

Pep Pill

Tomb Budget

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Albert Pyle

Charley Patrick was at a party, listing for himself the reasons why he was justified in not having a good time. In the first place the only reason he was at the party was that he was doing a favor for his wife Ellen. Not that Ellen did not deserve to have his help at when she asked for it, which wasn't very often. Charley liked to think that he did his share and a little bit more when it came to helping out around the house and in the rest of the Patricks' private life, almost a share and a half if you wanted to get technical about it. But calculating technically, this party clearly came down on the professional side of the ledger, since the hostess Shirley Cutter was the president of the public relations firm Ellen was now working for, somebody Charley didn't know in any way other than in the sucking-up-to-outside-Nordstrom's way. And didn't want to either. Shirley Cutter was brittle in that California, tweaked-every-two-years-or- so way, not a look Charley much liked. And he liked even less the way Ellen had started to talk about having a little work done on herself without laughing or joking the way she would have done before going back to work.

And he for sure didn't like Ed Woodward, Shirley Cutter's husband, one of those biggish guys who filled up his white dress shirts too tight through the arms and bulldozed through crowds and sweated and didn't care. So did not liking Ed Woodward get its own bullet point on the list of justifications for not having a good time, or did you have to take him as a package with Shirley? Charley went for the package. The list would be plenty long without going into that depth of detail. He looked out the window at the third growth timber in the glen where Shirley and Ed had paid what was obviously well over a million to create one of those overblown new places with seventeen different roof levels and a four car garage. The glen, which had probably been a nice place for cows to hang out away from the heat not all that long ago, had been tweaked as severely and, in Charley's view, as unfortunately, as Shirley Cutter's face in order to accommodate the sprawling house.

The snow that had begun falling well before Charley and Ellen started out, making the drive to the godforsaken township where Ed Woodward and Shirley Cutter settled when they got married, he for the second time and she for the third, was falling faster now, sticking in a wet way to the skinny shivering trees filling the slopes around the house. It was going to be a bitch getting back to the highway. The township definitely merited its own bullet point on the list Charley was building. There was no town out here. Just a million cul-de-sacs.

Was that a headache he felt coming on? A catering employee had pushed a tray of champagne flutes at the Patricks just as they were unloading their coats into the arms of another hired helper. Shirley Cutter, standing in purplish, long, pointed shoes on the buffed limestone floor of the entry hall didn't exactly glare at them when it looked as though they might decline the champagne, but she somehow managed to get across the idea that they – Charley, actually, since Ellen had a better sense of what was up – that Charley would be a jerk if he turned it down. And there had been just a touch of elbow from Ellen, invisible to anyone else, but unmistakably intentional to Charley, to reinforce the message, so he had lifted a flute and smiled over it at the brittle Shirley, who didn't exactly soften but maybe warmed a couple of degrees. Fortunately there was a full fledged bar and a full fledged bartender in a corner of a room that the Patricks' own 1925 Georgian revival lacked. It was an area with a big globe and a lot of paneling and a green leather chair the size of an English phone booth but not a lot of books. Looking around at it while the bartender fixed a nice big Manhattan, Charley's default cold-weather drink when he wasn't doing his own bartending, Charley figured that the room with a globe didn't have a purpose, it just had to be there because the house was so bleeding big that there needed to be something between the overblown entry hall and the door to the four car garage.

Charley was standing now in the big bay that was the defining feature in the Woodward/Cutter breakfast area, with its great view of the weedy timber and the steep slope behind the house. There wasn't a hint of the cold air outside, another significant difference between what was now on Charley's list the vulgar turn of the century mansion and his jazz-age Georgian. More than once in his own much smaller breakfast nook Charley had actually been kissed on the neck by a snowflake blasting through the

rattling double hung windows. They melted fast though. Charley liked being in the breakfast area for the way he was able to look like he was enjoying the view so that no one felt obliged to engage him in conversation.

Charley normally had no problems with conversation. He just wasn't interested in talking to anyone at this function since he knew exactly no one other than Ed and Shirley, and he was sure he would never see any of them again, so there was no point in learning anything whatsoever about anything in their lives, wherever it was those lives were lived.

The possible headache moved into the probable category. It had to be the champagne. If it was really champagne. It could have been something from brittle facelift country. Charley couldn't remember seeing a label, just a big white napkin wrapping the bottle. Surely if it had been high quality stuff, Shirley would have insisted the label be visible. So by the label display rules, this wasn't a party for top clients. Turning away from the Christmas card view, Charley could see Ellen in the distance in a big open area, framed by an archway featuring Christalmighty limestone trim where you would expect to find woodwork in a normal house. She was facing him, but looking up into Ed Woodward's undersized eyes. Charley radiated his pain to her and was gratified to see a little lapse in her concentration as his discomfort registered from a distance that had to be as long as a basketball court.

Not that she would do anything about his pain if it had indeed registered. He wasn't asking for that. He was asking for a few points for being brave when his head hurt at a party that he was only at to support her. Maybe a few years ago she might have been afraid he would make a little trouble, but they were older and on permanently good terms. Charley decided that she had sent him little sympathy rays, and that if she hadn't, she would be sympathetic in the car on the way home. So that was ok.

But maybe he should do something about the headache before it turned nasty on him. He started to look around for something that might be the bathroom area in this open plan house full of areas. There was a likely looking corridor, framed at its kitchen/breakfast end by another limestone arch. Surely there would be the post-millennial equivalent of what was in his house still a powder room. Everybody between him and the archway was engaged in conversation, so he did not expect to get snagged if

he left his post. And he wasn't engaged by anyone. There was a slight "Who are you" eyebrow lift from a dark haired woman in a red sweater, but Charley pretended not to notice as he walked purposefully in to the corridor. The first door he tried opened to a large but surprisingly messy closet containing a couple of elderly upright vacuum cleaners and a large bag of dog food. Charley didn't remember seeing a dog. The next door was locked. When he tried the latch, there was a click of what might be collie toenails on slick wood floor. Although you didn't see collies much these days. The people he knew were all keeping rescue dogs with no ancestors. Or no ancestors you would see at Westminster. The next door was also locked. There was light under the door, but there was also a discreet fake cough from behind the door when Charley tried the lock. So that was probably the powder room. Or powder area. But there was someone in there.

Now Charley decided he not only was getting a headache, but that he seriously needed to take a leak. What to do? Stand around and embarrass the current occupant when she made her exit? Go back to the big bay window and risk someone else queuing up for the next turn ahead of him? Or help himself to one of what he would bet would be at least four complete bathrooms upstairs? The sight of a secondary staircase at the end of the corridor settled it. Good plan. No one would see him climbing the big curving front stairs and wonder what he was up to. At the top of the stairs, after a landing and a turn, he was in a wide carpeted corridor, where a quick look told him that unlike his own neo-colonial, all the bathrooms were going to be attached to bedrooms. Charley went for the closest bedroom with a door ajar and a light on, an indication, to his way of thinking, that it was ok for guests to be there, saw on the far wall of the room a door open to a lighted bathroom, a further indication of permission, and went in.

He saw to the leak first and then started the hunt for headache relief. Bingo. There in the medicine cabinet he quickly spotted a medicine bottle and the friendly blue color he associated with the reliable Aleve. Was there a glass? There was. He ran a little water into the glass and reached for the Aleve. Only it wasn't Aleve. And the bottle wasn't a bottle. It was a prescription medicine jar. Charley peered at the label and found that he held in his hands Ed Woodward's Viagra.

Damn.

A score of thoughts poured into his brainpan. Charley had never tried the stuff, but he was curious. Intensely curious. Not that he needed it. Not yet. Not need. But, damn. You didn't have to need the stuff to enjoy it. Or that was what he gathered. Even though it was developed for – or at least advertised to – men who needed it. Like Bob Dole. What a stroke of genius that was!. To get Bob Dole to plug the stuff. Who doesn't like a war hero? And if a war hero needs a little help.. Well, what a great product. Charley dropped into a brief reverie about bathtubs on a cliff over the seashore. The image was from a commercial, one that ran surprisingly often on the network news. Whatever brand of fix-you-up product that was suggested that you could be Charley and Ellen's age and enjoy Pacific sunsets and sex involving outdoor bathtubs without guilt or chilly winds. Both of them had made cracks about it. But, damn. The product had moved way beyond need and was ninety percent into want.

He looked at the medicine jar and thought, for the first time in years, about theft. About committing theft. Him. He. Charley Patrick. Obeyer of the law. Observer of the letter and the spirit. This was a unique opportunity. He could try the Viagra without the embarrassment of talking to his current doctor who was about ten years younger than Charley and not the kind of guy to offer a manufacturer's sample. No way. To get a freebie, Charley would have to plead the actual ailment, and Dr. Franklin, who was supposedly as brilliant as he was humorless would be sure to ask him questions that would expose Charley as a thrill-seeking faker instead of a needy World War II veteran. And just like that he had the cap off and one of the little blue darlings in the palm of his perspiring hand. Take it now? What if he was allergic to the stuff and it killed him? How embarrassing would that be? Even more embarrassing than the four hour problem the ads warned about. No he would take it home and take it there. He froze. Was that someone outside the door? Christ. Here he was committing theft. Maybe even larceny? Wasn't that a cost thing? And didn't Viagra cost twenty bucks a pop? Would it be a misdemeanor or a felony. He wasn't a lawyer or a drug dealer, so he just didn't know. He stood for a moment, looking at himself in the big mirror. Did he care about being a thief, or was he just afraid that Ed Woodward counted his Viagra pills and knew to the Viagra how many he should have at any moment?

Charley didn't care. He wanted to know. He gently squeezed the top back onto the jar so it wouldn't click, replaced it on the shelf, quietly closed the medicine cabinet, pretended to wash his hands, and unlatched the door to find the dark haired woman in the red sweater waiting her turn. They smiled without speaking.

Back downstairs, Charley realized that his previous loner act would make him look like a furtive Viagra thief so he headed for a group in the dining room area, two couples, to make conversation. In the distance he saw the back of Ellen's head. Too late to do anything about it, Charley found that bulky Ed Woodward was part of the group he was joining. Squeezing the pill he had dropped into the pocket of his blazer, Charley began to sweat worse than his erectilely dysfunctional host. About where his aorta took off from its namesake valve, a little chunk of plaque the size of a fingernail clipping began to break loose from its moorings.