

Resident

They were in Irving's Deli on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, Finch and his retired agent Stew Portnoy.

"The other side of it," Finch said, "is does the world need another book from me?"

"One thing I still like about this place is they put the pickles automatically on the table," Portnoy said. "Right away, you're eating."

"C'mon, you hearing me at all?"

"I am, but I get it already. Stop with the wanting approval. You sound like someone on Facebook."

"I'm just saying," Finch said, "before I plunge in. All that work."

"What work? What else you got going that's in the way?"

"I have my routine . . . I get up, hoof it over to Starbucks, that's a mile give or take. Read the sports page. Eavesdrop on people's conversations . . . When the fog is sufficiently burned off, I go down to the Strand, take in whatever bikini situation you might have."

“Even on weekdays,” Portnoy said, “bikinis walking around?”

“Not as many,” Finch said.

“I hear you though . . . No guarantee anyone’ll read it. You’re lumped in on Amazon now with the dips who get their romance novels ghost-written in the Philippines for fifty bucks a shot.”

“Which is part of what holds me back,” Finch said. “Anyhow, then about four I start walking home.”

“I’m picturing it,” Portnoy said. “Plenty of hills, that’s good.”

“Helps me sleep,” Finch said.

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What he didn’t mention to Portnoy were the memory lapses. Small shit, here and there, not the scary stuff like getting mixed up on what month it was or whether he’d eaten lunch or not, but not being able to come up with Paul Newman’s name when he was flipping around the other night and *Butch Cassidy* came on. Not always remembering his phone number or email address when he was trying to give it to someone, which wasn’t that often, but still.

He'd been a legitimate writer once, and for a good stretch made a living at it in New York, though it helped to teach undergraduate courses when he could pick them up at NYU, or even over in Jersey at Rutgers. There'd been magazine work as well, a refreshing diversion from the grind of fiction, and he tried to pitch stories that grabbed him, such as the identical twins from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who were born three months premature and ended up on the US bobsled team.

That one was in 1994, his final article for *Sports Illustrated*, which is when things started to dry up big-time. His first novel, *Monte's Question Mark*, was published in '87 by Simon & Schuster, the sequel *Monte on Vacation* in '89, and four years later he'd squeezed out what he assumed was the concluder, *Weekends With Monte*.

Back then there were book release events within the business, usually at trendy restaurants in Soho and Tribeca, and Finch would get up halfway through and thank a bunch of people. The first book was well received by the critics, specifically David Pierremont in the *Times* who called it 'a spare, revealing snapshot of

the contemporary urban struggle', and the second got mostly favorable reviews.

The third book was hammered by the critics, and two years later Finch couldn't get a contract for *The Angus Compendium* which was his favorite of the four but nothing to do with the Monte series and which admittedly went off the deep end in a few places.

Portnoy explained to him back then that it wasn't necessarily a bad book, but that publishers were abandoning instinct and going more and more by computer projections, and not to take it personally.

Finch said fine, but he didn't buy the fancy reasoning. *Weekends With Monte* had been a clunker and deserved to get ripped. He wrote beneath his abilities in that book and it still ate at him. What he'd like to do, and what was more urgent now that these small but real memory lapses were occurring, was put out the fourth and final Monte book, finishing off the series properly and leaving his mark for anyone who might care.

It was too much to think about tonight though. It had been fun shooting the breeze with Portnoy for old

times' sake, but now a few easy laps in the pool sounded very good, followed by a long soak in the hot tub. Things could be worse, when you put it in perspective.

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Finch lived in the Marriot Residence Inn on Sepulveda Boulevard. The standard long term rate was too steep so he made a deal with them, five years up front, forty grand, the option to renew. This kept it under seven hundred dollars a month, a sweet deal for Manhattan Beach, and it included breakfast.

The room wasn't all that spacious, his door opened onto the parking lot and off to the right you saw the back of an auto glass shop, but how much did you really need?

A couple weeks after his lunch with Portnoy he returned from his daily routine and there were three squad cars at the hotel, one by the office and two about six doors down from his room, along with, he saw now, an unmarked car as well.

He went over there and one of the cops said, "You familiar with these people at all? 32-B, Spenkman?"

"Not sure," Finch said. "If I see them then I'll know."

“You won’t be, we took ‘em in,” the cop said. “The boyfriend. The female’s in LA General. Guy stabbed her and called 911, is what we got.”

Finch did remember there was a couple arguing quietly but pretty intensely last night in the lounge area off the pool, where the hotel served these complimentary happy hour mini-dinners three nights a week which weren’t bad at all. The guy real neat, gold chains, a mustache, looked like he had a hair weave. She was a lot younger, very white skin, somewhat voluptuous in an outfit that was slightly too tight.

It was an interesting altercation, what he could hear of it, something you might use in a novel, and Finch sat close to them pretending to be absorbed in the hotel tourist brochure on Universal Studios. It sounded like the woman may have been a paid mistress but who didn’t like it that the man was seeing multiple women, or maybe it was one woman in particular who got under her skin, but either way she was angry.

“Were they on vacation,” he asked the cop, “or just passing through, or what?”

“Let’s let me ask the questions, okay?” the cop said. “Would be helpful if you noticed something, or heard anything coming out of the room. Here.” He fiddled around with an iPad and showed Finch a photo, looking like it was part of a Facebook page, and it was the man from the argument.

Finch said there was nothing that jumped out, and the cop gave him his card in case.

He went back to his room and turned on the news. That was one of the simple pleasures of hotels, lying on the bed flipping channels. There wasn’t anything about a stabbing at the Residence Inn, so he did his little swim and hot tub thing, showered and went next door to Target, where he seldom bought anything but liked to look around.

The late news did have a mention of it, no names or details, just that the man had been taken into custody in an apparent domestic dispute with a woman, who was in serious but stable condition.

A day went by, quiet, and then the next morning you had a forensics van and two unmarked cars outside

room 32-B. There was a young gal with a reporter's notebook talking to a detective-like guy in a suit.

When she was done she saw Finch standing there and said, "Would you have a moment?"

Finch said he had all day. The woman laughed and extended her hand. "I'm Holly," she said. "I'm with the *Daily Breeze*." Finch knew the paper, it was the local weekly that covered Manhattan, Hermosa and Redondo. Never much in there.

"Forensics now and everything?" Finch said.

"She died," Holly said. "Overnight. Apparently there was a blood clot, and she took a turn."

"Jesus," Finch said, picturing the woman again, not wanting to but wondering where he stabbed her and with what.

"So I'm looking to fill in the blanks," Holly said.

"May I ask how many nights you've been here?"

Finch had to think about that one. "Around 700, give or take," he said.

"Now you're pulling my leg."

“I might have something for you,” he said. “Of course that’d require buying you dinner. There’s a Mexican joint, Scion’s.”

“I’ve been there,” Holly said. “Well . . . you don’t appear dangerous, and frankly I’m pretty sure you’re too old to be trying something . . . so okay.”

“Tonight?” Finch said.

“The sooner the better,” she said.

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The place felt like it was once an old-fashioned coffee shop, with a counter in the middle and booths extending off to the sides. Finch was carrying on about the South Bay restaurant scene.

“You’ve got here, then you’ve got Big Wok, and if you like Italian, the pizza place in Hermosa with the signed movie photos. The guy’s from Brooklyn, so it’s decent.”

“What’s Big Wok?” Holly said.

“Tremendous, all-you-can-eat Mongolian. You know, you fill up the bowl with the raw meat and vegetables and hand it to the chef in that circular pit and he goes to town.”

“So just the three restaurants, then. You’ve obviously whittled it down.”

“I’m on a budget,” Finch said. “But okay, enough of that. You’re a good sport putting up with me, that’s not why we came.” He told her about the man and woman and the confrontation from the other night. “So now you can dig and maybe scoop the LA Times, even the cops, who want to be the ones asking the questions,” he said.

Holly was taking notes. “Indeed,” she said. “You never know. Thank you.”

“Something else. They mentioned another person’s name, Roland, a couple times . . . Also, as I think about it, there was a Jaguar parked in front of that room, which didn’t mean anything at the time, but was probably their car.”

“And?”

“The car wasn’t there when the cops talked to me.”

“Maybe they towed it.”

“Unlikely it would happen that quick, and wouldn’t you need a warrant for something like that?”

“I’m not sure . . . but you’re saying, their car may have been somewhere else, when he assaulted her . . . Now that’s quite interesting.”

“Total speculation of course,” Finch said. “I used to try to write novels, so admittedly I’m always looking for that edge, real or not.”

Holly narrowed her eyes slightly and took a moment. “Wait a second,” she said. “*Terrence* Finch?”

He’d introduced himself, as he always did, as Terry. “Uh-oh,” he said. “Yeah . . . why?”

“Well I know your name, that’s amazing . . . I’m ashamed to say I haven’t read anything by you . . . I’m trying to write a novel myself. It’s my dream actually.”

“Good,” Finch said. “So go for it.”

“I was a creative writing major at Cal State Fullerton,” she said. “I tried to get into some MFA programs, but I got rejected, my work didn’t cut it.”

“Fuck that shit,” he said. “Sorry . . . but what you do, you sit your rear end down and you let it all hang out. Those MFA’s are a business. I’m not convinced they make you a better writer, in fact they probably make you worse.”

“Well I appreciate that,” she said, “and I guess it’s what I need to hear . . . Do you still write?”

“Me? Nah . . . That’s a young person’s game.”

“Really?”

“Let’s not focus on *me* here. What’s your thing about?”

“Well . . . essentially there’s a woman who’s walking cross-country. To raise money for charity. She has adventures along the way. Which include a few scares . . . I know it’s trite to say she ‘finds’ herself, and there’s more to it, but that’s sort of it.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Finch said. “I’d love to read what you have.”

“Oh my God, that would be incredible,” Holly said. “Needless to say, I didn’t expect *this* development tonight.”

He was writing down his email address. “Lucky thing,” he said, “I remember it. Been inconsistent in that department . . . Others too.”

“You seem just perfect to me,” Holly said. She had an award-winning smile, Finch decided.

“You’re lying,” he said, “but I’ll take it.”

“And I’ll absolutely work the leads you gave me, on the homicide.”

“Like I say, could be dead ends . . . Newspaper work in general’s good fuel for novelists though.”

“So what are *your* books about, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“The first three, pretty much just a guy. The fourth I tried to do too much.”

“Well I’m hooked,” Holly said.

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The next morning instead of his normal shorts Finch wore his swim trunks into town for his Starbucks stop, and down to the beach.

It was a bit crazy, he knew, but there was nothing like the presence of an interested and beautiful young woman to help turn back the clock. He hadn’t been in the ocean bodysurfing in twenty years, at least, but today was a good day.

And you know what? Maybe he *would* write that final novel, settle the thing once and for all. Who cares that there are no more publishers and he’s stuck with Amazon? Not as big a step down as it used to be, that’s

for sure, not even close. He even had the title in his head, *A Regular Monte*. The guy resolves the issue with his sister, moves back from Winnipeg to Oklahoma City, may or may not kill off the guy that screwed him out of the money and through it all learns to appreciate the little things.

The waves were pretty good-sized and the wind had picked up a bit. There were a half dozen boogie boarders in the water, and some surfers on the other side of the pier. Because of La Nina, if you bought into that, the water was supposed to be warmer this year, but the initial shock was brutal and Finch's heart was racing as he ducked under his first wave.

It took a few minutes, but he started getting into it and managed a couple of rides. Small stuff, close the beach, but still something. He got a little more brave and went out further, where the boogie boarders were hanging out, and on his third attempt he caught a real wave. He handled the drop and stayed ahead of the white water and rode it all the way in, to where his chest scraped the sand, which is how he always liked to finish it off.

The old sensation was back. Finch couldn't quite believe it. He worked his way back out, and a big one was developing and he could hear the boogie boarders getting excited as they adjusted into position. He knew he had this.

He took off just a fraction late. The wave broke on top of him and drove him down, and he was trying to breathe and started swallowing water, and he tried to find the surface but was being somersaulted around and had no idea what direction was up.

Everything started to go black and he saw his parents, and then he was in the yard of his elementary school at recess, and then on a train in South America that was going backwards in the mountains.

An arm, a strong one, locked around his chest and pulled, and he was gasping and coughing but now breathing, and the lifeguard cinched the rescue tube around him and angled him onto his back and brought him in.

“Sir, are you feeling all right?” the lifeguard said.
“Do you want us to call someone?”

Finch had watched the beach lifeguards for years, envied them, admired them, was awed by some of the things they did. He never expected he'd be part of the deal, but here you were.

“I’m good,” he said. “Really, I’m okay.”

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