

# Perks

**2650 words**

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 pinpoint 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 thrown off there in another guy's condo, a 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 home yet Pete figured might as well check the pool area, pick up a loose Time Magazine . . . that the night's still young--though 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, from pickleball, 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?” she 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,” he 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 meant 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 *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 gal you'd typically see her with.

“I don’t want to misspeak for Gertrude,” Lucy said, “but in my case, it was 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 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 unit . . . 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. 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 was a sturdy gal and 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," 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, 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 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,” 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 can 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 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 Carriibbean . . . 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 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 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 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 20th high school reunion, and that 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 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, 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 moment. “I saw one of those myself,” she said, “hovering over a silver mine in New Mexico.”

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 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.