

Perks

2600 words

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It was a balmy night in the Southwest, 15 degrees warmer than Manhattan Beach this time of year, and the desert fragrances were pungent. Flowering cactuses, cottonwoods and velvet mesquite were in the mix.

I'd admittedly gotten a little thrown off there in a guy's condo, guy named Waylon--there'd been a card game, and a few more people showed up and someone suggested something you could interpret funny . . . and it was fine now, but rather than go straight home I figured might as well check the pool area, pick up a loose magazine, see if anything's going on.

You could make out a few figures lounging around the main pool, a couple yellowish lights on at this hour . . . and this had been the case another time I was up late, you had these clusters of older folks who couldn't sleep.

Tonight one of them was Lucy, from pickleball, and she looked absorbed in a book, and I thought Jeez should I bother her . . . but you could at least say hi.

“Well you’re a night owl,” she said, closing the book, same perky smile as from the courts.

I took it as a signal to sit down for a minute and I 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 usually as well,” she said.

“What I’m getting to--the ocean air makes a difference, everyone says . . . But I didn’t sleep great out there either.”

“Well how old are you?” she said. And Gee, was that factoring into it already, in people’s view? I reminded myself to stop complaining, this gal had probably 30 years on me, and look at her going strong.

“43 but not important. All’s I’m saying, 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?”

I had been to the one in town, it was new and nice, but she meant the in-house thing, in the main complex behind the restaurant. “Once,” I said. “Too many James Pattersons.”

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.

I said, “I’m going to bore you, but I’m kinda trying to write one of those myself.”

“Really.” Leaning forward a bit. “Please tell me about your novel.”

“I might. First, I always like to get a backstory off people . . . How’d you and your friend end up here?” Meaning the woman you'd typically see her with.

“I don’t want to misspeak for Gertrude,” Lucy said, “but in my case, my kids. They forced me.”

“Hmm.”

“They thought I was isolated. I didn’t feel I was, but they won out. Faye’s in New Jersey, but Richard lives in Phoenix.”

“Ah. In striking distance 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.”

I said, “I was either telling someone, or thinking it to myself . . . you have a spark, you know that?”

She smiled. “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,” I said. “I mean I don’t know any of them real well, but yeah, someone invited everyone back to their unit . . . except I had a strange feeling they were going to start pairing 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. 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’.

Lucy no doubt had to fend off a few suitors in her day. You could tell she took care of herself but kept it natural, let the sun do its thing, little or no cosmetic intervention.

“Anyways,” I 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.

I wasn’t sure myself. The instructor back in Manhattan Beach, Finch, suggested taking a week off, following some fireworks. Not sure if it fell apart after that, I hadn’t checked in.

I said, “It was contentious. We were coming from different directions, 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. If it’s boring, I might fall asleep right here in this chaise lounge, which is fine too.” She gave me a playful look.

I 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.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking, but 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 type deal, straight through, got the gold watch at the banquet.”

“I see. Do you think he developed 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,” I 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 such?”

“No I don’t think he’s going to get treated. His doctor recommends 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, and he can’t come up with the example patient.”

I said, “I feel like you know me pretty well. You’re on my 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,” I said, “but then on late night radio--when you can’t sleep, like now--various guests 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?"

"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 is reasonable."

"You'd think. Did you ever watch the old show *Run For Your Life* with Ben Gazzarra?"

"Oh yes. I haven't heard that one mentioned in years."

"Way before my time but I ran into it on YouTube. So you remember the set up. Each week he does something he 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. "And each episode starts fresh, correct?"

"Right, stand-alones. So they're making suggestions--my guy's offspring--like go experience New Zealand, go snorkeling in the Caribbean . . . let's see what else . . . go on one of those tours they have of 9 major league stadiums . . . 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 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 up 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 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. But that seemed a little weak, even though the guy manhandled him, and 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 tries to let it go, 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 also . . . 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 30th high school reunion, and that guy remembers it again, and starts telling his wife about it, laughing.”

“No,” Lucy said.

“Right,” I said, “not enough. I think I’m gonna go with him zeroing in on the sub-human who stiffed his brother out of 169,000 dollars, and has gotten away with it, la-di-da, for several decades.”

Lucy thought about it. “That’s better. As the reader, I’d be more apt to buy in.”

“Thanks. I mean it could still change, but that’s the ballpark.”

“So what does June say?”

“Well they’re in this roadside cafe in Rachel, Nevada, in the vicinity of Area 51. In fact Bobby 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, 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.”

“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 minute. “I saw one of those myself,” she said, “hovering over a silver mine in New Mexico.”

There was a serious tone to it, and I didn’t say anything.

“With my dad,” she said, her voice cracking just a bit. “I was four.”

I waited, in case there was a punch line, and there wasn’t . . . and I took her hand, and she was good with it, and we sat there.

I thought of a story I was going to tell her earlier but hadn’t, where heading home from a picnic I 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 me of it.