voice. “You’re not saying . . . drugs?”

“Porn,” the guy said, and he didn’t lower *his* voice, since he was mad and obviously didn’t care.

“Holy Toledo,” Pete said, not knowing what that meant exactly, by itself--*porn*--but certainly one *more* element to process.

“So yeah,” Dave was saying, “I keep it simple in there . . . but notice how Ned, he made sure not to look in my direction.”

“Sheesh,” Pete said.

“I can tell you’re kind of in shock. When it’s people you know, it’s hard to conceive. You get used to it. It’s business.”

Pete couldn’t help it, he had to ask, leaning in and lowering his voice down to a near whisper. “*Ellen* though? She makes *porno* flicks?”

“Some. She’s more or less Mancuso’s right hand man. There’s another gal too, older.”

“You’re saying . . . they organize them? . . . Book them?”

“Yeah. *Produce them* would be the term . . . Fucker talked me into it, I needed the money, and then he shafts me . . . The way they got it set up, you can’t exactly take ‘em to small claims court.”

“Ooh boy,” Pete said . . . Now you were inclined to ask Dave if *he* hooked up with Ellen at all--*professionally*--but you had to leave that alone.

“So anyways,” Dave said. “I recognized you, figured I’d say something, for what it’s worth.”

“I appreciate it,” Pete said. “Let me just get it straight, though . . . their thing, operation, whatever . . . it’s *where* exactly?”

“You know down the Strand, the house with all the glass and the motorcycles in front?”

“Yeah. Like they’re being displayed . . . That’s a pretty incredible place actually.”

“Four, maybe five houses *past* there. That’s where it’s at. The front facade is all this interlaced exotic wood.”

“Dang. Pretty sure I *know* that one, yeah . . . You’re saying . . . the escort, and the other stuff, it’s all . . . right there?”

“Go take a look,” Dave said. “Son of a bitch is creative. Even rents rooms downstairs, like an Airbnb. A pricey one though. But no stone left unturned.”

“Wait . . . so Mancuso actually owns a house on the *Strand*?”

“Not sure about *that*. I think there’s an Argentinian connection involved . . . Either way the mope has moved up. When I first met him he had a studio apartment in North Hollywood.”

“Well, one thing,” Pete said, “no one seemed too worried, if I read the room right.”

“Nah,” Dave said. “Mancuso’s got lawyers who know their way around. A bust like that, they’re trying to make a statement, probably because some billionaire neighbor complained. Nothing’ll happen.”

Pete couldn’t help thinking those lawyers included his own tennis friend Chandler at one time, and who knows, maybe still did . . . and he and Dave got up and went out the door and said see ya later and turned in different directions.

Pete’s direction was to the right, down the hill. Starbucks was at the corner of Highland, so you had 2 1/2 short blocks to the beach, which were Manhattan Avenue, Ocean Drive and then the Strand.

Where you could turn left, toward that motorcycle house, and the one a few doors past it.

Hmm . . .

It was a little after two . . . *should* you just do what Dave suggested . . . mosey on over there, knock on the door, say *how you doing* to whoever answered and see where it went?

It was easy enough to find, and there was a small brick entryway with an arching redwood gate, and you pulled a cord and the gate opened and there you were at the front door, everything glass on the first level.

A middle aged woman answered, modestly dressed, jeans and a t-shirt, and Pete said there's a chance he has the wrong place, but would Ned Mancuso happen to be around.

The woman said please come in and Ned was talking on the phone at a small desk, two folding chairs facing it, and that was about it.

He saw Pete and stuck out a hand hello, and he ended the call pretty quick and stood up.

"My *Bud*," he said. "Hey I'm real glad you stopped by."

And this was one more example of how you scratch your head with a guy like this, since he was saying it as though he'd personally invited Pete over, and was happy Pete took him up on the offer . . . rather than wondering what he was *doing* here and how the hell he *found* this place.

"Well thanks for having me," Pete said. "But my first impression? Not much of an office for someone running a multi-directional operation like I keep hearing about."

Ned laughed. "Sit down," he said. "What, you're not impressed with the furnishings?"

"No," Pete said. "But I remember a guy telling me up in the Bay Area, he was operating a gym, and he had a fancy office overseeing the basketball court, the thing must have been 30 by 30. He had a couple couches in there, a private shower too."

Ned said, "You're going to tell me the place picked up steam when he scrapped the office and stuck in 10 more treadmills."

"Or turned it into a yoga studio . . . So what's going on?"

"You want something to drink? Doesn't have to be serious, could be Coke, Gatorade, whatever you like."

Pete said a soft drink would be nice, and Ned left the office for a second and called something to the woman who let Pete in. “That’s Josephine,” he said. “I’m *telling* you, without *her*, we wouldn’t be doing half as well.”

Josephine came back with two sodas in glasses, limes on the sides, and she put down round cocktail napkins that had dolphins swimming.

“A nice touch,” Pete said. “Does she . . . participate in any of your other activities?” Pete was wondering, is this what a madam looked like in Manhattan Beach?

“Put it this way,” Ned said, “she’s an all-around good judge of people. You *need* that, at least someone like me does, keep you pointing in the right direction.”

“Easy to get confused in business,” Pete said. “*She* get pinched, along you with you and Ellen?”

“Jesus, *pardner* . . . Hold your horses there a minute.” Ned was putting on an act, not hiding his amusement.

Pete said, “Some guy told me you owe him 8 grand. Which kind of pisses me off, if you want to know the truth.”

“First of all,” Ned said, “don’t believe everything you hear. Second, why would that bother you?”

“That’s not a good answer,” Pete said. “I’d respect you more if you said yeah I owe him 8 grand, and I may or may not pay him.”

“You’re all right,” Ned said, giving it a little wink. “Everybody gets paid though.”

There was intermittent noise in other parts of the house, people coming and going, and Josephine’s voice in the middle of it.

Pete said, “So if I wanted to rent a room here, what would *that* run me?”

“You don’t want to know. And if you add on amenities you’re in a different ballpark *still*.”

“So . . . if I’m reading it right, you’re in the *lodging* business . . . the *companionship* business . . . and there’s more adult stuff on top of that? Or was some guy feeding me a line?”

“No, no, that’s correct,” Ned said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Dang. What if I was a cop, all this time?”

“Then you’d probably want to take a look too. It’s been known to happen.”

They were in the foyer and you could see Josephine out on the front patio talking to someone and Ned said, “The elevator, or the stairs?”

Jeez . . . Pete hadn’t seen the elevator on the way in and couldn’t remember being in a single-family house that had one, but he said the stairs sound better because he needs the exercise.

A flight up Ned said, “*These suckers*, something you wouldn’t *think* about, the foundations.”

“No. What about ‘em?”

“Well you gotta find the bedrock, that’s where you start your concrete piers. Typically, you go down thirty feet.”

Pete said, “So living on the beach, you’re saying . . . people don’t realize it’s not so simple.”

“It really isn’t,” Ned said.

It was hard to tell what the second floor was all about, but there was a series of rooms off a main living area, no action here at the moment.

The third floor was another story, plenty of noise, including some music . . . and it sounded like people barking instructions. Hmm . . .

“The nice thing up *here*,” Ned said, “we can take advantage of the light. And use the ocean as a backdrop, depending.”

It was set up like a penthouse apartment, one big open space with windows all around and a terrace on the beach side, and it was furnished pretty modern and slick, plenty of leather and chrome, and Pete figured whatever Ned saved on his office was added in up here.

There was a fake fireplace but it looked pretty cozy, with a couple ceramic logs being lapped at by an orange gas flame.

Not surprisingly, there was a bearskin rug in front of the fireplace, and you had what looked like a cameraman and a soundman and a third person directing

traffic . . . the traffic being two women and a guy presently going at it in the vicinity of the rug.

It was strange, the stuff your mind could dredge up when something *else* was going on . . . and Pete remembered back to when he first met Ned, and they were checking out some beach volleyball action, and Ned broke the ice by saying people wonder how they don't burn their feet.

Now Pete said to Ned, "Do they ever get rug burn?"

"Haven't heard it brought up," Ned said.

"Quite a bit of friction there, when you think about it."

"Could be. What is a factor, with some of them, they overdo the tanning booths, and get burned *that way*."

Pete could see his point. All three of the current participants were quite tan, and it was December, plus none of them had any tan *lines*, which implied artificial means.

Yep, definitely not much in the way of clothing at this point. You figured they all started *out* with it, but that could have been a while ago, with he and Ned showing up in the middle of things. One of the gals did have a thin band of material around her waist, for a little extra aesthetics Pete supposed, but that was the extent of it.

He said to Ned, "How long's something like this *go* then? Typically?"

"It's up to them, how it plays out," Ned said. "What we ask them to do though, if they're going to go long, to keep switching it up."

"Ah . . . the positions, you mean?"

"Yeah . . . don't forget now, these are shorts, most of them. The business is a different animal than when you and I were going to a raunchy theater someplace and watching *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*."

Across the room another crew was apparently setting up for a scene, but meanwhile the activity in front of them was looking pretty relentless, showing no sign of abating.

Pete said, "Where do you find them all, if you don't mind my asking?"

“That part’s not as easy as you might think,” Ned said. “We try Craigslist for one, but you get mixed results. Word of mouth’s your best bet.”

“Oh.”

“Why . . . You looking to earn some extra dough?”

“Gee . . . not really, but you can’t be serious.”

“Oh yeah, we could use you no problem. There’s a mature category. It draws surprisingly well. Plus there’s other instances we need older guys.”

Pete was a little conflicted here--not whether he’d actually take the guy up on the offer, *that* wasn’t going to happen--but because he apparently passed the mustard, but strictly as an *old* guy. Though what did he expect?

He said, “What does it pay?”

“200 a scene,” Ned said. “That’s for normal work.”

“Like . . . what’s going on at the moment?”

“Right. Now we’re talking male talent. The female scale is different, higher.”

Pete assumed by *talent* the guy was using entertainment business slang, which would mean actor or performer.

Though this particular *guy* did have some actual talent, the way he was working stuff, one of the women suspended in the air at the moment.

Pete didn’t want to ask what was *non-normal* work, if two women and a guy plus a few props was normal.

He said, “So that beach lifeguard. Dave . . . At 200 a pop . . . that’d be what, 40 scenes then, that you owe him for?”

It was interesting to get a handle on it, when you pinned it down in concrete numbers.

“More or less,” Ned said, “but Cripes, can you *please* stop worrying about *Dave*?”

“How would that pan out though? I mean one a *day*, one a *week* . . . what?”

“Could be, over time, yeah . . . or could be a *couple* a day . . . nothing etched in stone . . . What’s wrong?”

Pete said, “What’s *wrong* . . . is I guess I’m starting to feel a little intimidated here . . . both what I’m *seeing*, and what I’m *hearing*.”

“That happens, it’s common. You get over it. I was serious when I said we can use guys like you in their 40’s.”

“I appreciate the offer . . . but honestly, based on what I’m witnessing? I think I come up a little short.”

“Don’t worry about *that* either,” Ned said. “There’s a place for you. Long as you’re in shape and on time, which I can tell you are.”

The threesome in the vicinity of the bear skin rug still hadn’t wrapped it up, was showing no signs of getting there in the next couple minutes, and somewhat astonishingly, the *other* scene began that they’d been setting up for across the room.

This one was more straightforward, one man, one woman, the guy white and the woman Latina or light-skinned black.

“*Where* do these end up?” Pete said. “You sell them on line, you say?”

“The longer ones,” Ned said. “But there’s been a shift there too. Now it’s these sites, that give the shit away for free, that are dominating the industry. It’s click and watch, no signup, no nothing. The money’s in the ads.”

Pete was going to ask, do you get paid per hit, or how did it work . . . but the logistics didn’t seem critical, it was obviously a lucrative business, otherwise what would everyone be doing here at 4 o’clock on a Friday afternoon in this multi-million dollar house on the Strand . . . and meanwhile Pete couldn’t help notice that the new couple had gotten past the early formalities and was getting down to business pretty strong.

Pete said, “One thing I’ll give you, compared to *our* day as you call it, with the full length films in the seedy theaters--there’s a lot less acting.”

“To put it mildly,” Ned said. “Plus they had to come up with those *plots* back then, most of them terrible. They were just killing time until the next scene.”

“So . . . Ellen . . . is *she* around today?”

“She’ll be here tonight. You have a little *thing* for her, don’t you? She told me you were ogling her at someone’s swimming pool.”

“Man,” Pete said, “I’m that bad? Not to mention that obvious.”

“So stick around. Or come back.”

One thing you had to say about Ned . . . or Lou . . . or whoever else he was known by . . . he was a good host.

Likely there was an angle built in, where he wanted something from you, or was setting you up *to* want something.

But still, you were comfortable, like you *could* hang around as long as you want . . . and Pete considered it, that it would be interesting to get a handle on *Ellen’s* role in all this.

Except he really *had* seen enough, and he told Ned his dating life may have inadvertently taken a hit . . . and Ned said don’t worry about it, you’ll be fine, and Pete said he’d try to keep that in mind.

Checker

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 that *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," Marlene 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?"

Marlene 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 then."

"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 that afternoon, 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 at noon-time. 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 punchdrunk, 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.

Marlene 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 and would be right back.

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 placemat, that was full of coupons as well . . . and you might as well take a look.

No more food though, they 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 store.

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 the night was still young . . . 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 Pete's, and she looked back up 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 mask 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 the 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. How ‘bout you?”

“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 happy 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.” Here 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 judgement 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 quite sensitive.”

“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 and a little shaky.

“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 wrong apartment, but it kind of broke the mood. So Pete asked her 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 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 puts a damper on it 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?”

“Might be tough,” Pete said, “but let me sleep on it.”

Exit Strategy

Driving back to the apartment from Santa Monica, Pete conceded that the therapy session had at least been interesting.

The guy'd been ticked off at first, a Dr. Stride, since Pete was late, and he opened by addressing it.

"When a patient is dismissive of the time, as in *your* case," Dr. Stride said, "that tends to be reflective of a larger issue."

"You're talking . . . a *major* larger issue, like they study in psychology classes?" Pete said. "Or was it that I *dissed* you? Even though I hate that word."

"Yes, the second interpretation," the therapist said, "which can typically be precipitated by the individual's need to call *attention* to themselves, through the tardy behavior pattern . . . That aside however, shall we *begin*, in the time we *do* have left?"

Pete was thinking the guy didn't necessarily know what he was talking about, but he was tired and feeling chippy, and this Dr. Stride *meant* well, so you might as well blow off some steam, and see what happens.

He said, "The reason I was late--someone took me to an Italian restaurant--now that I think about it, it started with *her* having a coupon--and that's where I picked up *your* coupon."

"Unh-huh." The doctor was about 55, tweed jacket, the kind of guy who might have been smoking a pipe as he was listening, if that were still legal in an office like this.

Pete continued, "I tried to be discreet when I spotted your coupon, but she caught me, my *friend*. I had to concoct something, that oh don't worry about *this*, it's not for *me*."

"Who *was* it for? In your version."

"This kid I help out, who's had some financial issues and was sleeping in his car . . . I keep calling him a *kid*, he's in his *twenties*."

"Why do you feel he needs therapy?"

Pete said, “Okay you’re not *listening* to me now. I *faked* it being for the kid, the free appointment.”

“So you *don’t* feel he needs therapy.”

“Jesus. How should *I* know? That was what popped into my head, is all.”

“And she believed you. Your lady friend in the restaurant.”

“I guess . . . I mean she didn’t *over-*do the subject at that point . . . You’re starting to piss me off actually.”

“Not a problem,” Dr. Stride said, and he cleared his throat, and looked down at his chart. “Mr . . . McGirk, how did the coupon make you twenty minutes late today?”

Pete thinking, wow, I was only 15 minutes late wasn’t I? Tops? Now he’s cutting it even *shorter* on me?

Though with the freebie business, how could you blame the guy, maybe. Probably tough enough sitting here all day with crackpots who are actually *paying* you.

Pete said, “Cutting to the chase? Which I know you guys hate, not massaging the daylights out of something first . . . But fine, there *was* the coupon dinner, we hit it off okay, she stopped over a couple times, and wouldn’t you know, when I was supposed to be on my way *here* an hour ago, we were busy banging each other.”

Pete figured that would get a little rise out of the guy, but Dr. Stride said, “Do you think your friend--for discussion purposes I’ll call her Robin--”

“I’m not a fan of that name on a woman. It’s Marlene, the *real* person.”

“Is it possible,” Dr. Stride continued, “that Robin suspected you were pulling the coupon for *yourself*?”

“I mean I don’t know, I don’t *think* so.”

“And *that* led to an increased interest in *you*, on her part?”

“Where the frig . . . are you *going* with this now?”

“The scenario that I suggest,” the doctor said, “is not uncommon.”

Looking at Pete and waiting. The way Pete pictured these psychologist types conducting business. Throw something out there, no idea where *they’re*

going with it, despite several decades of training, and let *you* put your foot in *your* mouth and react like you're a disturbed individual.

Okay . . . he was being a little hard on the guy.

Pete said, "I don't like your scenario. That would mean, I showed vulnerability, and she was intrigued by it . . . is *that* what it would mean?"

"It could. There are a scope of instigating factors, which potentially lead one individual to wish to explore another's psyche."

"*Fuck* this shit, then," Pete said.

"Now that's interesting you present your reaction that way," Stride said. "Are you typically angry at women?"

"You know something? . . . I'm getting the distinct feeling here, you're getting your rocks off jerking my *chain* . . . Am in the ballpark with *that*?"

The doctor made a note on the chart. "Your interpretation is a bit concerning," he said. "Do you ever find yourself wrestling with violent tendencies?"

"Not towards women, that's for sure, and you're barking way up the wrong tree if that's where you're going with this, my friend."

"Toward men then?"

"Sure, depending."

"I see. Dependent upon what factors?"

"If the guy *deserves* it . . . you need me to spell it out beyond that?"

"And what would constitute deserving it?"

"Okay here's an example . . . let's say you have a wife-beater piece of scum. She has a restraining order, but you know those things never work. Plus people don't change . . . *That* particular guy, you want to *injure*."

"Unh-huh. And *have* you ever executed on such a premise?"

Jeez, that was a curious choice of words out of this guy--*executed*. Pete knew what he *meant*, which was more like *followed through on*, but still.

"Only the one time, and I regret it. The kid I've been telling you about. I went too far in assuming he was mistreating his girlfriend."

"Unh-huh."

Pete said, “Those unh-huh’s are getting obnoxious . . . What, you think that makes me think harder on my *own*, when you do that?”

“Please continue,” Dr. Stride said.

“You want to know the truth?” Pete said. “I feel like you got me jumping through hoops, but you’re not finishing anything *off* . . . We’re all over the place, nothing being zeroed *in* on.”

The doctor made another note. “What is it you feel should be targeted?” he said.

“Okay . . . well since you ask, I’d like to know why I can’t maintain a normal relationship. That’d be one thing.”

“With men, or women.”

“*Women*. Jesus.”

“Unh-huh. Tell me about it.”

“Ooh boy . . . And this is just between us, right?”

The doctor nodded.

Pete said, “Well last year, I had a medical thing. A pretty major curve ball thrown at me . . . what am I talking about, *this* year. The *beginning* of it.”

“I see. And that affected your ability to maintain a relationship?”

“You’re supposed to tell *me*.”

Doctor Stride looked at his watch. “We’re going to need to end soon. Is there anything else?”

Anything *else*? This guy had to be kidding. Drawing stuff out of you, getting you to lower your guard . . . and then boom, that’s *it*?

Which you kind of wanted to call the guy on, except what would that accomplish . . . so Pete said, “I’m surprised you give coupons for this stuff.”

The doctor closed Pete’s chart. “You mean it reminds you of the brownies at Costco?”

“Now I’m not following you . . . or are you saying, the free samples.”

“Indeed,” Dr. Stride said, seeming to be in regular-guy mode now. “If they don’t *try* it, they won’t know.”

“Well I appreciate your half-hour,” Pete said. “And *I* know I was a wise ass a few times . . . so, sorry about that. Let me ask you this--and I expect an honest answer, not you trying to work me like a cheap car salesman.”

“Understood,” the doctor said.

“Do you think I need more of these? Sessions?”

“Unquestionably,” Dr. Stride said.

“See there you go,” Pete said. “Immediately doing what I said *don't* do.”

“That’s my honest evaluation,” the doctor said, standing up, and reaching out to shake hands.

Pete shook hands but didn’t say anything more . . . and driving home his head was going a *few* different directions . . . and he’d never been to a therapist before and it wasn’t *altogether* surprising the way it played out, and yeah, fine it *was* interesting . . . but man, couldn’t they at least give you *something* to chew on.

Lost and Found

The complex claimed the spa could seat 40, they loved to hit you over the head with that, and Pete noticed they mentioned it in the sales flyers for the new Phase 3 units as well . . . and the fact was he'd never seen more than 5 people in the thing at once.

He stood there for a minute dripping wet from the regular pool, letting the slight breeze chill him a little so the hot tub would have maximum effect, and then he eased into it.

Today you had a gal with a big floppy sun hat, her elbows on the edge, working her device; you had a guy with his eyes closed not moving a muscle, looking like he might have expired; and fortunately you had Arty, Pete's new friend.

"Mi hermano," Arty said. "You're the cynical guy that keeps saying these don't belong in Arizona. Then all I do, is see you *in* it."

This guy was a bit of a character. Had to be in his 70's, so he could easily be Pete's dad, and Pete was thinking, in some cultures even his grandpa.

Arty was a lifelong New Yorker until he retired down here, he had the thick accent, didn't try to disguise the fact that New York was in his bones and he missed it.

He was one of those industrious fellows that old New York seemed to produce. Started as a runner in the garment district, wheeling open racks of clothes along West 37th Street, and worked his way up to where he owned a company.

Guys like that usually ended up in Florida, and Pete had asked him, and Arty said he got sent there every summer when he was a kid, to stay with his cousins, and he never got along with them and it left a bad taste in his mouth.

So fair enough, here he was, and in a modest two-bedroom condo with his wife.

The wife was a sweet woman named Kay . . . though Pete was pretty convinced Arty was having an affair with someone else, right here in the Rancho Villas.

Pete was tempted to ask him about that part . . . in *general* terms . . . does stuff still *work* right, at your age?

Especially since Pete hadn't yet shaken off an intimidating experience he'd had--or rather, witnessed--along those lines.

Pete said, "No big deal probably, but my *walk* today, I picked up something."

"With Patti, right?" Arty said. "There anything there?"

"You know what? You don't miss stuff, I'll give you that, but you project."

"Pretty lady," Arty said. "Waiting for someone to float her boat."

Jesus. This guy really did get around if he knew the inner-workings of the staff. Of course he didn't worry about making stuff up, the kind of guy who'd be busting chops whenever possible, getting a big kick out of it, as he lived out his golden years.

"It's not like that," Pete said. "And *I'm* not looking for anything . . . I found a wedding ring, is all. Down by the 17th hole. A women's one."

"On the golf course? Or no?"

"Nah, in the weeds on the other side. Not exactly weeds, all that shit's planted, but you know what I mean."

"Big *rock* or what?"

"I just told you, that cactus-like stuff . . . oh, you mean the *ring*, big rock . . . not really, no, 3 diamonds, small ones."

"Well, so," Arty said, "what do you think happened?"

"If I knew I wouldn't have brought it up. I'd just be putting my head back, like other people in here, the way this thing's designed to relax you."

"I *never* put my head back, plus don't let the water get above your waist, you can stay *in* longer . . . Your likely scenario is there was an argument."

"Hmm. A lover's quarrel you mean? They take a walk to resolve it, she flings off the ring? That sounds kinda extreme."

“Not if you’ve witnessed the human population around here the last three years like I have. I spot couples every day, it’s obvious their relationships are *all* fucked up.”

Pete couldn’t entirely disagree, based on the two token jobs he’d picked up to help kill time here. Two weeks so far greeting people and handing them a towel when they walked in the fitness center, and Thursday evenings when he tended a little bar in the house lounge, and people would open up.

He said to Arty, “Or it’s been there a long time, and got uncovered by the rain.”

“Could be. The million-dollar question, what are you going to *do* with it?”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m picking *your* brain, since it hasn’t started going senile on you yet, I don’t think.”

“Now the key to *that*,” Arty said, “is maintaining the testosterone levels. Plain and *simple*.”

You weren’t going to ask questions there. Pete said, “So just turn it in then?”

“Yeah sure, *you* could do that, like a normal good citizen doing your duty would.” But giving him a cockeyed smile.

“And alternately . . .”

“Well you could have a little *fun* with it. Put it on eBay.”

“I was thinking more Craigslist. Even though I’ve been burned a few times. At least make the owner identify it. Probably a long shot though.”

“You never know,” Arty said. “There’s gotta be at least *some* story behind it. It would be interesting to hear it, before you returned it to the rightful owner . . . If that doesn’t work, like I say, you can be a Boy Scout and hand it over to the lost and found.”

“Uh-huh,” Pete said. “And that’d be the end of the line, and I can move on.”

“Which you don’t want to be doing,” Arty said. “I can tell.”

“You got a crystal ball then.”

“You’re one of these *guys*, I can’t put my finger *right* on it, but I’m getting there . . . you’re running from something.”

This got Pete’s attention, and he tried not to overreact . . . but what the *heck* . . . where did the old guy get off on *that*?

“Arty, I have to be honest with you,” Pete said, “you got a little too much Brooklyn left in you. I lived back there a while too, and it didn’t take long, I learned to be suspicious of *everyone*, until they proved me wrong.”

“I never said suspicious,” Arty said. “You’re on the *move*. Two different animals.”

Pete said, “A, you’re out of your mind . . . but B, how’s about we don’t worry about *me* . . . Or I could just pawn the thing, right?”

“If you’re going *that* route I’d try a jeweler first. If they don’t make you an offer at *all*, then yeah, you probably have to . . . Have you asked a simple question around here-- anyone lose a *wedding* ring?”

“Not yet,” Pete said, realizing that was pretty dang logical and obvious, wasn’t it.

“I’ll see ya,” Arty said, getting out, looking at his watch. “You extended me past my allotment.”

Pete said to take it easy. Arty was fit, and clearly precise with his habits.

Pete hated to think about a particular *other* guy, but Arty did remind you of an older--nicer--version of Maierhaffer, Pete’s tennis partner in San Francisco before things went sour. Both of them self-made, both street-smart and both screwing around on their respective spouses.

Wednesday morning Pete was in the Rancho Villas in-house coffee shop enjoying a pretty dang good butter croissant when someone asked if he knew who had the heart attack this morning.

He said no, he hadn’t heard, but by 9, a half hour into his front desk shift, there were whispers that someone was doing something they shouldn’t have-- meaning in someone else’s apartment . . . and you had to admit, wouldn’t *that* be an embarrassing way to go.

Pete got off at 1, swam a few laps and headed for the 40-person spa and there was Arty.

“A little fireworks around here apparently,” Pete said.

“It happens,” Arty said. He had a Wall Street Journal open and seemed focused, like he was committing stock tips to memory.

“Unh-huh,” Pete said. “Buddy of yours though?”

“Part of our *bridge* foursome. Not in the regular rotation though, he was a sub.”

“Ah.”

“Decent person,” Arty continued. “Standup guy. He was a steel executive in Pittsburgh. Interesting part of that *being*, he could have bought half this development probably, but there he was in a basic ground floor unit, like anyone else.”

“Wife and all?” he said.

“Indeed.”

“But she wasn’t around . . . when it happened.”

“No. He had a girlfriend,” Arty said, not lowering his voice or otherwise trying to be discreet. The candor was a bit surprising, since *he* was likely doing the same thing . . . except Arty was one of those straight-shooter guys, no reason to go through life tip-toeing.

“So, what . . . he spent the night in another apartment? That blatant?”

“Nah. What he did, pretty sure, he always started his normal day at 5. Got up, showered, kissed his wife, went for a walk . . . Took him a couple hours, he’s back by 7, coffee with the wife, plus a half a grapefruit and a poached egg--and he’s ready to start his day.”

“It takes that long, for you guys?” Pete said.

“Huh?”

“Couple hours of activity? At your age?”

“Depending, why not.”

“If the . . . equipment doesn’t work though? Then . . . no, *forget that*, don’t give me the plan B.”

“You almost asked,” Arty said, starting to laugh.

“Okay let me shift gears on you for a second. How would someone avoid leaving their DNA somewhere.”

Arty stared at Pete and boosted himself up on the edge. “I’m getting close to my limit,” he said, “but I gotta stick around and hear *this* now.”

“There’s nothing to hear,” Pete said. “Basic, generic question, is all.”

“Fine . . . I’m not sure. Ask someone who works in a lab, the way you see ‘em on those forensics shows, all suited up like they’re ready to operate on an Ebola patient.”

Pete was picturing the get-ups. Hazmat Suits.

He said “What about eyelashes. Do *they* automatically count, or does it need to include the root? You know what I mean, what’s the word . . . the follicle.”

“Jeeminy Christmas,” Arty said.

“What? . . . I’m *wondering* this stuff, because this 40-year-old serial killer case in California, there may be a breakthrough.”

“Not the *Zodiac* guy, you’re talking about? *He* was cagey. A lot smarter than they gave him credit for.”

“Different guy. Later. Started in the east bay, then Sacramento, some southern California activity too, sadly.”

“Okay I know who you’re talking about . . . What *kind* of breakthrough?”

“Not sure. Just that they got an improved way of testing for it now. Genetics and all. Anyhow . . . just thought I’d run it by you.”

Arty tugged on an earlobe and watched a reasonably well-endowed dark-haired woman in a bikini pass by and head toward the pool.

He turned back to Pete and said, this time quieter, “You’re in trouble, aren’t you.”

“No, no . . . *nothing* like that, are you *kidding*? . . . at the *most*, we’re talking a pre-*emptive* concern, is where *I’m* at.”

“Unh-huh,” Arty said. “You want to tell me about it?”

“Sure, I’d be happy too. If there was something *to* tell.”

Arty gave him a long look, and said, “What happened with that ring, by the way?”

That was another thing, there’d been three replies to his Craigslist posting and he hadn’t dealt with them yet.

Pete opened his phone and read them to Arty.

Hey, my wife lost that down there walking around. We were renting a time share for a week. It sounds goofy but it slipped off her finger. She was on the Atkins Diet. Please return my message.

I am responding about the FOUND RING. Please hold on to it for me, I am pretty certain it is mine. My husband lost it in the vicinity of the Rancho Villas Planned Community.

Yeah I need that ring. I’ll make you a deal for it. This is Ronald Haymaker.

“What do you think,” Pete said, “how would you handle it?”

Arty poker-face him. “Well good luck with that, my friend,” and he said to have a nice rest of the afternoon and took off.

Friday back in the hot tub--though a little later, cocktail hour--Arty’s in his usual spot.

“I switch my schedule,” Pete said, “to throw you off. But it doesn’t matter, you’re always here.”

“You have a sense of humor,” Arty said. “You’re not all that *funny*, but you have some adventure to your delivery.”

“Well,” Pete said, and he was starting to add a sarcastic come-back . . . but just then this gal Patti who he’d been spending a little time with came bounding

out the door of the fitness center and marched across the aquatic deck straight to him and said, “And I was right the *first* time. Ass-hole.”

And she picked up the nearest chair and flung it, surprisingly forcefully, into the hot tub.

Pete was prepared to duck, or go underwater, but fortunately the chair landed a little short of his position, and Patti went back inside.

Luckily Pete and Arty were the only ones in the Rancho Villas 40-person spa at the moment, and the chair was bobbing around in front of them.

Arty said, “She seemed excited.”

“Yeah, well,” Pete said.

“What about your ring deal?” Arty said.

“Ah don’t remind me. That was a *big* mistake, picking that *up*.”

“No takers? Or the wrong ones, you mean.”

“Wouldn’t you think,” Pete said, “two, three, mass communications by now, *one* of them can tell you what it actually *looked* liked?”

“You would think.”

“There’s been a couple more replies. One guy with a real attitude, like *where do you get off holding other people’s rings?*”

“Ah.”

“I get the distinct impression he wants to strongarm me . . . Just a hunch, if I met *that* guy--like he keeps wanting to--that he’d rob me.”

Arty considered it. “So why not call it quits, put the ring back exactly where you found it, and inform them all.”

“I thought of that,” Pete said.

“But . . . that would be no *fun*,” Arty said. “Correct?”

“Something like that,” Pete said.

Wildfire

Pete took a look at the listings on the website and there *were* people wanting you to drive their vehicles all over the place, including Mexico City in one case, and some of them had conditions attached, like you had to bring *their* dog or you had to detour on the way and pick something up.

Finally one jumped out, nice and clean:

Need pedal to the metal. Valley of the Sun to Bakersfield. Will fork over burger money.

You couldn't tell, but screw it, he called the number.

A guy answered and he was pleasant enough, and he confirmed the basics in the listing, the one weak point being you'd be driving a Ford Focus, a 2004, which Pete had a hunch was the first generation of the thing, but the guy said it *ran* great and the only issue was the compressor was shot so you didn't have air conditioning.

Pete could deal with that, even in hot weather he liked to open the windows, and this was still mild for down here, high 70's during the day.

The Bakersfield ending wasn't perfect, that angled you a couple hours north of Manhattan Beach, but you'd worry about it then.

The guy seemed eager, and told Pete to come on down, that he'd make sure he was trustworthy and hand over the key--and Pete liked his attitude.

On down meant a Walmart parking lot in southeastern Phoenix, and Pete sprung for an Uber and the guy showed up on time, he had his wife drive a second car, the meeting was short and sweet, the guy said he'd appreciate it if the vehicle got to Bakersfield by Tuesday, and that was that.

No mention of the **will fork over burger money** part, but Pete figured why push it.

So . . . the next morning Pete was all set bright and early, and he checked the map, no surprises, 17 to 303 to 124 to 10, and then the straight shot and you had it.

He stopped for his first bite at a Pilot on I-10, and it was good to be on the open road and in control, and you could hopefully relax and enjoy the scenery and stop obsessing over the bunch of *what if's* that had been keeping him awake lately for no logical reason.

Except the Ford Focus started making a funny noise, not a constant one . . . but increasingly often when Pete got it up to 65 and then eased up on the gas, you'd get a *rattling*.

And that was never good.

First he thought it might be the muffler dangling loose. He had that happen once driving in New York, the winter salt on the roads causing trouble with rust. He had to get out and stop traffic for a minute and yank the thing off and put it in the trunk.

But that wasn't it, and the rattling became more frequent, and louder, and the Focus lost power eight miles east of Wilma, Arizona, and it took another 50 yards to come to a complete and final stop, and by that time Pete had at least angled the piece of junk onto the shoulder.

Hmm . . .

He got out and stood there and looked around. It was Friday, very little traffic, and of course you were in the middle of the desert.

Probably the Sonoran. Though maybe the Mojave.

Whoopee.

The other thought that crossed his mind . . . the doofus assuring him that even though the Focus had a few *years* on her, she *ran great*.

Pete made a mental note--whenever anyone, in the history of the rest of your life, uses that expression . . . run the other way.

But fine, that was later. Right now, even the darn cell service didn't work. So Pete handled it the old-fashioned way and waited for a cop.

Which took over an hour, finally a guy pulling up behind him, lights going like he's responding to the World Trade Center attacks.

Then of course the guy sits in his vehicle for 5 minutes first, and Pete is thinking, *do I really seem that dangerous out here?*

The trooper got out and said hello and made a joke that it looks like something won the battle and it wasn't your *car*, and he jiggled as he laughed.

He was a big guy, overweight, and the Arizona version of the state trooper hat had a cowboy shape with a gold badge and high wings and a roped tassel staring at him above the brim as the guy got closer.

"See your license and registration please?" the trooper was saying now.

This wasn't great, and Pete was getting a little ticked off here, that you can't just help me a teeny bit by calling a tow truck?

But the issue--do you give him your *real* license, the Peter E. McGirk . . . and take the risk, in the (hopefully) unlikely event your name previously found its way into the system.

Or . . . you fork over your current *fake* ID, *George Worthy* . . . but *that* didn't sit great if the guy takes it back to the squad car and scans the sucker through something . . . trouble *that* way too.

The judgment call being--is this guy just busting *chops*, since he knows you only have car trouble . . . and he's *not* going to run anything . . .

Meanwhile Pete was digging around the glove compartment trying to *find* the registration. You had an old Ford Focus manual, a half thing of tic-tacs, a couple pens, a receipt for an oil change, someone's hair clip . . . and that was about it.

"Not looking great," Pete said to the trooper, "on the registration deal. I gotta be honest, I'm driving it for *another* guy, and it's my fault, I didn't check any of that stuff first."

"Oh yeah?" the cop said. "Where's the *other* guy at, then?"

"I have no idea. Not behind me if that's what you mean. All's I know, I'm dropping it in Bakersfield. It beats taking a bus." Might as well lay it out.

“*Were* headed to Bakersfield,” the trooper said, “*past* tense,” and he gave it a solid laugh.

“I have to be honest,” Pete said, “I can appreciate a sense of humor on a public official--I mean yeah we need *more* of that--but joking about someone when they’re *fucked*, like I am at the moment . . . I don’t know.”

“I *got* you Bud. Just trying to keep it interesting. No harm intended.”

“No *offense* taken. Sorry.”

“Gonna let you slide on the registration. Since we’re towing it. Technically it’s not a moving violation.”

“Oh boy, thanks.”

“So just give me your John Hancock here, and we’ll get the show on the road. You got Triple-A, any of that shit?”

Pete said he wasn’t sure, but the bad part either way, the guy was asking for a signature. One of those you give with your finger on an I-Pad, which apparently authorized him to call the tow truck.

You could scratch something illegible, but the fear was it would have to match up to the driver’s license the guy may *not* have forgotten about.

A car came barreling by, over the speed limit for sure, a red Chevy Blazer with big tires. His brake-lights were on as he passed Pete and the trooper.

“Hold that thought,” the trooper said, and he hustled into his car and peeled out of there after the guy with a major squeal of rubber and a cloud of dust.

Unbelievable, Pete thought. Now I got *another* hour.

You did have to wonder how the driver didn’t see the cop in advance and slow down. Highway 10 was straight as string at this point, bright day, huge domed sky, and you’d be able to spot the trooper’s flashing lights from about two miles back.

The conclusion would have to be, the guy was on the phone or texting or otherwise so preoccupied that even though he no doubt *saw* the trooper, the brain receptors didn’t react until it was too late.

The other observation was, it was surprising how agile the heavy cop was, he really went flying into his vehicle when the chase was on.

Whatever. Pete looked around in the back seats, Jeez, even an old newspaper or something would help, and on the floor under a rolled up piece of canvas were two books, both out of the 1960's and kind of radical, not what you'd expect from the Focus guy, based on their brief--and now ill-advised--interaction.

One was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and Pete had heard of it, it was a memoir from a controversial black guy. The other book was a series of stories, or more like essays, by Tom Wolfe.

Pete had read one of his novels, it was about a girl from the backwoods of North Carolina who ends up at a fancy basketball college like Duke, and dates one of the stars of the team. It wasn't bad. You got a feel for fraternities and sororities and it made you mad but you couldn't stop reading.

Pete liked how Wolfe didn't try to conclude anything or throw his opinion around, he just let it roll like a camera.

This book now from under the seat was a mixed bag, but one of the chapters was a profile of Carol Doda.

And Jeez, Wolfe did have a nice style, you had to admit:

She blew up her breasts with emulsified silicone, the main ingredient of Silly Putty, and became the greatest resource of the San Francisco tourist industry.

Pete remembered Carol Doda, the Condor on Broadway and Columbus, and the finale involved her dancing on a piano that got raised to the ceiling by invisible wires . . . and the author was doing a good job putting a human spin on her. . . though even better, the trooper was back.

"Sorry about that," the cop said. "Guy pissed me *off*. Right in my face. Some infractions you tolerate, some you don't."

“Well thanks for keeping us safe,” Pete said, and everything else aside, he meant it.

“So . . . where were we?” the trooper said.

“Uh, I think you needed me to . . . okay the tow.”

“Oh yeah . . . Listen, I called it in as I was circling back. Shouldn’t be long. I gotta get a move on.”

Wow. Pete was tempted to ask what the rush *was* all of a sudden, but of course you may have just dodged a bullet so you left it alone.

But the guy volunteered it anyway, “I’m on lunch.”

So Pete couldn’t resist asking if there was a specific *place*, since he was always up for a food recommendation, despite the circumstance.

“They’ll be towing you to Wilma,” the trooper said, “which should work out perfect. Right across from the Arco? You have *Evelyn’s*. Best chicken-fried steak in three counties. So long now.”

And he was gone again, not setting a record like chasing the speeder, but not fooling around either . . . and Pete knew the feeling, when your blood sugar’s dropping you take care of it.

The tow truck driver opened the hood and mumbled something about it smelling like a head gasket, and Pete figured if the guy was a *real* mechanic he wouldn’t be doing roadside duty--but then again, he’d had experiences with these guys being right on the money, quicker with the correct diagnosis than the *shop* guy.

Either way, what difference did it make, the thing was caput, but the state trooper had been right, *Evelyn’s* was something *else*, jumbo portions and various gravies dripping off the plates as the good-natured servers brought people’s food out. The entrees--and the desserts too--had the messy quality of everything being homemade.

If Pete had to guess, that was Evelyn herself orchestrating the proceedings back in the kitchen, and when it slowed down she came out and said hello all around, and you had the impression a lot of these folks stopped in here every day.

Pete was at the counter and she gave him a “How are *you* today?” and then spoke a minute with the guy next to him, and refilled both their coffees before getting back to work.

Pete said to the guy, “You got the better treatment there. Not the *local* one, but close.”

“I’m in a big rig,” the guy said. “Stop here whenever I can *time* it.”

“So where are you headed?” Pete said.

“Where are *you*?”

“It *was* LA. I have to wait now. Auto trouble.”

“Ah,” the guy said. “Well at least you got this place to keep you company. You at the Set-Tee?” That was the motel in town, up the block from the car repair place.

“Should be, yeah. Haven’t quite committed myself though.”

“I was gonna say, I could offer you a ride, except you’re waiting on your repair.”

Dang.

“I don’t *have* to be waiting . . . no,” Pete said.

“Okay then,” the guy said, finishing up. “Let’s get *to* it.”

And just like that . . . Pete was back on I-10 heading west, this time resting comfortably about 15 feet up, his head positioned just right against a passenger seat that might have out-comforted anything he’d ever sat in, except maybe his Costco recliner.

He liked this guy’s style, whose name was Abe. No screwing around, no asking things twice or making sure.

Though a half hour in Abe did say, “You return-tripping it, or what?” Which Pete assumed meant, would he be going back to Wilma to retrieve the vehicle when it was fixed.

“Not the top of my To Do list, no,” Pete said, and Abe seemed satisfied and left it at that.

He'd found the registration after all, and he gave it to the repair shop as a placeholder . . . and now he called them and said to please junk the car and send the guy on the registration the bill, and they were okay with that.

"More definitive now," the trucker said, "that you're not coming back."

"That was an error, yeah. I've made of a few of them lately."

"Like what?" Pete didn't feel like diving into anything, and he was awfully comfortable at the moment and it felt wonderful to just watch the road. And what a view from up here.

He particularly didn't want to get into anything *off-beat*, such as offering a political opinion without meaning to, and risk having *this* guy throw him out.

But a direct question, *like what?*, was reasonable.

"Well . . . for starters, I think I ran away from something I didn't have to. That led to other deficiencies."

"You been acting out of character, you mean?"

"Yeah. I seem to be overdoing stuff. Not letting it flow natural."

"You ever speak to anyone about that?"

"Hunh? You mean, psychologically?"

"Yeah. Like a counselor, a therapist."

Pete *had* actually, but he said no.

"*I* did," Abe said. "On account of my brother's teeth."

Uh-oh.

Pete tentatively asked, "What about your brother's teeth?"

"Only that he was visited by a alien. Not personally, but the shit got into the dental mix, and he ended up fucked."

"Ah," Pete said, but Abe was on a roll, and he bit off a hunk of beef jerky and continued.

"See my *brother*, he had a girlfriend in Las Cruces . . . For the geography-challenged, that's in New Mexico. 46 miles from El Paso. Which is one of your border towns."

"Hmm."

“They’re in a pizza joint--and that’s kind of curious already, with about 10,000 Mexican restaurants there, why would you choose Italian? At any rate, they order a house special, the works, and there’s an olive buried in the cheese that didn’t get pitted, and Pete breaks part of a tooth, a lower rear molar that has a filling in it.”

“Ah.”

“He’s gonna wait until he gets home, which back then was Lafayette.”

“Indiana,” Pete said.

“Exactly. But it starts bugging him, and the girlfriend convinces him to take care of it. So the upshot is, he gets a replacement filling, local, and then all hell broke loose.”

Pete would have been fine with the story stopping here, but you had 4 hours to LA still, probably more, once you hit traffic . . . and this Abe was a bit of a lunatic now, but at least thank God he was handling the big rig fine.

So Pete said, “What *kind* of hell broke loose?”

“Two *departments*. One, he developed a super strength. You wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it, at least I didn’t. But he could lift up cars, the front ends.”

“And there’s a *two*, as well?” Pete said.

“Yep. He could time travel. He didn’t intend to. But he did it once by accident. Scared the bejeezus out of him.”

Pete was thinking about that Carol Doda profile, he’d have to finish it at some point.

Abe was saying, “So I did my own investigation. You remember Roswell?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Pete said. “What about it?”

“You had your famous crash. But another one around that time, they released a discharge above a silver mine . . . outside Capitan. That’s Lincoln County.”

Abe let that hang and Pete realized he was being tested.

“You’re not gonna tell me,” Pete said, “silver, from the particular mine, ended up in your brother’s *tooth*.”

Abe smiled, pretty much for the first time. “You’re not bad . . . Rough start, didn’t know if you were all *there*, frankly, but you righted the ship.”

No one spoke for about 20 miles.

Then Abe mentioned that when they get to the warehouse in Imperial Beach he wouldn’t have to *fingerprint it*, which was always good.

Pete thought that might be trucker slang for not having to unload anything yourself, that there’d be a guy showing up with a forklift.

Abe started whistling, and Pete recognized the tune. It was the old Michael Martin Murphey song *Wildfire*. He remembered Murphey performing it once on the David Letterman show. Pete was sleepy now, and he closed his eyes and listened to Abe’s version.

Deficiency

“What was your *other* thing?” Chandler said. “Come on, I’m getting stiff here.”

They were on the tennis court bench at Polliwog Park, in between sets.

“Ah stupid,” Pete said. “But I’ve been subletting my place up north, my one-bedroom in the Marina. 3 grand a month.”

“Ho-ly Mackerel.”

“Yeah, the market’s gone insane, and that’s cheap. Anyhow, the mope stopped paying, it seems like.”

“You’re screwed.”

“Jeez, you’re a lawyer. Just like *that*?”

“Yeah big time. Especially Frisco. Liberal landlord-tenant courts, takes you forever to evict someone, and they can put in a simple, bogus defense, which *really* hamstring the process.”

“Now I’m in a very bad mood,” Pete said. “So let’s play. Though again . . . thank you on the *first* thing.”

This was getting uncomfortable, having to keep appreciating the guy, but the fact was you were getting free legal advice right and left just by letting him kick your ass on the court . . . and unfortunately the tenant assessment was right on target, wasn’t it.

Later Pete headed down to the *Crowe’s Nest* for a little cocktail hour, and it only took a second before Ned Mancuso spotted him and was up and coming over, big strides, like they were long lost friends.

Pete’s relationship with Ned was a work in progress. He enjoyed the guy, probably actually *liked* him, but he didn’t trust him.

Then again Ned had helped him out, couple of jams, and hadn’t asked for anything in return, at least yet.

“What’s shaking my *man*,” Ned said. “You hanging in there?”

Before Pete could answer Ned signalled for a couple of drinks.

“What,” Ned said, “you seem uncertain.”

“Nah, it’s all good, I just don’t want to *overdo* it yet.” Which is typically what happened when Ned took charge, it turned into a long night.

“Come on. Relax, take a *load* off. You need me to later, I’ll give you a lift.”

“Well that’s the good thing,” Pete said, “I can always walk home.”

“Oh yeah,” Ned said, “you got a sweet set-up there. That’s smart. You don’t have to depend on a car.”

“I won’t argue with you, though it’s a *little* far. Even two, three blocks closer, that changes everything.”

“So get a bike.”

“Yeah I *thought* of that. What holds me back, is not wanting to fly *off* the thing, negotiating the odd hill on the way *into* town.”

“So you get a helmet.”

“Nah, you can’t. I haven’t seen *anybody* with one since I’ve lived here.”

“Gee you’re right. Never thought of that . . . How about that *one* guy, you ever run into him up in the hills, always got a white t-shirt?”

“Yeah I know who you mean, and *that* guy’s something else. He’s doing *interval* uphill sprints on his one-speed cruiser. He’s got to be in his 70’s.”

“Cindy’s grandfather,” Ned said, leaving it at that, and Cindy was the waitress who’d just set down their Sunset Punches . . . and it was a reminder that when you stripped it all away, Manhattan Beach was a small town.

Pete asked Ned what *he* had going, and Ned said something about getting a little lucky this week . . . and you *sort* of wanted to know what that meant, but you probably didn’t.

“Not your fault,” Pete said, “you didn’t *remind* me of this--intentionally--but I got a guy not paying rent.”

“You own *rental* shit, you mean?”

“No, no, I learned my lesson with that. This *here*, is I sublet my place in the Bay Area when I moved down here in October.”

“So you *didn’t* learn your lesson then.”

“Okay, you wanna nitpick it, fair enough.”

“It seems to me,” Ned said, “you make up your mind on something, you make a clean break. Don’t half-ass it.”

Ned had a point of course. The only reason Pete was doing this, hanging onto the place on Broderick Street, was if it didn’t work out in southern California you’d never be able to afford an apartment in that neighborhood again, coming in cold.

“At any rate,” he said. “I have to go *up* there. I fear. Sooner rather than later.”

“I feel for you,” Ned said. “Tenants hold all the cards. Nothing worse. No easy solution.” And actually shaking his head . . . This wasn’t a good sign, Pete decided, if *Ned* thought it was going to be difficult.

Pete said, “This is out of left field, but when you hear about someone jumping off a hotel balcony into a pool--like one of those college fraternity spring break deals down in Cabo--how high is too high?”

“That’s a good point,” Ned said. “Where does it switch from novelty to suicidal.”

“Yeah . . . You ever read the one about the *trick* high-diver? The guy who climbs the ridiculous tower and dives into a little tank? Like they used to do in the circus?”

“That was good. It gave you a feel for it. The guy looking down at the tank, seeing it as the size of a silver dollar.”

Pete said, “Then of course, he’s up there on his perch, getting ready to do a test dive, no one around except the assistant who just finished rigging the scaffold . . . and two guys come around the corner and shoot *that* guy. Then as they’re running off, one of them takes a glance back and sees the diver up there watching.”

“Yeah, great start . . . See now, that scene was New Orleans, I’m pretty sure.”

“The rest of the story didn’t quite match the beginning. They got into some Civil War re-enactment nonsense. Just stick with the diver.”

“I don’t *remember* the rest,” Ned said, “so I get what you’re saying. . . Anyhow, didn’t mean to rain on your parade, your landlord-tenant business.”

“Okay, then do me a favor please and don’t keep bringing it up?” Pete was starting to get a little indigestion, an acid-reflux type thing, probably from skipping any actual food and going straight to the booze, and it did turn into a long evening, and he did walk home, and he didn’t solve anything, that’s for sure.

The San Francisco apartment was two flights up, and when Pete got to the top of the stairs the door was open a crack and he was going to say something but instead he tapped lightly, and a moment later there the guy was.

A little bigger than Pete remembered, and he had on baggy basketball shorts and those Adidas rubber slippers that you see soccer players wear when they take off their cleats.

“Dixson? Pete Seely.”

“I know who you are,” the guy said.

His full name was Dixson Herbel. He seemed to be what you’d want in a subletter. A friendly guy from North Carolina who got recruited by a start-up in the city, fired up about the job and pulling down plenty of salary to afford the apartment.

Pete’s instinct was also that a guy from North Carolina was less likely to screw you than someone from, say, Brooklyn.

Right now the guy didn’t offer to shake hands or invite him in, and Pete could see through the partially-opened door a pair of bare feet moving around in the kitchen, female ones.

Pete said, “You look like you’re a workout person. That’s good. You’d fit right in down south.”

“Where’s that?” the guy said, and for a moment it looked they might be headed toward a civilized conversation.

“West LA. Manhattan, Hermosa, Redondo. You ever been?”

The guy didn't respond, but said, "What-- you *call* me? *Harass* me that way--not once but twice--and that's not *good* enough?"

"Excuse me there?" Pete said.

The guy continued. "Now you have to present yourself unannounced? During my quiet time? . . . Is that the way you were raised?"

"Huh?"

"Listen to yourself, you fat fuck. You know exactly what I'm talking about. You provide me sub-standard conditions, I go along with it based on your assurances that you will address the 8 items we agreed upon. And on *your* end? You didn't care enough to do *crap* . . . So, you stopped getting paid."

For a second Pete wondered if there really *had* been a discussion about 8 items in the apartment that needed upgrade or replacement? He couldn't recall anything like that, unless he was truly losing his brain.

All he could remember was handing him the keys, and the guy telling Pete he was the luckiest man in San Francisco today because the apartment was 'killer' and the price was *right on* . . . and thank you so much for this opportunity.

Pete hated that expression 'killer', especially when there was no direct noun connected to it, which at least the guy did do, connect it to 'apartment'.

But back to this developing mother-*fucker* now . . .

Pete said, "Are you serious? I mean I'm willing to work with you, believe me . . . if you're in a jam . . . those things happen."

"You haven't been *listening*," Dixson said, "on account of you don't *want* to . . . So you'd best be moving on, would be my advice, unless you enjoy being in more hot water than you already are."

Pete tried to process this, and he couldn't understand how he'd be in *any* hot water . . . but before he could say anything further the guy pulled out his phone, which he'd been holding behind his back, and explained to Pete that he'd just documented the whole conversation, as part of his ongoing case, and that he'd see him in court, or the police precinct--whichever came first.

And before Pete could conjure up a comeback to *that*, Dixson closed the apartment door in his face.

Someone turned up the music in the apartment, some aggressive hip-hop . . . and Pete didn't sleep well that night, though he did come up with *one* idea, why not visit the guy at work.

Dixson Herbel worked at *Sonic Boomers*, which occupied the top two floors of an industrial building on Howard Street between 4th and 5th. Twitter, Dropbox and a few other household names were in the neighborhood.

The guy inside the front door couldn't have been nicer, except he told Pete he wasn't allowed in without a badge, and Pete had to wait until the guy got distracted by a UPS delivery to walk in.

No idea if Dixson was actually here, since the millenials all seemed to work from home at least *some* of the time . . . but he poked around and spotted him in the employee cafeteria, having coffee with a co-worker.

And Gee, you didn't have to pay for anything, so Pete helped himself to a slice of pie, grabbed a fork, and sat down with them.

"I am *not* . . . believing this," Dixson said.

"What?" Pete said, shoving in a large chunk of pie. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Mona, will you excuse us?" Dixson said to the co-worker, and when she left he said to Pete, "I'm going to call security on you in a second."

"Do me a favor and let me finish this first," Pete said. "Didn't know the perks were so sweet."

"You interrupted me," Dixson said.

"I got ya . . . you'll be throwing me *out* in a second, but first you want to teach me a lesson."

"That too. But I want to keep you around for minute so I can try to understand how someone can have a *death* wish, and not be worrying about the consequences.'

“Dang . . . I *know* you’re exaggerating, you’re going for the dramatic effect . . . Still, those are fighting words. It’s a good thing I’m a pacifist.”

“I see. Meaning *what* now? Otherwise *I’d* have to watch out? You’d be kicking *my* ass?” The guy applying an ugly sneer to the delivery.

“No, the opposite. If I weren’t a pacifist I’d be getting *my* ass kicked.”

“Okay, good to hear we’ve got that straight.”

“What about the rent?” Pete said. “Not sure if this is the definition of *business booming*, but something tells me the joint isn’t teetering on bankruptcy either.”

“You would have gotten it, if you’d addressed the issues I’ve outlined multiple times . . . But keep your shirt on. Once the lawsuit resolves itself, there will no doubt be an arrangement.”

Pete said, “You remind me of my dad. I miss him pretty bad. Not you personally, but the expression *keep your shirt on*. He loved that one, could apply it almost at will . . . but he especially loved using it on entitled scumbag *momma’s boys*.”

“Fuck YOU there, friend. I’ll give you 5 seconds to be on your way.”

Pete got up, and of course the guy tells him calmly and quietly that he better watch his back.

Pete had picked up some mace last year from a guy on Douglas Street, in the Castro district.

The guy was a computer hacker, that’s what Pete was seeing him about, but on the way out the guy handed him the can of mace *for good measure*, was how he put it . . . and Pete threw it in the trunk and had pretty much forgotten about it until now.

He still had the keys to his old building, but that might be messy, so he sat across the street in the car and waited for the guy to hopefully come home at a reasonable hour.

It took a while, but there was Dixson now, opening the bottom door, and Pete knew he was a little lucky, considering all the options these guys have after work.

Dixson hesitated inside the door, which was normal, that's where the mailboxes were . . . and when the guy got to the top of the staircase Pete was halfway up it . . . and the guy turned around and said, "Well what a surprise."

"I was back in the neighborhood," Pete said, climbing another step.

The guy said, "I was right then. You *do* have a death wish."

Dixson had a bag slung over his shoulder and he pulled it off and dropped it, and stood at the top of the stairs, pretty formidable arms slightly spread like a gorilla, getting ready to attack as Pete approached, two steps away now.

"Hi," Pete said, and he shot off the mace in the guy's face.

It only then occurred to him that he'd neglected to wear a mask, and he could feel the stuff right away, his eyes starting to tear, his throat having some trouble.

But nothing like what the *guy* was going through.

Pete said, "How about some fresh air, would that help?" and Dixson moaned, high-pitched like a baby pig squeal, and Pete marched the guy into the emergency stairwell and up to the roof.

He couldn't help thinking that up here you did have a view of the bridge, the Golden Gate . . . and he should have spent more time on the roof when he lived here.

Though you had to be careful, there was no rail. If you were drunk, stupid, or otherwise stumbling around in the dark--like now--you could step right off.

Dixson was in a weird squat at the moment, seriously addressing his respiration, and Pete reached down and grabbed him by the ankles, surprising him, and Dixson was straining to resist but Pete had the angle and the momentum . . . the only problem being, as they got close to the edge, how do you swing him around . . . so Pete maced him again and Dixson wasn't showing a whole lot of fight and Pete had him by the shoulder and dangled half of him off the side of the roof.

Pete intended to ask him a few *Are we good* type questions, but when he adjusted his grip he lost his leverage, and the guy's body was too far over the dang edge.

Pete started to panic and decided the easiest way to bring him back was grab one foot, with both hands, and really *pull* . . . and there you go, that started to work . . . except then HOLY SHIT . . . the guy's shoe came off in Pete's hand.

Pete grabbed at his calf, and there was a brief instant where he thought he had it . . . and then he didn't.

And Dixson disappeared over the edge.

Pete let a beat go by, and then approached, and looked down.

The guy had landed on the fire escape railing for the apartment below, and thankfully he toppled to the *left*, and onto the landing. If he'd toppled to the *right*, he would have met the sidewalk.

Dixson did get to his feet, and this was a big relief, because for a moment Pete wondered if the guy might have broken his *neck* . . . and he hightailed it down the steel ladder of the fire escape, making that little jump at the end, the last six feet or so . . . and the son of a gun hit the ground and was flying toward Marina Boulevard . . . the guy looking back and up at the roof one more time, like he was truly *spooked*, and that Pete was going to be chasing after him.

Which was ridiculous of course.

You never knew if you'd *completely* made your point, but Pete had a decent feeling about this one.

Home Depot was still open and Pete picked up a new lock for the apartment door, but unfortunately he got to a point of no return, where he had the old one out but couldn't get the dang *new* one to sit right.

Nothing more frustrating than battling a job and not getting it, but what could you do.

So he walked over to Weatherby's, and his favorite bartender Mitch was happy to see him, and after awhile Pete mentioned the unfinished business with the lock, and Mitch said no problem, he could take care of it for him right now if he liked.

Pete said, “Really?”, and Mitch said it was a slow night and they had it under control, plus he enjoyed doing stuff like this, it got him out of the bar.

Endgame

Neighborhood hardware stores were tougher to come by these days, but there was one on Lombard, run by a Chinese family, sort of a mixture of household goods and basic hardware stuff, along with a couple aisles of Asian food items.

It was Friday morning, a glistening bright day in the city for February 9th, though apparently they'd gotten a foot of snow overnight at Tahoe.

Pete found some decent wire, it reminded him of baling wire like they might use on hay, or to tie fencing together. The main thing, it was flexible enough that you could work it, and he had the guy cut him a nice three-foot length.

You didn't want to skimp on the gloves, and they had a brand that had *extra* heavy-duty padding, both on the palm and fingers, and even on the back-- and they were a little bulky when you slipped them on, but well worth it.

And oh yeah . . . the roll of duct tape, don't forget that.

So there you were . . . he was all set, and nothing to do now except drive over to Castro Valley.

The rental car he'd picked up Wednesday was a basic Honda Civic, but it seemed sufficient, and he threw some warm clothes in back and stuck the hardware supplies in the center console . . . and 40 minutes later he was dealing with Errol's community gate, the bottom of the hill, the houses up above.

Pete wasn't positive the guy'd be around. He was going by what Errol told him the other night, that he normally worked at home Monday Wednesday Friday, and you hoped nothing threw that out of whack today.

Errol had been one of Pete's bosses years ago, when Pete was a teenager working a summer job as a bicycle messenger. Now he'd done something very bad.

Pete leaned out the driver's window to where the console was, where visitors called up to the residents, and he took one of those healthy deep breaths and punched in Errol's code.

No answer. He gave it another 30 seconds and tried it again.

Errol's voice came on the intercom: "What do you need."

And Pete picked up the handset that was part of the intercom apparatus.

He said, "Dude I'm trying to *help* you here. Let me in." He hated the word *dude* but it just popped out.

There was no more conversation, and Pete was hanging onto the headset, hoping, and a good minute went by and then the buzzer sounded and the heavy security gate swung open, and Pete drove up the hill and pulled into Errol's driveway.

Errol opened the door, no smiles today, more of the *what do you need* attitude, not like he was going to challenge or attack Pete, but making it pretty clear that he didn't belong here now.

Pete pointed inside and said, "You mind?"

"I *do*," Errol said, leaving it there.

"Here's the thing," Pete said. "I'm not your enemy. You have some options, I know you do."

And he brushed past Errol into the house, Errol only making a half-hearted effort to restrain him, and he followed Pete in and closed the door . . . and Pete smashed him over the head with the flashlight he pulled out of his rear pants pocket.

It was one of those heavy-duty jobs, the kind the police used at one time, that took 6 full-sized batteries and could double as a night stick, or at least some kind of improvised weapon.

He'd actually picked *that* up from an ex-tenant who stiffed him on the rent and left his belongings in the apartment. The flashlight had been in a kitchen drawer.

Either way, Errol was in some trouble, but wobbling, trying to get up, and Pete smashed him with the thing again.

“Let’s go,” he said. “In the car.”

Errol got back to a sitting position and Pete found a towel and brought it along. Let the guy at least dab his wounds, though frankly it was more an *impact* thing, the guy taking some blunt force for sure. One little cut was *part* of it, Pete could see now, but no real blood.

Errol was stunned the way you see a fighter on TV staggering around when they don’t know quite where they are or what just connected with them, and Pete was able to guide him by the arm, resistance free, into the passenger seat.

“Make sure you put your seatbelt on,” Pete said, and the guy made a small motion with one hand toward where you pulled the belt, and didn’t go any further with it.

Before he started the engine, Pete took the duct tape out of console, taped Errol’s wrists together, and it was a bit of a pain in the neck, but he reached way down and got his ankles taped together as well.

“You can relax now for a while,” Pete said, easing it out of the driveway, onto Fox Ridge Drive, a right turn on Strobridge to the 580 ramp, then picking up the 680 interchange business through the Walnut Creek-Concord corridor, and connecting with I-80 at Fairfield.

“So far so good,” Pete said. “I’m turning into a grumpy old man, but I can’t *tolerate* traffic any more. How about you?”

Errol was staring straight ahead. He’d come around a bit, his eyes were showing some recognition.

Pete had to take a leak by the time they hit the Sacramento bypass toward Reno, and he considered stopping somewhere real quick, you could probably work it . . . but he better not fool around.

It wasn’t until around Colfax that Errol initiated his first bit of conversation.

He said, “If I might ask, where are we going?”

“And the *second* part of that?” Pete said, “*and what are you doing with me?*”

Errol didn’t say anything.

“You ever a Boy Scout?” Pete said.

Errol shook his head very slightly.

“You’re gonna require some winter survival skills. Snow-type ones. What I’ll be doing, is letting you off in the mountains. You’re going to need to keep your wits about you, and it’s up to you, how bad you want it.”

Errol was looking at Pete more wide-eyed now.

Pete continued. “You’ve always been good to me. And that’s why I’m giving you a chance . . . Jeez, good thing it’s not snowing, currently, otherwise we’d need chains right now.”

Which was true, he hadn’t thought of that. Meanwhile, dang, there *was* a fair amount of snow this winter, it was up pretty high already on the sides of the road from the snowplow, and you still had 45 minutes and a couple thousand feet of elevation before you got to Donner Summit.

Pete said, “But you let me down. An old colleague from the newspaper business laid a tip on me, and I put it together . . . Inconceivable as it was . . . I wished I never asked him about the case, honestly.”

Errol said, “Please Pete. I can’t expect you to understand. Everything just . . . got away from me that night.”

“I understand. Like a perfect storm.”

Errol didn’t say anything.

Pete supposed it *was* good to hear the guy confess, in actual words. In fact he wasn’t sure he could go through with it if he didn’t get that out of him just now.

What he meant by *it*--no, he of course *wasn’t* going to be dropping the guy off in the woods, letting him test his winter survival skills.

The bogus nonsense he was feeding the guy--that he better be ready to pull out his Boy Scout skills--that was to relax him a bit--hopefully--so he wouldn’t be fighting Pete for his life on the way *into* the woods.

At least until you get the baling wire around his throat, then yeah, all bets would be off.

Pete exited Highway 80 onto Soda Springs Road. He was somewhat familiar with the area. He'd been coming up here since he was a kid, not often, but a little skiing, a little summer stuff. There'd been a rental cabin he'd gone in on once at Northstar, 10 people paying their share, though it worked about okay because only a few of them were ever up here at the same time.

The human activity was on the south side of Highway 80. That's where you had the Sugar Bowl ski resort, and if you stayed on Soda Springs Road that direction you'd eventually wind your way down to Donner Lake.

If you crossed *over* though, the *north* side of I-80, there wasn't much, it got pretty remote in a hurry. Pete had some good memories over here, doing mountain biking, though once in perfect conditions, the middle of summer, he took an inadvertent wrong turn off the trail, and realized it a couple hundred yards in--and he had a *heckuva* time finding that trail again, and plenty of crazy thoughts swirled around in his head before he got there.

After a few miles he turned onto a side road. This was going to be tricky, since they'd plowed the main road, but not this one. This is when you wish you'd thought ahead, rented a Subaru, Jesus--or at least something with front wheel drive.

Though the Honda was handling it okay actually, and maybe Pete was mixed up, and he said to Errol, "This thing got front wheel *drive*? Do you know?"

"I believe it does," Errol said, very faintly.

So that was good then, and you couldn't have laid out better timing, the afternoon was getting on, and it was starting to get a little dark, which it tended to do real early in the mountains.

No one around, no houses, no cabins, no vehicles in the distance . . . nothing.

So Pete turned off the engine.

Errol sat there rigid, facing forward.

It occurred to Pete who am I kidding, this guy sees right through my bullshit, and is *expecting* the worst.

We'll find out.

Off to the right was a cut-through in a stand of pines, and then it closed in again on you and opened up in back, and you could see just a bit of light filtering into the spot back there, which looked clean and simple and logical. The snow was thick along the way, but you could handle it.

Pete got out and opened Errol's door, and he had to help the guy out, on account of the wrists and ankles being locked together with the duct tape . . . and Errol started hopping ahead, as though he knew where Pete wanted to go.

Pete thought back to an incident one day on the job at Speed-King delivery service, where Pete had been the teenage bike messenger. He was a pretty conscientious worker, and he didn't screw up a delivery very often.

On this one day, he did. He was supposed to pick something up at Number Two Embarcadero Center, and take it to the 38th floor of the Bank of America building, on California and Kearny.

But his brain wasn't working right, and instead he dropped the package on the 38th floor of the *Transamerica* Building. They didn't seem to be expecting it there, but Pete didn't think much of it, and they signed for it and that was that.

The shift ended and Pete was back in the Speed-King offices on Pier 7, checking out for the day, and Errol is on the phone and puts his hand up toward Pete.

The woman from the Bank of America building company is on the line, and it wasn't *any* company, it was Roche, Winston and Meyer, one of the most respected law firms in the city, and needless to say, a huge account for Speed-King. And apparently the package Pete screwed up was a legal document that had to be filed that day in court.

Errol asked Pete about it, Pete realized his mistake and explained what happened, and for a minute or so Errol stood there with the receiver held out to the side, and you could hear the woman yelling.

Finally the conversation concluded, and Errol winked at Pete and told him don't worry about it. Pete found out later, through the grapevine, that the woman insisted the messenger be fired, if Speed-King ever wanted any more

business from them, and Errol had calmly informed her that that wasn't going to happen.

Pete looked at the guy ahead in the woods now, and told him to come back.

They drove out to Highway 80 again, Pete got back on it headed east, toward Reno, and five minutes later he took the downtown Truckee exit.

He went south on old Brockway Road, and it felt like they were heading out into *different* wilderness now, except Pete veered onto North Shore, and then a little left turn, and the Honda came to a stop in front of the Truckee Police Department.

Pete cut off the tape on Errol's hands, then his feet.

"Take care of it," he said, and he watched Errol slowly go inside.

After a couple minutes, it seemed okay to leave. You could head right back down toward Sacramento, probably get most of the way out of the mountains before it was completely dark.

Then again you had the town of Truckee, with an old main street, some character to it, a few establishments. A little bit of a bar scene.

Pete was thinking, maybe there's a game on, you get into a conversation with someone. He could use that now.

Samples

“I really must be out of it,” Pete said. “They changed some stuff, I didn’t even notice.”

“Well you were away,” Tammy said.

“Except I’ve been back a week . . . Yeah, this patio furniture is new. I’m thinking those flowering plants weren’t there either, in the big round bowls? And the inside of the pool, the color looks different. More vivid. Is it possible they drained the thing and repainted it? Would that be a major job?”

“Anything’s possible,” Tammy said, “but pools tend to be the same color.”

“Either way,” Pete said, “why don’t you help yourself and go in, before we get started. Then I can size up the contrast too, see if I was mixed up on the repainting.”

“Or not,” Tammy said.

“You even *bring* a bikini? Or that’s not part of the deal today?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I do appreciate you giving me the time though.”

“Of *course* . . . why *wouldn’t* I?” Pete said.

Admittedly watching Tammy, his one-time surfing instructor, bob around the apartment complex pool would have been a nice touch. The reason they were here though, Tammy was following up, from when she found out Pete had once been a journalist, on the blog she was developing on women’s surfing.

“Women’s *pro* surfing?” Pete said now. “Or just the generic kind?”

“Yes, I’d like to focus on the professional game, with plenty of linkage to the *everyday* female in the water.”

“You’re losing me already. *What* game?”

“It’s a term. But yes the sport is competitive, often fiercely so.”

“Let me sidetrack you for a second. Does a woman really need to . . . scream out, in competition? Or is that a myth?”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost *me*. You mean after a great ride, in celebration? Before she paddles back out?”

“Forget it,” Pete said. “We were at a tennis event yesterday, me and a few people, we drove out to Indian Wells--and I’ve seen it on *TV*, but dang, in the flesh they *really* bellow it out.”

“Actually,” Tammy said, “I know a little something *about* that. I *played* junior tennis, and our coach, he had ground rules. He felt you were unfairly interfering with your opponent by making the noise.”

“Wow. That guy still around? He should get an award or something.”

“They ran him off. Some of the parents. They felt he was too dogmatic. Last I heard he’d moved to the Fiji Islands.”

“The lesson there,” Pete said, “let the coach *coach*. High school up north where I taught for a couple years? They had a JV coach, he was on a streak, 17-0 in league--this is basketball--and the parents got him fired. The principal caved in.”

“Let me guess,” Tammy said, “playing-time was a factor.”

“You’re kind of a genius,” Pete said. “What sports *don’t* you know something about?”

“Well I’m not a great swimmer.”

“Now *that* . . . you *gotta* be kidding me.”

“I know, you’d think. The ocean and all. I mean I’m not going to drown out there, but I won’t beat many folks in a 50 yard freestyle . . . I was on a swim team when I was a teenager, briefly, but the flip turn got me. It threw off my equilibrium. I’ve kind of resisted the activity ever since.”

“*Activity*, that’s kinda funny. I was on a swim team too as a kid, not a superstar swimmer either, but I did drown a guy once.”

Tammy’s mouth dropped open.

“Not that big a deal,” Pete said, “I mean there were circumstances involved. But don’t tell anyone.”

It occurred to Pete that he really didn’t *know* Tammy, but that if she *did* tell someone, he’d just pass it off as a joke.

Anyhow you might as well throw her a change-up. This is how it played out in their other get-together too, Pete happening to bring up the fact that his friend Ray procured him a gun once.

Which got Tammy off her surf instructor high horse, changed the tone of the rest of the meal. Today she wasn't in the same role, since she was looking to him to help her *out*--but still, shake things up a little, it never hurts.

"You're putting me on," she said. "I *think* . . . *Aren't* you?"

"Like I said, you live long enough things happen. It's not always anyone's fault . . . Your blog though, why not make YouTube videos instead?"

"Gosh. Pardon?"

"My thought lately is people don't read. Or at least their eyes don't move when they try, so they only pick up the words directly in front of them. At *most* . . . I mean, what blogs are popular anymore? *Name* a couple."

"Are you just saying that," Tammy said, "because you don't feel like helping me today? In which case, that's fine, we can reschedule."

Pete was going to answer but the side gate rattled and someone came into the pool area. It was Betty, the flight attendant for Southwest. She swam laps occasionally, looked pretty good in doing so.

Pete had tried to put a little bit of a move on Betty once, early on, before Marlene moved in, and he got the polite but firm rejection.

Now she was joining them, sitting down, more talkative than ever. Pete wondered what *this* was all about . . . but he'd been through enough that you positively *couldn't* explain about women to assume it was about anything.

The good part, Tammy opened up right away with Betty, all Pete had to do was introduce them--and soon Tammy disclosed why she was here, and wouldn't you know Betty was a literature major in her day and in fact loved editing.

"With all due respect," Pete said, "you *edit*?"

"Golly, he was listening *after* all," Tammy said to Betty. "The vibe I was getting, before you came along, was that his interest pertained largely to me stripping down and going in the water."

“Tell me about it,” Betty said, and when Pete scanned them both, neither one was doing much smiling.

So yeah, he really better cut back on the fraternity boy nonsense, there *was* a point where you wear out your welcome.

“But I’m serious,” Pete said, “you didn’t answer the question.”

“Yes I *do* edit, for your information,” Betty said. “I help friends who write things on Amazon. I’m their set of eyes, you might say.”

“What *kind* of things?” Pete said.

“Cooking tips, gardening books, memoirs. Is there a *problem* with that?”

“Not at all. In fact more power to you. 95 percent of the self-published stuff on Amazon is bad, if you don’t mind my opinion. None of it should have been inflicted on the world.”

“I beg to differ,” Tammy said. “I’ve found plenty of good stories on there.”

“Like what?” Pete said.

“Well, for starters, do you like mysteries?”

Pete said that depends.

“There’s this one series,” Tammy continued, “I’m hooked, I gobble up every new book *in* it.”

“Is that right.”

“The main character, you might say she’s a Renaissance woman. She’s multiply talented, but her focus in the books is she solves cold cases for the police.”

“Oh,” Pete said. “Sounds a little simplistic though, like they need to throw a couple *subplots* in there, spice it up. Don’t you think?”

“Not at all. I love the character. I’m happy to read about her doing a *crossword puzzle*.”

“One question on that,” Pete said, “how do they handle the sex scenes?”

“What do you *mean*?” Tammy said.

“I mean, does your gal . . . get down in the trenches, and if she does, how is that described? . . . Or it’s not styled that way.”

“What a chauvinist pig question,” Tammy said. “Out of everything you could ask about the series.”

“That’s for *sure*,” Betty said.

Pete had had the chauvinist expression thrown at him recently, and thought it must be making a comeback. In fact just yesterday, at the Indian Wells tennis. Though that person was semi-joking. These women didn’t seem to be.

But he thought it was a reasonable question, and he wouldn’t admit this to anyone, but he was toying with writing a mystery novel of his own.

He even had a bit of an outline. It was based on Mitch, the bartender Weatherby’s on Chestnut Street in San Francisco.

You could have one of those, good-looking guy, bachelor, lives on a houseboat across the bay, say Sausalito. The guy has a colorfully uneven past that may or may not fully reveal itself.

He listens to people’s problems, especially when they’re on their second or third round. If something hits a nerve, he may cross a line or two and help them out.

Pete didn’t dare run the story by a human. His tennis partner Chandler, for example, a clever guy but no-nonsense . . . *he* might have a good suggestion but his *overall* reaction could ruin your confidence and your author career is over before it starts.

Back poolside on this 76 degree February Saturday afternoon at the *Cheater Five Apartments*, Tammy had her laptop open now and she and Betty were studying the screen intently.

“If I use WordPress,” Tammy was saying, “then I believe I can set up a forum as well.”

“I’d agree with that,” Betty said. “Always a plus to offer the readers opportunity to interact.”

Pete cleared his throat. “With all due respect, I’ll make this announcement *one* more time. Go with YouTube.”

“I’m sorry?” Betty said.

“What I was starting to tell *her*,” Pete said, “people like to watch and and listen. No *readers* out there anymore, too dull and time consuming. Also hard work.”

“Well we’ll concede you your opinion,” Betty said, “I’m surprised actually Tammy would be consulting with you in the first place.”

Tammy said, “Pete doesn’t look like it, he could fool you a million ways, but he was a journalist.”

“You’re overdoing it,” Pete said. “Newspaper writer. Leave it at that.”

“Now I’m *impressed*,” Betty said. “I had no idea.”

It dawned on Pete that maybe he’d have better luck with some of these women if he laid more of his past on the table, upfront, emphasizing his strong points . . . though probably it wouldn’t make a stitch of difference.

“What you do,” he said, “first, show yourself surfing--and ideally not in a bulky wetsuit, but that’s up to you. Then come out of the water onto the beach and conduct the rest of your brief lecture--and I mean that, *brief*. People’s attention spans are *shot*. You give ‘em the one or two points you want to make that day on women’s surfing and you click the heck off.”

“*Oh* brother,” Tammy said, and Betty was reacting poorly as well.

The side gate jiggled again, and Holy Mackerel who was coming through it now but Ned Mancuso.

“Hey gang,” Ned said. Pete noticed the upbeat facial act was the same as always, but he didn’t have quite the normal bounce in his step.

Ned came over and bent down and gave Tammy a peck on the cheek. Pete had run Ned by Tammy one time and she responded that she was pretty sure she knew who he *was*, from the *Crowe’s Nest*, the tavern down by the beach.

Pete didn’t quite buy that then, and he definitely wasn’t buying it now, with Tammy holding Ned’s hand while he was leaning over, and taking a few extra seconds to let go.

None of Pete’s business of course.

Then Ned, without missing a beat, he introduces himself to Betty, and leans in and gives *her* a healthy and rather lengthy peck on the cheek as well . . .

Pete thinking *there* you go, Ned with whatever enigmatic trait you need, to pull that shit off, and everyone's thrilled all around . . . whereas if he, *Pete* tried it, someone'd be liable to call the police, or at the very least slap him.

"Well now that we're all unexpectedly here," Pete said, "can I offer anyone anything? Food? Beverage?"

The three of them indicated that would be fine, and Ned sat down and it was suddenly like old-home week around the pool, and Pete felt like the odd man out and wished he hadn't offered anything, except he had, so he went upstairs to try to put something together.

It took him a few minutes, he filled a couple trays and a mini ice chest, and when he got back down there they were huddled around the computer again, this time Ned in the middle, running the show.

No one acknowledged Pete's return until he started passing out stuff, and Tammy said, "Ned thinks *videos* are a good promotional tool, for *my* idea."

Saying this like it was a brand new brainstorm, not *Ned thinks so too*, just throwing it out fresh. What a surprise.

"Well that'd be one way, yeah," Pete said. "I thought they were into blogging though."

"That could work too," Ned said. "I always like visuals though. You're caught up in it right away."

No point broaching the subject again, but if *Ned* suggested Tammy surf on the videos in more minimal attire than a full body gray wetsuit, she'd say sure and probably go buck naked.

Anyhow . . . you had to seriously wonder what Ned was doing here.

He'd been by here only once . . . and that had been a middle-of-the-night deal, Ned laying a bit of timely information on Pete that he might find useful.

Unless this was about something as unlikely as a pair of Lakers tickets Ned couldn't use this evening--this was out of character.

If he did say so himself, Pete pulled together a pretty nice spread. Worked a little Costco magic with the microwave, and after a few minutes Tammy closed the laptop and everyone was stuffing their faces.

When they'd more or less devoured everything Tammy said, "Pete, you wouldn't happen to have a tad of something sweet, would you, to finish things off?"

"I know," Betty said. "A little tea and a tid-bit would work wonderfully about now."

"Tea yes," Pete said, "but unfortunately nothing dessert-like at the moment." Which wasn't entirely true, there was an unopened box of these frozen cream puffs up there, dang good, but someone had left them in his fridge a couple days ago and he wasn't sure if the person was coming back.

"I've got some Oreo's," Betty offered, and for whatever reason that prompted the two women to huddle for a minute, and then Tammy announced that were headed into town, and did anyone want to join them.

There was *zero* conviction in *that* offer, and Pete declined right away, and Ned shook his head thanks, and Tammy and Betty, without much more fanfare, picked up and left.

"That was some huddle," Pete said.

"Intense," Ned said. "Like they were gearing for a middle eastern summit."

"Sounds like they're craving sweets though," Pete said. "Particularly Tammy."

"Big-time."

"She *always* like that, in your experience, or just particular times of the month?"

"Particular times," Ned said, clearly not concerned about disguising the fact that he really *did* know Tammy pretty well.

Pete said, "That's one place the male species can't win. You have to admit. If they're acting different--*more* strange than just craving *sweets*, I'm talking-- but if you even *raise the possibility* that it could have to do with the time of the month . . . they'll flat out want to butcher you."

"Oh yeah. You bring *that* up, if they had a machete handy they'd use it. I'm *convinced* of that."

"So," Pete said. "What's cooking?"

Ned sat there fingering his temples, staring at the pool, not saying anything for a while. Something obviously *was* up, but he also had his pride.

Pete said, "Let me break the ice here . . . And what I'm saying is straight from the hip, so you want to be offended . . . that's *your* business."

Ned looked away from pool and locked on Pete.

Pete said, "You're not the most trustworthy guy, you got a sleaze bag element to you--and honestly? Since day one I felt like I gotta watch my back. And that concern has *evolved*, but at the core it hasn't *changed*."

Ned managed a weak smile. "Anything *else*?" he said.

"Yeah," Pete said. "You have a good heart."

Ned looked at him a little longer and then swiveled his head back toward the pool.

Pete said, "And the only reason I say all this . . . is *Man, talk* to me. I've *been* there . . . underneath that act of yours you're as stubborn as I am . . . but God *damn*."

Ned spoke softly, and it wasn't the volume that was different but the resignation in Ned's voice that Pete didn't like at all, the unfamiliar timbre.

"Yeah okay it's a guy," Ned said. "*Always* a guy. What do you want me to say?"

"Who is he?" Pete said.

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not *worrying* about it. But you're pissing me off."

"It's a little complex," Ned said. "We go back."

"Get me to the bottom line," Pete said. "Cause you're reaching out, stopping by here. You know that right?"

"Actually, no," Ned said. "There's a restaurant opened up--today's the grand opening--buddy of mine, down PCH, he's got this concept, the burgers and brew shit in *front*, and a mini-golf place in *back*."

"Jeez. Indoor?"

"Yeah. Year round action. You can putt every night until 2."

“That’s ringing a bell,” Pete said, “They have one of those up north, in the Mission.”

“Oh. How they making out?”

“Sounded busy. Millennials. Of course that type thing, tastes can change quick.”

“Mini golf’s been around a while though.” Ned said.

“That’s true,” Pete said. “When I was a kid, and used to go to my cousin’s in San Mateo? They had a huge spread down there, four 18-hole courses. You remember that *19th hole* deal, where you shoot to see if you win a free game?”

“Yeah.”

“One of the courses, you could get close to the hole, except you had to lay down in a kind of fountain thing and stretch out your arm under this screen, but then you could persuade the ball into the cup.”

“So you’d get wet but win free games?”

“Oh yeah. *All* day long. Those were good times.”

“That’s a good story,” Ned said.

“So you were kidding,” Pete said.

“Bout *what* now?”

“The reason you’re here . . . because your happy-go-lucky act is so thick, you can’t turn it off if your life depends on it.”

A guy was coming across the parking lot, a tenant named Ed who Pete knew. He hung around the pool fence for a minute and Pete said hello, and they mentioned the weather and the guy went upstairs and disappeared into his apartment.

“*Bottom*, bottom line?” Ned said. “I’m not here for the mini golf bullshit . . . but I’m not here to ask your help either.”

“I never said you were.”

“Oh.”

Pete took a second and said, “Good, we got that out of the way . . . So, you need help?”

“You know . . . you don’t listen,” Ned said. “Surprised you’ve gotten to this point, frankly, that type of deficiency.”

“You mean intellect-wise?”

“No. Wasn’t where I was going.”

“Because whatever minimal brainstorming I tried to lay on Tammy and Betty there, they rolled their eyes.”

“Oh yeah, they’re *all* mixed up. When you were upstairs, I almost had to get out of here.”

“Forgetting even that you needed help?”

“You keep coming back to that,” Ned said, “like one of those balloons at the fair you shoot with a water pistol. Thing keeps re-inflating.”

It was an odd analogy, but Pete asked Ned how about some coffee, and Ned said he wouldn’t mind.

Stars

"This doesn't feel like it's gonna work," Pete said.

"Little tight," Ned said.

"For Goodness sakes," Holly said, "I've never heard so much hemming and hawing."

"Really," Rosie said. "What it is, they're afraid to expose their inner selves."

Finch said, "Okay people, let's focus, if we may. We have our first handout." Holly took the folder from him and distributed the paperwork.

The only one who hadn't said anything, pro or con, was the new guy. Ralph Salvatore.

This was the New York guy Ned referenced last Sunday.

Who happened to show up in Manhattan Beach, looking, as Ned put it, for a little clarification on some events.

Ned had gone on to explain that Ralph being in town was logical *fallout*, and don't worry about it.

Pete met Ralph a couple nights ago in the Crowe's Nest, the guy one of those roly-poly types who laughed a lot and his midsection jiggled, and for all you knew on the surface, it was old home week around here for Ned.

In fact Ned had told Pete when he'd introduced them that night that they'd known each other since 3rd grade. And could Pete figure out Ralph's nickname?

Ralph seemed embarrassed and Pete said, "Number one, that's a dumb question, especially with no hint whatsoever, and number two, he doesn't want to go there."

"Do you?" Ned said to Ralph.

Ralph tilted his head, like whatever, and Ned said, "The Elevator."

Ralph did smile a little and Pete said, "So . . . your last name, they sort of rhymed it?"

“Sure,” Ned said, “that’s part of it. But this son of a bitch could dunk a basketball . . . I mean not in 3rd grade, but eventually. Before he gained the weight, where you see him now.”

Ralph put a hand up. “I couldn’t technically dunk it. I could roll it over the rim.”

Pete saw that he did have real big hands, could likely palm the ball easily, among other things, and here you had these two old buddies getting ready to tell East Yonkers playground stories.

Pete decided he was too old to be dancing around stuff, and he said to Ralph, “So what brings you out here, man?” Leaving out what Ned told him about Ralph *clarifying* things.

Ralph was smooth, you had to give him that. “Not much,” he said. “We’re working a real estate deal in Portland, so I’m on your coast anyway, so why not drop down and see my old friend Neddy. He’s extended the invitation, for what . . . 4, 5 years?”

“I’ve been here 12,” Ned said. “In fact 14 counting Hollywood. You never took me up on it until now.”

Ralph shrugged his shoulders so Pete said to Ned, “You say Hollywood? That’s when you were trying to act? I think you mentioned something about that, that first time.”

“*This* guy,” Ned said to Ralph, “We first make our acquaintance on the Strand. A ladies’ beach volleyball match is underway. You believe the first words out of his mouth? *How do the bikinis stay on, all the leaping and lunging and diving they’re doing?*”

“That’s a fair question,” Ralph said. “How *do* they?”

“How do *I* know?” Ned said. “You’ll have to ask one of ‘em.”

“A different answer than you gave me back then,” Pete said.

“It’s nice here,” Ralph said. “You’re right, I should have visited sooner.” He was arching his head to the left, where you had the view of the ocean through the middle window during the day, but even at night there were a few lights out there and you were aware of it.

Ned got tapped on the shoulder and excused himself, and Ralph took a seat at the bar, and you had both Cindy and Ellen waitressing tonight, which hadn't been the case in a while, and it would have been a perfectly comfortable scene if it didn't necessarily include this Ralph.

Now Finch was asking for a show of hands, and Pete couldn't quite believe he was in this situation, and he couldn't pinpoint exactly who talked him into it.

They were in Finch's motel room, of all places, Finch pacing around holding a clipboard, and Rosie and Holly on the bed and Pete and Ned and Ralph in these folding chairs that Finch said he borrowed from the breakfast buffet.

Finch said, "Good then. Do I have a volunteer to lead off?"

"I'll go," Rosie said.

What was happening, they got railroaded into a writing class. Or Pete got railroaded into it, and told Ned to join the fun, and amazingly Ned did, and he recruited Rosie.

They had found out this guy Finch was a semi-famous writer once -- meaning back in the 80's when books were a bigger deal -- and Holly had started looking at him as a mentor, and admittedly Pete got in the act as well, trying to get him un-stuck on that final novel he supposedly had in him, called *Monte something-or-other*.

Then it started as a joke, *this* part, Holly telling Finch, "Hey, you should teach a little workshop" and Finch laughed it off like you're out of your mind . . . and that was a couple weeks ago, and here everyone was.

Looking around the room -- and man, it was stuffy in here -- the one component you wouldn't have pictured was Ralph. Even Ned, you figured okay, he might have a story or two in him, but Ralph . . . and Pete figured it was Ned dragging him along, or it may have been as simple as Ralph was bored tonight.

But fine, Pete had gone along with Finch's pre-first class assignment and written a one paragraph summary of a novel *he could see someone writing about him*.

It wasn't very good, he hoped he wouldn't get laughed at--but meanwhile he had to admit it could be interesting to hear what the others came up with--and Rosie stood up and cleared her throat and started off.

'If a person wrote a novel about me he would make me one of those performers you see at the circus who fly on the trapeze. When I was 8 my mom took me. It was downtown, the Garden. The announcer was very loud. Not just for the high trapeze part but for all of it. After, my mom complained about the noise to some person and they gave her a number to call. I don't remember this. She told me a lot later.'

People shifted around a little, and Pete assumed they were waiting for more -- which *he* was too -- and then it took Rosie a minute to sit back down, which added to the possibility -- but then she did plop back onto the bed.

Finch cleared *his* throat and said, "Well, Rose . . . I call that a wonderful start."

Jeez, *Rose*.

"I second that," Holly said, pinching Rosie on the shoulder. "Wonderful premise, I'm seeing several directions the line can take."

"Well thank you so much," Rosie said.

"What happened when your mom complained?" Ned said.

Pete said, "Yeah that. And the *line*?"

"*Storyline*," Holly said. "Plot points. And whether we're talking omniscient narrator, stream of consciousness, or another point of delivery. It's all fascinating."

"You're full of shit," Pete said.

"I agree," Ralph said, who you didn't expect to hear from. "But anyways," he said, "I like the set up. Reminds me when my Uncle Rocky took *us* there, we's about the same age. Took the train from Eastchester to 42nd Street, then we had to walk though."

“Same thing then!” Rosie said. “Me and everyone, we took the 1 train. Though you could change to the express at 96th.”

“Where’d you grow up at?” Ralph said.

“Let’s stay on course, if we may,” Finch said. “Not that the backstories aren’t interesting, but who is next?”

“I’m fine,” Holly said, and she stayed seated on the bed and pulled a folded up paper out of her purse. She seemed tense.

‘I’m a wife in a bad relationship. The setting is 1950’s Culpeper, Virginia. My husband is cheating on me, and barely attempting to disguise it. I wish to cheat on him too, but I’m unable to . . . and it proceeds from there.’

Again you could hear Finch clear the throat. This time he paced a bit more and you assumed he was formulating some positive commentary, but meanwhile Ned spoke up. “I like it,” he said.

“I do too,” Pete said.

“That makes three,” Ralph said. “I’d keep reading, at least ‘til it slowed down.”

Finch said, “An interesting point. How would it proceed to slow down ineffectively, in your view?”

Rosie said, “Why can’t the woman cheat on the man?”

“I haven’t established that yet,” Holly said.

“You mean, she wants to,” Ned said, “but can’t come up with a willing partner?”

“Or she’s screwed up physically,” Pete said, “and *has* the partner, but can’t.”

“Or mentally maybe too,” Rosie said. “She wants to . . . howyoucall . . . intellectually . . . but there’s a little lightbulb that holds her back.”

Holly said, “I hadn’t thought of it that way -- but Gosh, that may be the best one.”

“Which one *were* you leaning toward?” Pete said.

“Ned’s way. But I see now, that was dull and cliched compared to Rosie’s way.”

Ralph said to Finch, “Answering your question. It would slow down when she started *thinking* about stuff too much, instead of *doing* shit.”

Pete said, “Why the Culpeper, Virginia? You ever been there? I mean, is it even a real place?”

“I have not,” Holly said, “but I believe I’ve heard of it, so it must be real.”

Ned said to Holly, “You ever been to a shrink?”

And more shifting around and another throat or two being cleared, and Holly said, “That’s a nervy question. I’d ask what gives you the right, but I guess I don’t mind.”

“No need to upset the apple cart, hon,” Finch said. “No one’s unwillingly on stage here.”

Pete didn’t care for the hon, but it was what it was, Finch was a harmless old guy with some new life injected into him, and it wasn’t surprising if he and Holly had developed a benevolent-uncle relationship.

Holly said, “I’m fine with it. We’re among friends, I feel . . . Yes, I’ve been in therapy.”

Ned took a moment. “Only reason I ask,” he said, “*your* type set-up, isn’t it what the psychoanalytical folks have a field day with?”

“I see what he’s saying,” Ralph said, “could there be more to it.”

“Like a dream you mean,” Rosie said. “How would it be explained? Like you’re a human being, now, in this room . . . but you go a different direction, and create a different world -- but it’s still you in it -- and what’s the reason?”

“Oh boy,” Pete said.

“I’d love to say that I’ll ask my therapist for an interpretation, but we cut ties two years ago,” Holly said.

“Good move,” Ralph said, “you look fine.”

“He’s probably right,” Ned said.

“Could very well be,” Pete said.

“Next?” Finch said.

“I got it,” Ned said, and he stood up, and found what he needed on his phone and started reading.

“My guy -- you want it to be me, so fine -- my guy’s Czechoslovakian. On his 21st birthday he gets a trip together, go back there and find his roots. (I shoulda said, he lives in Florida.) The problem being though, there isn’t any more Czechoslovakia. He finds out they dissolved it. There was a revolution in 1992, it turns out, which he should have paid attention to in school, but didn’t -- and they disposed of the place . . . or deposed it -- or the government -- however you phrase it. So anyways he gets to the airport, finds this out, and the check in girl is quite nice, explains they didn’t get rid of it, exactly, they just split it into two. My guy gets this, but it’s not the same, finding his roots is shot, and he doesn’t want to travel. But he asks the check in girl how about we get a drink when you get off work.”

Ned waited. Holly spoke first. “That’s a novel?” she said.

“In there somewhere I was thinking, unh-huh,” Ned said. “No?”

“I think it’s brilliant,” Finch said, and you could see him right away regretting the use of that word, implying he liked it better than the other two.

“I wish I thought of it,” Rosie said. “In a different form of course.”

“I think it’s a bunch of gobbledy gook,” Pete said, “but I have to go next.”

“So your *honest* opinion is worse?” Ned said.

Pete said, “My honest opinion is -- all that build up, when all your guy is seeking out . . . is a piece a ass.”

“I would agree,” Ralph said.

“Well I wanted to redirect it that way, yeah,” Ned said. “I don’t know enough about other countries to keep it interesting.”

Finch said, “Pete, can you conclude for us tonight?”

“Do I have to stand?” Pete said. “Because I really didn’t have a chance to put much thought into this.”

“Listen to this guy,” Ned said.

“Yeah, now the shoe’s on the other foot,” Holly said. “We had more time than you?”

“Yes get real Pete,” Rosie said. “Our ones so far, they sounded like we worked on them for days?”

“You definitely didn’t,” Ralph said, nodding.

Finch raised a hand again. “Before we hear what Peter has to offer, I will say, from personal experience--positive *and* negative--that often the first incarnation of an idea works best.”

“What I think you’re getting at,” Ned said, “is like those achievement tests in school. If your first inclination is B, then don’t over-think it into D.”

“Exactly,” Finch said. “James Joyce would work all day trying to get one sentence just so. Marcel Proust, for one, could write half a dozen chapters in the same time.”

This ground any momentum to a halt, Pete afraid Finch was going to continue on this tangent, especially if anyone prompted him further.

“Okay we get it,” Pete said. “My deal, welp, here goes nothing.”

‘My character is Archie. That’s me disguised, I guess is how we’re working it. Archie doesn’t have a lot of friends so he joins a chess club. This is in Kansas City, where he ends up after running out of gas, while running away from alimony payments in Oregon. He’s the worst chess player in the club but that’s okay, because he starts getting more attention -- people trying to help him -- than if he was the best player. One guy in particular tries to help him the most, gives him a couple books on basic strategy, and Pete thanks the guy by inviting him and his family to a pool party. (He doesn’t own a house of course, it’s an apartment complex, but still.) So the guy does show up with his family, but one of his kids is wild and mixes it up with

another kid in the pool who lives in the complex. The other kid's dad comes down to the pool and Archie's chess guest dad confronts this guy. By now some drinking's been going on, at least with the chess dad, and the two of them kind of bear hug and plunge into the pool with their clothes on. Archie knows he should do something -- but he also wants to see how it unfolds, so he just sits there on the chaise lounge. And long story short, the one guy drowns."

"Oh no, *which* guy?" Rosie said.

"The guy who lives there," Pete said, "but let me finish. They think he drowns. They drag him out and lay him on the side of the pool, there's a crowd by now, and some little guy pushes his way to the front and does something to guy's chest, and stomach too, and son of a gun the guy spits out water and is okay."

"That it?" Ned said.

"Almost. Archie thinks he recognizes the little guy, and that the guy's been tailing him from Oregon. So the next day Archie tries to get back at the guy by asking his girlfriend out on a date. She refuses, so Archie gets in the car and moves on. Probably to Little Rock, Arkansas. That's not clear yet."

"Hmm," Finch said finally. "*Anyone?*"

"Not really," Holly said.

"No," Ned said. "Except you used my part, the guy putting on the moves . . . But the dude's own girlfriend, isn't that kinda out of bounds?"

"Especially when he did you a favor and saved your friend," Rosie said.

"Not his friend, necessarily, but I hear you," Ralph said.

That was about the extent of the fireworks. Holly brought out the box of cookies that Pete assumed were standard in these meet-up deals, and Rosie helped Finch bring six cups of coffee back from the machine they had in the lobby, and everyone shot the breeze about trivial stuff -- the Dodgers outfield prospects after acquiring Mookie Betts, the new regulations in Manhattan Beach where you had to walk your bike on select parts of the Strand because some guy

got run over, a *fourth* ice cream shop opening in town and how was it going to make it.

“Well I have to say, this has been better than I expected,” Ned said. “You got me thinking different ways here.” And he thanked Finch and the others did too, including Ralph, and Finch asked Ralph if he wanted to contribute a novel idea of his own, even informally, and Ralph said no, but he’d take a rain check, and maybe next week.

Finch gave out the next assignment, which was to skip ahead and write the very final scene of your novels, where you finish it off with THE END.

“I must say, Terry,” Holly said, “that goes against the grain of your personal approach, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Finch said, and he left it at that, and a minute later Pete watched Ralph and Ned get into a car together . . . and he figured that’s what a good instructor does, he keeps you off-balance.

Recall

Dr. Moore ushered a patient out at 12:12, went back in the office, and greeted Pete on the button at 12:15.

“You run a rightfully tight ship,” he said. “Would that be Type A behavior, if it were a patient? Something that would qualify for you making a note?”

“It would depend,” she said, “whether it was an extension of other compulsive behavior, or an isolated example of the patient behaving responsibly.”

“How do you tell?”

Dr. Moore smiled. “You should become a psychologist. You’re quite curious how we operate.”

“What did you study before that?” Pete said. “Or that was it.”

“Gosh no. I was a linguistics major. I spent a decade in St. Louis. Didn’t come to this until well into my 30’s.”

“I’ll give you credit then, dang . . . Something bad happen at that point, that turned you introspective?”

“No. I had a boyfriend. We took a summer, hiked the Appalachian Trail. Thought things through. We came back, applied to PhD programs together.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Things don’t always go completely as planned,” she said. “But here I am.” Nice comfortable smile, obviously at ease with her decision from back when, despite the bit of mystery with the boyfriend.

Pete sat there a moment. He tried not to stare at her chest, which, no other way to put it, was abnormally large. Maybe it was just coincidence, or the light--but her get-up today--a cream-colored cotton blouse buttoned down the front--seemed to accentuate the situation worse than last time, when he made the unfortunate couple of comments.

Of course you’d assume the woman just went in the closet every day and put something on like anyone else, no deep-rooted thought to that aspect of the

presentation . . . and for God's sakes give the lady a *break*, none of us can control the luck of the draw when it comes to physical features.

Dr. Moore said, "Is that enough about *me* this afternoon? It's *your* dime of course. But my sense is you had a different motivation in reaching out this morning."

"There you guys go again, with the reaching *out* . . . But fine. For starters, something that's been bugging me lately . . . I had a friend with large breasts one time. There were issues." What a surprise that he'd lead off with this topic, after the introspection.

"Uh-huh," Dr. Moore said.

"She wasn't, like a girlfriend. She was older."

"Might she have been someone's mother? *Of* a friend?"

"Oh brother. We can't get past this. Now you have me in the womb again, or fresh out of it. You're going to ask me if I was breast fed."

"Were you?"

"I would assume so. But honestly, it was never brought up. And it won't be. My mom's not around. Neither of my parents, unfortunately."

"How old was she, your mom?"

"When she had me? Or when she passed?"

"Both."

"Let's get back on topic here. This friend, it was a summer during college, one of my roommates got us jobs in Florida. We had a band too, nothing official, just kicking it around a little, and then someone hires us to play . . . not the wedding obviously, but what do you call it when girls have a bachelor party?"

"A bachelorette party?"

"Probably. Not even that, it was when they all came back after. We played in someone's apartment."

"Do you play an instrument currently?"

"You're not complicated, you know it? I know where you're going, that music is good therapy, yada yada. Let me finish this."

She was taking a note.

Pete continued, “One of the people from the party -- she *wasn't* someone's mother--not that kind of age difference--but she might have been like a big sister or family friend. I never established it frankly.”

“Umm-hmm.”

“Anyways. When we're packing up the instruments she asks me if I give lessons. I never had, but I said sure, it seemed harmless enough . . . and only when the lessons began and we're both sitting there with the guitars on our laps, and you have that certain angle . . . then I noticed it, or them, you couldn't help it.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Moore said.

“And you know how when you purposely try *not* to call attention to something? And your eyes are roaming every which way *but* there? How that makes it worse?”

“Continue.”

“So fine, I must have given her a half dozen lessons, it wasn't hard, she wasn't a rank beginner . . . and then the final one, she announces that she can't come for a while because she's going in for some minor surgery.”

“Ah.”

“So I figured that was it, I picked up a few bucks spending-money out of the deal and I moved on. But then one day my roommate tells me he heard she was going in for breast reduction surgery.”

“Uhn-huh. And that bothered you.”

“Very much so, are you kidding? So I called her up. I tell her, it's none of my business, and it's fine if you hang up--but what the hell are you *doing* here?” Or *had* she done here, assuming it's too late already.

“Yes?”

“She was embarrassed, but she addressed it. She said she had second thoughts, she'd received some negative advice from a few people, and put the procedure on hold for the time being . . . I told her that was a wise decision . . . and did she want to set up another lesson in that case, and she said she'd let me know, but I never heard from her again.”

“I see,” Dr. Moore said. She looked at her notes. “You prefaced this discourse by labeling it ‘something that’s been bugging me lately’. How so?”

“I never got closure, is why. For all I know she went in a month later and took care of it. I know it sounds silly, and you probably think I’m a nut case.”

“Let’s explore that for a moment. How many years ago was this?”

“20. Give or take.”

“Would you characterize this experience as having been on your mind often, since then?”

“Not really. Only when something reminds me of it . . . like in a porno flick once in a while, that type thing.”

“And why do you think it still disturbs you occasionally? Is it a lack of control?”

“I think you got it,” Pete said. “I can’t stand it when people don’t listen to me. In certain cases.”

“And you feel this woman did not.”

“Put it this way. She ignored me, which is worse.”

“And why do feel that?”

“She canned the lessons, for starters.”

Dr. Moore made a note. “Did it occur to you that she may not have returned for the guitar lessons because you touched on a sensitive subject?”

“Fine, that too,” Pete said.

“Did you have sexual feelings for this person? And part of your frustration stems from not being able to explore those further?”

“Fine. *That too* . . . plus it was like, if she shrunk her situation, right in my face so to speak, she wasn’t giving anything a chance to play out.”

“And you wouldn’t have been as attracted to her, if she’d had the reduction procedure.”

“Again, you’re going to shake your head . . . but correct.”

“Have you been involved in any relationships with older women?”

“I thought I was one time, and I got dumped pretty quick.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Nah, it’s not worth it. But okay in a nutshell, I worked at a newspaper once. When you start off they stick you on the late shift, 5 to 2. Some gal comes in after midnight, I say can I help you, and it turns out she’s a roving food critic, turning in a restaurant review? This is before the internet was in full swing at newspapers, a lot of people still turned shit in.”

“And a brief relationship followed.”

“Yeah, about 10 minutes later, if you know what I mean. That late shift, it was pretty dead in the newsroom, and there were empty offices and so forth.”

“I see . . . So that was the extent of it.”

“I didn’t want it to be. I bought Warriors tickets for a couple nights later. I picked her up, it was all good. But she left in the 3rd quarter . . . No idea how she got home. I guess she took BART.”

“What was your age difference?”

“I was like mid-20’s, she was probably early 40’s? . . . Right about where *I* am now, in fact . . . Jeez, weird to think of like that.”

“So . . . anything else you can add Pete? From any direction that might be helpful?”

“Yeah well, I was in the central valley not too long ago. Do you like small towns?”

“Sometimes. I grew up in one. Do you?”

“I hear you. Good place to be from, might not want to live there though? . . . I’m taking care of some nonsense there, it’s running me a few days, I’m in a hotel, the staff is friendly, it’s not the worst thing, you know what I mean? You’re not in a major rush to get out of there, but even so.”

“I believe you’ve mentioned your affinity for hotels before. Why do you think you’re comfortable in that environment?”

“No, no. The womb stuff *again*? . . . Security? No responsibility? They even make your bed for you and clean up?”

“I’m detecting sarcasm.”

“You’re wondering if truth is sprinkled in though. Fine. I’ll add when you’re on the road, residing in those type places, your commitments are less. Normally.”

“Life is not as complicated for you, I believe you’re saying.”

“Yeah. So I meet this high school kid, he’s probably 18, he’s a senior, he’ll be out of there in a couple months. Guy has a good name, Pike Gillette.”

“He does. It’s catchy.”

“What I did, TV was bad one night so I found the high school track. You figure 4 laps to a mile, so if I go 8, I’ve done a little something. I’m talking *walking*, of course, no big thing. I stop at 6, but anyway I’m sitting in the bleachers, this kid comes along, putting on running shoes and we start talking, and I can tell he’s fine with it, because you always want to procrastinate your workout, it’s human nature.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Nothing monumental, except I found myself envying the heck out of this kid. He was athletic, all-American features, genuine smile. Polite, well-spoken. Everything ahead of him, is what I’m thinking . . . It also made me want to turn back the clock myself and do it right.”

“High school?”

“Sure. It had its moments, but plenty of stuff to straighten out. Wouldn’t you?”

“Please re-direct,” she said.

“So I’m assuming this kid’s got it all squared away, and the sky’s the limit . . . and I even tell him this -- and I’m paraphrasing -- but it’s like, take it from me son, you don’t always know how good you have it, until you get some perspective later on . . . and my unsolicited advice is keep right on having fun, and not waste time worrying about what comes next.”

“How did this Pike respond?”

“He seemed to consider what I was saying, and then he shifted gears. Which surprised me. Maybe me being a stranger. That he figured he could open up, it wouldn’t come back to bite him. Who knows.”

“How did he shift gears?”

“He told me a terrible story. There was an accident. A drunk driver ran up on a curb and killed a woman. The Pike kid knew the family, went to school all through with one of the daughters. It happened last fall, a lot of people were still reeling bad, he said.”

“And?”

“How did you know there was more? Isn’t that enough?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well there is more . . . Pike is having enough trouble wrapping his head around it. A couple weeks later the daughter is going through her mom’s things, and she comes across a diary and some letters. Bottom line--and don’t forget, it is a small town, but she informs Pike that her mom--and Pike’s dad--were having an affair.”

“Currently? At the time of the accident?”

“That wasn’t clear. They tried to piece it together, it may have ended a while back, or it could have been one of those on again off again deals. Eventually the daughter tells Pike that she figured out the timeline, and the affair had already been over for some time.”

“But he didn’t necessarily believe that.”

“Correct . . . You know something, you must be tough to go to the *movies* with. You’d be one of those people who keeps *calling out* what’s about to *happen* . . . Would you ever want to *go* to the movies by the way? I mean I know you’re married, you said that, but this is 2019.”

Dr. Moore took a moment. “Are you saying--to pick up on that--that you, for one, behave differently therefore? That in 2019 anything goes?”

“I don’t know *what* I’m saying. Pike finishes telling me all this, I sort of apologize for assuming his life is all idyllic Camelot, since it’s clearly anything *but* at this point, and he leaves off by saying--pretty darn matter of fact, too--that he has the ability to do something *about* it . . . and he’s going to. And he says good night, and takes off on his jog.”

“What do you feel he meant by that?”

“You’re supposed to tell *me*. I don’t know if he was serious or joking, like as a defense mechanism . . . or being symbolic or some shit.”

Dr. Moore was writing something down, drawing an arrow it looked like, connecting a couple things. She looked at her watch. “We’re going to need to conclude. In about 6 minutes. Anything else, Pete? What possessed you to call me this morning?”

“None of this. Jesus . . . But if you *need* one more topic . . . I guess that could be: If a guy had a terminal disease--but he got better--but he kind of changed his general approach while thinking he *had* the terminal disease--and yes he may really *be* disease-free--but the new approach he developed *remains*--is that *okay*.”

Another note from Dr. Moore. “How did he change his approach?”

“I don’t know . . . More aggressive with others, perhaps? More impulsive? Less concerned about ramifications? Less worried whether people like him? More apt to move on?”

“As opposed to dwelling on a particular?”

“I guess. But that’s *it*? I listed about 6 *things*.”

“Do you feel he should *alter* his current approach?” Dr. Moore said.

“Well,” Pete said, “in a perfect world, sure.”

“Does he feel liberated by the new outlook? The qualities you alluded to, they represent a sort of freedom, do they not?”

“Yeah? Could *be* I guess,” Pete said, rubbing his chin, giving that one a going over, no one quite putting it like that before.

“Does this person have a best friend?” she said.

“I don’t think so . . . If you define it as a couple people he can count on in a crisis, then maybe.”

“Does this person consider himself out of the loop, socially?”

“Now and then.”

“And that partial degree of alienation--he feels it’s the result of the *current* approach?”

“Maybe.”

“Under the *original* approach, he was more prominently in the social loop?”

“I told you,” Pete said, “*maybe*. What part don’t you understand?”

Dr. Moore cleared her throat and straightened up her notes. “That’s sufficient for today, Pete.”

“*I’m* sorry. That was on me, getting worked up for a second. Nothing to do with you. You’re doing your job.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you call the police on me though? Last time?”

“I did.”

“Oh . . . How ‘bout this time?”

“I’m not planning to.” They stood up.

Pete wanted to give her a hug last time, even brought it up, and who knows, maybe that was part of the deal, why she did call the cops.

But she opened the door for him and he hesitated a second and then reached around and gave her one . . . and like a good human being--flicking the switch on the therapist role for just a minute--she hugged him back, and it felt real enough, and you could always use one.

TV Tray

“Listen,” Pete said to Gloria, “you doing anything special today?”

They were in her kitchen, she had the griddle working, the middle of the stove, and hot cakes on there, and naturally with Gloria they weren’t your run of the mill Bisquick flapjacks.

“*Un*-believable,” Pete said, stuffing in the first bite after saturating the beauties with both the real Vermont maple syrup she brought out, as well an incredible blackberry jam from somewhere.

“Oh you *always* say that,” she said. “You’re my best fan.”

“And I’m betting you always say *that*,” Pete said, “because *whatever* you concoct--unless the guest in question was born *tastebud*-less--is going to leave them dripping in a state of orgiastic delight.”

Ooh. Ouch. Not only did that come out wrong--he meant orgasmic, didn’t he, not quite sure what the other word even meant--but why use any analogy remotely in the ballpark?

Pete remembered his dad once, at a dinner party, making a comment like that to an attractive guest, who lived down the block and was pretty tight with his mom, and who had gone through about five husbands.

His dad’s reference point wasn’t food, it was literature, and everyone had loosened up by now and his dad was quoting the woman a passage from Dostoevsky . . . Maybe that *wasn’t* it, the literature part, maybe his dad was relating *another* experience he liked to bring up, an archaeology trip he’d been a part of before Pete was born . . . either way, there was the ‘orgasms of delight’ summation.

In the dinner party case, Pete wondered if his dad was *making* it with the woman, or might in the future--and she was one of those society people who attended the opening night of the opera in full formal get-up, but otherwise wore awfully tight skirts and could swing the heck out of her hips when she walked past you.

So if you weren't trying to subliminally lead someone *on*, why on earth would you, in the middle of a stack of pancakes, angle your reaction like that?

Gloria did seem a bit lost for words, and Pete said, "That popped out. Terrible faux pas, on my part. Very sorry about that."

"So you're not trying to seduce me?" she said.

"Wasn't planning on it, no."

"I'm glad then . . . I mean, in a next lifetime, who knows."

Gloria refilled and re-stacked everything, and Pete said he's going to have to walk about 20 miles to work this off . . . and the semi-serious moment had passed, and they were back joking around . . . and you really did need the Glorias of the world, didn't you, where stuff didn't invariably have to lead to *other* stuff. Much better.

"At any rate," Pete said, "what I was starting you off with there, would you want to come with me and visit an old teacher?"

"Which school?" she said, and yeah, he was forgetting obviously he could mean someone from high school, Lowell, who they *both* knew.

"No, this is Marina we're talking."

"Middle school?"

"If you need to. We still called it junior high. Much stronger."

"Who's your teacher?"

"Mr. Gullickson. PE. Very tough customer, would probably be in jail today, or least bankrupt from all the lawsuits. I mean if you weren't paying attention, he'd physically smack you. He's not doing well, I heard."

"Where did you find this out?"

"Gee. You're giving me the 3rd degree . . . From one of those dumb Facebook groups I don't like admitting to being in, something like *We went to junior high school in San Francisco*.

"I've seen that one. We have our own though, Giannini. Our alumni class is pretty organized."

"What a surprise . . . This guy lives in Walnut Creek, Mr. Gullickson."

“And you’re saying he’s in ill health now? And you had a fond relationship with him?”

“Are you kidding?” Pete said. “Like I was getting to, he kicked our asses for three years.”

Gloria thought about this. “So you want to resolve things,” she said.

“One more thing about my dad,” Pete said, easing the Chevy Malibu rental off 680 onto Ygnacio Valley Road, “he said when he was a kid, my grandparents brought them over here a few times on a Sunday, and they swam in the creek.”

Of course there was no sign of any creek now, or walnut orchards either, the combination the town was named after . . . the dummkopfs on these planning boards, in Pete’s opinion, cheerleading every move that could transform the town into as faceless a one as possible. You had 10-story steel and glass buildings sitting where any chance for a walnut or a creek were buried long ago. Even now, there were a couple huge cranes doing something right there where you came off the exit ramp.

“You sure about that time frame, your dad?” Gloria said, and admittedly Pete was not, maybe it was too late already if his dad was a kid in the 1940s, but the story had a little pop to it.

A few miles east they came up on a huge medical complex and Gloria looked at Pete and he shook his head, like don’t worry I’m not dragging you into one of these places today.

You hit a T at the base of the hills and turned right into a residential neighborhood that had kind of seen better days.

The houses were early tracts, late 50’s early 60’s, and most of them looking like 2 bedroom jobs, with one-car garages sticking off the front, the type of situation where folks convert the thing into another room. Of course you had a percentage of houses that were renovated or built fresh.

Mr. Gullickson’s house wasn’t one of the new variety. Yes the outside had been painted in the last 20 years and the roof had been maintained, but that may have been it. Everything looked pretty dang original, including the windows with

those metal awnings hanging over them that you'd see in the old days in real hot places like Modesto.

Pete decided here goes nothing, and he rang the bell, and a pleasant woman greeted them. She was no spring chicken herself, probably as old as Gullickson, but she had a youthful spirit and still moved pretty smooth.

"I'm Peter," he said, and he almost never used that name but that's what he was back in junior high. He introduced Gloria, and the woman (Dolly) said, "It's very thoughtful of you to come . . . He has his good days and bad days, naturally." And she ushered them in.

You expected it, but it was tough to take anyway, Mr. Gullickson looking so diminished. He'd been a towering figure back then, was supposedly in the San Francisco high school sports hall of fame, and he'd played college basketball somewhere too. Pete was placing it . . . if he was 12, 13 back then, and Mr. Gullickson was in his 50's, which seemed about right, that'd put him mid-80s now. He was sitting on the couch watching a sporting event, Jeez, it looked like an English soccer match, the sound up pretty loud, and he was eating a sandwich on a folding TV table. He had on slippers and a robe, never the greatest sign in the middle of the day.

"Hello sir," Pete said. "You probably don't remember me, but I was telling Gloria here on the way over," (which he'd meant to but had forgotten) "how you used to challenge the whole class with those shots from half court."

This razed a bit of a smile out of Gullickson, and he was looking Gloria over, not worrying about Pete, but fair enough, maybe the guy was trying to place her, thinking he might have taught *her* one time too. Though Pete realized that back then, no, male PE teachers didn't teach any girls.

"Ronald was always *proud* of those mid court shots," Dolly, the wife was saying. "Weren't you dear?"

"Never missed one I guess," Gullickson mumbled.

"Before we get to that," Pete said, "I have to ask you --you always hated soccer. You made us play it for punishment."

"I still do," Gullickson said. "But my grandkids play. I have to join the fun."

“Anyways,” Pete said to Gloria and then the others, “yeah, on rainy days we’d be stuck in the gym. All three years, there was one day, same scenario. You’d grab a ball, announce if you missed from half court, you’d buy the whole class milkshakes . . . But if you made it, we’d have to run Funston . . . you gave us the option, up front.”

“Course I did,” he said. “That was the fun of it.”

“Meaning, you asked for a show of hands, who was in, on the bet. We all went for it every time, except maybe a couple kids who were in the chess club or something, where a milkshake wasn’t worth the risk of having to run. Unlikely as it would be.”

“How’d I do?” Gullickson said.

“Well, like I’m building up to sir . . . son of a gun, but you drained the shot, all three years. Nothing but net.”

This got a laugh out of the old man, though it was a slightly aggressive one, and the truth was he did hit the shots the first *two* years, but the third year’s one clunked off the front rim. And Gullickson had been good to his word, sort of, with the rewards that time, though he sent a couple kids to the soft serve place around the corner and had them come back with cones, and not shakes.

“I must say,” Gloria said, “we never had anything like *that* happen, at *our* school.”

“Which one?” Gullickson said.

“Giannini, in the Sunset.”

“I started off there,” he said. “Marina was a better fit.”

“Interesting,” Gloria said, “how so?”

You didn’t necessarily want him to get started with this, and odds were it boiled down to his discipline style enjoying more free rein at Marina . . . and anyhow Pete figured he should bring up the one thing that had been bugging for 30 years, before Mr. Gullickson might suddenly fade and had to take a nap.

“Sir,” Pete said, “I’m wondering if you really *remember* me. There was a baseball game against Denman. Playoff game. Jeb Caruso and Matt Fliker and Dave Horn were on that team too. You remember *those* guys, right?”

Gullickson was squinting at Pete now, and you couldn't tell if this was good or bad . . . but Pete went forward with it.

"I was playing second, they had one guy on, their final at-bat, we were up by two runs. I make the play, I go wide and backhand it, which wasn't routine . . . but the throw to first, it kinda slipped . . . You might remember, it pulled Caruso off the bag for a second, and then he stomped around trying to find it, and wasn't able to, and the guy was safe."

Gullikson was squinting worse, if that was possible. He said, "Yep. We get that *one*, there's two down, we nurse it home. Instead of the flood gates opening."

"Yeah, well," Pete said.

Mr. Gullickson did start to stand up now, though he couldn't quite make it on his own, and Dolly helped him. He said to Pete, "The *hell* you coming in here with that?"

Pete didn't have a good answer, and it did seem like time to leave, and Gullickson was working his walker, you saw the back of him heading down the hall and disappearing, and Gloria and Dolly embraced, and Dolly thanked them so much for coming.

Gloria waited a while, until they were on 24 and passing Lafayette on the left, and she said, "What *did* you bring that up for?"

Pete drove a little longer before addressing it. "No good reason."

"Except that," she said, "you were hoping he had let it go."

"I guess either *that*," he said, "or was senile enough where he didn't even remember coaching baseball."

"You're trying to make a joke, the senility--but there's truth to it. Correct?"

"You carry stuff around," Pete said, a little catch in his throat, which he hadn't expected.

Gloria reached over to him, said she admired him for trying . . . and traffic was light back into the city and after a while Pete said that was good, they'd lucked out with the traffic.

Perks

It was a balmy evening in the Southwest, 15 degrees warmer than Manhattan Beach this time of year, no marine layer in play, and the desert fragrances were pungent. Pete couldn't recognize any of them but flowering cactuses, cottonwoods, velvet mesquite, night blooming cereus--they might qualify . . . Even if those *weren't* what you were smelling tonight, good enough.

He'd admittedly gotten a little revved up there in another guy's condo, a guy named Waylon, there'd been a card game but the crux of the matter came later . . . and it was fine now but rather than go home just yet he figured you could check the pool area, see if anything is going on, pick up a loose Time Magazine . . . that the night's still young--though not really, it was after midnight.

You could make out a few figures lounging around the main pool, only a couple yellowish lights on at this hour . . . and this had been the case another time he was up late, you had these clusters of older folks who couldn't sleep.

Tonight, one of them was Lucy, one of the women from the pickleball sessions that Pete attended now and then, and she looked absorbed in a book, and Pete thought should I or shouldn't I butt in . . . but, you could at least say hi, so he did.

"Well *you're* a night owl," Lucy said, closing the book, the same perky smile as from the courts.

Pete took it as a signal to sit down for a minute and he said, "I used to live in LA. You could leave your windows open full-time, no bugs like you get in most of California."

"You can *here*, as well, usually," she said.

"What I'm getting to--the ocean air makes a difference. That's what everyone says . . . But I didn't sleep great out *there* either."

“Well how old are you?” Lucy said. And Gee, was that factoring into it already, in people’s view? Pete reminded himself to stop complaining so much, this gal had 25 years on him, at least, and look at her going strong.

“42, but not important,” Pete said, “all’s I was getting at, it’s nice they give you an alternative around here, should you require it.”

“I frequently sit outside until the wee hours,” she said. “Have you utilized the library?”

Pete had been to the one in town, it was new and nice, but she likely meant the the in-house deal, in the main complex behind the restaurant. “Once,” he said. “Too many James Patterson's.”

Lucy laughed. “I like more edge to my crime thrillers too. But the price is right, and you never know what someone may donate.” This was true, it was the honor system, plus the dang room was open 24 hours, with real comfy club chairs and good lighting. Lots of perks in this place.

Pete said, “I’m going to bore you, but I’m kinda trying to write one of those myself.”

“Really,” she said, leaning forward a bit. “Please tell me about it.”

“I might. First, I always like to get a backstory off people . . . How’d you and your friend end up here?” Meaning the gal you'd typically see her with.

“I don’t want to mis-speak for Gertrude,” Lucy said, “but in my case, it was my kids. They essentially forced me.”

“Hmm.”

“I grew up in New Mexico and lived most my adult life in New Braunfels, Texas. Do you know it?”

“That the hill country? It’s supposed to be beautiful, different than *typical* Texas.”

“Oh very much so, I loved it there. But Matt, my son, and Faye, my daughter, they didn’t trust me to be isolated out there any more. I didn’t feel I was, but they won out. Faye’s in New Jersey, but Matt lives in Phoenix.”

“Ah. In the ball park then. They’re right, better to be closer.”

“This was two years ago. It was an adjustment, I’m still not completely on board . . . but one must go with the flow.”

Pete said, “I was either telling someone, or thinking it to myself . . . but you have a spark. You know that?”

Lucy laughed. She said, “How did you enjoy *your* pickleball friends? You had some good rallies out there. Gertie and I, we don’t get on court with them much, we stick to our comfort zone of about 4 other senior citizens.”

“Funny you ask,” Pete said. “I mean I don’t know any of them real well, but yeah, someone invited everyone back to their condo . . . except I had a strange feeling they were going to start to pair off . . . so, here I am, that’s sort of it.”

“Well,” she said, “I suppose we all remember a few of those. Back in high school . . . It is awkward being the odd-person out.”

“That was definitely part of it,” he said. “Unh-huh.” No need to go into more detail, that Holy Toledo, there was a possible full-fledged orgy developing back there among the ‘interesting pickleball friends’.

Pete said, “Well you’re an attractive woman. I think you’re being modest, overstating the odd-person-out business.”

Lucy was a sturdy lady with an appealing presence, no doubt had to fend off more than a few suitors in her day. You could tell she took care of herself but kept it natural, let the sun do its thing, unlikely to entertain cosmetic intervention.

“Well,” Pete said, “fine, the novel. And you don’t understand what a generous assessment it is, calling it that. The whole thing, it’s part of a class. Or was.”

“What does *was* mean?” she said.

Pete wasn’t sure himself. His understanding was the instructor back in Manhattan Beach, Finch, suggested talking a week off, following some fireworks the last time. Not sure if it fell apart after that, Pete hadn’t checked in.

He said, “It was contentious. We were coming from different directions I guess, contrary life experiences.”

“But it got you going? The course?”

“I’ll give it that. What mine was evolving into--and hopefully still might . . . you sure you want to hear this? When I summarized it in that last class, people shifted around, scratched their shoulders, and essentially waited for the other person to say something.”

“Go ahead,” she said. “If it’s boring, I might fall asleep right here in this chaise lounge, which is fine too.” She gave him a playful wink.

Pete said, “All right. I’ve got a guy, he gets a terminal disease.”

“How old is he?”

“Old. I mean, not ancient or anything . . . but a retired type guy, compared to someone like me.”

“You’re not retired? I assumed most people here were.”

“Man, you’re firing off questions, staccato-like. And that’s good, don’t let me hamper that . . . I’m talking a typical *retired* guy, worked for the utility company or similar, full career, straight through, got the gold watch at the banquet.”

“I see. Do you think he got the disease due to inactivity in retirement?”

“I don’t get you . . . but now I guess I do. Not the physical slowing down so much, you’re saying, but more the spirit being broken?”

“Yes, being bored. Nothing dynamic to get up for in the morning.”

“So the person doesn’t . . . Good point. That may be my guy. Then again, he might have smoked two packs of Camels a day for 50 years.”

“That could be, as well,” Lucy said.

“Anyhow,” Pete said, “the guy’s kids, grown of course, are hounding him all the time on the phone. Subtle stuff. Not coming at him direct, but prodding him.”

“As far as treatment options? Experimental therapies and so forth?”

“No I don’t think he’s going to get treated. His doctor might recommend it, since that’s what they do, they don’t want you doing *nothing* . . . but my guy is a straight shooter, he asks his doc for a couple example patients, who were in his shoes and *got* the treatment and are still around a few years later. The doc says he’ll check into it, and my guy says how about one? Just give me *one*.”

“You’re implying, the recommended treatments are ineffective. That the physician is *unable* to produce the one example patient.”

Pete said, “I feel like you know me pretty well. You’re on my same page . . . Could we have been married, or brother and sister perhaps, in a past life?”

“Don’t laugh,” Lucy said, “I may very well believe in those.”

“I never did,” Pete said, “but then on late night radio--when you can’t sleep--like now--various guests do get you thinking . . . One thing they agree on, if there is such a force, people travel in the same packs, in and out of lifetimes.”

“I’ve heard that theory too.”

“Meaning, if you were my wife, I was destined to run into you in this life at some juncture--and in the next one I might be a woman and you could be my son. Or next door neighbor. Or barber . . . but I’m overdoing it.”

“Possibly. So your character does what? Regarding his grown children.”

“Yeah, so no--they’ve given up hounding him on the treatment options. He’s a stubborn son of a bitch, and a logical one too, since the doctor came up short.”

“So they’re persuading him to visit *them* more? Perhaps move in, so his final care is established?”

“They haven’t got that far. They’re trying to get him to live to the fullest, before he starts deteriorating.”

“Do they use that word, in speaking with him?”

“They try not to but he puts it in their face, so they agree, that yes that’s their motivation, while he’s still in good shape, to have some adventures.”

“Well, the premise seems reasonable.”

“You’d think. Did you ever remember the old show Run For Your Life with Ben Gazzarra?”

“Yes. I haven’t heard *that* one mentioned in years.”

“So you remember the set up. Each week he does something he probably wouldn’t otherwise do, takes a chance and goes for it. He’s trying to grab all the gusto he can in the time he has left.”

“It’s an admirable concept,” she said. “I enjoyed each episode being fresh, not tied to any previous week.”

“Right, standalones,” Pete said. “So they’re making suggestions--my guy’s offspring--like go experience New Zealand, go snorkeling in the Carribean . . . let’s see what else . . . go on one of those tours they have of 9 major league ball parks . . . even go skydiving if he wants . . . anything at all, and they’ll take care of it.”

“They mean well. I could see my kids coming at me with a similar push.”

“Sure, they do. But my character, Bobby, he doesn’t want to do any of that stuff.”

“I’m picturing him more of a Trent,” she said. “Or a Gregory.”

“Fine, I can change it. Anyways, he stops taking their calls. I mean he might start up again, but for now they can’t take no for an answer.”

Lucy nodded, “That *could* beat you down . . . So what does he *want* to do? Surely not simply sit around?”

“He’s got two things he’s dialed into. He wants to go to Area 51 and see a UFO. And then maybe stop in LA and kill a particular guy.”

“Golly.”

“Those are his words, not mine. So he starts calling ex-wives. And he has four of them. Number three, June, who he was least close to--and not the mother of his kids, that was number *two* who politely tells him to get lost--but June’s the most interested in helping him.”

“June still has feelings for him? Or is it out of compassion.”

“Good question, not sure he knows. But he’s in Reno when he calls her, and she says give her 24 hours to get organized--she’s in Oregon--and she warns him she’s gained back some of the weight she lost last time he saw her . . . but she’s a good trooper and she shows up like she says.”

“Then what?”

“Then I don’t *know*, dang, you need me to write the whole thing ahead of time?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“I’m kidding, Jeez . . . I think what’s going to happen, they go searching for the UFO, and meanwhile they re-connect. Not lovey-dovey, but they can talk shit out, and there’s a comfort in that . . . At some point he mentions his plan B.”

“Committing the crime.”

“Unh-huh. Mind you, in his view, he’s settling an old score. It’s not going to be, like, some random homicide.”

“What kind of old score?”

“Not sure. First I was thinking, some guy threw him out of a video store once, when he was questioning an extra charge on a movie he was returning. But that seemed a little weak, even though the guy manhandled him, and sort of really did *toss* him out of there.”

“You’d need something better,” Lucy agreed.

“So I came up with, a guy beat him up in junior high. My character lets it go all those years, though it eats at him occasionally. Then 10 years later he’s working the county fair, parking cars, and the other guy happens to be too . . . and my guy brings it up, and the other guy remembers and tells him he’d do it again too. Finally he sees the guy at a 50th high school reunion, and the guy remembers it *again*, and starts telling his wife about it, laughing.”

“No,” Lucy said.

“Right,” Pete said, “not enough. I think I’m gonna go with him zeroing in on the sub-human who raped his sister, and has gotten away with it for several decades.”

Lucy thought about it. “That’s better,” she said. “As the reader, I’d probably buy in.”

“Thanks. I mean it could still change, but that’s the ballpark.”

“So what does June say?”

“Well they’re in this little roadside cafe in Rachel, Nevada, in the vicinity of Area 51. In fact Pete has been telling her to watch for UFO’s as they’ve been driving, because he can’t, since there are warning signs for cattle in the road . . . Bottom line, she processes it, where he’s going in his head, and suggests they drive to Nova Scotia first.”

“Long way, and you typically take the ferry to get there, I believe.”

“That’s it. Or they’ll have to go around, up through Newfoundland. Weather can be a factor as well, slow you down quite a bit.”

“So . . . he agrees? And then passes away, on the road?”

“Wow, that’s pretty brutal. Hadn’t thought of that. Could be, though.”

“What was *your* ending then? He still acts on settling the old score?”

“Hard to say. I’m at the point--still in the scene in the cafe, they’re having dessert--where he questions her motivation--but doesn’t say no, either.”

“That’s nice. They sound like a sweet couple actually.”

“Remains to be seen . . . but hey, you’re a heckofa good sport. Not only did you not fall asleep from boredom, you may have jumpstarted my plot line, in more than one spot.”

Lucy took a moment. “I saw one of those myself,” she said.

There was a serious tone to it, and Pete didn’t say anything.

“With my dad,” she said, her voice cracking just a bit. “I was four.”

Pete waited, in case there was a punch line, and there wasn’t . . . and he took her hand, and she was good with it, and they sat there.

He thought of a story he was going to tell her earlier but hadn’t, where heading home from a picnic one time he helped a guy who only had one leg, and more than once the guy called himself the odd man out.

You weren’t going to tell Lucy that now, but tonight reminded him of it.

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