

Visuals

3800 words

A guy sat down next to Pete outside Starbucks, young guy, good shape, surfer-type bleach-blonde thick head of hair.

“I *recognize* you,” Pete said, “but I don’t *know* you.”

“Dave,” the guy said, shaking hands.

“From the bar, correct?” Pete said, placing him now from last night, and probably a few others, at the *Crowe’s Nest*, down the hill near the pier.

“You got *that* right,” Dave said. “My go-to venue. I tend to keep a low profile.”

“That’s the way to do it. We all unwind at a different pace.”

“I couldn’t help notice you talking to Ned Mancuso,” Dave said.

Pete wasn’t quite sure what to do with that one. He said, “You’re like *me*, it looks like. You don’t *work*.”

Dave smiled. “I can appreciate your answer,” he said. “Since I might have ruined your soy latte by bringing that guy up too early in the day.”

Pete said, “Never drink soy *anything*. Under any circumstances . . . *Real* fat, that’s the one and only way to go.”

Dave said, “The a-hole owes me 8 grand. Plus royalties.”

“I know the feeling,” Pete said, not surprised at a development like this, and figuring no need to ask. You sit here a few minutes, it should come out.

“But what you said before,” Dave said, “you’re retired? That’s the gig *I* want.”

“I get that reaction. My comeback is, a work in progress. Give it a try, and *then* see.”

“I wish,” Dave said. “I’m a beach lifeguard, but I got no seniority, and it’s seasonal. So I personal-train, the fitness game.”

Pete said, “A lot people say that, and I never quite pin it down . . . You go to a *gym*, administer sets on the *Cybex* machine, make sure their *form* is sound? Or is it an at-*home* deal, with yoga mats?”

“Those are two ways. I work with them *outdoors*, public places. The pier was perfect, but then this other guy comes along--he had knee surgery but he’s back--and that’s kind of his territory.”

“Yeah I’ve seen that guy,” Pete said.

“So right now I’m at Dockweiler, by El Segundo . . . It’s nothing fancy, my sessions. Like . . . see that curb over there? Step up and down on it a hundred times alternating your feet, and then crab walk backwards to where I’m standing at.”

“They obey, then, no problem?”

“Oh yeah. It helps that they think I played college football, that makes ‘em like to show off.” Dave spoke a little quieter. “I didn’t really play, but I kind of maneuvered it onto my Facebook.”

“You mean . . . you faked a college?”

“No, real college, Southern Miss. D-1 and everything. I was what they call an invited walk-on. They redshirted me a year, but I didn’t make it past spring camp. Never got on the field. White guy wide receiver down in Mississippi.”

Pete thought about it and said, “I can see where you’re coming from. Okay you lied, but the end result is the clients get a better workout.”

“Well I like your outlook,” Dave said.

“That’s not Ole Miss, right? Two different places?”

“Oh yeah. Ole Miss is in Oxford. Southern Miss is Hattiesburg.”

Pete said, “If I had to take a wild guess, you don’t sound like you’re *from* there.”

“Not at all, La Jolla . . . They swallow their words, very different . . . though I’m a fan of the accent, and I liked it there . . . What fucked me in the end was there was one of the assistant coaches, an older guy, he had a daughter. I had a class with her and started dating her, and even though I was already cut from the team by then, that was off-limits and they threw me out of school.”

“*Good* old boys.”

“No kidding.”

Pete said, “Those two towns though, Oxford and the other one . . . how would they be if someone wanted to . . . *hang out* for a while, lay low?”

“You mean *you*?” Dave said laughing.

“Jeez,” Pete said. “Quite a projection on your part.”

“Just a hunch. You know Ned, for one.”

Dave not smiling as much now, because he’d come full circle back to his own situation.

And no point asking if Dave knew Tammy, who’d given Pete a surfing lesson, and was supposedly a personal trainer herself. He would, but so what.

“So that’s it?” Pete said. “You don’t run around at night doing Amway or something? . . . I’m joking, you sound *plenty* busy, like you’re hustling.”

“*Amway*? What’s that?”

“Forget it, I’m dating myself. Multi-level marketing. Biodegradable cleaning products. My uncle and cousin tried it, teamed up, had a falling out, and *still* aren’t speaking.”

“I gotcha. Passive income, on the side. That’s not bad. If you have a better suggestion than Amway--it sounds like--let me know.”

“Anyhow . . .” Pete said. “How’re the rescues? You get a lot of those?”

“We can. Usually someone who we already warned, ignoring a rip current . . . Sometimes the surfers and boogie boarders get too close, and you have to watch for some guy getting hit in the head . . . The other thing, the European tourists in the summer, they’re oblivious to the conditions.”

“Not a lot of waves to contend with in the Mediterranean.”

“I guess not,” Dave said. “You know Mancuso got pinched, right?”

“I did hear that,” Pete said.

“You guys being engaged in conversation last night, I figured you did.”

“He didn’t bring it up. But you know Ellen, the waitress, right? She mentioned it.”

“She took the hit *with* him,” Dave said. “A couple others too.”

“Oh . . . that part she left out.”

“Surprises,” Dave said.

“So . . . like . . . an *escort* thing then?” Pete said, trying hard to wrap his mind around *Ellen* now.

“That and more,” Dave said. “Yeah they got nailed on the *first* thing. The second one is where he screwed *me*.”

Pete lowered his voice. “You’re not saying . . . drugs?”

“Porn,” the guy said, and he didn’t lower *his* voice, since he was mad and obviously didn’t care.

“Holy Toledo,” Pete said, not knowing what that meant exactly, by itself--*porn*--but certainly one *more* element to process.

“So yeah,” Dave was saying, “I keep it simple in there . . . but notice how Ned, he made sure not to look in my direction.”

“Sheesh,” Pete said.

“I can tell you’re kind of in shock. When it’s people you know, it’s hard to conceive. You get used to it. It’s business.”

Pete couldn’t help it, he had to ask, leaning in and lowering his voice down to a near whisper. “*Ellen* though? She makes *porno* flicks?”

“Some. She’s more or less Mancuso’s right hand man. There’s another gal too, older.”

“You’re saying . . . they organize them? . . . Book them?”

“Yeah. *Produce them* would be the term . . . Fucker talked me into it, I needed the money, and then he shafts me . . . The way they got it set up, you can’t exactly take ‘em to small claims court.”

“Ooh boy,” Pete said . . . Now you were inclined to ask Dave if *he* hooked up with Ellen at all--
professionally--but you had to leave that alone.

“So anyways,” Dave said. “I recognized you, figured I’d say something, for what it’s worth.”

“I appreciate it,” Pete said. “Let me just get it straight, though . . . their thing, operation, whatever . . . it’s *where* exactly?”

“You know down the Strand, the house with all the glass and the motorcycles in front?”

“Yeah. Like they’re being displayed . . . That’s a pretty incredible place actually.”

“Four, maybe five houses *past* there. That’s where it’s at. The front facade is all this interlaced exotic wood.”

“Dang. Pretty sure I *know* that one, yeah . . . You’re saying . . . the escort, and the other stuff, it’s all . . . right there?”

“Go take a look,” Dave said. “Son of a bitch is creative. Even rents rooms downstairs, like an Airbnb. A pricey one though. But no stone left unturned.”

“Wait . . . so Mancuso actually owns a house on the *Strand*?”

“Not sure about *that*. I think there’s an Argentinian connection involved . . . Either way the mope has moved up. When I first met him he had a studio apartment in North Hollywood.”

“Well, one thing,” Pete said, “no one seemed too worried, if I read the room right.”

“Nah,” Dave said. “Mancuso’s got lawyers who know their way around. A bust like that, they’re trying to make a statement, probably because some billionaire neighbor complained. Nothing’ll happen.”

Pete couldn’t help thinking those lawyers included his own tennis friend Chandler at one time, and who knows, maybe still did . . . and he and Dave got up and

went out the door and said see ya later and turned in different directions.

Pete's direction was to the right, down the hill. Starbucks was at the corner of Highland, so you had 2 1/2 short blocks to the beach, which were Manhattan Avenue, Ocean Drive and then the Strand.

Where you could turn left, toward that motorcycle house, and the one a few doors past it.

Hmm . . .

It was a little after two . . . *should* you just do what Dave suggested . . . mosey on over there, knock on the door, say *how you doing* to whoever answered and see where it went?

It was easy enough to find, and there was a small brick entryway with an arching redwood gate, and you pulled a cord and the gate opened and there you were at the front door, everything glass on the first level.

A middle aged woman answered, modestly dressed, jeans and a t-shirt, and Pete said there's a chance he has the wrong place, but would Ned Mancuso happen to be around.

The woman said please come in and Ned was talking on the phone at a small desk, two folding chairs facing it, and that was about it.

He saw Pete and stuck out a hand hello, and he ended the call pretty quick and stood up.

“My *Bud*,” he said. “Hey I’m real glad you stopped by.”

And this was one more example of how you scratch your head with a guy like this, since he was saying it as though he’d personally invited Pete over, and was happy Pete took him up on the offer . . . rather than wondering what he was *doing* here and how the hell he *found* this place.

“Well thanks for having me,” Pete said. “But my first impression? Not much of an office for someone running a multi-directional operation like I keep hearing about.”

Ned laughed. “Sit down,” he said. “What, you’re not impressed with the furnishings?”

“No,” Pete said. “But I remember a guy telling me up in the Bay Area, he was operating a gym, and he had a fancy office overseeing the basketball court, the thing

must have been 30 by 30. He had a couple couches in there, a private shower too.”

Ned said, “You’re going to tell me the place picked up steam when he scrapped the office and stuck in 10 more treadmills.”

“Or turned it into a yoga studio . . . So what’s going on?”

“You want something to drink? Doesn’t have to be serious, could be Coke, Gatorade, whatever you like.”

Pete said a soft drink would be nice, and Ned left the office for a second and called something to the woman who let Pete in. “That’s Josephine,” he said. “I’m *telling* you, without *her*, we wouldn’t be doing half as well.”

Josephine came back with two sodas in glasses, limes on the sides, and she put down round cocktail napkins that had dolphins swimming.

“A nice touch,” Pete said. “Does she participate in any of your other activities?” Pete was wondering, is this what a madam looked like in Manhattan Beach?

“Put it this way,” Ned said, “she’s an all-around good judge of people. You *need* that, at least someone like me does, keep you pointing in the right direction.”

“Easy to get confused in business,” Pete said. “*She* get pinched, along you with you and Ellen?”

“Jesus, *pardner* . . . Hold your horses there a minute.” Ned was putting on an act, not hiding his amusement.

Pete said, “Some guy told me you owe him 8 grand. Which kind of pisses me off, if you want to know the truth.”

“First of all,” Ned said, “don’t believe everything you hear. Second, why would that bother you?”

“That’s not a good answer,” Pete said. “I’d respect you more if you said yeah I owe him 8 grand, and I may or may not pay him.”

“You’re all right,” Ned said, giving it a little wink. “Everybody gets paid though.”

There was intermittent noise in other parts of the house, people coming and going, and Josephine’s voice in the middle of it.

Pete said, “So if I wanted to rent a room here, what would *that* run me?”

“You don’t want to know. And if you add on amenities you’re in a different ballpark *still*.”

“So . . . if I’m reading it right, you’re in the *lodging* business . . . the *companionship* business . . . and there’s more adult stuff on top of that? Or was some guy feeding me a line?”

“No, no, that’s correct,” Ned said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Dang. What if I was a cop, all this time?”

“Then you’d probably want to take a look too. It’s been known to happen.”

They were in the foyer and you could see Josephine out on the front patio talking to someone and Ned said, “The elevator, or the stairs?”

Jeez . . . Pete hadn’t seen the elevator on the way in and couldn’t remember being in a single-family house that had one, but he said the stairs sound better because he needs the exercise.

A flight up Ned said, “*These* suckers, something you wouldn’t *think* about, the foundations.”

“No. What about ‘em?”

“Well you gotta find the bedrock, that’s where you start your concrete piers. Typically, you go down thirty feet.”

Pete said, “So living on the beach, you’re saying . . . people don’t realize it’s not so simple.”

“It really isn’t,” Ned said.

It was hard to tell what the second floor was all about, but there was a series of rooms off a main living area, no action here at the moment.

The third floor was another story, plenty of noise, including some music . . . and it sounded like people barking instructions. Hmm . . .

“The nice thing up *here*,” Ned said, “we can take advantage of the light. And use the ocean as a backdrop, depending.”

It was set up like a penthouse apartment, one big open space with windows all around and a terrace on the beach side, and it was furnished pretty modern and slick, plenty of leather and chrome, and Pete figured whatever Ned saved on his office was added in up here.

There was a fake fireplace but it looked pretty cozy, with a couple ceramic logs being lapped at by an orange gas flame.

Not surprisingly, there was a bearskin rug in front of the fireplace, and you had what looked like a

cameraman and a soundman and a third person directing traffic . . . the traffic being two women and a guy presently going at it in the vicinity of the rug.

It was strange, the stuff your mind could dredge up when something *else* was going on . . . and Pete remembered back to when he first met Ned, and they were checking out some beach volleyball action, and Ned broke the ice by saying people wonder how they don't burn their feet.

Now Pete said to Ned, "Do they ever get rug burn?"

"Haven't heard it brought up," Ned said.

"Quite a bit of friction there, when you think about it."

"Could be. What is a factor, with some of them, they overdo the tanning booths, and get burned *that* way."

Pete could see his point. All three of the current participants were quite tan, and it was December, plus none of them had any tan *lines*, which implied artificial means.

Yep, definitely not much in the way of clothing at this point. You figured they all started *out* with it, but that could have been a while ago, with he and Ned

showing up in the middle of things. One of the gals did have a thin band of material around her waist, for a little extra aesthetics Pete supposed, but that was the extent of it.

He said to Ned, “How long’s something like this *go* then? Typically?”

“It’s up to them, how it plays out,” Ned said. “What we ask them to do though, if they’re going to go long, to keep switching it up.”

“Ah . . . the positions, you mean?”

“Yeah . . . don’t forget now, these are shorts, most of them. The business is a different animal than when you and I were going to a raunchy theater someplace and watching *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*.”

Across the room another crew was apparently setting up for a scene, but meanwhile the activity in front of them was looking pretty relentless, showing no sign of abating.

Pete said, “Where do you find them all, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“That part’s not as easy as you might think,” Ned said. “We try CraigsList for one, but you get mixed results. Word of mouth’s your best bet.”

“Oh.”

“Why . . . You looking to earn some extra dough?”

“Gee . . . not really, but you can’t be serious.”

“Oh yeah, we could use you no problem. There’s a mature category. It draws surprisingly well. Plus there’s other instances we need older guys.”

Pete was a little conflicted here--not whether he’d actually take the guy up on the offer, *that* wasn’t going to happen--but because he apparently passed the mustard, but strictly as an *old* guy. Though what did he expect?

He said, “What does it pay?”

“200 a scene,” Ned said. “That’s for normal work.”

“Like . . . what’s going on at the moment?”

“Right. Now we’re talking male talent. The female scale is different, higher.”

Pete assumed by *talent* the guy was using entertainment business slang, which would mean actor or performer.

Though this particular *guy* did have some actual talent, the way he was working stuff, one of the women suspended in the air at the moment.

Pete didn't want to ask what was *non-normal* work, if two women and a guy plus a few props was normal.

He said, "So that beach lifeguard. Dave . . . At 200 a pop . . . that'd be what, 40 scenes then, that you owe him for?"

It was interesting to get a handle on it, when you pinned it down in concrete numbers.

"More or less," Ned said, "but Cripes, can you *please* stop worrying about *Dave*?"

"How would that pan out though? I mean one a *day*, one a *week* . . . what?"

"Could be, over time, yeah . . . or could be a *couple* a day . . . nothing etched in stone . . . What's wrong?"

Pete said, "What's *wrong* . . . is I guess I'm starting to feel a little intimidated here . . . both what I'm *seeing*, and what I'm *hearing*."

"That happens, it's common. You get over it. I was serious when I said we can use guys like you in their 40's."

“I appreciate the offer . . . but honestly, based on what I’m witnessing? I think I come up a little short.”

“Don’t worry about *that* either,” Ned said. “There’s a place for you. Long as you’re in shape and on time, which I can tell you are.”

The threesome in the vicinity of the bear skin rug still hadn’t wrapped it up, was showing no signs of getting there in the next couple minutes, and somewhat astonishingly, the *other* scene began that they’d been setting up for across the room.

This one was more straightforward, one man, one woman, the guy white and the woman Latina or light-skinned black.

“*Where* do these end up?” Pete said. “You sell them on line, you say?”

“The longer ones,” Ned said. “But there’s been a shift there too. Now it’s these sites, that give the shit away for free, that are dominating the industry. It’s click and watch, no signup, no nothing. The money’s in the ads.”

Pete was going to ask, do you get paid per hit, or how did it work . . . but the logistics didn’t seem critical,

it was obviously a lucrative business, otherwise what would everyone be doing here at 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon in this multi-million dollar house on the Strand . . . and meanwhile Pete couldn't help notice that the new couple had gotten past the early formalities and was getting down to business pretty strong.

Pete said, "One thing I'll give you, compared to *our* day as you call it, with the full length films in the seedy theaters--there's a lot less acting."

"To put it mildly," Ned said. "Plus they had to come up with those *plots* back then, most of them terrible. They were just killing time until the next scene."

"So . . . Ellen . . . is *she* around today?"

"She'll be here tonight. You have a little *thing* for her, don't you? She told me you were ogling her at someone's swimming pool."

"Man," Pete said, "I'm that bad? Not to mention that obvious."

"So stick around. Or come back."

One thing you had to say about Ned . . . or Lou . . . or whoever else he was known by . . . he was a good host.

Likely there was an angle built in, where he wanted something from you, or was setting you up *to* want something.

But still, you were comfortable, like you *could* hang around as long as you want . . . and Pete considered it, that it would be interesting to get a handle on *Ellen's* role in all this.

Except he really *had* seen enough, and he told Ned his dating life may have inadvertently taken a hit . . . and Ned said don't worry about it, you'll be fine, and Pete said he'd try to keep that in mind.