

# Office

**2475 words**

Jason had seen a guy named Dr. Pride for a few sessions. Odd name for a therapist, but Pride turned out to be a nice guy, and came to personally check on Jason one day, which led to dinner and drinks, after which Dr. Pride told him he could no longer treat him.

What happened there was Jason was playing tennis with this guy Mac on a Sunday afternoon in Redondo Beach--older guy who didn't move great but who typically beat him in straight sets, which was hard to take--and Jason sees this skinny person hanging on the fence outside the court, and the guy looks familiar but he's too caught up in the match and doesn't put it together until after that it's Dr. Pride.

"What the heck?" Jason said. Mac had his shirt off, a bad sight, and was on the ground doing some cool-down calisthenics in one of the service boxes.

You could feel Dr. Pride scanning the situation. “Just wanted to make sure everything’s okay,” he said. Friendly enough but sure sounding clinical.

Jason said, “You mean . . . in *my* department? Like we’re talking--a *welfare* check deal?”

“Not in those terms,” Pride said.

“You gotta be nuts,” Jason said. “What, you just happened to be passing through, and decided to say hello? . . . Or, you made a concerted effort.”

“A bit of the latter.” Looking at Jason straight on, the irritating way he did in the office those couple times, when Jason teeter-tottered on giving an answer.

You also figured Pride lived more toward Santa Monica, since that’s where the office was. That would mean the dude had gone out of his way to track him down in the South Bay. Which had to include stopping by the apartment first and asking whereabouts questions, wow. Separately, Jason couldn’t help wondering what this was going to run him, this extra *house* visit. Did these guys charge an arm and a leg for time and travel, especially on a weekend?

He said, “You gotta be kidding me . . . You show up, ‘cause I phone the office and leave a *message*? All’s *that* was, I was putting myself in the rotation for another session, no big *deal*, and definitely no emergency. Jeez.”

“The answering service personnel are trained to red-flag certain calls,” Dr. Pride said. “When a patient in their estimation expresses a degree of urgency--particularly during an off-hour--we take it seriously.”

Jason was shaking his head. “*Patient* now. Can you give me a break here please?”

“And the addendum,” Pride said, “is *seriously* until proven *otherwise*. Can you express what might have prompted you to reach out last night?”

Jason looked over at Mac concluding matters with the exercises and thankfully departing the court, giving him a cocky wave, but what could you do, Jason waved back, so the doofus wouldn’t get the satisfaction of thinking he was upset he lost.

“I just got through *telling* you why. You’re way projecting if you call that reaching out.”

“Anything new that you can pinpoint--since our last visit--that may be weighing on you? Relationship issue?

Workplace connected? Something unexpectedly angered you?”

“You mean like a traffic deal? Sure, I get *those* every day. In fact some guy more than likely’ll cut me off on the way back up Sepulveda Boulevard from *here*.”

Stride said, “*Beyond* that. Beyond day-to-day Los Angeles living. Which certainly contains its own stress component. But what else?”

Jason didn’t feel like being psychoanalyzed on a tennis court. Or in the guy’s office either, for that matter. You put a gun to his head, fine, the reason he called for another appointment was the business with Holly, the newspaper gal. The related part. Still, not that it was *that* big a deal, not something he couldn’t handle.

He said, “I gotta go. Meet some people over in MB. You’re welcome to tag along . . . I’m happy to buy you dinner, and you’d have the added bonus, being able to continuously monitor my mental state.”

Dr. Pride was thinking about it, which Jason didn’t really expect. “You sure?” the doc said, and Jason reconsidered--that Jeez, maybe this guy *would* be scrutinizing him all night, putting on the half-glasses

and taking notes--but what could you do, and he said of *course* I'm sure, and they got in their cars and Pride followed him to Manhattan Beach.

You had Jason's sometimes roommate Brent showing up, and Brent's sometimes girlfriend Alice there too, and *Jason's* sometimes--though not current--girlfriend Marna, who lived in his apartment complex. Also on hand was a friend of Brent's named Michelle, Jason a bit fuzzy on her connection tonight, but bottom line there'd been a re-opening of his favorite Italian place and he'd offered to take Brent, and the guest list expanded.

So what was one more, the therapist . . . Except Pride ended up dominating the proceedings, delivering a dang lecture on whatever subject popped up, and pretty quickly the women--and even Brent--were hanging on his every word . . . and Jason had to excuse himself mid-meal and head across the street to the tavern where he fit in better, and he put away a couple shots and made it back to the Italian place in time to take care of dessert and the check.

Then they *all* headed to the tavern for a nightcap, at which point it was starting to look like Pride had paired off with Alice, who, Holy *Smokes*, had to be 20 years younger . . . and that Brent had connected with Marna, who had to be 20 years *older*--and so you had Jason and Michelle, but Michelle seemed to be having a thing for one of the female bartenders and had made herself comfortable on a high stool . . . leaving Jason twiddling his thumbs.

In fact Dr. Pride did end up dating Alice--and it would end badly later--but tonight at last call he announced to Jason that he could no longer treat him professionally due to 'excessive interaction'--but that *separately* this had been a *heck of a lot of fun*, and thanks.

So . . . on Monday morning Jason called the office again, this time asking for a referral. A different male therapist called him back and said *he'd* be happy to consult with a former patient of Dr. Pride, but the guy sounded a little too eager, and Jason said do you have any women at all, and the guy said not in this group but he'd get back to him.

It was Pride though who called him that night and mentioned a gal in Sherman Oaks, which seemed a little far but Pride said ‘off the record’ it might be a decent fit . . . and the guy ended the call once again appreciating the *interesting* Manhattan Beach activity.

Dr. Sawyer (who said call her Jean if he liked) worked him in for Tuesday, and here they were, Jason in a hardback chair and Dr. Sawyer behind a minimalist desk, and for better or worse the first thing Jason noticed--how could you not--was Dr. Sawyer’s massive chest.

You almost felt bad for the woman, going through life like that, nothing she could do to fully disguise it, that’s for sure.

It also was a serious distraction right now, a focal point, and Jason wanted to ask her some--what he considered legitimate--questions, as to lifestyle practicality and so forth, without being a total ass and getting thrown out of there.

Meanwhile Dr. Sawyer started in.

“Now Mr. Falcone I’ve briefly reviewed your chart,” she said, “as compiled by Dr. Pride. Before we address

those specifics, is there anything you can offer that you assume is *not* in your file?”

She leaned forward a bit and shuffled the paperwork as she asked the question, and her anatomy protrusion was even more prominent--which seemed impossible.

Jason couldn't help it. He said, “Okay now, you keep doing that, there's no way I can focus on *my* issues.”

He figured worst scenario if she gave him an indignant *I Beg Your Pardon* that he could explain it away, that he was referring to her looking at the file when he was trying to answer the question. Maybe.

She said, “I share Dr. Pride's concern that you requested a call-back Saturday night. Would you care to elaborate?” Either not processing his obnoxious comment or more likely outright ignoring it, not surprising, she had plenty of experience there . . . plus she was a professional.

Jason said, “I *already* told the guy. I didn't *request* any call-back, just an advance appointment. It could have been, we're talking a couple weeks away. Dang.”



Dr. Sawyer was making a note, which hadn't taken long. "Unh-huh," she said, "and in that case why didn't you simply wait until Monday morning?"

"To pick up the phone? How should *I* know."

"I see . . . Reviewing the remarks from the answering service technician . . . 'caller appeared demanding and agitated'. Would you care to elaborate? . . . Also would you like a mint, soda, spring water? We have See's candy on hand as well."

"Jeez, you're sugaring me up. What, clients give more acute answers that way?"

Dr. Sawyer laughed, and the anatomy bounded a bit. She was a nice enough gal, probably just trying to put him at ease with the snacks business.

"Not necessarily," she said. "More significant is whether a patient truly wants to root out an issue." Studying him.

Jason did have a problem of course, he was considering killing the guy who was hassling his newspaper friend Holly.

So fine, he'd been looking for a little *direction* Saturday night. Nothing you were going to admit to

these people, in so many words. Part of why he'd called in, he was hoping there might be an after-hours hot-line type thing, where some anonymous person could give him a quick attitude adjustment--at which point you got on with your Saturday night like nothing happened.

"Do you ever date patients?" he said. "I don't mean *you*, specifically, necessarily--but does it ever happen in the business?"

Dr. Sawyer cleared her throat. "I believe you know the answer to that Mr. Falcone." Tapping her pencil on the desk now.

"Man you make it tough, you guys are good at waiting people out . . . Something else I've noticed, part of the technique—certain questions, you'll throw 'em in again, as though you never asked them. That to try to break down the client, in case he's lying?"

She at least smiled. "I *will* say, you've hit on an aspect of psychodynamic therapy that is commonly employed."

"Meaning . . . you force us to dig deep enough, repeatedly, we throw off the top layer. And the story changes."

Dr. Sawyer nodded and narrowed her eyes slightly, and said, a little softer, “What would you like to tell me today, Jason?”

“Uh-oh, breaking out the first name now.”

She folded her hands and didn’t say anything.

He thought about it, saw 20 minutes left on the clock, wondered what you could do out here in Sherman Oaks, which was the dang San Fernando *Valley*, to kill time and wait out traffic on the way home.

He said, “I have a friend, she writes for a newspaper. You might have heard of it, or maybe not, it’s one of those local weeklies, never much in there. The *Daily Breeze*.”

“I have not,” Dr. Sawyer said. “What kind of friend?”

“Oh boy, right away. It’s not what you think. But she got in some trouble.”

“Unh-huh.”

“Nothing she *caused* . . . stop with the judging people.”

Dr. Sawyer was quiet.

“At any rate, she’s on a story, a rare heavy-duty crime for Hermosa Beach. There’s a Residence Inn, an

incident in a room. My friend gets inside information that maybe the police don't have yet--and she hustles, this gal, she's trying to make a name for herself, maybe scoop the LA Times."

"Are you involved with this person?"

"See now, that's the *second* time, and it's not a pertinent question. You're asking *dating*? Negative. I mean I wouldn't *mind*, if it ever came to that, but no."

"But you're helping her."

"Yeah. Who wouldn't, this situation."

"Which situation?" Dr. Sawyer said, glancing at the clock.

"Bottom-lining it? Some guy may have threatened her. Who she tried to interview. As to what happened in that hotel room."

"Did your friend make a police report?"

"That she did. But those don't typically work, do they? . . . Meanwhile her editor says forget it, the story's not worth it--but my friend, she has to persist, she actually meets the guy down in South Central, at a Carl's Junior but still--and leaving out the details of what he might have said to her, she's scared now."

“Scared--as in fear of physical harm?”

“I don’t know. She gives me the poker face, kind of like you’re doing.”

Dr. Sawyer made some fresh notes, and used a red marker on something in his file. She said, “We have about 5 minutes I’m afraid. How can I be of help? Right now?”

“Well, you could give me a hug I guess.” Which he did kind of feel like, beyond the sexualized anatomy part. The woman did exude compassion, someone you wouldn’t mind knowing.

“But short of *that*,” Jason said, standing up, “it’s a wrap. That was good for me, thank you. How’d it work out for you?”

Dr. Sawyer asked if he wanted to schedule a follow-up. He said, “In other words, your answer, off the record, is: *Frustrating*.”

She smiled and offered a beverage for the road, and he said no but he’d dig into that See’s candy after all, and man the quality control was still there, no different than when he was a little kid and the teacher would pass them around on special occasions.

Jason stepped outside. You couldn't quite see it from here but you could *feel* the 405 backing up already, 3:30 in the afternoon, and he figured why press the issue . . . and he found a multiplex theater where you could watch one movie and likely zigzag around to a couple others if you needed to.

Under normal circumstances, tomorrow would be as good a day as any to pay a visit to that guy Roland, the one hassling Holly, and see what happens.

The problem now of course, you had this therapist gal in on it, and Jason supposed that was the idea. Sooner or later there'd be a Plan B, there always was.