

Unless

2150 words

The third day down there, Pete taking it slow, enjoying the bikini offerings along The Strand, some guy on a bicycle almost runs him over.

Pete didn't care for this but had pretty much forgotten about it by the time he reached the Manhattan Beach Pier and wandered out to the end, except the same guy happened to be perched on one of the benches, the pier apparently being his turnaround point. He was watching the late-afternoon surfers down below.

Pete took a seat next to the idiot and said, "I really look that old to you?"

The guy squinted at him. "Come again, Bud?"

"What were you doing, about 25 back there? I almost had to adjust my power-walk to avoid you."

"That's pretty funny," the guy said, placing it now.

Pete said, "It wasn't the 'out of the way, old man', specifically, that hit a nerve."

“Let me guess. You didn’t like the tone.”

Pete said, “But forget that for a second . . . I’m really an old man, is your impression?”

“You’re asking me for an honest answer?” the guy said, amused. “Well compared to the studly population we got around here . . . what do *you* think?”

Pete had to admit he could see his point. It was a little intimidating exercising here, a much more intense vibe than his old stomping grounds, the Marina Green in San Francisco. Everyone looked great. Even the legitimate old guys seemed fitter and moved better than he did.

Either way, there was the guy’s bicycle leaning up against the railing. It looked like a fancy hybrid bike, with about 80 gears, and bells and whistles up the wazoo.

Then again, it could have been a knock-off version from the rack at Target.

Pete watched the surfers for a minute. Only medium-sized waves today, short rides, but a lot of skill down there.

He got off the bench and picked up the guy's bike and threw it over the side of the pier into the ocean.

The guy popped up and looked over the railing, and turned to Pete with a wide-open mouth, and started racing to the front end of the pier where the stairs took you down to the beach.

Pete realized there was one surfer close to the pier who he hadn't seen when he flung the thing over. Luckily the guy wasn't aware of the bicycle plunging into the water nearby, and more importantly it didn't hit him.

It did seem like the right time to start moving and to probably re-blend into the throng, so he headed back to The Strand and turned south toward Hermosa, and by this time the bike guy had taken off his shoes and was wading into the water, his head swiveling around like a bird.

More interesting to Pete was the beach volleyball game taking shape right in front of him, four gals who knew what they were doing, the serving and the diving and the spiking all at a high level, and the outfits micro-swimsuits, at best.

“You’re probably wondering,” someone said, “how they don’t burn their feet.”

Pete was hoping the person wasn’t talking to him, but he was, a pleasant-enough-looking guy with a backwards Dodgers cap and a newspaper under his arm.

“They still read papers in L.A. then,” Pete said.

“Not sure,” the guy said. “I pick up the leftovers at The Coffee Bean. Not much bite to them anymore though.”

“You got that right, I was in the business once,” Pete said, thinking about running into an old colleague at the Booker Lounge in Cow Hollow, comparing notes on what they were doing these days, neither one of them quite able to replace the excitement of the newsroom when a story was breaking.

“What interested me,” the guy said, “was you tossed it, and then you took your time. Nothing that urgent bothering you, where you had to hightail it out of there.”

Pete said, “Jeez . . . I was that obvious then?” A little alarmed that he hadn’t blended back in after all.

The guy said, “I’m watching a couple Mexican kids reeling in a pretty big fish. Something I always wanted to try, but never committed myself to.”

“I know . . . you have to be willing to get a little dirty, plus all that *time*.”

“And then you gotta filet it, I guess, or some other shit,” the guy said. “So I look to the left and there’s this strange scene playing out, the metal going up and over . . . I can’t help wondering, are they having some kind of logical beef, or is it just some dude off his rocker.”

“So you followed me to find out,” Pete said. “Answer your original question, I wasn’t wondering how they don’t burn their feet . . . but how do the outfits stay in place?”

“They don’t always.”

“Oh. Not a big deal. Just something to be curious about, I guess.”

“You sound like me,” the guy said. “Let’s get a drink.”

There was a three-block stretch on Manhattan Beach Boulevard, coming up the hill from the water, where you could zig-zag bar to bar and they all felt pretty much the same. Cozy establishments, partial views of the Pacific, just beat-up enough without overdoing it.

“If you go local,” the guy was saying, who’d introduced himself as Ned, “you need to be wearing flip-flops. Take a look around.”

Pete said, “When I was a kid, on vacation, we used to call them zorries. The strap though, it digs into my foot between the toes.”

They were in the *Crow’s Nest*, not quite 4 o’clock, a little table in back, sipping whiskey sours. Ned seemed to know everyone, and introduced him to Cindy, the waitress.

“Are you new?” she said, friendly.

“You mean, as opposed to passing through?” Pete said. “I think so, yeah.”

“Well it looks like you’re in good hands already with Neddy,” she said, and left them alone.

“The e after your name,” Pete said. “Sounds like there’s some depth there.”

“Yeah, well,” Ned said. “Where you holing up at, anyway?”

“Ah, I got an apartment. Month-to-month. Kinda re-inventing myself a tad.”

“Yeah? . . . What’s so important you gotta reinvent yourself *from*?”

The correct answer of course would be: *From expending a lot of time and energy and stress trying to avoid damaging a couple people . . .* Or along those lines.

Obviously you couldn’t put it that way, so Pete said, “Up north. I had a medical scare . . . I think I’m out of the woods, but something like that, it makes you act different.”

“You’re out of the woods, how?” The guy not dancing around it, which Pete could appreciate.

“Well I go in, figuring they’re going to give me a couple Alka-Seltzers--the doctor, he’s an old friend of mine, the whole thing no big deal . . . I come out, I’m

driving down to Colma pricing burial plots . . . You know where that is?”

“Is that like, Daly City? You see that shit from the freeway going to the airport, no?”

“No, that’s 280, a veterans’ cemetery. Different. But back to my deal, a few days later, when you get yourself half-way stabilized, you start thinking funny thoughts.”

“I can imagine. What kind of thoughts? . . . You want another?”

Pete said he wouldn’t mind.

“One of my goals coming down here,” he said, “cut back on the hard liquor. And the free radicals. Someone lectured me on those too. I’m off to a flying start.”

“Your lecture-person needs an update,” Ned said, signaling Cindy with two fingers. Pete thought of his friend Allison examining his tongue and telling him what he needed to work on to improve himself. She was looking at a chart, and he asked her which organs she could tune up. She’d been pretty bossy, but still.

That was back near the beginning, which seemed like a long time ago. Pete counted it off on his fingers,

and said, “Right around the end of football, the regular season, is when they death-sentenced me.”

“So we’re talking, what, mid-January?” Ned said.

Pete said, “Dang, coming up on nine months now. That’s good.” Though at the same time, thinking, *Is that actually very long?*

“So . . . you’re saying, the chemo took hold? You beat it?”

Pete said, “Your name really Ned?”

“No, Lou,” the guy said.

“Cause I’m hearing a touch of New York. And you look pretty Italian, if you pinned me down.”

“Well I’ll stop short of calling you a genius for those observations . . . I lost most of the accent. Acting classes out here. Even then, I had to work at it.”

“It surface sometimes though, where you revert back?”

“It’s been known to.”

Pete had no idea where he was going with this Lou, but he supposed it wasn’t the worst way to be closing out the day, especially when he didn’t have a whole lot else going on. “The acting *work?*” he said.

“Nah, not great . . . I thought I could come out here and kinda take over the industry. It ain’t that simple.”

Pete said, “You’re reminding me of the guy in *Get Shorty* now . . . The book was a lot better than the movie.”

“Actually,” Lou said, “*The Sopranos* is what you might say triggered my interest in Hollywood. They kind of shift gears there, remember where the nephew writes a script? And they fly out to get that actor to entertain it.”

“I know who you’re talking about. The half-Indian guy who played Ghandi. He’s not that interested, and they send him a message.”

Lou said, “I can’t remember what the final outcome was, did they ever get it into production . . . or was it one of those loose ends they never dealt with.”

Pete said, “That’s something I appreciated about the show . . . They didn’t need to tie everything up into a neat package.”

“You’re right. Like the loose Russian down the Pine Barrens. You always wonder, is it gonna come back and bite ‘em in the ass.”

“When you brought up *The Sopranos* as your motivation,” Pete said, “I thought it was going to be where Tony has the dream that he’s the traveling salesman, and is at the convention at that hotel in L.A.”

“After he gets shot,” Lou said. “But I thought that was the midwest.”

“Ever shot anyone?” Pete said, the second whiskey sour starting to kick in good.

“Funny,” Lou said, “something I had in mind to ask *you*.”

The place was filling up. Cindy was joined by another waitress, a platinum-blonde, petite, with her hair up, and some of the regulars were putting their hands on the two of them here and there, friendly and probably harmless in a casual beach town, though maybe not somewhere else.

Pete said, “So what kind of business are you in now? Since the movie-star career bombed, apparently.”

Lou said, “You know . . . a little of this, little of that . . . *business* business.”

“And you’re looking for assistance . . . in some way, shape or form.”

“You tell *me*,” Lou said. Deadpan now, eyes a little colder, and Pete could picture him leaning against the stoop outside a three-family house in East Yonkers, which if that wasn’t the exact neighborhood was close enough.

Pete took his time, still amused by this guy but also wondering what line he might be crossing, or already had.

Lou got a call and stuck his hand out like *sorry about this* and he plugged one ear and stood up and went outside. Cindy the waitress came over and said, “I see you boys have hit it off already.”

Pete thought of asking Cindy what she was doing later. The diagnosis he was telling Ned/Lou about made him bolder, impulsive . . . even after he didn’t show any symptoms and it started looking like someone could have made a mistake in the medical chain and maybe there never *had* been anything to worry about.

But he remembered he was supposed to grab a bite with Emma, who he’d met by the pool yesterday in his little apartment complex. So he said to Cindy, “The guy ever act? I mean that was really part of the deal?”

“Ned?” she said.

“Yeah. As a stepping stone to roughing people up?
Or whatever?”

“You’re funny,” she said, and she put a fresh cocktail napkin under his drink and moved on . . . and Ned was still outside and Chris took in the scene, decided the *Crowe’s Nest* wasn’t a bad vibe . . . and maybe cultivate your *own* garden for once, how about.