

# Stars

## 3400 words

"This doesn't feel like it's gonna work," Pete said.

"Little tight," Ned said.

"For Goodness sakes," Holly said, "I've never heard so much hemming and hawing."

"Really," Rosie said. "What it is, they're afraid to expose their inner selves."

Finch said, "Okay people, let's focus, if we may. We have our first handout." Holly took the folder from him and distributed the paperwork.

The only one who hadn't said anything, pro or con, was the new guy. Ralph Salvatore.

This was the New York guy Ned referenced last Sunday.

Who happened to show up in Manhattan Beach, looking, as Ned put it, for a little clarification on some events.

Ned had gone on to explain that Ralph being in town was logical *fallout*, and don't worry about it.

Pete met Ralph a couple nights ago in the Crowe's Nest, the guy one of those roly-poly types who laughed a lot and his midsection jiggled, and for all you knew on the surface, it was old home week around here for Ned.

In fact Ned had told Pete when he'd introduced them that they'd known each other since 3rd grade. And could Pete figure out Ralph's nickname?

Ralph seemed embarrassed and Pete said, "Number one, that's a dumb question, especially with no hint whatsoever, and number two, he doesn't want to go there."

"Do you?" Ned said to Ralph.

Ralph tilted his head, like whatever, and Ned said, "The Elevator."

Ralph did smile a little and Pete said, "So . . . your last name, they sort of rhymed it?"

"Sure," Ned said, "that's part of it. But this son of a bitch could dunk a basketball . . . I mean not in 3rd grade, but eventually. Before he gained the weight, where you see him now."

Ralph put a hand up. "I couldn't technically dunk it. I could roll it over the rim."

Pete saw that he did have real big hands, could likely palm the ball easily, among other things, and here you had these two old buddies getting ready to tell East Yonkers playground stories.

Pete decided he was too old to be dancing around stuff, and he said to Ralph, “So what brings you out here, man?” Leaving out what Ned told him about Ralph *clarifying* things.

Ralph was smooth, you had to give him that. “Not much,” he said. “We’re working a real estate deal in Portland, so I’m on your coast anyway, so why not drop down and see my old friend Neddy. He’s extended the invitation, for what . . . 4, 5 years?”

“I’ve been here 12,” Ned said. “In fact 14 counting Hollywood. You never took me up on it until now.”

Ralph shrugged his shoulders so Pete said to Ned, “You say Hollywood? That’s when you were trying to act? I think you mentioned something, that first time.”

“*This* guy,” Ned said to Ralph, “We first make our acquaintance on the Strand. A ladies’ beach volleyball match is underway. You believe the first words out of his

mouth? *How do the bikinis stay on, all the leaping and lunging and diving they're doing?*

“That’s a fair question,” Ralph said. “How *do* they?”

“How do *I* know?” Ned said. “You’ll have to ask one of ‘em.”

“A different answer than you gave me back then,” Pete said.

“It’s nice here,” Ralph said. “You’re right, I should have visited sooner.” He was arching his head to the left, where you had the view of the ocean through the middle window during the day, but even at night there were a few lights out there and you were aware of it.

Ned got tapped on the shoulder and excused himself, and Ralph took a seat at the bar, and you had both Cindy and Ellen waitressing tonight, which hadn’t been the case in a while, and it would have been a perfectly comfortable scene if it didn’t necessarily include this Ralph.

Now Finch was asking for a show of hands, and Pete couldn’t quite believe he was in this situation.

They were in Finch’s motel room, of all places, where Finch had a long-term deal. He was pacing

around holding a clipboard, and Rosie and Holly on the bed and Pete and Ned and Ralph in these folding chairs that Finch said he borrowed from the breakfast buffet.

Finch said, “Good then. Do I have a volunteer to lead off?”

“I’ll go,” Rosie said.

What was happening, they got railroaded into a writing class. Or Pete got railroaded into it, and told Ned to join the fun, and amazingly Ned did, and he recruited Rosie.

They had found out this guy Finch was a semi-famous writer once--meaning back in the 80’s when traditional hardcover books were a bigger deal--and Holly started looking at him as a mentor, and admittedly Pete got in the act as well, feeling bad for the old guy and trying to get him un-stuck on that final novel he supposedly had in him, titled *Monte* something.

Then it started as a joke, *this* part, Holly telling Finch, “Hey, you should teach a little workshop” and Finch laughed it off like you’re out of your mind . . . and that was a couple weeks ago, and here everyone was.

Looking around the room--and man, it was stuffy in here--the one component you wouldn't have pictured was Ralph. Even Ned, you figured okay, he might have a story or two in him, but Ralph . . . and Pete figured it was Ned dragging him along, or it may have been as simple as Ralph was bored tonight.

But fine, Pete had gone along with Finch's pre-first class assignment and written a one paragraph summary of a novel *he could see someone writing about him*.

It wasn't very good, he hoped he wouldn't get laughed at--but he supposed it *could* be interesting to hear what the others came up with--and Rosie stood up and cleared her throat and started off.

**'If a person wrote a novel about me he would make me one of those performers you see at the circus who fly on the trapeze. When I was 8 my mom took me. It was downtown, the Garden. The announcer was very loud. Not just for the high trapeze part but for all of it. After, my mom complained about the noise to some person and**

**they gave her a number to call. I don't remember this. She told me a lot later.'**

People shifted around a little, and Pete assumed they were waiting for more--which *he* was too--and then it took Rosie a minute to sit back down, which added to the possibility--but then she did plop onto the bed.

Finch cleared *his* throat and said, "Well, Rose . . . I call that a wonderful start."

Jeez, *Rose*.

"I second that," Holly said, pinching Rosie on the shoulder. "Wonderful premise, I'm seeing several directions the line can take."

"Well thank you so much," Rosie said.

"What happened when your mom complained?" Ned said.

Pete said, "Yeah that. And the *line*?"

"*Storyline*," Holly said. "Plot points. And whether we're talking omniscient narrator, stream of consciousness, or another point of delivery. It's all fascinating."

"You're full of shit," Pete said.

“I agree,” Ralph said, who you didn’t expect to hear from. “But anyways,” he said, “I like the set up. Reminds me when my Uncle Rocky took *us* there, we’s about the same age. Took the train from Eastchester to 42nd Street, then we had to walk though.”

“Same thing then!” Rosie said. “Me and everyone, we took the 1 train. Though you could change to the express at 96th.”

“Where’d you grow up at?” Ralph said.

“Let’s stay on course, if we may,” Finch said. “Not that the backstories aren’t interesting, but who is next?”

“I’m fine,” Holly said, and she stayed seated on the bed and pulled a folded-up paper out of her purse. She seemed tense.

**‘I’m a wife in a bad relationship. The setting is 1950’s Culpeper, Virginia. My husband is cheating on me, and barely attempting to disguise it. I wish to cheat on him too, but I’m unable to . . . and it proceeds from there.’**



Again you were aware of Finch clearing the throat. This time he paced a bit more and you assumed he was formulating some positive commentary, but meanwhile Ned spoke up. “I like it,” he said.

“I do too,” Pete said.

“That makes three,” Ralph said. “I’d keep reading, at least ‘til it slowed down.”

Finch said, “An interesting point. How would it proceed to slow down ineffectively, in your view?”

Rosie said, “Why can’t the woman cheat on the man?”

“I haven’t established that yet,” Holly said.

“You mean, she wants to,” Ned said, “but can’t come up with a willing partner?”

“Or she’s screwed up physically,” Pete said, “and *has* the partner, but can’t.”

“Or mentally maybe too,” Rosie said. “She wants to . . . howyoucall . . . intellectually . . . but there’s a little lightbulb that holds her back.”

Holly said, “I hadn’t explored it that way--but Gosh, that may be the best one.”

“Which one *were* you leaning toward?” Pete said.

“Ned’s way. But I see now, that was dull and cliched compared to Rosie’s way.”

Ralph said to Finch, “Answering your question. It would slow down when she started *thinking* about stuff too much, instead of *doing* shit.”

Pete said, “Why the Culpeper, Virginia? You ever been there? I mean, is it even a real place?”

“I have not,” Holly said, “but I believe I’ve heard of it, so it must be real.”

Ned said to Holly, “You ever been to a shrink?”

And more shifting around and another throat or two being cleared, and Holly said, “That’s a nervy question. I’d ask what gives you the right, but I guess I don’t mind.”

“No need to upset the apple cart, hon,” Finch said. “No one’s unwillingly on stage here.”

Pete didn’t care for the hon, but it was what it was, Finch was a harmless old guy with some new life injected into him, and it wasn’t surprising if he and Holly had developed a benevolent-uncle relationship.

Holly said, “I’m fine with it. We’re among friends, I feel . . . Yes, I’ve been in therapy.”

Ned took a moment. “Only reason I ask,” he said, “*your* type set-up, isn’t it what the psychoanalytical folks have a field day with?”

“I see what he’s saying,” Ralph said, “could there be more to it.”

“Like a dream you mean,” Rosie said. “How would it be explained? Like you’re a human being, now, in this *room* . . . but you go a different direction, and create a different world--but it’s still you *in* it--and what’s the reason?”

“Oh boy,” Pete said.

“I’d love to say that I’ll ask my therapist for an interpretation, but we cut ties two years ago,” Holly said.

“Good move,” Ralph said, “you look fine.”

“He’s probably right,” Ned said.

“Could very well be,” Pete said.

“Next?” Finch said.

“I got it,” Ned said, and he stood up, and found what he needed on his phone and started reading.

**“My guy -- you want it to be me, so fine -- my guy’s Czechoslovakian. On his 21st birthday he gets a trip together, go back there and find his roots. (I shoulda said, he lives in Florida.) The problem being though, there isn’t any more Czechoslovakia. He finds out they dissolved it. There was a revolution in 1992, it turns out, which he should have paid attention to in school, but didn’t -- and they disposed of the place . . . or deposed it -- or the government -- however you phrase it. So anyways he gets to the airport, finds this out, and the check in girl is quite nice, explains they didn’t get rid of it, exactly, they just split it into two. My guy gets this, but it’s not the same, finding his roots is shot, and he doesn’t want to travel. But he asks the check in girl how about we get a drink when you get off work.”**

Ned waited. Holly spoke first. “That’s a novel?” she said.

“In there *somewhere* I was thinking, unh-huh,” Ned said. “No?”

“I think it’s brilliant,” Finch said, and you could see him right away regretting the use of that word, implying he liked it better than the other two.

“I wish I thought of it,” Rosie said. “In a different form of course.”

“I think it’s a bunch of gobbledy gook,” Pete said, “but I have to go next.”

“So your *honest* opinion is worse?” Ned said.

Pete said, “My honest opinion is--all that build up, when all your guy is seeking out . . . is a piece a ass.”

“I would agree,” Ralph said.

“Well I wanted to redirect it that way, yeah,” Ned said. “I don’t know enough about other countries to keep it interesting.”

Finch said, “Pete, can you conclude for us tonight?”

“Do I have to stand?” Pete said. “Because I really didn’t have a chance to put much thought into this.”

“Listen to this guy,” Ned said.

“Yeah, now the shoe’s on the other foot,” Holly said. “We had more time than you?”

“Yes get real Pete,” Rosie said. “Our ones so far, they sounded like we worked on them for days?”

“You definitely didn’t,” Ralph said, nodding.

Finch raised a hand again. “Before we hear what Peter has to offer, I will say, from personal experience--positive *and* negative--that often the first incarnation of an idea works best.”

“What I think you’re getting at,” Ned said, “is like in school, if your first inclination is B, then don’t overthink it into D.”

“Exactly,” Finch said. “James Joyce would work all day trying to get one sentence just so. Marcel Proust, for one, could write half a dozen chapters in the same time.”

This ground any momentum to a halt, Pete afraid Finch was going to continue on this tangent, especially if anyone prompted him further.

“Okay we get it,” Pete said. “My deal, welp, here goes nothing.”

**‘My character is Archie. Archie doesn’t have a lot of friends so he joins a chess club. This is in Kansas City, where he ends up after running out**

**of gas, while running away from alimony payments in Oregon. He's the worst chess player in the club but that's okay, because he starts getting more attention -- people trying to help him -- than if he was the best player. One guy in particular tries to help him the most, gives him a couple books on basic strategy, and Pete thanks the guy by inviting him and his family to a pool party. (He doesn't own a house of course, it's an apartment complex, but still.) So the guy does show up with his family, but one of his kids is wild and mixes it up with another kid in the pool who lives in the complex. The other kid's dad comes down to the pool and Archie's chess guest dad confronts this guy. By now some drinking's been going on, at least with the chess dad, and the two of them kind of bear hug and plunge into the pool with their clothes on. Archie knows he should do something -- but he also wants to see how it unfolds, so he just sits there on the chaise lounge. And long story short, the one guy drowns."**

“Oh no, *which* guy?” Rosie said.

“The guy who lives there,” Pete said, “but let me finish. **They *think* he drowns. They drag him out and lay him on the side of the pool, there’s a crowd by now, and some little guy pushes his way to the front and does something to the guy’s chest, and stomach too, and son of a gun the guy spits out water and is okay.**”

“That it?” Ned said.

“Almost. **Archie thinks he recognizes the little guy, and that the guy’s been tailing him from Oregon. So the next day Archie tries to get back at the guy by asking his girlfriend out on a date. She refuses, so Archie gets in the car and moves on. Probably to Little Rock, Arkansas . . .** That’s not clear yet.”

“Hmm,” Finch said finally. “*Anyone?*”

“Not really,” Holly said.

“No,” Ned said. “Except you used my part, the guy putting on the moves . . . But the dude’s own girlfriend, isn’t that kinda out of bounds?”



“Especially when he did you a favor and saved your friend,” Rosie said.

“Not his friend, necessarily, but I hear you,” Ralph said.

That was about all the fireworks. Holly brought out the box of cookies that Pete assumed were standard in these meet-up deals, and Rosie helped Finch bring six cups of coffee back from the machine they had in the lobby, and everyone shot the breeze about trivial stuff--the Dodgers outfield prospects after acquiring Mookie Betts, the new regulations in Manhattan Beach where you had to walk your bike on select parts of the Strand because some guy got run over, a *fourth* ice cream shop opening in town and how was it going to make it.

“Well I have to say, this has been better than I expected,” Ned said. “You got me thinking different ways here.” And he thanked Finch, and the others did too, including Ralph, and Finch asked Ralph if he wanted to contribute a novel idea of his own, even informally, and Ralph said no, but he’d take a rain check, and maybe next week.

Finch gave out the next assignment, which was to skip ahead and write the very *final* scene of your novels, where you finish it off with THE END.

“I must say, Terry,” Holly said, “that goes against the grain of your personal approach, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Finch said, and he left it at that, and a minute later Pete watched Ralph and Ned get into a car together . . . and he figured that’s what a good instructor does, he keeps you off-balance.