

CRACKLE POP

An Episodic Novel

by Ted Gross

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Chapter One

I took a different trail to the beach and halfway there I hear some stirring in the shaded undergrowth, and I'm pretty sure a young couple is in the middle of the act.

I had to admit, if you're going to screw around outdoors in nature this wouldn't be the worst choice.

Though another 20 yards in would be more secluded. But they were playing the odds, there weren't a lot of humans coming through here on a Tuesday afternoon, and I would have passed by without noticing if the woman hadn't made a high-pitched sound.

There was another trail that fed into this one up ahead and that's the one the

locals used, the main reason being this one had a ton of poison oak.

Not directly on the trail so much-- they had maintenance guys who cut it back every spring--but immediately off it. If you swung your elbow wrong for instance, you could be in trouble.

That was in my head as I walked the rest of the way. The gal unleashing her noise in the splendor of the moment, the two of them laying down--or squatting or kneeling or however they were doing it-- smack dab in the middle of an acre of the lush green native shrub.

On the beach there was a middle-aged woman throwing a stick to a dog, and she was heavily endowed, lots of movement with each throw, nothing supported adequately. She had bird legs. Not sure if the scene was erotic or unattractive, but it caught your attention, the couple in the brush setting the tone.

Depending on the tide you were limited how far you could go left or right before running out of beach, so today I went right, toward Doran, and I did get cut off around the bend but that was fine, I was calculating I'd put in a couple miles and still had the return trip.

Speaking of which, coming toward me now I was pretty sure was the couple.

They were having a pretend argument, playfully shoving each other. Big smiles, all kinds of energy, I'm guessing early 20's.

I weighed the should I or shouldn't I. If it *was* them they might appreciate it.

So I put up a hand, which startled them both, and they angled away and I said, "Yo. I have a public service announcement is all. Maybe it benefits you, maybe not."

They stopped walking and the guy said, "Sir? Are you speaking to us?"

I looked around and the lady throwing the stick was gone and there was an older man way down there toward Point Reyes and that was about it.

I said, “Have to say, it’s like someone warned you to watch out for random people on the beach . . . which I guess I can understand, someone told me the same thing first time I visited New York. Of course I was in high school.”

“That’s where we’re from,” the guy said.

“Not the city,” the young gal said, “but near there.”

“Okay here’s the deal,” I said, “before I re-scare you.”

“You’re not now,” the guy said.

“No,” the woman said.

I said, “And this is a little delicate . . . so feel free to shut me down. Was that you two, frolicking back there?” Signaling the direction with my head.

No one answered right away. Then the woman said, “We saw you.”

“Sorry about that,” the guy said.

“Nah, don’t be silly,” I said. “Only reason I ask, you know what poison oak looks like, right?”

“Not sure. You’re saying we may have contracted it?”

“Contacted it, yeah. At the minimum.”

“Oh wow,” the woman said, extending her arms and rolling them around.

“Well is it similar to poison ivy?” the guy said. “That’s what we have back east. I don’t believe I noticed anything like that.”

I’m thinking man you’re an idiot, they’re almost the same thing, maybe the leaves on the oak version are a little larger, but Jeez. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but if it were me I’d want to get some water on stuff. Sooner than later.”

“You’re saying that’s a remedy?” the gal said.

“Maybe not the textbook one, but it’s bailed me out a couple times. The issue is the oils, you hope to eliminate ‘em before they take hold. Or you pray to.”

“I got a terrible case of poison ivy once at sleepaway camp,” she said. “My eyes closed all the way for a day.”

“Really?” the guy said. “What camp you go to?”

“It was in Maine.”

“Get out of here,” he said, “mine was too. We flew to Bangor.”

“Mine was near Portland,” she said.

“Hold on,” I said, “you guys flew to summer camp? . . . but we’re getting sidetracked. I’d recommend going in the ocean. I mean don’t drown or anything, but get good and wet.”

“A preemptive strike,” the guy said, sizing it up, the water looking fairly nasty at the moment, me agreeing that it wasn’t a

friendly swimming beach, waves pounding big rocks, plus you had the undertow that the sign at the bottom of the trail warned you about.

“Or I guess,” I said, “as an alternative . . . I do have an outdoor shower.”

The couple looked at each other. “That’s okay,” the guy said, “we don’t want to put you out, Man.”

“We don’t,” the gal said. “But it’s around here?”

“You say *around* here, that’s an interpretation. But yeah, once you’re back at the parking lot, it’s a two-minute drive.”

“We actually took the bus,” the guy said.

“Jesus,” I said. “No one does that. I didn’t even know there was one.”

“Well,” he said, “it lets you off on Highway One, bottom of the hill. Seemed kind of normal.”

“Where from?”

“Santa Rosa,” she said. “We’re staying at the hostel.”

“Okay now you got me twice,” I said. “I moved here from Santa Rosa, and I wasn’t aware of a hostel. But yeah, you want, I’m happy to drive you. Though we should get a bit of a move on, I’m not kidding.”

Heading back up the trail I didn’t say anything when we passed the spot, but the woman pointed it out.

So I took a careful look at the foliage and said, “Yep, you’re arguably screwed.”

They laughed, kind of nervously, and I realized I used the wrong word, but whatever, it was accurate and more importantly I was worried now about them in the car, leaving oils behind that might screw *me* later. I figured you better spray the seats with bleach or some shit.

“Whoa what a view,” the guy, Jason, said when we pulled into the driveway.

“Honestly,” the gal, Erin, said. “This reminds me of my uncle’s one, in North Carolina. The Outer Banks.”

“Thanks, it’s fair,” I said. “Plenty of house blockage between us and the water, as you can see. Plus you caught a nice day. No fog. Sometimes we’re socked in for a week.”

“Who is we?” Erin said.

“No you’re fine,” I said. “Just me in the house, no surprises . . . Meanwhile, the shower’s around the side, I’ll set you up.”

“Do you always refer to yourself in the third person?” she said.

She was mixed up on her persons, but she was starting to get interesting, and kind of cute.

I said, “I’m thinking about something else now too. Everything you’re wearing, we’re better off bagging it up and throwing in the garbage. I’ll look around, I think I can give you fresh stuff.”

Jason said, “You are taking this seriously. Don’t get me wrong--which we appreciate.”

“You mean you have fresh women’s clothes as well?” Erin said.

I was tossing it around. That woman Andrea had left some stuff here from when we’d been connected briefly. She was a little skinnier than Erin, and if the clothes didn’t fit or were tight Erin might feel bad, you never knew.

I realized there was a simpler solution and I said how ‘bout I just throw everything in the laundry when they’re done, and they said that sounded great, and I brought down a couple terrycloth robes and towels and some soap.

“Now it’s good I remembered I had this,” I said. “*Tecnu*. Take your time with it, don’t skimp. We used to use *Fels Naptha*. Not sure if they fooled with the formula, but this stuff’s better.”

“Dude,” Jason said, “you’re really . . . going beyond the call of duty.”

“You certainly are,” Erin said.

“Fine. Main thing, like I say, be thorough. Also cold water, if you can handle it. Lukewarm at the most.”

I went inside and it was a little early but it had been an eventful day so far, at least by my reduced standards living out here in Bodega Bay, where nothing much happened.

So what the hay, and I fixed myself a gin and tonic.

You could hear the water going strong through the kitchen wall, the outdoor shower.

A lot of the houses had them. Some people surfed, especially the weekenders, and I supposed the showers made sense, though I could only remember using mine once, when I stepped in a bunch of dog shit coming back from the little fitness room that was part of your HOA fee.

You had to give the architect credit, the shower was perfectly secluded. Once someone shut that gate they had total privacy.

Admittedly . . . you did have that one angle from inside the house, upstairs, the northwest corner of the guest bedroom, where when you leaned to the right you had a couple inches of glass that gave you an overhead view of the situation out there.

Hmm.

I didn't want to be an ass . . . but maybe just a glance, make sure they have everything they need? Kind of a no harm, no foul deal?

So I trudged up there and took a look--and Holy Toledo--Erin had her towel, but not on her, it was folded up neatly on the cement and she was kneeling on it, and the guy was standing in front and she was going to town on him.

I gave it another minute, and the positions changed slightly but the torrid

pace down there continued unabated . . . so I refreshed my beverage and sat down in the living room and flipped channels, no good sports on right now, so I settled on a water ski jump competition from a lake in Florida.

There was a tentative knock on the front door, and I realized I didn't clarify to come in the house when they were finished, and I told them make themselves comfortable and how did it go.

"Oh wonderful," Jason said. "The set-up, the ocean air. You have the full package here my friend."

"It's quite inspiring," Erin said.

"I know, right?" I said. "Peaceful. Kind of a Zen situation, when you let yourself go with it."

I brought out a couple beers and Jason got caught up in his phone and said something privately to Erin.

"What?" I said.

“We’ve managed to foul this up,” he said. “The bus back, it left at 4:42.”

“One a day, you’re saying,” I said, “each way . . . Not a problem, I can you drive you.”

“You’d do that?” Erin said.

“Sure. It’s like 35 minutes. I can always find something to do in Santa Rosa. They have a good Barnes and Noble. Reasonable homeless element to it, but that’s okay.”

“Well one thing,” Jason said, looking at the label on the Black Butte Porter, “this hits the spot. Where is it from?”

“I think Chico,” I said. “Or . . . you’re perfectly welcome to stay over. We have an extra bedroom all set.”

Erin said, “You keep adding or’s.”

“Babe,” Jason said. “What are you saying to the man?”

“Nah I can tell she’s just fooling,” I said. “Anyways, think it over. No

imposition. You have your own bathroom up there, I'll barely know you're here."

I threw the clothes in the machine and made sure to bleach the heck out of my own hands when I closed the lid, and when I came back Jason said they'd love to take me up on that offer, and if there's any way they can reciprocate when I come back east just name it.

I made a fire and after a while Erin went in the kitchen and pulled together some creative odds and ends, and I decided it all tasted pretty dang good, and we finished it off with rocky road ice cream.

Jason told a story--since summer camp had been brought up--a kid at his broke into the freezer one night and came back with a tub of it for everyone in the cabin, and the head counselor caught him and made him run a mile, and the kid collapsed with an asthma attack.

"Then what?" Erin said.

“Come on,” Jason said, “I don’t know then *what*. That’s not enough?”

“What did you want to have happen?”
I said.

“I like conclusions,” she said.

“Well, you won’t love this one either,”
I said. “But lemme ask you first--you didn’t put like a couple drops of CBD oil in that sauce did you? I’m feeling kind of spacey.”

Erin said, “What a strange thing to say.”

“Wouldn’t do anything anyway,”
Jason said. “That’s the whole point of CBD.”

“Oh right,” I said. “So . . . I had someone tell me once they killed someone at their summer camp. Bumped them off a high trail.”

That shut things down for a minute.
Erin said, “And that’s all? Which I’m assuming, since you led off with a tease.”

“He didn't exactly,” Jason said. “All’s he said was the story would be inconclusive.”

“I don’t like teases,” she said. “Anyhow . . . gentlemen . . . I’m going to turn in. Matt, it’s been quite an interesting day. So thank you for that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said when she was gone. “She gets argumentative when she’s tired. Part of her make-up, which I’ve learned the hard way a few times.”

I was thinking there might be an interesting story or two there as well, but I was pretty beat myself and said goodnight.

When I woke up Erin was in the living room. “Jeez,” I said, “almost 9. I never sleep that late.”

“Jason’s out finding coffee,” she said. “Your pillows, are they down? We slept like babies.”

I said I had no idea but I was thinking without a car you weren’t going to find

coffee around here, but then I remembered the little trailer that was sometimes there in the mornings for the maintenance guys, so maybe Jason would get lucky.

Erin said, “I have an uncle in San Jose. When I come out to visit, you should come down.”

“Seriously?”

“You really should.”

“Un-huh . . . that’s the second uncle now you’ve mentioned.”

“Is that a problem?”

I said, “How’s your trip been otherwise? Your needs been met?”

She said, “Who told you that story?”

“The camp deal? Ah, this lady friend. She was a librarian. Fertile imagination, I’m guessing.”

“Could it have happened?”

“Sure, why not.”

“And just like that, you’d be okay with it.”

“Meaning . . . would I call the authorities on her if I had believed her?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Well, you think you got me pegged pretty good. That’s amusing.”

“Did you watch us?” she said.

“What’s that now?”

“I couldn’t help but notice, the guest room.”

“Oh. The vantage point. I took a look, yeah.”

She said, “I think *you* may have bumped someone off a trail once. Not some librarian person. What do you think of that?”

“I think you’re playing. You’re looking for an edge.”

“Right. I like that.”

“You like what?”

“How you put things,” she said.

#

My dad kept a lifelong diary. He started it when he was a kid, 11 or 12 years old, and would brag that the only time he missed a day was on a trip to Yugoslavia when he went to a soccer game and then out drinking with some locals and he woke up in another town and didn't know up from down.

The diaries were the cheap appointment-type books that people pick up at the end of the year. Each day had a designated amount of space, and it wasn't a lot, but my dad kept it simple . . . one or two highlights, such as who he might have run into on his walk or who he talked to on the phone, and if anything interesting was mentioned. Sometimes he'd include a baseball score if the game was exciting, and he'd name the winning and losing pitchers.

Occasionally there were random notes for the novel he was going to write. That was the whole point of the continuous diary, he enjoyed telling people, that you'd

look back through it and your off-the-cuff ideas had germinated.

I wasn't aware of any novel ever getting off the ground. But my dad did talk about qualifying into *The Big Book of Alternate Records*, that you never knew, since who else kept a daily diary for half a century.

I figured if you got in *The Big Book of Alternate Records* you'd be more famous than if you actually wrote a novel . . . and he hired a consultant at one point but nothing happened.

One other thing he included in his diary entries were his female conquests--the names of the women he bedded down, and enough of the specifics that you got the idea.

There were the women *before* my mom, and the women after, and my dad's pace didn't change much.

I knew all this because I read a whole bunch of the diaries when I was 17, which confirmed what I'd suspected for a while.

I'd gotten my driver's license and I had my own set of keys to my parents' cars, but sometimes I'd end up with my dad's set, which had a small extra key on it.

So I made a copy of that key and from then on I'd sneak into his attic study and open up the bottom drawer of the gray heavy-duty industrial desk and read what he had to say.

I supposed my dad would be considered a handsome man--though not that handsome--and my mom was more ordinary looking--but not that ordinary. Either way it was shocking how successful he had been at fornicating with other women . . . unless he was making it up, but I was pretty dang convinced he wasn't.

There was even the woman up the block. She and her family moved away years ago . . . but man, *her*? She was sure

nice those times a ball went in her yard and my friends and I had to ring the bell to retrieve it. And generous with the Halloween candy. Good spirit, big smile.

Also in the mix was a vivid reference to one of my elementary school teachers. Not a main one, but a woman who came in part time and taught French. I put it together that my dad was on the school board for a couple years, so that must have been the groundwork.

When I poured through those diaries at 17 years old I thought about two things.

One, I wanted to kill my dad.

Two, I wondered should I tell my mom.

I carried both considerations around for a while, and eventually neither one made sense. If I killed my dad--and got away with it--who would benefit, ultimately? Anyone?

And I decided my mom had to know, how could she not . . . and me telling her

would only make things worse, since she'd know now that I knew.

I told my friend Joe, and Joe didn't have a problem with it, since his parents were divorced and he would have taken a bad dad who was at least living with him, which I hadn't thought of.

So I told my girlfriend Clara, and she dumped him a week later and I wondered if laying that on her had something to do with it, though there were other issues, there always were.

I bounced around odd jobs after high school. Finally I tried culinary school in the Napa Valley and became a reasonably skilled chef.

I worked at a ritzy Asian-fusion place in Bel Air and then a seafood waterfront one in Fort Lauderdale, until the head chef made a comment I didn't like one night and I walked out of there, and resurfaced at a resort in Kennebunkport, Maine.

Sometimes in the summer, during the day, I would double up as one of the tennis pros. I'd never been a great player but I figured out how to teach it, it wasn't complicated as long as your students weren't very good . . . and in the rare instance when one was, I'd redirect them to the real pros.

It was a Tuesday morning in July and I checked in with the desk gal in the pro shop. The way the resort worked it, she handed the pro a handwritten card for each lesson, and I thought it was classy and the handwriting was stylish, big looping cursive with the names of today's students and the time slots.

I gave my first lesson, then the second, and hadn't thought about the name of the third student until she was coming down the steps onto the court from the viewing deck. She was an older woman but fit and tan and wearing all white, everything in place.

Molly Hightower.

Now of course you could have multiples of those, it wouldn't be the all-time rarest name . . . but my dad was a pretty avid tennis player . . . so that, combined with reading all about *some* Molly Hightower in one of the year's diaries--you had to wonder.

It would be unfair to squander any of the lesson time asking questions, so I proceeded as normal. Molly was athletic, had a solid backhand--she'd developed the two-hander, which wasn't easy when you'd started tennis in the one-handed era--and hit the forehand hard but was erratic.

It was my last lesson of the morning so we had time to sit on the bench after, and Molly Hightower explained that she had a touch of bursitis in her shoulder, which is why she'd been off her game on the forehand side.

“But you were nailing the ball,” I said, “that part doesn't hurt it?”

“Surprisingly I’m okay there,” she said. “It’s more of a coordination issue, I think. My radar is haywire.”

“I got you,” I said. “Where did you learn tennis? I mean, initially?”

I was tempted to ask a more direct question--something like *Where did you play tennis with my dad*--see where that might lead . . . but the timing was inappropriate.

Molly laughed. “Oh, back in the dark ages, do you mean? Rolling Hills, in Orange County.”

I was familiar with it, southern California, pretty neighborhood packed with high-end estates. Some big names came out of that club, including Pete Sampras.

“Well good then,” I said, “that about wraps it up. Any questions?”

She got her stuff together and said, “How about you?”

“Where’d I learn, you mean? Or more, how about you period?”

She smiled. “The second selection.”

“I get that, from different students. For some reason they want to know the backstory, like what circuitous route landed me here, which shouldn’t be all that interesting . . . since I mostly stand still and feed balls out of a basket, and sometimes ask the student if they ever knew my dad.”

It was still inappropriate, but it popped out, and there you had it.

Molly took a moment. You couldn’t tell for sure if she was reacting, putting it together--or if that was her normal pace.

She said, “You have freedom. Always something to envy.”

And she headed back up the steps to the clubhouse.

The resort hosted a Wednesday night social event, and I started off in the kitchen and then did the carving table at the buffet.

Molly and her husband came through and she introduced me to Jack, very polite fellow, and eventually there was dancing to a three-piece band, the musicians wearing white tuxedos.

I was on a break smoking a cigarette outside and Molly found me and she said, “They dimmed the lights when the music started. We older folks take our chances.”

“That’s what downward-spiraled my dad,” I said. “He was trying to get a frisbee out of a tree, and he skidded down the trunk and broke his hip.”

“You have a wild imagination,” she said, “but how *is* your father?”

If there was still a question mark, this took care of it.

I said, “He’s hanging in there. Like I told someone, I thought about pushing him off a cliff at one time, but the risk/reward ratio wasn’t there . . . Were you banging him before my mom, or after? I can’t keep the periods straight.”

“Afterwards I’m afraid,” she said.

“Well . . . how was it? I’m not talking about the act . . . I guess I’m saying, the companionship, did you have fun?”

“Your father was marvelous company. Yes.”

“Actually,” I said, “I never asked anyone that question before.”

“So, you’ve similarly encountered, other friends of his?”

“Just one, who would qualify.”

“There's no need to tell me about it, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I will anyway. I was working a dog track in Orlando? Feeding info sheets to the track announcer. My dad's in town so I bring him. There was a vet on site, an attractive woman, kept to herself. I found out later my dad put the moves on her, and they had a thing. Didn't last long of course, by default.”

“Gosh,” Molly said. “Did you reach out to this person later? Your co-worker?”

“Confront her? That’s what I’m trying to tell you, no.”

“But you did so . . . with me.”

I said, “What were you looking for, when you screwed my dad?”

“You ask the difficult questions . . . Would love in all the wrong places work?”

“Not sure. Did you fool around elsewhere, beyond it?”

“I did.”

“And any right places turn up?”

“Jack is a wonderful man,” she said. “It will be 23 years in November.”

“You didn’t quite answer my question there. You know that, right?”

The band started playing the old Five Satins tune ‘In The Still Of The Night’. The song was out of the 1950’s, but I knew a lot of those. I was in a rock band in high school, and we figured out if we learned oldies we could get paying gigs.

Everything was wrong with it, but I slid my arm around her waist and she was

okay, and her hand was on my shoulder, and I pulled her in just a bit and we moved to the music . . . and you could hear dogs barking in the distance and I thought I heard a train, but there wouldn't be one around here, it was something else.

#

I looked at the listings on the website someone told me about and yeah, there were people wanting you to drive their vehicles all over the place, including Mexico City in one case, and some of them had conditions attached, like you had to bring their dog or you had to detour on the way and pick something up.

Finally one jumped out, nice and clean:

Need pedal to the metal. Valley of the Sun to Bakersfield. Will fork over burger money.

You couldn't tell, but screw it, I called the number.

A guy answered and he was pleasant enough, and he confirmed the basics in the listing, the one weak point being you'd be driving a Ford Focus, a 2004, which I had a hunch was the first generation of the thing, but the guy said it ran great and the only issue was the compressor was shot so you didn't have air conditioning.

I could deal with that, even in hot weather I like to open the windows, and this was still mild for down here, low 80's during the day.

The Bakersfield ending wasn't perfect, that angled you a couple hours north of Manhattan Beach, but you'd worry about it then.

The guy seemed eager, and said come on down, that he'd make sure I was trustworthy and hand over the key--and I liked his attitude.

On down meant a Walmart parking lot in southeastern Phoenix, and I sprung for an Uber and the guy showed up on time, he had his wife drive a second car, the meeting was short and sweet, the guy said he'd appreciate it if the vehicle got to Bakersfield by Tuesday, and that was that.

No mention of the **will fork over burger money** part, but I figured why push it.

So . . . the next morning I was set bright and early, and I checked the map, no surprises, 17 to 303 to 124 to 10, and then the straight shot and you had it.

I stopped for my first bite at a Pilot, and it was good to be on the open road and in control, and you could hopefully relax and enjoy the scenery and stop obsessing over the bunch of what if's that had been keeping me awake lately.

Except the Ford Focus started making a funny noise . . . not a constant one, but increasingly often when I got it up

to 65 and then eased up on the gas, you'd get a rattling.

And that was never good.

First I thought it might be the muffler dangling loose. I had that happen once driving in New Jersey. It was a little hairy, I had to get out and stop traffic for a minute and yank the thing off and put it in the trunk.

But that wasn't it, and the rattling became more frequent, and louder, and the Focus lost power eight miles east of Wilma, Arizona, and it took another 50 yards to come to a complete and final stop, and by that time I at least had the piece of junk on the shoulder.

Hmm . . .

I got out and stood there and looked around. It was Friday, very little traffic, and of course you were in the middle of the desert.

Probably the Sonoran. Though maybe the Mojave.

Whoopee.

The other thought that crossed my mind . . . the doofus assuring me even though the Focus had a few years on her, she ran great.

I made a mental note--whenever anyone, in the history of the rest of your life, uses that expression . . . run the other way.

But fine, that was later. Right now, even the darn cell service didn't work.

So I handled it the old-fashioned way and waited for a cop.

Which took over an hour, finally a guy pulling up behind me, lights going like he's responding to the World Trade Center attacks.

Then of course the guy sits in his vehicle for 5 minutes first, and I'm thinking, do I really seem that dangerous here?

The trooper got out and said hello and made a joke that it looks like

something won the battle and it wasn't your car, and he jiggled as he laughed.

He was a big guy, and the Arizona version of the state trooper hat had a cowboy shape with a gold badge and high wings and a roped tassel staring at you above the brim as the guy got closer.

"See your license and registration please," the trooper was saying now.

This wasn't great, and I was getting a little ticked off, that you can't just help me a teeny bit by calling a tow truck?

But the issue--do you give him your real license, the Matthew E. Grady . . . and take the risk, in the (hopefully) unlikely event your name previously found its way into the system.

Or . . . you fork over your current fake ID, George Worthy . . . but that didn't sit great if the guy takes it back to the squad car and scans the sucker through something . . . trouble that way too.

The judgment call being--is this guy just busting chops, since he knows you only have car trouble . . . and he's not going to run anything . . .

Meanwhile I was digging around the glove compartment trying to find the registration. You had an old Ford Focus manual, a half thing of tic-tacs, a couple pens, a receipt for an oil change, someone's hair clip . . . and that was about it.

"Not looking great," I said to the trooper, "on the registration deal. I gotta be honest, I'm driving it for another guy, and it's my fault, I didn't check any of that stuff first."

"Oh yeah?" the cop said. "Where's the other guy at then?"

"I have no idea. Not behind me if that's what you mean. All's I know, I'm dropping it in Bakersfield. It beats taking a bus." Might as well lay it out.

“*Were* headed to Bakersfield,” the trooper said, “past tense,” and he gave it a solid laugh.

“I have to be honest,” I said, “I can appreciate a sense of humor on a public official--I mean yeah we need more of that--but joking about someone when they’re fucked, like I am at the moment . . . I don’t know.”

“I got you Bud. Just trying to keep it inner-esting. No harm intended.”

“No offense taken. Sorry.”

“Gonna let you slide on the registration. Since we’re towing it. Technically it’s not a moving violation.”

“Oh boy, thanks.”

“So just give me your John Hancock here, and we’ll get the show on the road. You got Triple-A, any of that shit?”

I said I wasn’t sure, but the bad part either way, the guy was asking for a signature. One of those you give with your

finger on an I-Pad, which apparently authorized him to call the tow truck.

You could scratch something illegible, but the fear was it would have to match up to the driver's license the guy may not have forgotten about.

A car came barreling by, over the speed limit for sure, a red Chevy Blazer with big tires. His brake-lights were on as he passed us.

“Hold that thought,” the trooper said, and he hustled into his car and peeled out of there after the guy with a major squeal of rubber and a cloud of dust.

Unbelievable, I'm thinking. Now I got another hour.

You did have to wonder how the driver didn't see the cop in advance and slow down. Highway 10 was straight as string, bright day, huge domed sky, and you'd be able to spot the flashing lights from two miles back.

The conclusion would have to be, the guy was on the phone or texting or otherwise so preoccupied that even though he no doubt saw the trooper, the brain receptors didn't react.

The other observation was, it was surprising how agile the heavy cop was, he really went flying into his vehicle when the chase was on.

Whatever. I looked around in the back seats, Jeez, even an old newspaper or something would help, and on the floor under a rolled up piece of canvas were two books, both titles out of the 1960's and kind of radical, not what you'd expect from the Focus guy, based on our brief--and now ill-advised--interaction.

One was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and I had heard of it, it was a memoir from a controversial black guy. The other book was a series of stories, or more like essays, by Tom Wolfe.

I'd read one of his novels, it was about a girl from the backwoods of North Carolina who ends up at a fancy basketball college like Duke, and dates one of the stars of the team. It wasn't bad. You got a feel for fraternities and sororities and it made you mad but you couldn't stop reading.

I liked how Wolfe didn't try to conclude anything or throw his opinion around, he just let it roll like a camera.

This book now from under the seat was a mixed bag, but one of the chapters was a profile of Carol Doda.

And Jeez, Wolfe did have a nice style, you had to admit:

She blew up her breasts with emulsified silicone, the main ingredient of Silly Putty, and became the greatest resource of the San Francisco tourist industry.

I remembered hearing about Carol Doda, the Condor on Broadway and Columbus, and the finale involved her dancing on a piano that got raised to the ceiling by invisible wires . . . and the author was doing a good job putting a human spin on her. . . though even better, the trooper was back.

“Sorry about that,” the cop said.

“Guy pissed me *off*. Right in my face. Some infractions you tolerate, some you can't.”

“Well thanks for keeping us safe,” I said, and everything else aside, I meant it.

“So . . . where were we?”

“Uh, I think you needed me to . . . okay the tow.”

“Oh yeah . . . Listen, I called it in as I was circling back. Shouldn't be long. I gotta get a move on.”

Wow. I was tempted to ask what the rush was all of a sudden, but of course you may have just dodged a bullet so you left it alone.

But the guy volunteered it anyway,
“I’m on lunch.”

So I couldn’t resist asking if there was a specific place, since I was always up for a food recommendation, despite the circumstance.

“They’ll be towing you to Wilma,” the trooper said, “which should work out perfect. Right across from the Arco? You have Evelyn’s. Best chicken-fried steak in three counties. So long now.”

And he was gone again, not setting a record like chasing the speeder, but not fooling around either . . . and I knew the feeling, when your blood sugar’s dropping you take care of it.

The tow driver opened the hood and mumbled something about it smelling like a head gasket, and I figured if the guy was a real mechanic he wouldn’t be doing roadside duty--but then again, I’d had experiences with these guys being right on

the money, quicker with the correct diagnosis than the shop guy.

Either way, what difference did it make, the thing was caput . . . but the state trooper had been right, Evelyn's was something else, jumbo portions and various gravies dripping off the plates as the good-natured servers brought people's food out. The entrees--and the desserts too--had the messy quality of everything homemade.

If I had to guess, that was Evelyn herself orchestrating the proceedings back in the kitchen, and when it slowed down she came out and said hello all around, and you had the impression a lot of these folks stopped in here every day.

I was at the counter and she gave me a "How are *you* today?" and then spoke a minute with the guy next to me, and refilled both our coffees before getting back to work.

I said to the guy, “You got the better treatment there. Not the local one, but close.”

“I’m in a big rig,” the guy said. “Stop here whenever I can time it.”

“So where are you headed?” I said.

“Where are you?”

“It was LA. I have to wait now. Auto trouble.”

“Ah,” the guy said. “Well at least you got this place to keep you company. You at the Set-Tee?” That was the motel in town, up the block from the car repair place.

“Should be, yeah. Haven’t quite committed myself.”

“I was gonna say, I could offer you a ride, except you’re waiting on your repair.”

Dang.

“I don’t have to be waiting . . . no,” I said.

“Okay then,” the guy said, finishing up. “Let’s get to it.”

And just like that . . . I was back on I-10 heading west, this time resting comfortably 15 feet up, my head positioned just right against a passenger seat that might have out-comforted anything I'd ever sat in, except maybe the Costco recliner.

I liked this guy's style, whose name was Abe. No screwing around, no asking things twice or making sure.

Though a half hour in Abe did say, "You return-tripping it, or what?" Which I assumed meant, would I be going back to Wilma to retrieve the vehicle when it was fixed.

"Not the top of my To Do list, no," I said, and Abe seemed satisfied and left it at that.

I had found the registration after all, and gave it to the repair shop as a placeholder . . . and now I called them and said to please junk the car and send the guy on the registration the bill, and they were okay with that.

“More definitive now,” the trucker said, “that you’re not coming back.”

“That was an error, yeah. I’ve made of a few of them lately.”

“Like what?”

I didn’t feel like diving into anything, and it felt wonderful to just watch the road. And what a view from up here.

I particularly didn’t want to get into anything off-beat, such as offering a political opinion without meaning to, and risk having this guy throw him out.

But a direct question, *like what?*, was reasonable.

“Well . . . for starters, I think I ran away from something I didn’t have to. That led to other deficiencies.”

“You been acting out of character, you mean?”

“Yeah. I seem to be overdoing stuff. Not letting it flow natural.”

“You ever speak to anyone on that?”

“Hunh? You mean, psychologically?”

“Yeah. Like a counselor, a therapist.”

I had actually, but I said no.

“I did,” Abe said. “On account of my brother’s teeth.”

Uh-oh.

I tentatively asked, “What about your brother’s teeth?”

“Only that he was visited by a alien. Not personally, but the shit got into the dental mix, and he ended up fucked.”

“Ah,” I said, but Abe was on a roll, and he bit off a hunk of beef jerky and continued.

“See my brother, he had a girlfriend in Las Cruces . . . For the geography-challenged, that’s New Mexico. 46 miles from El Paso. Which is one of your border towns.”

“Hmm.”

“They’re in a pizza joint--and that’s kind of curious already, with about 10,000 Mexican restaurants there, why would you choose I-talian? At any rate, they order a

house special, the works, and there's an olive buried in the cheese that didn't get pitted, and Earl breaks part of a tooth, a lower rear molar that has a filling in it."

"Ah."

"He's gonna wait until he gets home, which back then was Lafayette."

"Indiana," I said.

"Exactly. But it starts bugging him, and the girlfriend convinces him to take care of it. So the upshot is, he gets a replacement filling, local, and then all hell broke loose."

I would have been fine with the story stopping here, but you had four hours to LA still, probably more, once you hit traffic . . . and this Abe was a bit of a lunatic now, but at least thank God he was handling the big rig fine.

So I said, "What kind of hell broke loose?"

"Two departments. One, he developed a super strength. You wouldn't

believe it unless you saw it, at least I didn't. But he could lift up cars, the front ends."

"And there's a two?"

"Yep. He could time travel. He didn't intend to. But he did it once by accident. Scared the bejeezus out of him."

I was thinking about that Carol Doda profile, I'd have to finish it at some point.

Abe was saying, "So I did my own investigation. You remember Roswell?"

"I've heard of it," I said. "What about it?"

"You had your famous crash. But another incident around that time, they released a discharge above a silver mine . . . outside Capitan. That's Lincoln County."

Abe let that hang and I realized I was being tested.

"You're not gonna tell me," I said, "silver, from the particular mine, ended up in your brother's tooth."

Abe smiled, pretty much for the first time. "You're not bad . . . Rough start,

didn't know if you were all there, frankly, but you righted the ship."

No one spoke for about 20 miles.

Then Abe mentioned that when they get to the warehouse in Imperial Beach he wouldn't have to fingerprint it, which was always good.

I guessed that might be trucker slang for not having to unload anything yourself, that there'd be a guy showing up with a forklift.

Abe started whistling, and I recognized the tune. It was the old Michael Martin Murphey song *Wildfire*. I remembered Murphey performing it once on the David Letterman show, after Letterman gave it a big build-up. I was sleepy now, and I closed my eyes and listened to Abe's version.

#

When the shock of the diagnosis wore off, I figured if I was going down the tubes anyway I might as well take some people with me. So I made a list.

On top of the list was Ray, who beat me up good in junior high school.

There were others. One guy raped my sister after-hours in an office building and got away with it. Another was a drunk driver who crossed over a two-lane in southern Oregon and killed a childhood friend. Another guy, in the newspaper, threw a little lap dog into traffic.

My doctor wanted to put me on an experimental therapy. I said how about first putting me in touch with someone who'd been on that therapy and was still around. The doc said he'd look into it, but he never got back to me.

I only confided in one person, my favorite bartender Mitch at Weatherbee's on Chestnut Street. A month in, Mitch said

I looked okay, and when was the thing supposed to ramp up?

Another month went by and I was wondering if he had a point . . . and Mitch said could they have mixed up my sample in the lab, or some shit?

I told him that possibility--long shot that it was--was starting to occur to me too. I was still doing my morning run, the Marina Safeway to the bridge and back, 6 miles. Yeah the thing could be laying low, but I had to say, I felt normal.

Mitch said so go get re-tested for God's sakes.

The problem being, I'd checked off one item on my list, and at this point I didn't want to know.

Meanwhile I'd connected with Ray. Ray lived on Webster between Turk and Eddy. Still in the old neighborhood.

Ray's building was a modern low-rise that took up half the block. It looked like a regular complex, but I guessed

redevelopment money, a step up from where Ray probably lived back then, but still the projects.

A security guard was sitting behind a high desk and a piece of plexi-glass in the lobby.

“Could you direct me to Reynaldo Holmes please,” I said.

“And who should I say?” the security guard said, picking up the house phone.

“Charles Fuqua.”

“He says he’ll come down,” the guard said. “You’re welcome to wait in the lounge, right there.”

I unfolded a hardback chair and took a seat. There was an elderly woman up front watching a talk show with the volume loud.

When Holmes walked in, he looked old. He’d had a high forehead and light complexion and had moved with an easy grace back then. Now he had a slight limp

and had gained some weight, but it was definitely him.

“Charles, he had a rough time of it,” Ray said. “He ran with a bad bunch, got into it.”

“Oh yeah?” I said.

“That boy been down for some time now. Which bring me to my next question: Who the fuck are you?”

I stood up. Ray’s eyes were yellow and he was missing an upper incisor.

“Matt Grady. From Marina?” I extended my hand.

Ray took it, and I knew he knew.

“Man, now you taking me back,” Ray said. “You’re talking junior high school. Only school I remember, Galileo. Played some ball there.”

“Is that right.”

“Caught me a touchdown on Turkey Day at Kezar, corner of the end zone . . . We called it Strong 86 Flag, two DBs on me, I

went up and got it. We lost to Lincoln . . .
They was full of white boys like you.”

I said, “Remember playing War Ball
on rainy days?”

“Fuck you talking about?”

“You remember, give me a call.” I
picked up an old newspaper and wrote my
number on it.

Ray said, “I got four hours a day,
they working on my kidneys in a chair . . .
Mother fucker asking do I remember War
Ball.”

“If you do, Ray, call me.”

I thought of asking him what the
final score was of that Turkey Day game,
but that was getting off the subject.

A week later I get a phone message
from the guy. It sounded like he’d been
drinking and I couldn’t understand much. I
called him back after breakfast.

“Yeah,” Ray said. “I phoned to tell
you you’re an ugly piece of shit, just like

you was back then. I'm not losing sleep over it or nothing, but I remember what happened that time by the park . . . It shouldn't have happened."

Wow.

"Oh, so now you going silent."

I took a minute.

"Actually no Ray, you got me thinking, a little different here. Would you want to . . . get a drink . . . or have lunch or something?"

"Man, you is one strange white boy. Why not? If I can squeeze you into my schedule."

We made it for the next day, and when I got there Ray was outside waiting, talking to a guy on the sidewalk who was laughing at something Ray said.

Ray struggled a little getting in and out of the car, but it went okay. We got squared away in Weatherbee's, not the exact table but next to one where I brought

a date not too long ago that didn't work out great.

"This is the kind of joint," Ray said, looking around, "I'd never walk into in a million years."

"I hear what you're saying," I said, "but you get comfortable with a place. They know you, start you off with a smile, no surprises. That's worth something."

"It is," Ray said. "I had one like that on Turk Street, Monte's, but they let it go. You didn't trust the cuisine no more."

We ordered drinks. I got a beer, Ray had scotch on the rocks. Mitch wasn't bartending today at lunch, it was Eloise, a plump redheaded woman with a hearty laugh.

"You okay drinking that hard stuff?" I said. "You're on kidney treatment, right?"

"Hemodialysis," Ray said. "I was going three days a week. They got a whole unit at SF General just for us, so we can take a piss. Then they do a big study, how

four days filters you better than three. That's where I'm at now. I got Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday off . . . Answer your question, we supposed to avoid alcohol."

I said, "Where'd you live, when you and Charles and Williams jumped me back then?"

"On Sacramento."

"Jeez, I always figured you lived down past Geary. The projects."

He said, "I can tell you getting ready to reminisce about Marina Junior High School now . . . Mr. Gullickson, the PE teacher. Man, that dude kicked my ass for three years."

"No kidding. Remember how he'd come up to guys and slap you if he thought you weren't paying attention?"

"Yeah, *man*."

"You ever hear the one, a kid is looking into the girls' gym, so Gullickson made him put on one of their uniforms?"

"That blue shit?"

"Yeah, the one-piece jobs. Then he sends the kid in there for the period."

Ray was laughing now, his shoulders moving.

"I wonder how his discipline style would go over today," I said.

"It wouldn't," Ray said, "but it wasn't the worst thing. Kids's too soft now . . . That's not why we here though, is it?"

"No." I leaned in and lowered my voice. "Any idea how I'd get a firearm that couldn't be traced?"

Ray scrunched up his face. "Grady," he said, "you a more fucked up motherfucker than I even thought. What you want to go messing with something like that for?"

"If I ended up . . . hurting somebody, . . . which I'm not sure about, but if it happened . . . wouldn't that be one way to handle it? A short-barrelled something or other they couldn't track?"

“Sound like you playing Cops and Robbers with me now son.”

“No, there’s a situation . . . a legitimate one, not around here, but there’s a possibility.”

Ray gave me a long look.

“What would it be, something like twenty years ago we messed you up?”

“Eighteen. It was 2002.”

“You been carrying it around with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me work on it. And I wouldn’t mind a refill.”

On Wednesday afternoon I dropped in on Ray in the dialysis department at SF General.

“Well now, looky here what the cat brung in,” Ray said.

He had two strands of red rubber tubing taped to his forearm that continued into a couple canisters attached to a

standing, computerized machine. Ray was wearing a sweater and Oakland A's cap and sitting on a recliner, partially covered by a blanket. There were nine or ten identical patient set ups, and several TVs were blaring.

"I called you back," I said. "But there was no option to leave a message."

"And there never will be," Ray said. "I hate the telephone. I'm a fan of direct contact."

"Good thing I remembered your schedule, then. What'd you want?"

"I got your thing is all."

"You did?"

"Told you I'd look into handling your business, didn't I? So why you surprised?"

"No, it's just, I thought you might, put me in touch with someone or whatever. Not finish it off."

"You want it or not?"

"Oh, yeah. Listen, I appreciate it."

“Don’t be jumping for joy like it Christmas morning. You setting up for some serious shit now.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You owe me nothing. If you want, you can buy me another drink.”

“Ray, you’re a good man, you know that?”

He was quiet for a second. “So all these years later . . . that’d be your conclusion then.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re still a little white boy piece of crap,” he said. “But looking at the whole picture, I guess I’ll take it.”

I got together a couple more times with him. Once we heard some jazz.

That fall I moved to Manhattan Beach. The loose idea was reinvent myself, now that it looked increasingly like I wasn’t going to die off.

I came back for Thanksgiving and the day after dropped in on Ray.

The security guy in the lobby said Ray was in the hospital, Saint Francis.

God damn it.

Ray was sitting up, looking irritated, pointing the remote control at the TV.

“Grady, you little prick,” he said.

“Now that you here, how ‘bout finding me some fresh batteries.”

I never knew whether to shake hands, give the guy a hug, whatever else, since he didn’t particularly like any of it.

“What happened to you, man?” I said.

“Ah I fell.”

“You mean like at home? What’d you do?”

“Naw, picking me up some wrestling tickets . . . They got so much dog shit on the sidewalks now, was trying to avoid stepping in a pile, got tangled up and went down.”

“Jeez . . . Well, not the worst thing I guess. I mean at least you were out and about, compared to *old* people reaching

into an upper cabinet and having a problem.”

Ray said, “Whyn’t you shut up while you ahead.”

“What kind of wrestling?” I said.

“Only one kind. Why you asking that?”

“You mean, the stuff we watched as a kid? Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage?”

“Yeah. The Honky Tonk Man coming over the top rope. The Junkyard Dog and shit. They re-enacting it next weekend, the Cow Palace.”

“Not . . . bringing the same guys back, you’re not saying . . . you mean re-igniting it? The sport?”

“You call it what you want,” Ray said, “and you can take the tickets too. I won’t be able to make it.”

I said, “Hold on, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here . . . You look good, I’m not seeing any casts anywhere. You just got shook up, hit your head, what?”

“My hip. They calling it a hairline fracture. Not putting me under the knife or nothing, but I got to go to a rehab joint.”

“Oh no Ray, don’t do that. If you can avoid it. Something like that, it can beat you down, the atmosphere. You can lose your motivation, start thinking like the permanent ones.”

He laughed. “The lifers. I keep saying it, you pulling out the surprises . . . Didn’t know you was now a medical doctor too.”

I asked the nurses’ station for new batteries. No one could find any, but they gave me a fresh remote and I tested it out on Ray’s TV.

“You got college ball this weekend, some good rivalry games,” I said.

“Fine. I’ll keep it in mind.”

I felt awkward standing there, but I didn’t want to sit down.

Ray said, “I appreciate it, you checking on me. I know you got more

important business to take care of, now that you a Hollywood type.”

“Okay,” I said, “Let’s don’t be going all serious. You got my number, nothing’s changed. I’m an hour away, hour and a half tops, on the airplane.”

“I know,” he said.

And that was that.

I walked out of the place, good to get some real air, the medical smells were tough.

Chapter Two

It was a weekday in May, normally quiet here but not now, with Covid turning the world haywire. The neighborhood was full of rental people, and when you ran into them outside hardly any of them were wearing masks, which pissed me off worse.

At the bottom of the hill there was a clubhouse with a restaurant and bar, and the food wasn't much but the view was world class, Doran Beach right below you arching toward the Head, where different times of year you could see whales migrating between Alaska and Baja. There was a sign on the bluff informing you this was the longest mammal migration in the world, 11,000 miles round trip, which always blew your mind.

And to the left out the restaurant window, on a reasonably clear day, Point Reyes, also noteworthy as the westernmost tip of land in the continental US.

So you were in good hands. Of course now with the virus the restaurant was closed. They'd tried a take-out thing but that fell apart quick.

Beyond the clubhouse were some tennis courts and a pool, and a gate that put you on a zig-zag path down to the beach.

Which is where I was headed, but I always liked to check out the scene at the pool first, and you had the typical couple of people swimming laps and a few laying in the sun on the small grass section. No interesting bikinis today, which was one upside of the rental idiots taking over the neighborhood, you had more to look at.

There was a voice coming from the hot tub area, a penetrating one, and dang, it sure sounded like my high school

girlfriend Deena. A long shot, and it had been several years, but it did.

The hot tub was designed to sit 3 or 4 but it had about 12 people in it at the moment, and there were beer bottles and wine glasses and of course no social distancing.

The truth was I wasn't particularly worried about the virus and didn't take many precautions myself, but it was the idea of outsiders coming in ignoring them that hit a nerve.

At any rate . . . I got a closer look, and Jeez, yep, it was Deena in there in the mix. She had a visor and her hair was up and kind of messy and the smile was the same and the laugh especially was the same . . . so I went over and said hi, and she said hi back, trying to keep it nonchalant in front of her friends, and I said what are you doing here?

Deena got out and we talked for a minute and I invited her over for a little

happy hour, told her bring whoever she wants, and gave her the address and we ended it with a half hug and she said she'd try to make it, and thanks.

Wow. The high school thing had ended badly and I tried to put the moves on her once after, when she was back from college for Christmas break--and we had an okay time but the moves didn't work.

I got home and checked the inventory and figured there were enough odds and ends that you could grill something, if it came to that, and the booze supply was reasonably in place . . . so bottom line, don't sweat any of it until something happens.

But the bell rang at 4:30 and there she was, along with another woman and a guy, and I gave it the big smile and waved them in.

It was a little awkward, me announcing that my culinary and hosting skills weren't the greatest, but no one

seemed to care and they got what they needed, and the grilled idea turned into cheese jalapeno poppers from Costco, which everyone gobbled up fine.

Deena said, “This is nice. You don’t have a wall to wall view, but we’d all settle for this.”

“We would,” Deena’s friend Becky said.

“That’s for sure,” their friend Bob said. “What does one of these run you these days, you don’t mind my asking?”

“I think 8 or 9?” I said. “We got a little lucky there with the timing. Deena you remember my sister Ellen, right?”

“Not really,” she said.

“Well, we had a great-aunt pass away in Salt Lake City. She was better off than anyone thought, and she cut us in on a few bucks. We ended up buying this place-- Ellen and me--for 550.”

“Got it,” Deena said. “So you trade off, or she’s here sometimes too?”

“Nah we tried that. I ended up selling my condo in Santa Clara and bought her out. I overpaid, that part, but what are you gonna do.”

“So what did she do with the money?” Deena said.

“We’re getting a little nosy here,” Bob said.

“No, that’s fine,” I said. “Far as I know, she invested in a company that made tow truck parts. Not the vehicle, but the mechanism and shit. Her boyfriend’s deal.”

“For the big ones?” the friend Becky said. “That tow semis?”

“That I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“My cousin,” Becky said, “he’s a long-haul trucker. He broke down once in Wyoming. With the wind chill it was 70 below, he said.”

“Whoa,” Deena said.

“Right?” Becky said. “So the tow truck guy saves my cousin, but he has to ride with him a couple hours, since this is

the middle of nowhere. Anyhow Jim, by the end he's convinced the tow driver is certifiably crazy."

"How's that?" Bob said.

"He felt the man had committed a murder, is what he told us. Now I'm not sure if he meant years earlier, but that would be my guess."

"Hmm," Deena said. "So he wasn't, like on the run then . . . that particular night."

"No not all, was my impression," Becky said, nodding.

I cleared my throat and pointed toward Bodega Head and said did you know there's a natural spring-fed pond at the base of it, and Sir Francis Drake tied up there in the 1500's.

Bob said, "Isn't he one of the ones they're pushing to change the names, on account of Black Lives Matter?"

"Unh-huh," I said. "Which may tick a few people off, since we got a bay named

after the guy 30 miles down the road, along with a few other things.”

“Oh yeah Jeez,” Bob said. “*Drake’s*, the barbequed oyster place. We were just there.”

“So we’ve made the connection,” Deena said. “How about that.”

“No need to get nasty,” Bob said, and to me, “she does that. Everything’s fine, and then no rhyme or reason.”

“Sticks in the needle,” Becky said, nodding again.

“Dee, we’ll see you back there,” Bob said, “and thank you Matt.”

“We will,” Becky said, “and now you can chit-chat.” And it didn’t take long at all and they were gone.

I refreshed the beverages and said, “You can give me the backstory, how y’all ended up here, and the various connections. Or no, that’s fine too.”

“Not that interesting,” Deena said, “so correct, let’s not worry about it . . .

What do you do all day? I can't quite picture it, living here full time."

"Ah I still got a few irons in the fire. I go down to the peninsula once in a while. Main way though, when things tighten up? I rent this sucker out for a week and pitch a tent on the beach."

"You're kidding."

"Not the normal beach, one of the campground ones. Doran, Westside, Sonoma Dunes--that one gets dang windy of course, but the point being it's a small sacrifice to rake in a couple grand when you need it."

"Have to say . . . that's fairly ingenious Matt."

"Okay you're overreacting. You can't always find a renter and sometimes they don't pay you in full, or they latch onto something and complain about it, like it wrecked their whole stay."

"Such as?"

“I had one guy going nuts about the jacuzzi not getting hot enough. He complained to the management company gal that helps me, she gave him thirty percent back off his week. Even though I set the thing on purpose a little low, since I had someone pass out in it once.”

“Where is it?” she said. “I didn’t even see one. Can we try it?”

“You didn’t have enough? Earlier?”

“I can handle it,” she said, and I could have been imagining it but I detected a slight purr in her delivery, and I started to wonder how this was maybe going to work now.

The jacuzzi was on a side deck off the downstairs bedroom, and yep, you did have privacy there. There were weathered gray vertical slats that formed the railing, everything tight together, the design allowing you to view the ocean while you put your head back--though you just caught

a sliver of that between houses--while not letting the neighbors, or whoever, see you.

Deena said, "I'm going to take a shower and then I'll join you. You don't mind?"

I said be my guest, and she reappeared five minutes later totally nude, and heading toward the sliding door out to the deck. "Come on," she said. "What are you doing?"

I never liked being naked in public, though this wasn't exactly that . . . but I felt enough energy in the situation where my manhood wouldn't be too shrunk at the moment, and I stepped out there and slid in next to her.

"Much better," Deena said, closing her eyes. "Don't you agree?"

Over the railing I could see a guy I knew, out walking his dog. There weren't many cars coming through the neighborhood, certainly no random ones, since there was a little guard hut at the

entrance, and everyone walked in the street.

“That’s Al,” I said, pointing, and Deena opened her eyes like it was a big inconvenience. “Shall I invite him to join us?”

“Fine with me,” she said.

“Really? Jeez, I was kidding . . . funny thing with that guy though, how you meet someone, you despise them from the get-go? They rub you wrong on every level?”

“Yeah. So you turned it around with Al.”

I said, “You know something, I see what those people were getting at, your friends. You jump to the punch line, spoil the build-up.”

“Fine. How’d you turn it around? He’s not a bad looking person by the way.”

“Petted his dog a few times. Amazing how that activity can soften people up . . . you keep yourself pretty fit, I’m noticing.”

She said, “I got into art modeling. The money’s sporadic but it holds you to a higher standard.”

“Yeah? How’d you end up gravitating to that?”

“My boyfriend’s an artist. You remember I used to paint too, right?”

“Nah. Definitely doesn’t ring a bell.”

“He’s more successful than I ever was. Part of that’s because he’s a black man.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah, so, he got me some modeling gigs and I ran with it. Between you and me he’s not a great artist, but he has a good artist name. It’s all about the perception.”

“My guess is I haven’t heard of him, but go ahead.”

“Azumi Adunabe.”

“Ah. The African card.”

“Correct. His real name is Marquise Jones. He’s a product of the flatlands of Berkeley.”

“Personally, I like Marquise Jones better.”

“So do I. But he's in a gallery in Atlanta, and one in Miami. And there's a dealer in Carmel who pushes his work to the Pebble Beach crowd.”

I said, “As I think about it . . . and by the way, how's the temperature in here?”

“Perfect.”

“See, that's what I say. And yet we caved in when the tenant complained.”

“I thought you said your management lady did.”

“You don't miss much. I had a roommate, his girlfriend was an artist. Her mom was Japanese, so she grabbed the mom's maiden name as her art name.”

“How'd she do?”

“Not sure. I had a falling out with that guy. He came home in the middle of the night, pounding on the door that he lost his keys. He ended up breaking a window to get in. I got stuck with the bill.”

“So you weren’t home?”

“No I was, but I figured why get up.”

Deena said, “I’m picking up a bit of theme. You have problems with tenants. Roommates, whoever.”

I said, “You screw other people? Or it’s not like that.”

“I do sometimes. What I was building up to, the art modeling thing sucks. I mean if you’re willing to drive all over the Bay Area, and up to Sacramento and so forth, you can grind out a living. And now with Covid, there’s Zoom sessions.”

“But?”

“Yeah. So this one artist--nice older guy--he asks me if I can send him some custom screenshots he can work from at his own pace. I had no idea how to price them so I priced them high and he didn’t balk.”

“Nudes, you’re talking.”

“Oh yes. So a little light bulb went on, there’s a better way.”

“So you shifted gears, and you’re a photo art model now . . . Well that’s good, you’ve carved out a niche.”

“Actually I evolved a bit further. I make shorts.”

I looked at her a moment to make sure she was serious. “Yeah?” I said, and my voice went slightly high.

“Not what you think,” she said, “let’s don’t get carried away. First of all, I never show my face. And it’s not like I’m on a set, it’s all private.”

“But you say . . . the money’s decent?” Still processing it.

“The money’s great. There’s the straight residuals, you pick up from Porn Hub. But there’s also the back end, which I must say can pleasantly surprise the heck out of you.”

I was pretty sure back end wasn’t the image that I momentarily flashed on, but still. I said, “How do you never show your face?”

“I handle it all with my webcam,” she said. “Though I got an upgrade, a Logitech. Which I’m glad I did because they’re out of stock now. Have you looked on Amazon?”

I said I hadn’t, but I got the gist, you had all the work from home and Zoom type shit gobbling up the electronics . . . but I asked again about the face.

“So it’s in the angle,” she said. “And if I err, I edit it out in production.”

“Has anyone . . . like recognized you? Anyway?”

“Couple times. Someone recognized my partner unfortunately, and sort of put it together.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Process of elimination . . . same partner every time?”

“Come on Matty, what do you think I am? I told you, it’s mostly me putting on a little show, a personalized striptease if you will.”

“But partners sometimes.”

“Of course. You have to keep the fans off-balance, demonstrate that you do have that element in your game.”

“Ah.”

She pushed up out of the jacuzzi and sat on the edge. “We could partner up for a couple,” she said. “That would work okay.”

I held onto that one for a minute, and before I could adequately respond Deena had her towel and went inside on the couch and was texting.

When she came back she was dressed. “Sorry about that,” she said. “I forgot to square it with someone from this morning.”

I said, “You had a furrowed brow there, whatever it was . . . You’re supposed to relax out here, that’s the whole point . . . though I’m not seeing that at the moment. Nope.”

“Well aren’t you a raging mastermind,” she said, and took off.

I spotted that guy Al again, coming the other way with the dog. I called down there with a what's up and Al said not much and stood there a second, so I figured invite him in . . . and I threw on some sweats and put together a couple martinis.

The dog, Biscuit, was very excited to see me, happier about it every time, it seemed.

I said to Al, "Border collies I know a little something about."

"You don't," Al said, "since she's three-quarters Aussie shepherd."

"Okay same underlying principle. They need a project. The walk up and down the neighborhood ain't gonna cut it, long term."

"What do you suggest?" Al said.

"Don't know. Maybe we can google up something reasonable for her. You heard that story, right, they leave one in the back yard all day and finally the dog gets

frustrated and herds together the patio furniture and wraps the hose around it.”

Al considered it. “I don’t leave her in the back yard much.”

“Anyhow,” I said. “You need an olive or something?”

“I’m good. Some gal did appear to be flying out of here, couple minutes ago.”

“You noticed that huh? She laid a weird trip on me.”

“You’re saying that like it’s a novel discovery. That’s what they do.”

Biscuit jumped up on the couch and snuggled in between us.

I said, “I couldn’t get anywhere when it meant something. Now she maybe wants to use me as a vehicle. A tool.”

“A means to an end,” Al said, nodding. “I could tell you stories, my brother.”

“Yeah well she called me a genius for figuring something out . . . In fact not even

that, just pointing it out, that she looked like a disturbed individual.”

“Meaning she agreed with you?”

“It was like, tell me something I don’t already know, if you really want to make yourself useful.”

“Now you're catching on,” Al said.

#

I was a little down on my luck and was working as a groundskeeper at a tennis club, tough because I’d been a chef at one of those places and even gave tennis lessons for a while, though admittedly I faked that part pretty good.

So I’m behind the far courts fiddling with the drip system and roses when a member comes up to me, woman named Charlotte. She asks do I have time for a quick drink when I get off. Needless to say, not your typical member-groundskeeper interaction.

I give it a second and ask do you mean here, pointing at the clubhouse where they had a little set-up, and she says no, somewhere else.

So we meet at this place *Kenny's* in the strip mall behind Panda Express.

Charlotte was always polite to the employees at the club, asked how your day was going and listened to your answer. Once I was jackhammering the asphalt entrance circle to get at a broken pipe, and she commented that I hope they're taking care of you at Christmas, the money you're saving them if they had to call people out of the yellow pages.

I got to *Kenny's* a little late, and it looked like some guy'd already been hitting on her unfortunately, but she said it was okay, which I appreciated.

“Sorry about that,” I said, “the swim lessons, they were complaining about their eyes stinging in the pool.”

“The chlorine levels then,” she said.
“But I thought that’s why they invented the swim goggle.”

I said, “You’re a little bit a piece of work. And pardon me if I’m overstepping, you look tired.”

She informs me her husband 'has been fucking someone'. That he called from Interstate 5 crossing the Oregon border and she asked him how the weather was up there and he said it was a trophy day, except she checked Accuweather when they hung up and they were having a freak snowstorm.

She said she could see herself at that moment going in the kitchen and selecting the right implement and calmly cutting off his balls.

So Jeez, good thing he wasn’t available. Guy’s name was Wayne, nice enough person, I knew him from the club too.

There'd been signs, she said. One was a phone call that came in while he was in the shower. She said she rarely touched his phone but they'd put a bid on a foreclosed cabin in Lassen County and he said he should be hearing from the broker that afternoon.

So Charlotte was excited when it rang and picked up and said hi.

The voice stumbled around for a second. "Oops, I'm sorry--I may have the wrong number . . ."

Charlotte said, "No, I think you're good, if you're looking for Wayne--is this about the bid?"

The woman clicked off, and Charlotte added the episode to the *Not Good* column.

Already in it, she said, were the business trip to Fresno where she couldn't reach him overnight, and the 15-year high school reunion where he was too chummy with a couple women, even by high school reunion standards where let's face it

everyone's trying to turn back the clock and get away with a little something.

Then her friend Mara mentioned she saw Wayne in Union Square, a sunny Tuesday afternoon, sitting on a bench eating ice cream with a woman who looked about 22.

That though, Charlotte mostly dismissed when Mara described the gal, pretty sure she knew who it was, she'd met her at Wayne's company Christmas party and she was a nice kid fresh out of Brown University working an internship.

A Lacey or Stacey.

Who plenty of guys were putting their hands on at the Christmas gig, which deflected Charlotte wondering about Wayne specifically.

She asked Mara what they were doing on the bench in Union Square and Mara said they were on their phones mostly, but still, she didn't want to surprise Wayne and

interrupt . . . just in case you might embarrass someone.

Which Charlotte could understand, stay out of people's business, especially during business hours . . . and each component probably added up okay if you isolated them one by one--the bench, the Fresno thing, the reunion--even the wrong number when Charlotte answered, maybe it was legitimate--people did dial wrong, after all.

Except now . . . the bullshit with the weather.

To make sure, she logged onto Weather.com and re-entered Ashland, Oregon, and they were reporting the same blizzard-like conditions as Accuweather. She said there was a link to a female TV reporter standing by the side of a road, a snowplow passing by and everything looking pretty darn white and the gal not looking comfortable.

It was like the reporter's lips weren't working right from the chill and she was having trouble enunciating, and Charlotte was angry at the woman for not handling her job professionally.

Which she said was a stupid kneejerk reaction, and she closed the computer and thought *what next*.

She woke up at 2 in the morning and was pretty sure that was it for the night, but she took some Calms Forte anyway and that didn't work.

Middle of the night TV wasn't a good option, it depressed her, so she tried the Stephen King book where the character goes back in time and attempts to stop Lee Harvey Oswald. Her dental assistant recommended it. But no.

So she gets up and make bacon and eggs, and coffee, the whole shebang-- separately I'm getting hungry hearing all this . . . and she tries to figure out if she

really could hurt--or kill--this guy, and get away with it.

I was sure she was exaggerating, but dang.

She decided to call him, like 5:30 in the morning, and he answered.

Wayne asked what time it was and called her *Hon.*

Charlotte told him he sounded groggy.

Wayne said he's not kidding, what's up, he needs more sleep.

Charlotte said someone called here and said they were a project manager and needed to speak to him.

Wayne said wait, they called the landline?

Charlotte said she was afraid so, and do me a favor and tell your clients they wake me again it won't go smoothly.

Wayne said well, I mean, did they have an accent?

She said she couldn't tell. Wayne said, you mean male or female, and she said the second, and listen I'll talk to you later, and by the way where are you.

It sounded like Wayne stumbled around for a second and told her a Days Inn off the interstate, and was that okay?

Charlotte said someone told her, their opinion, the Super 8's are your best bet on the road these days.

Wayne said he'd keep it in mind . . . and did the person leave a callback number.

She said your client? No they didn't which was part of her letting him know, in case it wasn't legit.

Wayne said yeah it might not have been, good idea on her part for the heads up.

She asked how he'd find out. If it was legit.

Wayne said oh, he'd run it by the office, see if anyone had the same thing, lots of scams out there needless to say.

Charlotte said you guys have interns and all, right? Who can get to the bottom of these things.

Wayne said sure, that's one way . . . and that he really did have to get back to sleep, and to be good.

Charlotte had a new thought then, maybe don't do anything. Let him do his thing, collect the evidence, rake the asshole through the coals in divorce court and clean him out.

The problem with that, she was saying, whatever satisfaction would be superficial.

I absorbed it a minute. I said, "Mr. Gabbert. That's too bad. He's one of my more pleasant members."

"Oh yeah," Charlotte said, "he can turn it on good. That's how he duped me."

“Okay let’s don’t maybe jump to astronomical conclusions,” I said. “The male species, we do make blunders. They’re not un-reversible.”

“Blunders. I love it. You guys are so full of shit.” She took a good-sized gulp of her gin mule.

“All’s I’m pointing out, it may not be worth a nuclear event.”

“I see. One and done, and we’re good . . . My problem, if I had the right sized cleaver I’m afraid I’d do damage.”

“So go see someone.”

“You mean anger management-wise? You’re a trip. That would only fuel the fire, someone telling me to calm down, even though *they’d* want to inflict something too, the shoe was on the other foot.”

“I’m talking together,” I said, “family counseling. It’s helped me various times, I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

Charlotte said, “I would like to pin it down, who he’s specifically screwing.

There's obviously the 22-year-old kid. I wouldn't entirely bet the house in Las Vegas, but she's up there."

"Fine, near the top of the leaderboard. Except you just said, it doesn't matter. The who, what, when part."

"You left out how and why. You're right though . . . do you have to be somewhere?"

"I'm okay."

She signaled for seconds. "So years ago when I get out of school I'm working the front desk of a gym in LA. There's a man comes in five days a week, same time, right on the button. He had something interesting going, a graphic arts studio that was tied to the movies. Anyhow, trailing him by two minutes every day--also like clockwork--Meg, or Peg, or Gem or Jill, one of those, who was his top designer. Supposedly."

I said I get the picture.

“There’s rumors but little naive me I’m giving them the benefit of the doubt. Then one evening he’s in with a pocketful of cigars, passing them out. He’s a father, he announces.”

“And meanwhile Peg or Meg is bringing up the rear as per normal.”

“Right. So it hit a nerve with a few people and when the two of them finished their workout and left, a woman coming out of the locker room says: Tonight of all nights, she can’t lose the Frederick’s of Hollywood get-up? . . . You know what I’m talking about, right? I think they’re out of business now, but the lingerie place.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and that’s . . . out there, for sure.”

Charlotte said, “You know something? You don’t ask a lot of irrelevant questions, which I admire. There was one of those radio psychologists--since you brought up the field--she’d always ask the gossipy questions. Like a woman would call

in and mention her boyfriend was abnormally endowed, and the psychologist would ask how abnormally.”

“Okay, but Jesus.”

“Yeah but you get what I’m saying. Maybe that’s not the best example. There was Dr. Laura who was obnoxious but never strayed from the issue at hand, and then these other radio gals, where I’m hearing this and going--are you fricking kidding me?”

“They went for the juicy stuff.”

“I mean how is the girlfriend’s problem going to be solved by knowing the guy’s specific inches?”

“Oh boy . . . any way you could lower your voice just a tad, here?”

“And I know what you’re thinking. I’m doing the same damn thing, I’m all over the place.”

I said, “And I’m in violation for asking, but what was the final update on Peg-Meg and the graphics guy?”

“Interesting you ask. We ran into her years later at a street fair in Costa Mesa. Meaning Wayne in the picture now. She remembered me, gave me a big hug. She was married, at least I’m assuming, they had rings.”

“Might have been back in the day too.”

“Sure, why not. Wayne’s talking to the guy so I ask her whatever happened to so-and-so. It was frustrating, I couldn’t think of his name. Which I remember now clearly, Dante.”

“Yeah?”

“She turns heavy-duty red, I swear, not exaggerating. So I can’t resist--I say, well, back at the gym we heard you dressed for success.”

I had to smile. “You got some definite devil in you girl.”

“She interrupts Wayne and the husband and they move along. It was an

opportune time because there was like a fire eater starting up, distracting things.”

I lit a cigarette. It was the kind of place no one cared and I offered her one and she waved it off, but then took it and lit it off mine.

I said, a little quieter, “Coming full circle . . . you venting? Or you want someone to talk to Wayne?”

“Ho-ly shit,” Charlotte said. “You’d do that?”

“Funny you're surprised, seeing as how you brought me here . . . but no.”

She said, “Have to say, your eyes look . . . a little colder. Right as you said that. The no you wouldn't talk to Wayne.”

“Deadpan? It’s something you can practice. Comes in handy occasionally. Can diffuse a situation, though it slips out wrong sometimes.”

“Except, I’m pretty sure, you would talk to him . . . Just have to weigh what makes sense. On my end.”

“So there we go.”

“What would you say to him?”

“Hypothetically? I’d say, Mr. Gabbert, none of my business but please take it from me, whatever might be going on, it ain’t worth it.”

“Gosh . . . and that would work, do you think?”

“How should I know. It’s your baby.”

“Well what would be . . . the next rung on the ladder . . . if necessary?”

I said, “You always cross that bridge when you come to it. Easier than all that, why not go after him different? Turn it around.”

Charlotte said, “You’re not looking at me a certain other way now, are you?”

“Nope.”

“I believe you. I thought of that the last couple days. Not for me.”

“Well,” I said, looking at my watch, “if there’s nothing else.”

“Whoops, almost forgot,” and she handed me fifty bucks. “This’s been kinda fun Matt, I’ll admit.”

I said, “Buddy of mine up north, he was pulling a Wayne, big-time. One weekend he can’t reach the wife, and it grinds everything to a halt. She was at a spa with a girlfriend was all, but he didn’t know that. And she never set him straight.”

“So the bad boy got jealous, of the female who wasn’t floating his boat.”

“Yep. Emotions’ll run you down a strange road . . . or why not just kick him out?”

“Wayne? That sounds simple, but I could see it turning complicated. Not sure how I’d work it.”

“What you do, you change the cylinder on the front door. That’s how. I can take care of it for you now, you like.”

“Really?”

“You said yourself, I’m handy.”

“Wow . . . And if that didn’t do it? And Wayne, I don't know, broke back in or something?”

“Then we’d have a situation,” I said.

“I like the we,” Charlotte said.

#

I rang Johnnie’s bell on the way to school, like normal, but today he said come in for a second and you could hear the TV in the family room and his mom was watching and she looked like she’d been crying.

The morning news was on, and at the moment the anchor was handing it off to the weather reporter, which looked harmless enough.

His mom was half sitting, half lying back on the couch and I noticed her robe was open. Not a lot, but still.

Johnnie kissed her and we got out of there and went to school, and he told me

there was a political candidate she had worked for, and there was an accident overnight.

I was thinking about the robe, that I'd seen everything on a real woman for the first time--boom, just like that, there it was--and I didn't know how I felt about it.

There was the secret pleasure in experiencing her intimacy without her knowing it--at least I was pretty sure she wasn't aware of her display--but there was also a disconcerting amount of flesh around her belly, beautiful white softness admittedly, but Jeez, rolls of it.

I knew Johnnie's mom as a petite lady. Stylish, typically wearing tight jeans, sometimes high boots with them.

I dreamed about her that night, we were on a beach and a raccoon came out of the sand dunes and grabbed our lunch, and she was in a jeweled turquoise bikini and got up and chased after the raccoon, and it

was surprising how fast she moved, and also how mad she got.

The next year Johnnie and I were in high school and I played sports and we hung out with different crowds, and a week after graduation I headed to the Texas Gulf to work on a charter fishing boat.

I bounced around a while, different jobs, different states.

I drove a Fed X truck in north Florida, not delivering the packages but picking up and redistributing from the central hub in Ocala. It was all at night, traffic was light, it wasn't a bad gig.

I worked as a lighting tech at a movie studio in Burbank, and that was kind of fun and you met a few people, though there were delays, you stood around.

I worked at a resort in Sun Valley, a sardine processing plant in Fairbanks, an Italian restaurant in Philadelphia and a bicycle company in Waterford, Wisconsin.

One thing I tried to avoid was old high school stuff, but there was an alumni basketball game and a couple teammates called and they sounded so dang hurt if I and everyone else didn't show up . . . so here you were.

I played forward, nothing great, didn't always start, but I had one shining game where the basket looked as wide as a pond and I hit 6 three-pointers, one short of a school record, though another kid smashed it later with 11.

The alumni game was on a Friday night and they'd facelifted the gym but it felt exactly the same, and I got out there, feeling overweight and out of shape and ran up and down the floor against the current varsity, and I didn't score any points and didn't touch the ball much but when it ended I was pretty sure I at least didn't tweak anything, so you had that.

I showered and someone said we were all required in the wrestling room . . .

and I started thinking, ooh boy, what did I get into here. The plan for the weekend was to look in on my aunt and uncle, visit the zoo, where they'd rescued a baby rhino I'd seen on YouTube--and if I had the nerve, get in touch with an old friend Marie, see what was up there.

But now the wrestling room . . . Some music was playing, a jazz trio, and they had a wine and cheese deal going on and there was a stand where you could buy raffle tickets for whatever.

So they were using the room for a get-together--as opposed to actually making you watch some kind of wrestling exhibition--and I figured this was standard enough, these alumni gigs, and Jeez, give 'em a break.

I recognized the guy on keyboard, kid named Stack, who'd been in my class but didn't play basketball, and there was a female vocalist who wasn't bad, and by their interactions--Stack working his hand

around and down her right hip a few times--they were an item.

A few of the old coaches and PE teachers were milling around on the perimeter, but I didn't see a reason to try to remind any of them who I was, and they didn't look too excited about being here, frankly.

I circulated through my teammates, shook hands with all of them, patted a few on the back--8 guys had shown up out of the original 12, which seemed decent--and concluded with some small talk and moved on.

The jazz people took a break and I was leaning against the wall near the little makeshift stage, checking my phone, when someone handed me a glass of red wine, and it was Johnnie's mom.

I looked at her carefully and confirmed it, and I gave her a big hug, what could you do.

It was stupid but I asked it anyway,
“What are you doing here?”

“I’m still on the PTA,” she said. “Not a lot has changed.” She was smiling, she looked great.

I was doing some quick arithmetic . . . when that incident occurred, and then you tack on high school and the real world after that . . . she’d be pushing late-40's right now.

I said, “Well how’s Johnnie? What’s he doing?”

“John lives in Omaha,” she said. “He’s an attorney. He’s been married and divorced but I think he has it right this time, at least I hope.”

“I see,” I said. “Welp . . . how did you enjoy the game, or did you bother?”

“I didn’t watch it,” she said. “I did see you play part of a real game once though.”

“Gee, really? Only fair, right? I should have weight-trained. I was a lazy athlete. It might have helped my quickness.”

She had a glass of wine of her own, and took a swallow. “Well how have you been Matt?” she said. “It’s good to see you.”

And that, I wasn’t sure how to interpret . . . but I figured you only live once, and given my limited reappearances around here . . . so I said, “When you wrap it up, I’m thinking we can have dinner.”

She didn’t respond right away, and someone tapped her on the shoulder and asked her a question, but when she was done she said it would be all right.

She drove, and we went to China Basin, a dicey neighborhood back then but now renovated and trendy. There were a couple of themed cocktail lounges on Townsend Street and she had her mind on the second one, and you could eat in back.

“Good pick,” I said. “Not boisterously loud. That stops me, a lot of the cutting edge places, I can’t understand the other person.”

“I’m glad,” she said.

“The worst thing, those situations, you hear *part* of what someone said, but not all of it. Maybe just a word at the end you didn’t catch. You let them know, and they repeat the whole paragraph on you.”

“So, maybe you try to figure out what you didn't hear, as opposed to asking.” She was smiling.

We went with what the waiter recommended, and for a second I panicked about my credit card balance since this was obviously an upscale place, but then I remembered I’d made a payment and we were okay.

We talked about some mutual friends Johnnie and I had had, she weighed in on the Super Bowl, that she wasn’t a fan of Tom Brady, and she said she was planning to hike part of the Appalachian Trail in the fall, which had always been on the bucket-list.

“You mean, like, solo?” I said.

“No. With my boyfriend.”

“Oh. Did you ever get married again? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I did not. I felt it was best for John not to have a step parent in the mix.”

“Well I admire you there. The current guy, you live together?”

“Not at the moment.”

We were into dessert and coffee and I steadied myself a bit and said, “If you throw me out of here--or slap me--it’s no problem.” I cleared my throat.

“Unh-huh?” she said.

“I dreamed about you sometimes,” I said. “It’s embarrassing to admit. But there you have it.”

“Nothing wrong with it,” she said.

“Wow. Just like that then, no big deal?”

“What did you dream?”

I lowered my voice. “Well . . . I believe I undressed you a few times. Sorry to bring that out.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I even talked to a therapist about it once. That wasn’t the whole thing, but it was part of it.”

“I see,” she said. “And how did the therapist frame it?”

“He said . . . or you know how they are, they don’t actually *say* anything . . . but the takeaway had to do with my own mother. A stand-in figure.”

“Ah.”

“Which to me was total bullshit. Does one behavior always need to be rooted in another one?”

“I would agree.”

“With me? Or the guy?”

“You,” she said, and she reached over and stroked my cheek.

“Hmm.”

“Do you want to make love to me tonight Matt?” she said. “Is that it?”

I took my time.

“I do, in the worst way. But I’m not going to.”

She said that was fine, she was trying for a little levity and didn't mean for me to take it seriously . . . and we finished up, and outside the restaurant she asked if an Uber worked okay and I said sure, I could do that, and she hopped in her car and was gone.

#

I put the phone down and said to Tim, "That was the a-hole."

"Speaking of the devil, eh?" Tim said.

"Guy now's telling me *I'm* the one should be ashamed," I said.

"Yeah but give me that part again? You told him *he* should be ashamed . . . *what* was the reason?"

I looked at Tim. "Before I conclude *you're* getting on my nerves . . . what the fuck did you just *ask*?"

"Take it easy," he said. "All's I'm trying to establish, what it was he's turning

around on you. You're becoming tougher to follow. Maybe ease up on it a while."

"Ease up?"

Tim didn't say anything. A golf ball came in our direction and fell short, no direct threat, though you did have to keep your eyes open out here. We were in my backyard in Rohnert Park, nice open expanse behind you, except when golfing was in session, since it was the south 9 of the municipal course, meaning full of hackers.

"This case is getting to me," I said. "Didn't mean to imply you're the enemy too."

"Case now though," Tim said. "Like I expressed, your mental health may not be worth it here."

"Well . . . except you're not in my shoes, are you Bud."

"See there you go. There's no chance . . . right? . . . that you'd progress to

physically attacking this guy or something.”

“Come on, dog. What do you think I am?”

“Okay,” Tim said. “So we got that aspect handled . . . I think.”

“Oh, you’re not even with me there?”

“So I’m taking your word for it. You’re limiting your rage to civil activity.”

I said, “Thing that really hits a nerve? This guy redirecting on me.”

“Second time now you mentioned that,” he said.

“That’s all Trump,” I said.

“Aanh?”

“Your boy. Guy’s replicating him. You put him in office.”

“Okay we better rein it in now,” Tim said, “I’m happy to humor you to a point, but not off the deep end.”

“Scum bag projects,” I said. “Spends his day tweeting. Accusing everyone else of what he’s guilty of, and he knows it.”

“Your guy now, or still Trump?”

“Trump, and then my piece of garbage picking up on the angle. Telling me to look in the mirror, is why he defaulted on the loan. Can you believe this?”

“I’ll admit,” Tim said, “I had some tenants once . . . you know my downstairs, where we got the ping pong table and shit now?”

“Yeah. An in-law set-up. Granny, whatever.”

“So they stopped paying. I hate litigation but I had no choice, went through the channels with the sheriff, and by the end not only the guy, but the whole family, they’re blaming me for why they couldn’t come up with the rent.”

“So you’re making my case,” I said, “what’s your problem?”

“Yeah, but then I start thinking, was I overcharging ‘em? Was I sympathetic, when their situation may have changed? . . .

Might be something you need to look at.
Your guy.”

I said, “I’m telling you man, I’m liable to pick up something and hit you with it.”

“Dude I’m just reacting honest.
Nothing personal.”

I said, “I saved the idiot, is what I did. Calls me up a year ago sobbing that I’m ruining it for his family if I *don’t* do the loan. So against my better instincts, I go through with it.”

Tim was rubbing his chin. “Well I guess one way,” he said, “is you make it with his wife. That could achieve a measure of payback.”

My butt in the patio chair was getting real uncomfortable. “What are you, a wise guy now? And that would get my money back--how?”

“It may not,” Tim said, “just throwing it out . . . On the Donald deal though, before you get your tit in a wringer like the dumb Libs?”

“Unh?”

“We’re looking at four more years. Fortunately. Reason being, your key voters are scared they’re gonna lose their guns. Doesn’t matter what they think of Trump.”

“Oh yeah?”

“So my advice to you in that department--deal with it my friend . . . I know it's off-topic, but I couldn't let that go, since you stirred it up.”

He finished it off with a smug look I’d seen before . . . a *that’s that* type thing. There was a fireman down in the city I used to play handball with, and that guy’d stick you with the same look after he cleaned your clock on the outdoor court in Golden Gate Park.

There was a golf club leaning against the house, a putter. I had a putting green set up in the side yard, one hole, astro turf carpet. That’d be a little extreme. So I stood up, made an old-fashioned fist, smiled at

Tim, and--why not--hit him in the side of the jaw.

Tim tilted sideways out of his chair onto his rear end, more surprised than hurt probably, since I wasn't feeling it too bad in the knuckles, unlike the couple times in my life I'd legitimately hit someone . . . and Tim mumbled something about knowing you were fucking crazy and this confirms it and got the hell out of there.

A couple days went by and nothing was going to change with the loan default business, that's for sure, so I figured what would it hurt to take a ride down to Tracy.

That was another thing. I'd fallen for the mope being successful in a new venture. Hay bale houses. The guy claimed he was developing a neighborhood, he and his brother, and they had investors from Kansas City, and there was glossy paperwork detailing just how much better

insulated and biodegradable their units were than your run of the mill new homes.

I figured fine, there was probably a gimmick in there somewhere, but the guy had to be stable enough to at least pay a dang loan.

Admittedly I was raking him. 9 percent, interest-only, 3-year balloon. Typical hard-money bridge loan. The guy I'd worked with in Vegas made of ton of them. But that guy drew the line at lending money to friends.

So here you were, pulling up to the house now, the one you loaned the \$300k on.

And okay, the thing was worth more than that, which Tim had been trying to calm me down about . . . that if you had to foreclose on the prick and throw him out and re-sell the place--all that mess--you should get your original money back . . . but that was beside the point.

The first thing I didn't like, taking in the scene here at 1320 Arrow Drive in Tracy--a late-model Mercedes SUV sitting there gleaming in the driveway, with a good-sized boat up high next to it. Classy mahogany finish on the thing, the tight script on the stern informing you her name was Offshore Marauder.

I had no idea if I had high blood pressure but recently I imagined it going up. I didn't like doctors, preferred to get my medical information off the internet. There was a New Zealand report that tart cherry juice maybe did the job, so I kept a jar of softgels in the glove compartment and grabbed a couple now and gulped them down.

Something else I was doing more lately--deciding life's too short . . . and I got out, crossed the street and rang the fucker's doorbell.

It sounded like people were running around in there and the noise stopped and

a sweaty kid opened the door and I asked if his dad was around, and the kid said no but his mom's upstairs, and I said if you wouldn't mind.

The kid called up to her and went back to rough-housing with his friends, and I remembered those days, no complications and you had all this energy.

“Yes may I help you,” the mom was saying, coming down the hall, and before I answered she recognized me and said, “Matty, it's been so long, it's nice to see you. Won't you please come in?”

And this was the thing about the mom, Brianna, she was so darn nice that all these years you never knew if she was putting you on. Even now, there was a reasonable chance she knew nothing about the mortgage default, that that was all the husband's business. Gus.

Brianna was wearing a flowery low-cut blouse, the way she did it back then too when she was first dating the idiot. She was

fuller in the upper body, her waist was shorter. Same skinny legs. Her display was probably innocent enough, but still, giving you that glimpse, a hint.

I said, “How about a cup of coffee?” Not making a move to come in. She picked up on it, considered it, and put up a finger to excuse herself a second . . . and when she returned she had her purse and a light jacket.

“They old enough to stay by themselves?” I said.

“Borderline,” Brianna said, “but my daughter’s home. She babysits.”

There was a place in a strip mall she said was good, and I followed her over there, and the coffee wasn’t hot enough, they served it out of these silly thermoses, but you could talk.

Brianna said, “This isn’t like, the start of some kind of intervention, is it?”

I said, “Hey, you never know. Should it be?”

She said, “Gus does enjoy his cocktails. If it’s one of those. But usually it’s the immediate family doing the intervening.”

“Yeah, and catching you off guard . . . How’s the marriage otherwise?”

She said, “You know you’re being very forward Matty. And I’m detecting hostility.”

“Remember the time,” I said, “that party, we almost, you know.”

“No.”

“But you do. It would have happened, except for there was no available privacy. All we needed, a half hour, or in my case an hour, but same thing.”

“And you are truly full of yourself,” she said.

“I’m recalling we even went down to the basement, the laundry room they had where you could close a door. Two other folks already had the same idea

unfortunately. Lot of reefer floating around that night.”

Brianna was shaking her head.

“What?” I said. “It wouldn’t have worked out anyway . . . or, I’m making it up . . . or, what are you doing here with this clown. Which one?”

She took her time and said, “The only part you have remotely correct is Gus was behaving badly that night.”

“Fine . . . so, you wanted to get back at him. Or if that’s too strong, you weren’t going to lose sleep if it happened . . . That in the ballpark?”

She smiled. “It must be a real hoot going through life a know-it-all.”

I said, “Leaving that alone. Someone suggested I try to make it with you this time around, to press a point.”

She kept it cool. “That’s from a movie.”

“I thought of that too,” I said. “The doofuses have the fender-bender outside

the car dealer. Both too stubborn to admit any degree of fault.”

She said, “I’m not going to do anything with you. If you really were serious. Which I doubt.”

“I wasn’t sure. Now that I’m here, no. You’re a little worn out . . . I had my chances back then and screwed it up, is the bottom line.”

Brianna didn’t absorb that one as well. “Like to see you try having a couple kids,” she said.

“No you look fine, that’s not it.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Right.”

She said, “And you know . . . if I did do something with you . . . you’d never get paid.”

“Ah, so you do know about that. But it’d backfire, you’re saying.”

“Most certainly. You know my husband.”

“Unh-huh. Thing of it is, it’s already backfiring. So I figured have some fun anyway, what’s there to lose? My friend Tim, that was the only piece of his advice made any sense.”

“Except you’re not feeling it.”

“Not at all.”

She said, “You can’t at least . . . give me a sense of what you mean by that?”

I said, “All I can tell you Babe, the full package isn’t quite ready for prime shipping.”

Brianna got up and cleared her place and said, “Thanks a lot Matty. Thanks for nothing. Ass-hole.”

“Gee,” I said, “I didn’t remember that kind of temper on you.”

She said, “You’re going to want to talk to Gus I assume. He should be home in twenty minutes.”

“Nah, thanks, I don’t need to. Driving down here, I came up with a Plan B. It might surprise him.”

“I thought *I* was Plan B,” she said.

“Oh yeah, right . . . Plan C then,” I said.

#

I said to Gloria: “Listen, you doing anything special today?”

We were in her kitchen, she had the griddle working, middle of the stove, hot cakes on there, and with Gloria they weren’t your run of the mill Bisquick flapjacks.

“Un-believable,” I said, stuffing in the first bite after saturating the beauties with both the real Vermont maple syrup and an amazing blackberry jam from some farm.

“Oh you always say that,” she said.
“You’re my best fan.”

“I’m thinking not necessarily,” I said,
“because whatever you concoct--unless the guest in question was born tastebud-less--

is going to leave them dripping in a state of orgasmic delight.”

Ooh. Not only did that come out wrong, I meant orgasmic, didn't I? . . . not sure what the other word even was--but why use any analogy remotely in the ballpark?

I remembered my dad once, at a dinner party, making a comment like that to an attractive guest, who lived down the block and was pretty tight with my mom, and who had gone through about five husbands.

My dad's reference point wasn't food, it was literature, and everyone had loosened up by then and he was quoting the woman a passage from Dostoevsky . . . Maybe that wasn't it, the literature part, maybe he was relating another experience he liked to bring up, an archaeology trip he'd been a part of before I was born . . . either way, there was the 'orgasms of delight' summation.

In the dinner party case, I wondered if my dad was making it with the woman, or might in the future--and she was one of those society people who attended the opening night of the opera in full formal get-up but otherwise wore awfully tight skirts and could swing the heck out of her hips when she walked past you.

So if you weren't trying to lead someone on, why on earth would you, in the middle of a stack of pancakes, angle your reaction like that?

I said, "That popped out. Terrible faux pas, on my part. Very sorry about it."

"So you're not trying to seduce me?"
Gloria said.

"Wasn't planning on it, no."

"I'm glad then . . . I mean, in a next lifetime, who knows."

She refilled and re-stacked everything, and I said I'm going to have to walk about 20 miles to work this off . . . and the awkward moment had passed, and we

were back joking around . . . and you needed the Glorias of the world, where stuff didn't invariably have to lead to other stuff.

“At any rate,” I said, “what I was starting you off with there, would you want to come with me and visit an old teacher?”

“Which school?” And yeah, I was forgetting obviously that could mean someone from high school, who we both knew.

“No, this is Marina we're talking.”

“Middle school?”

“If you need to. We still called it junior high. Much stronger.”

“Who's your teacher?”

“Mr. Gullickson. PE. Very tough customer, might be in jail today, or at least bankrupt from all the lawsuits. I mean if you weren't paying attention, he'd physically smack you . . . He's not doing well, I heard.”

“Where did you find this out?”

“You’re giving me the 3rd degree . . . From one of those dumb Facebook groups I don’t like admitting to being in, something like *We went to junior high school in San Francisco.*”

“I’ve seen that one. We have our own though, Giannini. Our alumni class is pretty organized.”

“Why am I surprised . . . This guy lives in Walnut Creek, Mr. Gullickson.”

“But you’re saying underneath it, you had a fondness for him?”

“Are you kidding?” I said. “Like I was getting to, he kicked our asses for three years.”

“So you want to resolve things,” she said.

“One more point about my dad,” I said, easing the Chevy Malibu rental off 680 onto Ygnacio Valley Road, “he said when he was a kid, my grandparents

brought them over here on Sundays, and they swam in the creek.”

Of course there was no sign of any creek now, or walnut orchards . . . the dummkopfs on these planning boards cheerleading every move that could transform the town into as faceless a one as possible. You had 10-story steel and glass buildings sitting where any chance for a walnut or a creek were buried long ago. Even now there was a crane doing something right where you came off the exit.

“You sure about that time frame, your dad?” Gloria said, and admittedly I was not, maybe it was too late already if my dad was a kid in the 1940s . . . but the story had a little pop to it.

An assisted living complex was coming up on the right, and Gloria looked at me and I shook my head, don’t worry I’m not dragging you into one of these places today.

You hit a T at the base of the open hills and turned into a residential neighborhood that had seen better days.

The houses were early tracts, 50's and 60's, looking like 2 bedroom jobs, with one-car garages sticking off the front, where folks convert the thing to another room. Sprinkled in you did have some houses that were renovated or built fresh.

Mr. Gullickson's wasn't one of the new variety. Yes the outside had been painted in the last 20 years and the roof had been maintained, but that was it. Everything looked pretty dang original, including the windows with those metal awnings hanging over them that you'd see in the old days in real hot places like Modesto.

I decided here goes nothing, and I rang the bell, and a pleasant woman greeted us. She was no spring chicken herself, probably as old as Gullickson, but she had energy and still moved fine.

“I’m Matthew,” I said, which is what I was back in junior high. I introduced Gloria, and the woman, Dolly, said, “It’s very thoughtful of you to come . . . He has his good days and bad, naturally.” And she ushered us in.

You expected it, but it was tough to take anyway, Mr. Gullickson looking so diminished. He’d been a towering figure, was in the San Francisco high school sports hall of fame, and he’d played college basketball somewhere too. He was sitting on the couch watching a sporting event, Jeez, it looked like an English soccer match, the sound up pretty loud, and he was eating a sandwich on a folding TV table. He had on slippers and a robe, never the greatest sign in the middle of the day.

“Hello sir,” I said. “You probably don’t remember me, but I started telling Gloria here on the way over, how you used to challenge the whole class with those shots from half court.”

This razed a bit of a smile out of Gullickson, and he was looking Gloria over, not worrying about me, but fair enough, maybe trying to place her, thinking he might have taught her one time too. Though I remembered back then, no, male PE teachers didn't teach any girls.

“Ronald was always proud of those mid court shots,” Dolly, the wife was saying. “Weren't you dear?”

“Never missed many I guess,” Gullickson said.

“Before we get to that,” I said, “I have to ask you--you always hated soccer. You made us play it for punishment.”

“I still do,” he said. “But my grandkids play. Have to join the fun.”

“Anyways,” I said to Gloria, “so of course on rainy days we'd be stuck in the gym. All three years, there was one particluar day, same scenario. He'd grab a ball, announce if he missed from half court, he'd buy the whole class milkshakes . . . But

if he made it, we'd have to run Funston . . . he gave us the option, up front."

"Course I did," Gullickson said. "That was the fun of it."

"Meaning, you asked for a show of hands, who was in, on the bet. We all went for it every time, except maybe a couple kids who were in the chess club, where a milkshake wasn't worth the risk of having to run. Unlikely as it would be."

"How'd I do?" Gullickson said.

"Well, like I'm building up to sir . . . son of a gun, but you drained the shot, all three years. Nothing but net."

This got a laugh out of the old man, though it was a slightly aggressive one, and the truth was he did hit the shots the first two years, but the third year's one clunked off the front iron. And Gullickson had been good to his word, sort of, with the rewards, though he sent a couple kids to the soft serve place around the corner and had

them come back with cones, and not shakes.

“I must say,” Gloria said, “we never had something like that happen, at our school.”

“Which one?” Gullickson said.

“Giannini? In the Sunset.”

“I started off there,” he said. “Marina was a better fit.”

“That's interesting,” she said, “may I ask how so?”

You didn't necessarily want him to get started with this, and odds were it boiled down to his discipline style enjoying more free rein at Marina . . . and I figured I should bring up the one thing that had been bugging me for 20 years, before Mr. Gullickson might suddenly fade and need to to take a nap.

“Sir,” I said, “I'm wondering if you really remember me. There was a baseball game against Denman. Playoff game. Jeb Caruso and Matt Fliker and Dave Horn

were on that team too. You remember those guys, right?”

Gullickson was squinting at me now, and you couldn't tell if this was good or bad, but probably bad . . . but I went forward with it.

“I was playing second, they had one guy on, their final at-bat, we were up by two runs. I make the play, I go wide and backhand it, which wasn't routine . . . but the throw to first, it kinda slipped . . . You might remember, it pulled Caruso off the bag for a second, and then he stomped around trying to find it, and wasn't able to, and the guy was safe.”

He was squinting worse. He said, “Yep. We get *that* one, there's two down, we nurse it home. Instead of the flood gates opening.”

“Yeah, well,” I said.

Mr. Gullickson started to stand up now, though he couldn't quite make it on his own, and Dolly helped him. He said to

me, “The fuck you coming in here with that?”

I didn’t have a good answer, and it did seem like time to leave, and Gullickson was working his walker, you saw the back of him heading down the hall and disappearing, and Gloria and Dolly embraced, and Dolly thanked us so much for coming.

Gloria waited a few minutes, until we were on 24 and passing Lafayette on the left, and she said, “What *did* you bring that up for?”

I drove a little longer. “No good reason.”

“Except that,” she said, “you were hoping he had let it go.”

“I guess either that,” I said, “or was senile enough where he didn’t remember coaching baseball.”

“You’re trying to make a joke, the senility--but there’s truth to it. Correct?”

“You carry stuff around,” I said, a little catch in my throat, which I hadn’t expected.

Gloria reached over, said she admired me for trying . . . and traffic was light back into the city and after a while I said that was good, we’d lucked out with the traffic.

#

Marlene said she had a few minutes and grabbed her towel and sat down, and I guessed she didn’t have to be anywhere even in a few minutes, if she was floating around in a pool, noontime on a Monday.

I said boy, this has been some day already, and opened up a section of the LA Times that was laying there.

“If you’re asking me to react to something,” Marlene said, “would you mind completing a thought?”

“I don’t mind at all. In fact I’d suggest filling you in over dinner . . . except it’s a little early, but we can make it work.”

She said, “Something tells me you’ve made that parlay before, to various people.”

“Oh most definitely,” I said. “That’s one of my signature moves . . . Create unfinished business, which is so intriguing that the person can’t resist joining me.”

“Pret-ty sleazy,” she said.

“Or,” I said, “hows about let’s cut out the bullshit and go have a drink?”

Marlene opened up a section of the newspaper now too.

“You’re right,” I said. “What I’ll do in that case, I’ll pick up some ribs, we’ll have a little barbeque . . . Around 5 okay?”

She thought about it and said, “We’re allowed to barbeque here?”

“I’ve never tried it, no. How would you work it? Throw out some lava rocks or something? On the cement?”

“Now you’re playing with me,” she said. “But . . . I suppose I can buy you dinner. If you like pizza. I have a coupon.”

“Sheesh,” I said. “All the moves I save up, trying to use on individuals--that’s a first.”

“You don’t like the tables being turned.”

“Not at all. I need to be in control. I know . . . it’s a weakness.’

“Not always,” she said.

In that case I had a small project I figured I could squeeze in, but it screwed me up--not the project itself, but these two drivers getting into it on one of the cross-streets, and out of their cars blocking traffic . . . and I tried to be a peacemaker but it didn’t play out great.

Marlene said, “Golly . . . unless you took a dip in the ocean, or got tangled up in a hose . . . you’re sweating pretty profusely.”

“Well I have a thing about being late,” I said. “I get ticked off at people when they keep me waiting . . . sometimes drop ‘em . . . so the pressure’s on me, I have to keep producing.”

Marlene looked at her watch and didn’t say anything.

We were back by the pool, and she was reading a book, using another chair as a footrest. Her hair was pinned up and she had on a long cotton dress. There were subtle suggestions of the curvaceousness I had admired earlier, but everything tasteful.

“I’m going to jump past that for a second, the timing part,” I said. “You have more freckles than you did mid-day. It must be the light.”

Marlene ignored it and said, “Were you serious when you said you’ve dropped people for being tardy?”

“Consistently tardy, yeah. There comes a point.”

“I run late,” she said. “You were in luck tonight, since I already live here.”

“Well you’ll probably get dropped pretty soon then.”

“In that case,” she said, “shall we even bother?”

“It depends how hungry you are.”

“Not a good line, honestly.”

I said, “I was telling someone, can’t remember the circumstance . . . but that my mom would lecture me, make sure you marry someone who can get ready fast and eats a lot.”

She said, “Interesting. So you’re advancing the marriage card. Why not.”

“Nah,” I said. “You’re only halfway there . . . If you have a good appetite, that is. Otherwise you’re zero of the way there.”

Marlene reacted funny for the first time, like she doesn’t mind playing along some, but this is ridiculous.

I said, “You have to forgive me, I’m a little punch drunk, and I can blurt stuff

out . . . which comes from being preoccupied . . . which I am more of lately.”

“Well it’s not the worst thing to have a lot on your plate. Though fiction can help.” Holding up her book, something by Robin Cook, a medical thriller.

“You mean it distorts your real world, a good story?”

“Possibly . . . or removes you from it entirely. I gave in and bought myself a Kindle. It’s wonderful.”

“I can’t read on those things.”

“Oh there’s an adjustment, but then you’re off and running. Now I have a Kindle Unlimited membership, so I’m a full-fledged devotee.”

“The problem,” I said, “I look around at the qualifying books on Amazon, that I assume you’re talking about, and they have this *Look Inside* feature where you can read the first 10 percent?”

“Exactly.”

“And when I try that, I cringe.”

“Well you’re a tough critic. Maybe that’s part of your problem.”

“Jeez . . . you know me, what, three hours, and you’re already diagnosing a problem.”

“I am pretty hungry,” she said.

Marlene’s coupon was for the pizza place in Hermosa that I liked, and I hadn’t been there in a while. Hole in a wall a block from the beach. The owner was friendly, liked to talk.

Tonight he came by the table pretty quick, but it was busy and he didn’t linger. I said, “That guy, he told me his life story. I could barely eat, though I didn’t mind, it was entertaining.”

“I like when people wear their emotions on their sleeve,” Marlene said.

“That’s kind of a strange comment.”

“Really? I was merely following up what you just said.”

“I don’t know, you shifted it a little, kind of killed any momentum I had going.”

She took a swig of her beer and didn’t say anything, and I was thinking that’s good, hopefully she’s not too big a boozier, since beer over wine is a decent sign.

She said, “You’re kind of a whack job. First I thought you were the rugged type, like the Marlboro Man. But you’re needy.”

“But see? You’re not particularly bent out shape about it.”

“What about your friends?”

“You mean, do any of ‘em share your view?”

She said to take it how I wanted, she had to use the ladies’ room.

I liked this place all around. It was cozy, the prices were fair . . . plus with the coupon, there were no complications, just *2nd entree free*. Other places, often there’s fine print.

I noticed the paper place mat, that was full of coupons too . . . and you might as well take a look.

No more food, these were outside businesses, and not the fancy ones around here but the ones that looked like they needed a little help.

Several up on Sepulveda . . . a muffler place, a tax preparer, nail salon, surf shop . . . and a couple further down on Artesia toward the Redondo Beach mall--a music store and a Verizon phone place.

Then there was one more, for a service way over in Santa Monica:

Skilled Family Counselor. 10 Years Experience.

Crisis intervention-caring and compassionate-traditional solo practice-relationships-diversity.

Free 45-minute evaluation.

Hmm. I figured since my eye had wandered there anyway . . . what would it hurt, to save the darn thing?

So I moved the calzone off the place mat and casually made a couple creases and tore off the small counseling service item and stuck it in my pocket, and Marlene came back and we finished up, seeing things more in tune, the second half of the meal.

I debated suggesting going somewhere else, since it was still early . . . when the waiter took away the dishes and Marlene asked what I'd torn off.

I hesitated and she put 2 and 2 together and checked her own mat against the missing part of mine, and she looked at me.

I said, "What? You think I'm going too far?"

“I really don’t know enough to comment,” she said, “but it is sweet of you to consider.”

And this was real weird . . . her point being, apparently, me taking her seriously when she called me a nut case, and deciding to address it.

“Let me ask you this,” I said. “No forget that, wrong line of questioning . . . Do you like bars?”

“I can,” she said. “I have to get up early though.”

So far neither of us had poked into the other’s business, the how we made a living part, and that was good.

I said, “So, let’s head to my place for a while . . . The good thing, you can even wear your robe and slippers, since you have a built in escape if you’re worried I’m not going to behave myself.”

“Are you?”

“Of course.” Which was accurate, I wasn’t planning any moves, that wasn’t the thought process, at least I didn’t think.

So we went back and Marlene didn’t stop in her apartment and change to the robe and slippers but she made herself comfortable on the couch and I put on coffee and asked if she wanted to play cards, or how about a board game.

She said she felt like some old-fashioned TV, and I handed her the changer--no idea what typical TV was any more, the lines blurred.

There was one show I heard about, no idea when it was on, but I ran it by Marlene. The premise was a guy puts on a disguise and robs a bowling alley. He only clears a couple hundred bucks, and he never gets caught, but the psychological weight is heavy-duty, and he pays the price on some level every day.

Marlene nodded and said she'd never heard of it, and put on the Rachel Maddow Show.

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“I like to stay informed, if you don’t mind.”

“Fine. Except you wanted old-fashioned television, I thought.”

She wasn’t listening. A guest was talking about a looming government shutdown, if Washington didn’t get its act together pronto.

“Meanwhile,” I said, “have you ever thought about living in Florida?”

“Huh?”

“Should be a basic question, not seeing the confusion.”

“Have you ever *been* to Florida?” she said. “Why would you put yourself in those extreme conditions?”

“I’m thinking . . . if you were going to re-invent yourself somewhere . . . it might be an option. No, obviously.”

“I spent a winter there once,” she said. “That was in Gainesville. By the time the heat and humidity and bugs roll around, you’re thrilled you’ve vacated.”

“Wait a second. Gainesville, that’s barely real Florida. You’re in more like Georgia there.”

“Real Florida’s worse . . . what’s so bad about here?”

I had to admit, there was nothing bad about it, in many ways Manhattan Beach was the best place I’d ever lived.

I was trying to distract her from the dumb political talk show. I said, “I’ll break the ice and ask you. What’s your story?”

“I’m a school teacher,” she said. “Good old K through 8.”

“Oh . . . Except not at the moment. Or, wait a second, is school out for Christmas vacation then?”

“I believe they get out Wednesday. But you were right, I’m looking for a job.”

“Jeez. Well, how’s that going?”

“It’s a process, is the best I can say.”

“So just like that, boom, you’re here?
I mean where’d you teach before?”

“Appleton, Wisconsin.”

“Holy Smokes. Big change.”

“I felt I needed one, yes.” There we go, now we’re getting to it, the standard scenario, a relationship gone sour and someone needs a fresh start.

I said, “You don’t seem that difficult to be around. The guy had bad judgment then . . . went gay on you? . . . what?”

“It’s a she,” Marlene said. “And if you don’t mind, we can dispense with the comedy please.”

“Ah . . . Well, see? . . . This is what I was thinking earlier, going back to the pizzeria . . . why it’s better to not ask too many questions.”

“A bit late now,” she said, and it was clear she was still sensitive, and her voice was quieter.

“That’s my fault all the way then,” I said. “I should have trusted my instincts . . . but . . . seeing how the damage is done . . . just to clarify, you’re a lesbian then?”

“I’m not sure,” Marlene said, and there was a knock on the door, and Jeez, some guy had the wrong apartment, but it kind of broke the mood. So I asked how her job search was going.

“It sucks, honestly.”

“Okay that’s no problem. You just need to think outside the box.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well the key, you find out what the doofuses are doing--and do the opposite.”

“Interesting. And the doofuses being the other teacher applicants?”

“Your competitors, yeah, who do you think? . . . I was almost going to bring up an old story, where the guy *deals* with his competitors . . . I don’t want to bore you.”

“It won’t,” she said. “How did your friend address it?”

“Not my friend, a guy in a book. Made-up. And the guy’s a sociopathic case . . . but my point is, there’s some logic to the principle.”

“Which is what?”

“Okay . . . there’s a job available, very specific, a dying industry, paper mills . . . there’s only a handful of people qualified for the particular position. So first, the guy puts an ad in the industry newsletter.”

“Hmm.”

“The ad is for a similar job but a fake one. He takes out a PO box and requires the applicants’ resumes to be mailed there.”

Marlene said, “So he’s going to figure out how many others are going to apply for the real job.”

“That . . . plus get their addresses. Once he obtains all that information, he kills them off, one by one . . . It was do-able, because as I said it was so specialized, you only had, like a half dozen qualified applicants.”

“My God, you can’t be serious.”

“What’d I just say? . . . This didn’t really happen. This is a *story*.”

“I know, but just the concept.”

“In his demented brain, what’s wrong with the concept? He’s the last man standing, so he’s the only one who applies for the job.”

“Does he get it then?”

“Pretty sure he does, yeah, but then something happens that throws in a monkeywrench I think . . . That’s irrelevant. You’re missing the big picture, asking a question like that.”

“Well excuse *me*, then,” she said.

“So the trick is, how that applies to you, getting hired by the LA Unified School District. Is that what they call it?”

“In Los Angeles proper yes. At this point I’ll settle for any number of districts.”

“Well like I said, that’s just an example of going outside the box . . . Maybe

someone else will have a 360 degree different recommendation.

“I like yours, actually,” she said.

“Oh. So I’m not the whack job as much now.”

“If I did the same thing-- hypothetically--faked a listing, and collected resumes, how would I . . .”

“Discourage . . . the other applicants, without killing them?”

“Unh-huh.”

I said, “That'd be tougher. Admittedly. But hey.”

#

The person I wanted to see would be in her 50’s, and why keep screwing around if it’s something you can’t get past.

A friend encouraged me, pointing out that I’d brought it up at least 3 times, though when I asked her to come along she

balked at that one, that would be overdoing it.

She said have a good time, don't rush back--which I agreed with, get it out of your system.

I hated the word closure, but this probably qualified. I waited until April 1st, that was my barometer for going over the Sierras on Highway 80 without having to put on chains, and that should hopefully apply to those stretches in Nevada too, where you assumed you were in the desert and in the clear but the elevations catching you by surprise.

And it did snow that first day but it was only flurries, and after that I was good, and you could open the window and stick your elbow out and you had the smell of early grasses that was different from California and triggered old memories.

I could fall asleep in the first 20 minutes of a movie but I was good behind the wheel, could go 12 hours easy, and

Google Maps gave me an ETA of 35, so I broke it into three days, spending the first night in Rock Springs, Wyoming, and the second in Newton, Iowa.

I enjoyed the friendly breakfast chatter in the small town cafes, and I learned that the corn date in Nebraska was April 15th, but with climate change (or whatever was going on) the farmers were confident the end of March, and that's when they were throwing it in the ground.

This was going to be tough. I was headed to a college town, 90 miles to go now, the second-guessing creeping in. I'm wondering, if I take a step back for a moment . . . what am I doing exactly . . . and who's going to benefit?

When I was 17, the summer before my senior year, I got roped into a bicycle ride across three states.

A third of the way through Michigan I had a problem with my derailleur and I fell behind the others, and on a quiet stretch

my bike became un-rideable and I had to stick out my thumb.

A family stopped, they'd been fishing, and the dad threw the bike into the boat, they drove me into town, and they let me pitch my tent on their front lawn. There was a spin-off campus of the state university there, and the dad was on the faculty and gave me a little tour, and later I thought I should have gone to a school like that--or even that one.

The dad slept in, but the mom got up early and invited me into the kitchen and cooked me fried fish and eggs and sent me off. There was a bike store you could walk to and they took care of the repairs and I eventually caught back up to the others.

I didn't remember what I talked about with the mom in the kitchen. I did remember her being a bit nervous, as though she wasn't used to talking to strangers without the husband around.

There was a daughter about 10 sitting at the table, and a little brother in a high chair. The daughter was painting designs on flat grey rocks and I didn't think of it but she'd probably collected them at the lake or river where they'd been fishing.

When I left she gave me three of them for good luck. I put the rocks in my front handlebar bag and told the mom and daughter that I'd be sure and send a postcard when I made it to South Dakota, but I never did.

I kept the three rocks though for about 10 years until they got lost in a move.

A couple years ago there was a guy and his girlfriend at a cocktail party talking about a long-distance bike trip they were planning, and I always enjoyed hearing this stuff and I gave them some tips, such as carry a freewheel remover and a pair of vice grips, otherwise you can't change a broken spoke on the rear wheel--and they

appreciated it and the guy asked if I've done any solo touring, and I said not really, except when I got separated that time, and they wanted to hear all about it.

When I got home that night I was motivated to google around, what happened to those people, and that cozy town?

I couldn't remember the family's last name but I was pretty sure the dad was George, and I ran down the college faculty in alphabetical order and there were a couple Georges but when you clicked on their bios they didn't look right.

Some of the individual departments had *In Memoriam* pages, and there was a George Nowacki noted in the history department, and I'm thinking the family did have a Polish-sounding last name, and Jeez, could that have been the *guy*.

Not much there, other than he'd been a tenured professor for a few decades, and dang--he passed away 9 years ago, which if

it *was* the guy would have been awful young.

I searched the county obituaries archive and I found George's. It didn't say much but there was a photo of him. At the end it had him survived by his wife Janet and son Rodney, and preceded in death by his daughter Emily.

I got up and made a salami sandwich and poured myself a brandy, and I didn't want to, but I got back on the computer and searched for the daughter.

It didn't take long. She was killed in an accident on a two-lane highway outside of town, at the age of 20. She'd gone east to college, it said, and was thriving in school and in life, and she was home for winter break. The road was icy, the authorities said, and someone slid across.

There was a picture of her grown up, a bit of a smile but not-overdoing it, the same sensitive kid who gave me those rocks.

I went out back and lit a cigarette. It was a clear night, there was a stiff wind, and you could see airplanes in the distance, and probably you could identify stars and planets if you knew what you were looking for. I felt like crying, I tried to, but I didn't.

A month later I wrote the mom a letter. I didn't say much, just that I was the guy that pitched the tent on their lawn that time, and I'd heard what happened . . . and I mentioned the rocks.

The mom, Janet, didn't answer the letter, and I sat on that for a while. Here I was now, pulling up in front of the house, 2 in the afternoon.

There was a fence that wasn't there before and the front lawn was gone, replaced by shrubs, but it was the same place, and I remembered George pointing out a famous campus building, red brick and ivy-covered, that you could see between houses, and I was looking at it now.

I took a deep breath and rang the bell. A man answered, an older guy chewing something, and he had work overalls on and some tools sticking out of the pockets.

I asked if Mrs. Nowacki was available and the guy sized me up a second and called over his shoulder, “Jan,” and he went back to whatever he was doing.

I hadn’t considered this simple logic, that she’d likely gotten remarried. Janet appeared at the door and said hello and asked if she could help me. She looked okay, like an active person, and her hair was done and she had on earrings.

I said I can’t expect her to remember this, but one summer, you kind of rescued me, and it lingered.

Janet stood there a minute, and I would wonder later if she was deciding which way to go. What she said was, “Yes, I remember you. Now please respect our privacy.”

I nodded, and Janet closed the door.

I took a walk on campus. It was coming back, George showing me some of the academic buildings that day, and then the indoor pool, which I remembered being brand new and pristine.

I went inside and a young gal was swimming laps in the far lane, and there were some benches and I sat down and thought about what happened to George.

“Are you getting in today, or just observing?” the swimmer said, smiling. I hadn’t noticed her get out, and she was taking off her cap and goggles and grabbing a big towel.

I actually felt like jumping in, if I were set up for it, a nice reward after all that driving.

“I’m afraid I’m on the sidelines,” I said, managing a weak smile back.

“There you go,” she said, and she pulled on a pair of sweatpants and threw some stuff in a backpack and was gone.

#

I hear the door open and Dr. Moore is wrapping it up with someone, and she greets me on the button at 12:15.

There'd been another therapist, a Dr. Stride, but that guy disqualified himself because he and I ended up socializing at a bar. This was the second go-round now with the Dr. Moore gal.

“You run a rightfully tight ship,” I said. “Would that be Type A behavior, if it were a patient? Something that would qualify for you making a note?”

“It would depend,” she said, “whether it was an extension of other compulsive behavior, or an isolated example of the patient behaving responsibly.”

“How do you tell?”

Dr. Moore smiled. “You should become a psychologist. You’re quite curious how we operate.”

“What did you study before that?” I said. “Or this was it.”

“I was a linguistics major actually,” she said.

“I’ll give you credit then, dang . . . Something bad happen at that point, that turned you introspective?”

“A friend and I took a summer, and we hiked the Appalachian Trail. When we returned we applied to PhD programs together.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Things don’t always go completely as planned,” she said. “But here I am.” Nice comfortable smile, obviously at ease with her decision from back when, despite the bit of mystery with the apparent boyfriend.

I sat there a minute. I tried not to stare at her chest, which, no other way to put it, was abnormally large. Maybe it was

just coincidence, or the light--but her get-up today--a cream-colored cotton blouse buttoned down the front--seemed to accentuate the situation worse than last time, when I made the unfortunate couple of comments.

Of course you'd assume the woman went in the closet every day and put something together like anyone else, no deep-rooted thought to that aspect of the presentation . . . and for God's sakes give the lady a break, none of us can control the luck of the draw when it comes to physical features.

Dr. Moore said, "Is that enough about me at the moment? It's your dime of course. But my sense is you had a different motivation in reaching out this morning."

"There you guys go again, with the reaching out . . . But fine. For starters, something that's been bugging me lately . . . I had a friend with large breasts one time.

There were issues.” What a surprise leading off with this topic, after the introspection.

“Uh-huh,” Dr. Moore said.

“She wasn’t, like a girlfriend. She was older.”

“Might she have been someone’s mother? Of a friend?”

“Oh brother. We can’t get past this. Now you have me in the womb again, or fresh out of it. You’re going to ask me if I was breast fed.”

“Were you?”

“I would assume so. But honestly, it was never brought up. And it won’t be. My mom’s not around. Neither of my parents, unfortunately.”

“How old was she, your mom?”

“When she had me? Or when she passed?”

“Both.”

“Let’s get back on topic here. I was working a tech job at studio in Burbank. Couple of us put together a band, nothing

official, just kicking it around a little, and then someone hires us to play . . . not the wedding obviously, but what do you call it when females have a bachelor party?”

“A bachelorette party?”

“Probably. Not even that, it was when they all came back after. We played in someone’s apartment.”

“Do you play an instrument currently?”

“You’re not complicated, you know it? I know where you’re going, that music is good therapy, yada yada. Let me finish this.”

She was taking a note.

I continued, “One of the people from the party--she wasn’t someone’s mother--not that kind of age difference--but she might have been like a big sister or family friend. I never established it frankly.”

“Umm-hmm.”

“Anyways. When we’re packing up the instruments she asks do I give lessons. I

never had, but I said sure . . . and only when the lessons began and we're both sitting there with the guitars on our laps, and you have that certain angle . . . then I noticed it, or them, you couldn't help it."

"Hmm," Dr. Moore said.

"And you know how when you purposely try not to call attention to something? And your eyes are roaming every which way but there? How that makes it worse?"

"Continue."

"So fine, I gave her a half dozen lessons, it wasn't hard, she wasn't a rank beginner . . . and then the final one, she announces she can't come for a while because she's going in for minor surgery."

"Ah."

"So I figured that was it, I picked up a few bucks spending-money out of the deal and I moved on. But then one of the band guys, he tells me he heard she's going in for breast reduction surgery."

“Uhn-huh. And that bothered you.”

“Very much so, are you kidding? So I called her up. I tell her, it’s none of my business, and it’s fine if you hang up--but what the hell are you doing here? . . . Or had she done here, if it’s too late already.”

“Yes?”

“She was embarrassed, but she addressed it. She said she had second thoughts, she’d received some negative advice, and put the procedure on hold . . . I told her that was a wise decision . . . and did she want to set up another lesson in that case, and she said she’d let me know, but I never heard from her again.”

“I see,” Dr. Moore said. She looked at her notes. “You prefaced this discourse by labeling it ‘something that’s been bugging me lately’. How so?”

“I never got closure, is why. For all I know she went in a month later and took care of it. I know it sounds silly, and you probably think I’m a nut case.”

“Let’s explore that a moment. How many years ago was this?”

“A dozen. Give or take.”

“Would you characterize this experience as having been on your mind often?”

“Not really. Only when something reminds me of it . . . like in a porno flick once in a while, that type thing.”

“And why do you think it still disturbs you occasionally? Is it a lack of control?”

“I think you got it,” I said. “I can’t stand it when people don’t listen to me. In certain cases.”

“And you feel this woman did not.”

“Put it this way. She ignored me, which is worse.”

“And why do you feel that?”

“She canned the lessons, for starters.”

Dr. Moore wrote something down.

“Did it occur to you that she may not have

returned for the guitar lessons because you touched on a sensitive subject?”

“Fine, that too,” I said.

“Did you have sexual feelings for this person? And part of your frustration stems from not being able to explore those further?”

“Fine. That *too* . . . plus it was like, if she shrunk her situation, right in my face so to speak, she wasn’t giving anything a chance to play out.”

“And you wouldn’t have been as attracted to her, if she’d had the reduction procedure.”

“Again, you’re going to shake your head . . . but correct.”

“Have you been involved in any relationships with older women?”

“I thought I was one time, and I got dumped pretty quick.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Nah, it’s not worth it. But okay in a nutshell, I worked at a newspaper once.

When you start off they stick you on the late shift, 5 to 2. Some gal comes in after midnight, I say can I help you, and it turns out she's a roving food critic, turning in a restaurant review? This is when people at newspapers still turned physical shit in. At least some of them."

"And a brief relationship followed."

"Yeah, about 10 minutes later, if you know what I mean. That late shift, it was pretty dead in the newsroom, and there were empty offices."

"I see . . . So that was the extent of it."

"I didn't want it to be. I bought Warriors tickets for a couple nights later. I picked her up, it was all good. But she left in the 3rd quarter . . . No idea how she got home. I guess she took BART."

"What was your age difference?"

"I was like early-20's, she was probably early 30's? . . . Around where I am now, in fact . . . Jeez, weird to think of like that."

“So . . . anything else you can add Matt? From any direction that might be helpful?”

“Yeah well, I was in the central valley not too long ago. Do you like small towns?”

“Sometimes. I grew up in one. Do you?”

“I hear you. Good place to be from, might not want to live there? . . . I’m taking care of some nonsense, it’s running me a few days, I’m in a hotel, the staff is friendly, it’s not the worst thing. You’re not in a major rush to get out of there, but even so.”

“I believe you’ve mentioned your affinity for hotels before. Why do you think you’re comfortable in that environment?”

“No, no. The womb stuff again? . . . Security? No responsibility? They even make your bed for you and clean up?”

“I’m detecting sarcasm.”

“You’re wondering if truth is sprinkled in. Fine. I’ll add when you’re on

the road, residing in those type places, your commitments are less. Normally.”

“Life is not as complicated for you.”

“Yeah. So I meet this high school kid, he’s probably 18, he’s a senior, he’ll be out of there in a couple months. Guy has a good name, Pike.”

“Unh-huh.”

“What I did, one night I found the high school track. You figure 4 laps to a mile, so if I go 8, I’ve done a little something. I’m talking walking, no big thing. I stop at 6, but anyways I’m sitting in the bleachers, this kid comes along, putting on running shoes and we start talking, and I can tell he doesn’t mind, because you always want to procrastinate your workout, it’s human nature.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Nothing monumental at first, except I found myself envying the heck out of this kid. He was athletic, all-American features, genuine smile. Polite, well-spoken.

Everything ahead of him, is what I'm thinking . . . It also made me want to turn back the clock and do it right."

"Correct your high school experience."

"Sure. It had its moments, but plenty of stuff to straighten out. Wouldn't you?"

"Please re-direct," she said.

"So I'm assuming this kid's got it all squared away, and the sky's the limit . . . and I even tell him this--and I'm paraphrasing--but it's like, take it from me son, you don't always know how good you have it, until later on . . . and my unsolicited advice is keep right on having fun, and not waste time worrying about what comes next."

"How did this Pike respond?"

"He seemed to consider what I was saying, and then he shifted gears. Which surprised me. Maybe me being a stranger. That he figured he could open up, it wouldn't come back to bite him."

“How did he shift gears?”

“He told me a terrible story. There was an accident. A drunk driver ran up on a curb and killed a woman. The Pike kid knew the family, went to school all through with one of the daughters. It happened last fall, a lot of people were still reeling bad, he said.”

“And?”

“How did you know there was more? Isn't that enough?”

“I didn't.”

“Well there is more . . . Pike is having enough trouble wrapping his head around it. A couple weeks later the daughter is going through her mom's things, and she comes across a diary and some letters. Bottom line--and don't forget, it is a small town, but she informs Pike that her mom--and Pike's dad--were having an affair.”

“Currently? At the time of the accident?”

“That wasn’t clear. They tried to piece it together, it may have ended a while back, or it could have been one of those on- again off-again deals. Eventually the daughter tells Pike she figured out the timeline, and the affair had been over for some time.”

“But he didn’t necessarily believe that.”

“Correct . . . You know something, you must be tough to go to the movies with. You’d be one of those people who keeps calling out what’s about to happen . . . Would you ever *want* to go to the movies by the way? I mean I know you’re married, you said that last time, but this is 2020.”

Dr. Moore took a moment. “Are you saying--to pick up on that--that you, for one, behave differently therefore? That in 2020 anything goes?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying. Pike finishes telling me this, I feel bad assuming his life is all idyllic Camelot, and he leaves off by saying--pretty darn matter of fact,

too--that he has the ability to do something about it . . . and he's going to. And he says good night, and takes off on his jog."

"What do you feel he meant by that?"

"You're supposed to tell *me*. I don't know if he was serious or joking, like as a defense mechanism . . . or being symbolic or some shit."

Dr. Moore was writing, drawing an arrow, connecting a couple things. She looked at her watch. "We're going to need to conclude. In about 6 minutes. Anything else, Matt? What possessed you to call me this morning?"

"None of this. Jesus . . . But if you need one more topic . . . I guess that could be: If a guy had a terminal disease--but he got better--but he kind of changed his general approach while thinking he had the terminal disease--and yes he may really be disease-free--but the new approach he developed remains--is that okay?"

Another note from Dr. Moore. “How did he change his approach?”

“More aggressive with others, maybe? . . . I don't know, more impulsive? Less concerned about ramifications? Less worried whether people like him? More apt to move on?”

“As opposed to dwelling on a particular?”

“I guess. But that's it? I listed about 6 things.”

“Do you feel he should alter his current approach?” she said.

“Well,” I said, “in a perfect world, sure.”

“Does he feel energized by the new outlook? The qualities you alluded to, they represent a sort of liberation, do they not?”

“Yeah? Could be I guess,” I said, rubbing my chin, giving that one a going over, no one quite putting it that simple before.

“Does this person have a best friend?”

“I don’t think so . . . If you define it as a couple people he can count on in a crisis, then maybe.”

“Does this person consider himself out of the loop, socially?”

“Now and then.”

“And that partial degree of alienation--he feels it’s the result of the current approach?”

“Maybe.”

“Under the original approach, he was more prominently in the social loop?”

“I told you,” I said, “maybe. What part don’t you understand?”

Dr. Moore cleared her throat and straightened up her paperwork. “That’s sufficient for today, Matt.”

“I’m sorry . . . That was on me, getting worked up for a second. Nothing to do with you. You’re doing your job.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you call the police on me though? Last time?”

“I did.”

“Oh . . . How ‘bout this time?”

“I’m not planning to.” We stood up.

I wanted to give her a hug last time, even brought it up, and who knows, maybe that was part of the deal, why she did call the cops.

But now she opened the door and I hesitated a second and then reached around and gave her one . . . and like a good human being--flicking the switch on the therapist role for just a minute--she hugged me back, and it felt real enough, and you could always use one.

Chapter Three

“What was your other thing?”
Chandler said. “Come on, I’m getting stiff here.”

We were on the tennis court bench at Polliwog Park, in between sets.

“Ah stupid,” I said. “But I’ve been subletting my place up north, my one-bedroom in the Marina. 4 grand a month.”

“Ho-ly Mackerel.”

“Yeah, the market’s gone insane, and that’s cheap. Anyhow, the mope stopped paying, it seems like.”

“You’re screwed.”

“Jeez, you’re a lawyer. Just like that?”

“Yeah big time. Especially Frisco. Liberal landlord-tenant courts, takes you forever to evict someone, and they can put

in a simple, bogus defense, which really hamstrings the process.”

“Now I’m in a very bad mood,” I said. “So let’s play. Though again . . . thank you on the first thing.”

This was getting uncomfortable, having to keep appreciating the guy, but the fact was you were getting free legal advice right and left just by letting him kick your ass on the court . . . and unfortunately the tenant assessment was right on target, wasn’t it.

I headed down to the Crowe’s Nest for a little cocktail hour, and it only took a second before Ned Mancuso spotted me and was up and coming over, big strides, like we were long lost friends.

My relationship with Ned was a work in progress. I enjoyed the guy, probably actually liked him, but I didn’t trust him.

Then again Ned had helped me out, couple of jams, and hadn't asked for anything in return, at least yet.

"What's shaking, my man?" Ned said.

Before I could answer Ned signalled for a couple of drinks.

"What," he said, "you seem uncertain."

"Nah, it's all good, I just don't want to overdo it." Which is typically what happened when Ned took charge, it turned into a long night.

"Come on. Relax, take a load off. You need me to later, I'll give you a lift."

"Well that's one good thing," I said, "I can always walk home."

"Oh yeah," Ned said, "you got a sweet set-up there. That's smart. You're not automobile-dependent."

"I won't argue with you, though it's a little far. Even two, three blocks closer, that changes everything."

"So get a bike."

“Yeah I thought of that. What holds me back, is not wanting to fly off the thing, negotiating the odd hill on the way into town.”

“So you get a helmet.”

“Nah, you can’t. I haven’t seen anybody with one since I’ve lived here.”

“Gee you’re right. Never thought of that . . . How about that one guy, you ever run into him up in the hills, always got a white t-shirt?”

“Yeah I know who you mean, that guy’s something else. He’s doing interval uphill work on his one-speed cruiser. He’s got to be in his 70’s.”

“Cindy’s grandfather,” Ned said, leaving it at that, and Cindy was the waitress who’d just set down our Sunset Punches . . . and it was a reminder that when you stripped it away, Manhattan Beach was a small town.

I asked Ned what he had going, and he said something about getting a little

lucky this week . . . and you sort of wanted to know, but you probably didn't.

“Not your fault,” I said, “you didn't remind me of this--intentionally--but I got a guy not paying rent.”

“You own rental shit, you mean?”

“No, no, I learned my lesson with that. This, is I sublet my place in the Bay Area when I moved down here in October.”

“So you didn't learn your lesson then.”

“Okay, you wanna nitpick it, fair enough.”

“It seems to me,” Ned said, “you make up your mind, you make a clean break. Don't half-ass it.”

He had a point of course. The only reason I was doing this, hanging onto the place on Broderick Street, was if it didn't work out in southern California you'd never be able to afford an apartment in that neighborhood again, coming in cold.

“At any rate,” I said. “I have to go up there. I fear. Sooner rather than later.”

“I feel for you,” he said. “Tenants hold all the cards. Nothing worse. No easy solution.” And actually shaking his head . . . This wasn’t a good sign, I decided, if *Ned* thought it was going to be difficult.

I said, “This is out of left field, but when you hear about someone jumping off a hotel balcony into a pool--like one of those college fraternity spring break deals down in Cabo--how high is too high?”

“That’s a good point. Where does it switch from novelty to suicidal.”

“Yeah . . . You ever read the one about the trick high-diver? The guy who climbs the ridiculous tower and dives into a little tank? Like they used to do in the circus?”

“That was good. It gave you a feel for it. The guy looking down at the tank, seeing it the size of a silver dollar.”

I said, “Then of course, he’s up there on his perch, getting ready to do a test dive,

no one around except the assistant who just finished rigging the scaffold . . . and two guys come around the corner and shoot that guy. Then as they're running off, one of them takes a glance back and sees the diver up there watching."

"Yeah, great start . . . See now, that scene was New Orleans, I'm pretty sure."

"The rest of the story didn't quite match the beginning. They got into some Civil War re-enactment nonsense. Just stick with the diver."

"I don't remember the rest," Ned said, "so I get what you're saying. . . Anyhow, didn't mean to rain on your parade, your landlord-tenant business."

"Okay, then do me a favor please and don't keep bringing it up?" I was starting to get a little indigestion, an acid-reflux type thing, probably from skipping any actual food and going straight to the booze, and it did turn into a long evening, and I did walk

home, and I didn't solve anything, that's for sure.

The San Francisco apartment was two flights up, and when I got to the top of the stairs the door was open a crack and I was going to say something but instead I tapped lightly, and a moment later there the guy was.

A little bigger than I remembered, and he had on baggy basketball shorts and those Adidas rubber slippers that you see soccer players wear when they take off their cleats.

“Dixson? Matt Grady.”

“I know who you are,” the guy said.

His full name was Dixson Herbel. He seemed to be what you'd want in a subletter. A friendly guy from North Carolina who got recruited by a start-up in the city, fired up about the job and pulling down plenty of salary to afford the apartment.

My instinct was also that a guy from North Carolina was less likely to screw you than someone from, say, Brooklyn.

Right now the guy didn't offer to shake hands or invite me in, and I could see through the partially-opened door a pair of bare feet moving around in the kitchen, female ones.

I said, "You look like you're a workout person. That's good. You'd fit right in down south."

"Where's that?" he said, and for a moment it looked we might be headed toward a civilized conversation.

"West LA. Manhattan, Hermosa, Redondo. You ever been?"

He didn't respond, but said, "What--you call *me*? Harass me that way--not once but twice--and that's not good enough?"

"Excuse me there?"

The guy continued. "Now you have to present yourself unannounced? During my

quiet time? . . . Is that the way you were raised?”

“Huh?”

“Listen to yourself, you fat fuck. You know exactly what I’m talking about. You provide me sub-standard conditions, I go along with it based on your assurances that you will address the 8 items we agreed upon. And on your end? You didn’t care enough to do crap . . . So, you stop getting paid.”

For a second I wondered if there really had been a discussion about 8 items in the apartment that needed upgrade or replacement? I couldn’t recall anything like that, unless I was truly losing my brain.

All I could remember was handing him the keys, and the guy telling me he was the luckiest man in San Francisco today because the apartment was killer and the price was right on . . . and thank you so much for this opportunity.

I hated that expression ‘killer’, especially when there was no direct noun connected to it, which at least the guy did do, connect it to ‘apartment’.

But back to this developing mother-fucker now . . .

I said, “Are you serious? I mean I’m willing to work with you, believe me . . . if you’re in a jam . . . those things happen.”

“You haven’t been *listening*,” Dixson said, “on account of you don’t want to . . . So you’d best be moving on, would be my advice, unless you enjoy being in more hot water than you already are.”

I tried to process this, and I couldn’t understand how I’d be in any hot water . . . but before I could say anything further the guy pulled out his phone, which he’d been holding behind his back, and explained that he’d documented the conversation, as part of his ongoing case, and that he’d see me in court, or the police precinct--whichever came first.

And before I could conjure up a comeback, Dixson closed the door in my face.

Someone turned up the music in the apartment, some aggressive hip-hop . . . and I didn't sleep well that night, though I did come up with one idea around 4 in the morning, why not visit the guy at work.

Dixson Herbel worked at Sonic Boomers, which occupied the top two floors of an industrial building on Howard Street between 4th and 5th. Twitter, Dropbox and a few other household names were in the neighborhood.

The guy inside the front door couldn't have been nicer, except he told me I wasn't allowed in without a badge, and I had to wait until he got distracted by a UPS delivery to walk in.

No idea if Dixson was actually here, since the Millenials seemed to work from home a lot . . . but I poked around and a

few minutes later spotted him in the employee cafeteria, having coffee with a co-worker.

And Gee, you didn't have to pay for anything, so I helped myself to a slice of pie, grabbed a fork, and sat down with them.

"I am not . . . believing this," Dixson said.

"What?" I said, shoving in a large chunk of pie. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Mona, will you excuse us?" Dixson said to the co-worker, and when she left he said, "I'm going to call security on you in a second."

"Do me a favor and let me finish this first," I said. "Didn't know the perks were so sweet."

"You interrupted me," he said.

"I got ya . . . you'll be throwing me out in a second, but first you want to teach me a lesson."

“That too. But I want to keep you around for a minute so I can understand how someone can have a death wish, and not be worrying about the consequences.”

“Dang . . . I know you’re exaggerating, you’re going for the dramatic effect . . . Still, those are fighting words. It’s a good thing I’m a pacifist.”

“I see. Meaning what now? Otherwise I’d have to watch out? You’d be kicking my ass?” The guy applying an ugly sneer to the delivery.

“No, the opposite. If I weren’t a pacifist I’d be getting *my* ass kicked.”

“Okay, good to hear we’ve got that straight.”

“What about the rent?” I said. “Not sure if this is the definition of business booming, but something tells me the joint isn’t teetering on bankruptcy either.”

“You would have gotten it, if you’d addressed the issues I’ve outlined multiple times . . . But keep your shirt on. Once the

lawsuit resolves itself, there will no doubt be an arrangement.”

I said, “You remind me of my dad. I miss him pretty bad. Not you personally, but the expression *keep your shirt on*. He loved that one, could apply it at will . . . but he especially loved using it on entitled scumbag momma’s boys.”

“Fuck YOU there, friend. I’ll give you 5 seconds to be on your way.”

I got up, and of course the guy tells me calmly and quietly that I better watch my back.

I had picked up some mace last year from a guy on Douglas Street, in the Castro district.

The guy was a computer hacker, that’s what I was seeing him about, but on the way out he hands me the can of mace *for good measure*, was how he put it, explaining that someone laid a case on

him . . . and I threw it in the trunk and had pretty much forgotten about it.

I still had the keys to my old building, but that might be messy, so I sat across the street in the car and waited for the guy to hopefully come home at a reasonable hour.

It took a while, but there was Dixson now, opening the bottom door, and I knew I was a little lucky, considering all the options these guys have after work.

Dixson hesitated inside the alcove, which was normal, that's where the mailboxes were . . . and when he got to the top of the staircase I was halfway up it behind him . . . and the guy turned around and said, "Well what a surprise."

"I was back in the neighborhood," I said, climbing another step.

Dixson said, "I was right then. You do have a death wish."

He had a bag slung over his shoulder and he pulled it off and dropped it, and stood at the top of the stairs, pretty

formidable arms slightly spread like a gorilla, getting ready to attack as I approached, two steps away.

“Hi,” I said, and I shot off the mace in the guy’s face.

It only then occurred to me that I’d neglected to wear a mask, and I could feel the stuff right away, my eyes tearing, my throat having trouble.

But nothing like what the guy was going through.

I said, “How about some fresh air, would that help?” and Dixon moaned, high-pitched like a baby pig squeal, and I marched him into the emergency stairwell and up to the roof.

I couldn’t help thinking that up here you did have an amazing view of the bridge, the Golden Gate . . . and I should have spent more time on the roof when I lived here.

Though you had to be careful, there was no rail. If you were drunk, stupid, or

otherwise stumbling around in the dark--
like now--you could step right off.

Dixson was in a weird squat at the moment, seriously addressing his respiration, and I reached down and grabbed him by the ankles, surprising him, and he was straining to resist but I had the angle and the momentum . . . the only problem being, as we got close to the edge, how do you swing him around . . . so I maced him again and he wasn't showing a whole lot of fight and I had him by the shoulder and dangled half of him off the side of the roof.

I intended to ask a few *Are we good* type questions, but when I adjusted my grip I lost my leverage, and the guy's body was too far over the dang edge.

I started to panic and decided the easiest way to bring him back was grab one foot, with both hands, and really pull . . . and there you go, that started to work . . .

except then HOLY SHIT . . . the guy's shoe came off in my hand.

I grabbed at his calf, and there was a brief instant where I thought I had it . . . and then I didn't.

And Dixson disappeared over the side.

I let a beat go by, and approached, and looked down.

The guy had landed on the fire escape railing for the apartment below, and thankfully he toppled to the left, and onto the landing. If he'd toppled to the right, he would have met the sidewalk.

Dixson did get to his feet, and this was a big relief, because for a moment I wondered if the guy might have broken his neck . . . and he hightailed it down the steel ladder of the fire escape, making that little jump at the end, the last six feet . . . and the son of a gun hit the ground and was flying toward Marina Boulevard . . . the guy looking back and up at the roof one more

time, like he was truly spooked, and that I was going to be chasing after him.

Which was ridiculous of course.

You never knew if you'd completely made your point, but I had a decent feeling about this one.

Home Depot was still open and I picked up a new lock for the apartment door, but unfortunately I got to a point of no return, where I had the old one out but couldn't get the dang new one to sit right.

Nothing more frustrating than battling a job and not getting it, but what could you do.

So I walked over to Weatherbee's, and my favorite bartender Mitch was there, and after a while I mentioned the unfinished business with the lock, and Mitch said no problem, he could take care of it for me right now if I liked.

I said, "Really?", and Mitch said it was a slow night and they had it under

control, plus he enjoyed doing stuff like this, it got him out of the bar.

Chapter Four

My friend Mike had access to a cabin in Mendocino County and we were up there for a three-day weekend. Mike and his relatively new girlfriend Penny, and me and someone I met at the gym a few days ago, Tina.

We were down a dirt road and it was remote, and you didn't have the internet. You could sort of pick up a couple TV channels the old-fashioned way but that was it for modern entertainment, so we were sitting around at night playing cards and board games. It was semi-refreshing.

We'd pulled out Pictionary and there was a clue involving a body part, and when the round was over Mike said to me, "Remember the guy in high school with the intimidatingly . . . large situation?"

Penny giggled and Tina didn't make any noise but she seemed to sit up a little straighter.

"No," I said, "I don't. And that was a long time ago."

"Not that long," Mike said. "What do we got," . . . and he was counting it off on his fingers . . . "like, 14 years now?"

"Around that," I said, hoping to divert the subject. "Tell you one thing, they're hammering us for reunion donations, lot of emotion in their appeals . . . You get those, right?"

"Oh yeah," Mike said. "I gave 'em money once, the 5-year, and they stepped up their pace. Big error."

"Me too," I said. "Did you *go* to the 5-year, by the way? I don't remember you there."

"I don't remember you there either," Mike said. "Anyhow . . . new round."

"That's it?" Penny said.

"What?" Mike said.

“Well you . . . intrigued us, is all,” she said.

“You did,” Tina said, speaking up for the first time.

It was casual so far with Tina. The cabin had two bedrooms plus a sleeping loft, and I’d explained that when I invited her, which was likely the difference-maker.

“Well, since you’re not leaving it alone,” Mike said, “reason I bring up this guy--Cragin--I ran into him at Costco a couple weeks ago.”

“Oh,” Penny said. “How was that?”

“You mean, how did he look, was he in shape and so forth?” Mike said. He was smiling, clearly enjoying this.

“That’s an odd name, Cragin,” Tina said. “What was this individual like back in high school?”

I thought that was kind of an odd *question*, was the personality supposed to fit the name?

“He was a bit of a character when you got to know him, but overall kind of quiet,” Mike said. “Sort of a hippy. We were with him in JV football.”

“Oh that guy, yeah,” I said, figuring I couldn't avoid it.

“I thought you didn't remember him,” Mike said.

“No, but the name now, I'm placing him . . . backup quarterback, didn't get on the field much.”

“Skinny dude,” Mike said, “not real athletic.”

“Oh,” Tina said.

“Well did he remember you at Costco?” Penny said.

“Sure, and it was good catching up. It was early enough too, you know what I mean, before they start shutting down the sample stands? So I was taking care of a freebie dinner, killing two birds at once.”

Tina said, “You're trying to tease us. Aren't you?”

“Dang,” I said. “You’re more direct than I realized.”

“No, it’s just, if someone starts a story--they met an old friend,” she said, “why keep detouring from it?”

“He does that,” Penny said. “He blurts stuff out--the shock factor--and then hangs onto it.”

“It’s not holding anything back,” Mike said, “but it’s like, what’s the rush? . . . But fine, Cragin lives in Santa Cruz, was in town helping his folks. Does something in tech, has a wife and a kid, another on the way. Said he surfs down there in his free time.”

“Skinny guys I think have an advantage at surfing,” I said. “Any of you ever tried it?”

“Once at Club Med,” Penny said. “I never got up.”

“That’s why they start you on the sand, the good instructors,” Mike said. “If

you can't stand up, no point going in the water."

"Is your friend Cragin still thin?" Tina said.

"Seemed to be," Mike said. "One of those fast metabolism guys . . . Though the first time I see him in the locker room, after practice, I tell him there may not be a lot of room left for the rest of us in here."

"Ah Jesus," I said.

"Gosh," Tina said.

"Really," Penny said. "What was his reaction?"

"You know, he was embarrassed," Mike said. "I was being a jerk."

I said, "Can't quite place it, but pretty sure I heard that room line in a movie, or book. Not original, the point being."

"Anyways," Mike said, "now we ready for another round? How about I make some coffee, and Babe we got any more of those Vienna Fingers?"

“Well is that his first wife, and such?” Tina said. “The mother of his children?”

“That I don’t know,” Mike said. “I mean we didn’t hover in place there forever, plus he was asking me questions too.”

“What did he want to know?” Penny said, “and no, we’re out of the cookies. Of course there’s liquor.”

No one refused and we resumed Pictionary and we did get a little sloshed, and a half hour later the subject swung back to Cragin.

Tina said, “It’s just a bit surprising . . . someone like that . . . that he’d settle down so definitively.”

“Right,” Penny said, “so young. Not now so much, but when he started his family.”

“You ladies are funny,” Mike said, leaning his chair back, a cigar added to the mix. “What you’re driving at, he didn’t

pleasure enough women . . . Relative to his advantage.”

I said, “I’m feeling the booze, but that’s the first somewhat reasonable comment you’ve made tonight.”

“I see,” Mike said, “so you’re agreeing with them. He should have played the field more thoroughly.”

“No,” I said, “the way you presented it was reasonable. Calling someone’s unusual--object--an advantage. That’s not bad . . . Or maybe even nicknaming it, *The Advantage*. That’s better.”

Penny and Tina were smiling. Mike said, “I didn’t mean it that way. Reinterpret it as you like.”

I said, “Remember the old porn star, John C. Holmes?”

“Oh yeah,” Mike said.

“So, that guy pleased hundreds of women,” I said, “I mean you would assume. And he ended up on cocaine or heroin, that whole scene, and he died early . . . It was a

little more complicated, I'm thinking now, organized crime might have been involved. They did a Dateline on it, one of those shows."

"There you go," Penny said. "Your friend Cragin made the admirable choice."

"Or the safe one," Mike said. "I don't know . . . have to say, if it was me, I'd be playing the field. Just the reality."

"Me too, I'm afraid," I said.

"Thanks a lot," Penny said to Mike.

"Okay let's don't start World War 3 here," Mike said. "All's I'm saying, someone's got a freakish luck of the draw, maybe they run with it a while."

"A God's gift," Tina said, and she looked pretty serious, it wasn't a joke . . . and I wondered how I'd ever match up, the bar being set ridiculously high, if it came to that.

Penny said, "I had a boyfriend who was intimidated by other men."

"Which one?" Mike said.

“Not one of the ones I told you about. Dale . . . Which was pretty weird, since Dale was a very attractive man. In the Adonis category, literally.”

Now Mike was looking a little stiff, but he kept his mouth shut.

“How was intimacy?” Tina said.

“Ooh boy,” I said.

“Well,” Penny said, “since we’re in full disclosure mode, and sort of loopy from the wine . . . great.”

“But there was a problem,” Mike said, sounding like he was clenching his teeth.

“He was beautiful,” Penny said, “he was endowed, he had manners, he was caring.” She started to kind of stare off in the distance.

“We get it,” I said. “What happened?”

“We were at an Oakland A’s game,” she said, “and the A’s rallied in the bottom of the last inning and people were standing up, so Dale and I did, and a man behind us told us to sit down. That made me more

determined to keep standing up, but Dale sat right down.”

They were quiet for a minute, and Tina said, “I’m not connecting the dots.”

“When we got home,” Penny said, “I demanded we go in the bedroom right away.”

“Okay I can see that,” Tina said, “you needed his manhood reinforced. How did that go?”

“That part went fine,” Penny said. “We broke up the next day though.”

Mike and I looked at each other.

“Who else was on that JV team?” I said.

“You know something, that’s a good question,” Mike said.

Chapter Five

I said to Jessica, “Remember the time we were lounging around your pool and the fat guy went off the diving board backwards?”

“No,” Jessica said, “no recollection whatsoever.”

“You don’t? Jeez, we laughed about that for years, I thought . . . at the minimum weeks, days.”

“You’re going to refresh me anyway, so go ahead.”

“Well, someone’s daring him to trick dive. Guy does have a presence when gets up there, works that wheel with his foot.”

“Adjusting the tension. I did that.”

“So . . . you were athletic too. Point being, this guy probably clocks in at 275

but he's still a player, taking the issue seriously."

"What are you talking about, *issue*? It's a condominium. You can hear the shuffleboard pucks loud and clear, even underwater."

"Everyone's taking it easy, you're saying?"

"That's the idea."

"It's discs, though."

"What?"

"The proper name of the equipment. Not pucks . . . What are the sticks called?"

"How should I know. Not sticks obviously now."

"Cues. I lived in Florida for a while. I'm sure I told you about that."

"Well whoopee," Jessica said.

"Our guy though, he's all set, toes on the end of the board, and then it's like an afterthought, he reverses it. His back to the water."

"Unh-huh."

“Guy sticks his arms out parallel, closes his eyes, looking like a Zen deal now, buckles the knees and springs up beautifully, high, you almost can’t believe it.”

“Uh-oh,” Jessica said.

“Yeah. Some kind of twist in the air, you had to give him credit. But on the way down--just about clears it--but clips his chin on the board.”

“Wow.”

“Or mouth. Either way, there’s blood . . . he takes it out on the guy in the cheap seats who suggested the dive.”

“Wait. Is that when the two fellows got in the bear hug?”

I said, “So why’d you make me tell the whole thing?”

“I didn’t remember the first part, what precipitated it.”

“You need some Vitamin D or something. Jog shit loose in the back of the cortex.”

She didn't say anything and I felt bad I went too far, probably touched a nerve. She had mentioned one time a relative had Alzheimer's toward the end, maybe an aunt.

I said, "Anyhow, you got the concept, so we're good."

"Concept of what? See now this is the kind of thing that irks me."

"Loose ends. They don't always cinch up neat and tidy . . . I told you about the guy in Sioux City, right? With the diagnosis? His version of loose ends?"

The cocktail waitress came by and Jessica put up a finger for another daiquiri. "Matt you're an idiot," she said.

"Fine, I suppose the reason I conjured up the diving board incident is because I had words with someone in my neighborhood today. Or more like he had words with me."

"That would be a first," she said, and I couldn't tell when she was being sarcastic,

but at least she was smiling. The booze kicking in probably helped. She lit a cigarette, which you could still do in Vegas casinos. “Finish the pool story. I’m fuzzy on what happened after the bear hug.”

“Now you’re pulling my leg,” I said. “Testing me.”

“Could be. You’ve been known to embellish.”

“So . . . or lemme rephrase it. The Millennials are always starting stuff with *so*. You notice? I hate that . . . Our guy and the opponent--not as big but matches up reasonable--they get into, like you say, the Sumo lock, belly to belly, and then teeter-totter toward the edge of the pool.”

“One or two people started screaming, I remember.”

“I don’t recall that part. Bottom line, they plunge into the water. They’re under for about as long as you reckon they should be, and just when you think this isn’t good, our guy pops up, the diver. And

unfortunately, the unthinkable. He drowned the lighter guy . . . which admittedly points out, for all that's wrong with being a fat guy, it doesn't hurt to be one in an underwater fight."

"Okay fine," Jessica said, "you're a regular comedian."

"My deal though, shifting gears back to that. The guy who read me the riot act today. I'm trying to gauge first of all, did I do anything wrong."

"What did you do?"

"Threw some pop flies to a couple kids in the cul de sac."

"That seems harmless enough. What's the second thing you're trying to gauge, after did you do anything wrong?"

"Is the guy Mob."

"That *could* play a role in your future interactions," she said. "The pool thing though, some people dove in, right?"

“They did. One of them an older guy, out here minding his own business, laying in the sun reading the Atlantic Monthly.”

“Really? You remember the actual magazine?”

“I’m just saying. That type. Well-off enough individual, likely owned a vacation unit. Catching some R&R in the desert.”

“And so . . . it got broken up, correct? No harm no foul.”

I said, “Weird expression coming out of you. Where’d you get that from?”

“Listen, I have to meet Sharon. Are we still on for that movie?”

“Hey why not,” I said.

When I got home there was no sign of the neighborhood kids, and that made it easier, no decisions at the moment.

Finishing off the pool business in my head, re-running it, yeah the out-of-town guy went in but it was a half-effort, him staying out of the way as two younger

dudes plunged in right behind him and broke it up pretty easily and a few seconds later everyone's heads were back above the surface.

And it may not have been as dramatic as all that . . . the diver and the guy who dared him to do it did have each other locked up but they were probably in shallow enough water where they could have stood up and saved themselves. But stories always told better when there was a threat of somebody perishing.

The follow up, the more juicy part, was the two battlers instead of thanking the rescuers *turned* on them for interfering, and there were words and someone from the management office which overlooked the pool area slid open a door and told everyone to cool it . . . and the young guys got out of there.

So now you had--forgetting the Atlantic Monthly guy--the two bozos who got into it in the first place lounging around

the pool together like nothing happened, and I wondered if there was ever a sequel to the whole shebang.

It would have been interesting to stick around a little longer and find out, but back then I had to get to work, I was dealing cards at the Tropicana, second shift. It wasn't terrible, when you stacked it up against other jobs I'd had, but your feet did bother you when you got off.

Later I didn't have to do that as much, work for someone else. On account of that very gig, dealing the 21.

One night you had a guy, plenty of enthusiasm, laying a black chip on two hands at once, occasionally upping it beyond. The guy was having fun, and he went up 4 or 5 hundred, and I watched him more carefully and was convinced the guy didn't know how to card-count but was at least playing the basic strategy you could memorize out of a book. When to hit, stand, double down, split pairs--all that.

That table, I was dealing out of the hand. Mostly on the Strip it was shoes, 8 decks, but every casino kept a few tables going the old fashioned way. It was more fun for sure working out of your hand, and you could flash a move here and there as you delivered the cards.

Card counters--the real ones--wouldn't touch a game dealt out of the hand, since they knew the dealer could cheat you, and I wouldn't disagree with them on that.

One way was you'd deal seconds, which involved subtly peaking at the top card and if it wasn't favorable--meaning the customer might win the hand--then you flipped him the second card instead.

You could even take it a step further, deal thirds if the second card wasn't the greatest.

Occasionally a player would pick up on it and yell out as the dealer was raking in his bet, 'Hey, that guy just dealt me the

wrong card!’ and a pit boss would come over trying to look concerned and he’d check with the dealer, and the dealer would raise an eyebrow and tilt his head like what can you do, another nutcase at my table, and the pit boss would say something cordial to the player.

I hadn’t cheated anyone in a while, didn’t enjoy it, and didn’t see why you needed to with the house having the edge. If a player got on a hot streak the idea was keep him happy, keep him there as long as possible until the odds came back to reality and eventually the guy went limping off.

This night though, with the upbeat guy at the table betting pretty large and ahead the 4 or 5 hundred, there were three other players. Two of them were together, a man and woman speaking what I guessed was Russian. They were playing 5 dollar hands, the table minimum, no big deal.

But the other player was a middle-aged woman I had dealt to before, and I

pegged her as a degenerate gambler who frittered away her weekly paycheck. She was always pleasant about it, even tipped me sometimes, which was tough to take. She'd introduced herself once as Shirley.

Tonight even though the one guy was winning, the cards weren't falling for Shirley, and she was down to about 50 bucks in chips. And I was afraid of this since she'd done it once before, and now she shoveled it all forward, letting it ride on one final hand.

You figured it wasn't going to matter, even if she won and managed to pull herself away from the table tonight and went home, that she'd blow it soon enough, but still . . . and Shirley drew a king and a 2 and asked for a hit, and I couldn't help it, I peeked at the top card in my hand, and it was a 10 so I bypassed it and dealt her the second one which was a 5, giving her 17, not that great but I had 14 and hit it with a 9 and busted.

Sure enough Shirley picked up her chips and got up and said goodnight, and a few more hands went by and the Russian couple was gone and it was just the one guy left, and the guy asked me how did the breaks work, and I said it could vary by casino but here we worked 60 minutes and got 20 off, and that we weren't allowed to check our watches but you could feel a break coming on, and where are you from, and how's your night going otherwise?

They didn't want you over-conversing with the customers but it wasn't a busy shift and they weren't going to fire you for small talk, and the guy said his night's going fine, he's in Vegas looking at some property, you got a nice town here, and how's yours going.

I said good enough, and then a fresh dealer did appear, young gal named Kim, and we made the transition and I told the guy to stay safe.

The Tropicana featured a snack bar, designed for employees, but the public was welcome too, if they happened to find it. Not much to the place, no glitz at all, some high round tables to eat at after you ordered. But it was quick and the tamales were dang tasty--as good as any of the taquerias I'd sampled in Vegas.

Which is what I was working on now, a couple of those babies, dipping them into the red sauce they gave you, when the guy from the tables showed up.

"Mind if I join you?" he said, sitting down, not waiting for an answer so I didn't offer one.

The guy looked around and said very quietly, "I seen what you did . . . helping us out . . . that one hand."

I said, "And you're mixed up my friend."

"Or more accurately, helping *her* out. Or trying to ."

I didn't say anything. What you did want to ask the guy, if you could admit to it, was had I done any good for Shirley in the end, even a smidgeon's worth?

"You have a good heart," the guy said, "you demonstrated that. Plus a little nerve. You should get into flipping houses, it's a less time-consuming effort than what you've got going, currently."

I wondered what having a good heart or nerve had to do with success in the real estate business, and I still didn't say anything, and the guy pulled out a business card and said give me a call sometime, and winked and said to have a good rest of the evening.

I fingered the card for a minute, fingered it for a couple weeks at home on the couch watching TV, and finally called him. The guy, Toby, remembered me and said first thing would be he could use some bird-dogging help in Vegas, since he himself lived in Oklahoma City . . . and one

thing led to another, and soon enough I found myself sufficiently in the real estate business, and quit my job.

Bird-dogging meant digging up potential deals, specifically houses in various stages of foreclosure where the numbers made sense. I was a quick-enough learner, and pretty good at zeroing in on the right ones and not wasting time with the marginal deals, and a month later I threw some possibles Toby's way, and Toby ended up closing on one and dropped a 5 thousand dollar finder's fee on me. I decided bird-dogging had potential.

Eventually I started making my own deals, and Toby had no problem with that, and meanwhile Toby had picked up a dozen properties in Las Vegas mostly thanks to me, and he hired me to manage them.

You had to give the guy props for generosity, though I figured Toby looked at it as a two-way street, that you keep people happy it's good for business. Toby told me

go ahead and move into the one on McFarland Place, and don't worry about the rent for awhile.

This one needed rehab, but you could live there fine, and I moved in a couple weeks after I quit my job at the Tropicana.

And things were working out all right until I came home one afternoon and two of the neighbor kids--Billy and Dan--were in the cul-de-sac playing catch with gloves and a hardball. I watched them a few minutes and figured what the heck, and I dug up some old tennis balls and told them we can't use the hardball for this, but who can catch these pop-ups . . . and the kids got real interested and took it as a challenge and I started off easy, letting my arm loosen up, and then started throwing the ball higher, until ten minutes in when I really started cutting it loose, putting those things way up into the stratosphere.

Okay not quite, but the kids were the right age where that's how they saw it, and

Billy and Dan would stagger around under the ball as it came down and rarely be able to make the catch, and the activity drew a few other kids as spectators and when I finally conceded that my arm was hurting and that'd be it for today, Dan, or maybe it was Billy, said that was the coolest thing, and when could they play again.

I said I'd try, and I went inside and figured I better ice it and I was glad I did because it was hard to sleep that night as it was.

But the arm rebounded and the next afternoon I resumed the high-fly competition, and more kids joined in, and I hammed it up by describing the action out loud like a play-by-play announcer.

This went on 5 or 6 days and it seemed harmless enough--I was getting into it, feeling pretty strong out there, challenging myself to top my previous throws, turning back the clock a bit--until

the guy from #49 McFarland came out of the house and got in my face.

This was 10 in the morning, the kids were in school, and I was in the driveway hosing down my car. If it was cocktail hour that would have almost been better, because you chalk it up to liquor and the guy overreacting. What he simply said was *don't do this any more, you're causing trouble around here*.

Technically he said *no more*--don't do this *no more*--and the accent did sound New York and the guy looked pretty dang Italian, which was why I brought it up that way to Jessica . . . that my concern, given the reality of Vegas--after *was I doing anything wrong and didn't realize it*--was *could the guy be Mob*.

I wasn't sure what connection this guy had to the kids. You didn't want to ask around and you sort of didn't want to know. Especially if he was a dad or uncle of

one of the ones who'd been having fun chasing the fly balls.

That was in the Silver Dollar, not on the Strip but on Fremont Street—old Vegas--where I'd gotten together with Jessica and told the diver story and mentioned the neighbor. I liked it there because the smoke wasn't as bad as most of the other casinos, who knows why.

The Silver Dollar had a comfortable little sports book as well, and the next day I stopped in again and laid a few bucks on UCLA to cover, then did a couple errands downtown, had to look something up in the courthouse involving a rental property, and hit Trader Joe's for some organic burger as the last stop.

Hanging the left turn off Concordia onto McFarland, I could see the kids ahead, riding bikes and goofing around, and you were going to have to make a decision here pretty quick . . . and when I parked, a

couple of them came over and asked is now a good time to throw us some high flies.

What were you going do, it wasn't a perfect analogy but I thought of a bunch of puppy dogs waiting for a biscuit, who hadn't done anything wrong in their lives yet.

I said give me a couple minutes and I went inside and got the tennis balls and stretched the right arm out good--by now I had a routine which worked pretty well, using a high shelf for leverage.

There'd been one deadbeat tenants deal that unfortunately escalated into threats against Toby and me when we proceeded to evict the people, and then a guy showed up and spoke to the tenants and they stopped the threats and moved out. Toby had sent the guy, he was a felon on parole it turned out, a tough customer, and I asked Toby about it and he said you don't like to have to go there, but you need a hole card if you ever do.

This was a new side of Toby, a slightly scary one, but I couldn't help thinking now were you going to need to go there yourself.

I finished stretching and came back out, ready to fire the ball into the stratosphere once more.

I got the thing going and you still had the original kids Dan and Billy circling around out there plus the 3 or 4 others who'd become regulars, and I had to delegate whose ball the next one was so they wouldn't crash into each other . . . meanwhile keeping an eye on #49.

It got to be dinnertime and the game dispersed. The guy waited until it was over, kind of like I figured it would happen, and the doorbell rang and he asked me if he didn't understand English.

I hesitated and said, "You want to come in for a second?" Not sure where I was going with it, but it seemed better than the alternative.

The guy was starting to answer when another man's voice called his name, *Frankie*.

It was Mr. Munroe standing there, the older guy who lived a couple doors up from me at #27, and Frankie turned and Munroe said, "Be a good boy and go home now."

Frankie stared at him for a minute and then scrunched up his face but did as he was told, and Munroe and I watched him go back down the block and disappear into his house.

"Young folks," Munroe said.

I was trying to put it together, were Mr. Munroe and Frankie related somehow, or have a history, or what. I'd never seen the two of them socialize in the neighborhood, if that counted for anything.

I had learned by now it wasn't always worth it, it was easier to go with stuff.

I said, “Well I guess you never know, what can hit a nerve.”

“Nah, you don’t,” Munroe said.

#

I was driving cross country and I was close, a Red Roof Inn in Elmore, Ohio, 24 miles east of Toledo, Sandusky County.

You forgot how you could shoot through states quick back here. A big day tomorrow--the rest of Ohio, corner of Pennsylvania, the meat of New York, crossing the Hudson River below Albany--then into Western Mass, through the Berkshires and you’re bringing it on home to Boston.

Cambridge, technically.

It was 11 hours but I remembered a bad experience with rush hour traffic in the Boston corridor, which seemed to extend about 200 miles, so I played it safe and left

at 2 in the morning, and rolled up early
afternoon at my sister Ellen's.

After the formalities I said, "Have I
aged much since that time in Vermont?"

"To be honest," Ellen said, "I don't
have a clear image of what you looked like
then."

I said, "This wasn't the worst drive,
actually. What always blows my mind is
how much of the country is farms . . . What
about work and stuff, how is it?"

"I'm on the computer," she said.
"Grant writing, some management
consulting, the occasional freelance project.
It's good, because I can work around Bert."

"That is good, because whenever I
hear someone say management consulting
I have no idea what they're talking about.
But hey, that's my problem."

She looked at her watch. "Before you
get comfortable I have to pick him up. You
want to come?"

"Do you think . . . he'll have any idea who I am?"

"He didn't this morning, but I filled him in."

"Ah."

Ellen had the middle floor in a squared-off three family house that I remembered they called a triple-decker back here. It felt like a working class neighborhood, but there were some fancy cars parked on the street, though Ellen's was a beat-up Corolla.

"What do you pay for your place?" I said.

"Twenty-three hundred a month. Why?"

"I don't know, you could do a lot better in Phoenix. Guy I know's neighborhood, you get a whole house for seventeen, eighteen. You can park in your driveway, and you don't need an ice scraper for the windshield."

She said, "I don't think I'm Phoenix material. Bert's not either."

"You don't know that. I'll talk to him and feel him out."

"Matty, don't be confusing him, okay?"

"You know what? At his age, you can turn everything upside down and he's fine."

"Well his dad moved to Florida. So that part's not fine."

I said, "No. That wouldn't be."

We waited outside in a lineup with the other parents, everyone idling. I'm thinking turn off the damn engines and relax. It was clearly a private school, but I hoped Ellen wouldn't get into the curriculum, and whether it was a charter, Waldorf, alternative or other.

Bert was coming. He was a smiling kid with curly hair that came down in his eyes. He was shorter than most of the others and had on a backpack that looked way too big.

I got out of the car with Ellen, and without saying anything Bert came up to me and hugged me around the waist, and for a moment I felt my throat tighten. "Hey man," I said. "You're not supposed to know me."

"You're my uncle," Bert said. "Are you staying over at our house tonight?"

"I'd like to. If you can handle me being on the couch."

Bert said, "Hey, I'll sleep on the couch. You go in *my* room."

I said, "No, I'm not kicking you out of your room. But can you show it to me? See what we got going on in there?"

"Yeah!" he said.

Ellen said since it was a special occasion why not go for ice cream, and we went to a place in Harvard Square that was full of college kids putting away big sundaes. Bert dug into his for the first few bites and then started to struggle, and I finished it off for him.

"That's good, you'll never be a fat guy," I said.

"I'm small though," he said. "I'm a shrimp."

I said, "Maybe now, but I was noticing something. You got big feet."

"He does," Ellen said.

I said, "I'm telling you, you're going to be tall."

"Well my dad's pretty tall," Bert said. I was picturing Stan, and he wasn't huge, maybe 5'10 but so what.

"There was a kid in my school," I said. "Joey Figg. He towered over everyone until about sixth grade. In eighth grade when we graduated, he was the shortest one in the class."

"Wow," Bert said.

"Another guy, Andy Hokapp, little back-up point guard on the freshmen team in high school? His junior year, he was dunking the ball. He grew like a foot. He

had real big feet when he was young, just like you."

"Man!" Bert said.

"Just don't dunk on me though," I said. "When you come out to San Francisco."

Ellen stared at me. Bert slid over and put his head on my shoulder, and there didn't seem to be any rush to go anywhere.

Ellen told Bert to go in his room and take care of his homework, and we sat at the dining room table drinking red wine. I said, "So what's the story with Stan?"

"He met someone, she's from down there, and he moved in with her. About a year now. He's in a stepdad situation."

"Ah, Jeez."

"Not sure if I ever let you in on it, Stan was married once before me. He has a couple of teenage kids of his own."

"You did tell me that, but still. Christ."

"It's a mess. The sad thing is, Stan has a good heart. I see a lot of that in Bert . . . How about you Matty?"

I said, "Well I don't want to jinx myself, but I feel like I'm picking up steam in the right direction."

"Someone you could actually settle down with?"

"A few wildcards that need to pan out, but yeah, not inconceivable."

Bert came into the dining room. "That was a little quick," Ellen said. "You sure?"

"Pretty sure," Bert said. "Can't I play some hockey with Uncle Matt?"

I said, "Bert, I have to draw the line at hockey."

"He has a table-top game," Ellen said. "He's pretty into it."

The hockey set was in the center of Bert's room, on a low stand with two dedicated chairs. One team was the Boston Bruins and the other was the Chicago

Blackhawks. Bert had given every player a name off the NHL rosters, and he announced the action as we played. He kept getting the puck to his center forward, who would ram it into the net before I could find the handle for my goalie.

"Two things this proves," I said, after I lost 10-1. "First, mechanical games are much better than electronic ones. Second, if you don't grow enough to dunk, you can always make it as a play-by-play man. You're amazing."

"Can we go again?" he said.

"We can. In fact we can keep going until your mom drags me out of here."

Bert called into the other room, "Mom, me and Uncle Matt are busy. Please don't bother us."

"And even if she drags me out of here," I said, "I might sneak back in."

We had breakfast together, and on the way to school I told Bert I was leaving today and he started crying.

"You know what?" I said. "You're the best nine-year old I've ever met in my life. It's not even close."

"Are you coming back?" Bert said.

"Either that, or what I'm hoping, you can come out and see *me*. Soon."

"Yeah! Mom, can we?"

"We'll talk about it," Ellen said.

"Right now you have to say goodbye, or you'll be late."

"Bye, Uncle Matt," he said, and he ran over to a friend who was being dropped off, and I was relieved to see them joking around as they disappeared into the school.

"It's a defense mechanism," Ellen said. "That's how he says good-bye to his dad . . . Matty, you okay?"

I didn't say anything.

Ellen said, "Well this visit, it's been good for all of us. Clearly."

After a minute I said, "Okay I'm going to lay this out there. One of those life's too short ones . . . Can you and Bert move to San Francisco?"

"Matty, you have to be real. How would we undertake something of that magnitude?"

I said, "How? . . . You got what, a month, month-and-a-half left of school? Then you pack two suitcases, you get on the fucking plane, and I meet you at the other end. That's how you do it."

"Well you are certainly animated. I didn't see this coming."

"Neither did I. But sometimes, you just have to *do* shit."

"Okay, don't talk about it any further. I won't ignore what you've said, and we have to leave it there right now."

"You and Bert, you can have my apartment. I've got a place to stay."

"Matty, what the hell did I just tell you?"

"I'm just saying."

I had to see about something in Virginia, and it took a week and it sure felt good to be back on the open road.

I decided to drop it down to Highway 40 on the return trip, not quite the deep south but something different.

One observation, as I rolled through Arkansas, Oklahoma and now north Texas: The portions were bigger in the truck stops than off Highway 80, and the food was better.

At a gas station near Amarillo I called Ellen.

"How's the little man?" I said.

"He's fine," she said.

"But what?"

"I talked to him about coming out and visiting. We might."

"Wow . . . that's great news. But for how long?"

"I thought a week would be about right. Then maybe go see Suzanne too."

"Jeeminy Christmas, a week? Just stay."

"No Matty, that's not going to work."

"You know what? At least stay for the summer. Develop a little routine, get a bead on the city. There's day camps up the wazoo that Bert will love. On the weekends I'll take him bodysurfing at Stinson Beach."

"He's not that great a swimmer."

"God damn it . . . Now why is that?"

"He's just never taken to it very well."

"Okay, forget the camps. We'll get him lessons every day, and at night I'll take him to the Family Swim and help him."

"I feel like you're overpowering me here."

"That's because you need to be overpowered . . . I love you though."

"Love you too," Ellen said.

Friday I had lunch at a Coco's in Barstow, and I sat at the counter and watched the short-order chefs work. I remembered a family trip to the Grand Canyon once where we also stopped in Barstow, not at a restaurant but a drive-in, and everyone got slushes.

I remembered it because something went wrong with the slush machine and they all came out funny, and our dad would bring it up over the years and embellish the story.

I was never real close to my dad, but I could picture him on those road trips, getting out of the car whistling, his shirt stuck to his back, and telling everyone to order whatever they wanted, that the price didn't matter.

I missed him now.

#

I said to Stella, “Did you see the thing in the paper, the cop suing everybody?”

Nope, she said. “And I don’t need to hear about it, but you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“In town, I’m talking about.”

“Really? Which one?”

That was a valid question, six or eight officers being the extent of the little police force. You did recognize most of them. “The woman,” I said. “That big gal.”

“Her?” she said.

“I know, right? She’s always smiling, at least when I’ve seen her around. Or was. It said she’s not here anymore.”

Stella said, “She stopped me once for a registration. I was parked coming out of the UPS place, and she was walking in with a package. She noticed my sticker.”

“Okay, so not pulled over then, with the lights and the fanfare.”

“Is there an issue?”

“No, no, however you interpret it’s fine. Bigger issue, it seems to me, she was mailing a package, on duty you’re saying?”

“Okay you just defended the woman. And what’s wrong with that?”

“Everything. She line up, and all?”

“She was getting ready to. I mean last I checked, packages didn’t mail themselves. But we talked a while first.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“Mainly it was Ohio State football. She’s from there.”

I said, “Now you’re either messing with me . . . or I don’t even know.” Stella hated sports. I had to go down to my basement office to watch them.

She said, “The reason it came up, I have that ‘proud parent of a UCLA student’ decal on my window? She said, oh, her team is coming out to play them.”

The decal was from five years ago and referred to Stella’s son Milo, who subsequently dropped out of UCLA and

manages a go-kart track. I couldn't understand why she didn't scrape it off.

“So,” Stella said, “once she told me take care of that registration and let her know--that it was looking more like the honor system--I decided might as well play along, since her attention was diverted.”

“You weren't sure she wasn't still going to nail you with a Fix-It ticket. Kind of like you had to audition your way out of it.”

“You're an asshole, but go ahead think that.”

“Anyhoo,” I said, “you know the lieutenant guy? Who seems to run the show?”

“I do. He has a Slavic name. He's a nice man.”

“Oh. Where'd you meet him at?”

“Starbucks. Craig introduced me.”

“And Craig is who again?”

“Craig is retired from Albertson’s, and he’s working to sustain the urgent care facility. I’m in their email loop.”

I hated when she spoke like that, but I knew who Craig was now. I’d attended a couple town council meetings and the urgent care project had no shot, the guy was an idiot.

I said, “What it is bottom line, the big gal, she’s accusing your lieutenant friend of sexual harassment. There’s other shit added in, the city manager looking the other way, but that was the highlight . . . why you laughing?”

“I don’t know, it’s an odd picture.”

“You’re saying she’s not harassible?”

“You just said that, I didn’t.”

I said, “The scenario in the lawsuit, there’s someone unresponsive on the grass in the plaza. The gal shows up and leans over the person, trying to assist. She smells booze, but that’s beside the point.

Lieutenant guy responds in street clothes,

and leans into the gal while she's hovering over the victim, and he doesn't act good."

"What do you mean by all this leaning in?"

"The lieutenant--according to her anyway--he whispers in her ear from behind to speed it up. Because they need to go somewhere better and talk about that ass."

"Wait . . . her ass?"

"Obviously. Jesus."

"When you say *that* ass, you're not making sense . . . See this is why you need to take more time formulating your thoughts before delivering them. I'm serious Matt."

I said, "I'll keep it in mind. Ohio State crushed UCLA by the way, if that was last year."

"I wouldn't know," she said. "One tidbit I surprised her with, there's a small town out there that hits you over the head

with an Ohio State player when you enter it. There's a big sign."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is before you were in the picture. Someone else and I were driving from Detroit to Roanoke. I'm tempted to say it was Celina? The boyhood home of Jim somebody."

"Tressell?"

"That's what she guessed too, the cop."

"He's the head coach."

"This was an older retired player. I remember his name, only because it connected to something in my book club."

I thought a minute. "Otis?"

"You're not bad . . . Imagine a town basing their identity on a football player."

"I like that. I'm gonna have to google him. Pretty sure Jim Otis played in the pros too. This would have been like early 70's. Rugged dude, a throwback."

“Is that right. Anyway, she didn’t know the answer. Despite making a bunch more guesses. She didn’t want me to tell her either, I could see her working it around as she went to send off the package.”

“I think her name’s Clara, in the lawsuit article. Not a real fan then, you need to have a handle on your school’s history.”

“A rich fan now though maybe, eh?”

“Huh?”

“Those harassment suits always pay off. Name me one that didn’t.”

I couldn’t think of any off hand but that wasn’t the point. She was right, big Clara probably’d be making some serious money here . . . meaning as a little old homeowner, my property taxes would creep up. Stella was living with me rent-free, on the hook for nothing.

I said, “Well since you’re rooting for her so hard, I think I’ll go over to Bill’s for a while.”

She said, “That’s it. Run away when you disagree. Way to be a big boy.” And the laugh she followed it with . . . quite a timbre to it, have to say.

I had a progression when things went south. Which typically didn't start with Bill, but with my bartender Mitch. There was also this palm-reader I knew, Sue-Ann. You handled it.

#

I got cocky, I cheated some people in the real estate business, and a judge in Contra Costa County told me nine months community service--or else I’d be going away for five.

It wasn’t like a Ponzi scheme or mortgage fraud--nothing of that magnitude--but I was selling How To

packages and shortchanging the purchasers.

I got the idea on vacation, in a Starbucks, overhearing these two guys. They were sitting there in board shorts and flip flops but it was clear they were players. The one guy had invented an adjustable orthotic and hit the jackpot it sounded like on late night TV with an infomercial. The other guy seemed to be an investor from back east, working a deal.

I went home and at a Labor Day party in Orinda I told a couple people about it and one of them said “the way you’re carrying on, it sounds like *you* want to do something like that.”

“I’m up to my eyeballs already,” I said. “Plus I’m not sure what I would ever *infomercial*. But thanks.”

“Well it doesn’t have to be a product per se, does it?” some guy’s wife injected. “Maybe you offer a how-to course.”

“Right,” someone said. “Become a guru.”

“I’m down with that,” the wife said. “I’d buy it.”

There was bocce-ball happening on a double court back past the pool, and everyone headed over there, but I liked the ring of guru.

Admittedly I had some momentum, knew my way around the foreclosure game, and could teach others by way of \$677 packages.

So . . . against my better judgment I booked some late night TV myself, and it was surprisingly effective out of the gate, as was a **You Can Buy Houses** billboard I rented on Highway 80 between Vallejo and Fairfield.

The TV part, I did get off on strutting around telling my story to a fake live audience. It was like a drug.

What screwed me was the kicker, to close the \$677 deal. I offered 2 hours of

telephone consultation with either me or one of my ‘staff members’.

Early on I realized that part wasn’t going to work, and I shut down the contact information I’d included with the course. It didn’t seem like that big an issue, because the course was legit, the nuts and bolts from someone who’d been in the trenches, not a bunch of filler like some other gurus threw out there. I firmly believed that one deal, you’d make your money back several times over.

Now I was working the food line, dinner and breakfast 7 days a week at the Fort Mason hostel. I had a little room behind the kitchen.

“Try the O’Brien potatoes, they’re special tonight,” I said.

The young German guy smiled and scooped himself a couple while his girlfriend bypassed the entrees and continued to the salad bar.

“She’s too skinny,” I said to Ruby, the head cook.

Ruby was a tough gal from Oakland, weighed in at probably 250. She said, “Honey, none of ‘em care to listen to you.”

“What, you don’t agree with me?” I said. “The old days, women wanted curves. That was the standard.”

“The doctor says I got to lose a hundred pounds,” Ruby said. “My feet’s swelling up.”

“You heard of Sophia Loren? Before my time of course, but you catch them in the old movies. Or Anita Ekberg? Same deal . . . Now that was your female form.”

“We need more chicken fried steak,” Ruby said.

I went in back and got a fresh tray. It was another Tuesday night, a bunch of months to go.

“So you gonna take the doc’s advice?” I said.

“Already have,” Ruby said. “Joined me a gym.”

“Those never work. You should ride a bike, like I’m considering.”

“White people do that,” she said.

“You make fun of me,” I said, “but sooner or later I’ll break you down, and you’ll get next to me.”

Ruby laughed. “You’re cute. But you a dumb ass.”

The routine was breakfast ended at 8:30, I cleaned up, and was free to leave until dinner prep at 4.

Mostly I walked around. One thing I noticed along the Embarcadero, these guys were riding people up and down on specialized three-wheeler bikes. They called them pedi-cabs. Some charged a flat rate, others worked for tips.

After a couple weeks, with spring in the air, I decided that would be fun. I cornered one of the riders at Justin

Herman Plaza and asked where he got the bike, and the guy said he worked for a company and had no idea. I offered him \$500 for it.

“Tell ‘em it got stolen,” I said.

The guy thought about it and took the money. I pedaled the thing back to the hostel, maneuvered it into my room, went out and got some spray paint and took it outside and painted it a nice lime green.

The next day I parked myself in front of Pier 39 with the other pedi-cab doofuses. I tried to dress neat to stand out, and wore a sport coat from Vegas.

It took an hour before a cop asked to see my license. I said driver’s license or business license . . . but either way I didn’t have one.

“This shit’s all regulated,” the cop said. “But you knew that, right?”

“So I can’t ride anybody around?” I said. “It’d be to their benefit, I know the city pretty well.”

“Yeah, no harm, no foul,” the cop said. “Except it don’t work that way. Can’t charge ‘em, you don’t got the permits.”

I waited for the cop to leave, and two French kids I recognized from the hostel said hello and asked how much an hour ride would be. I said 20 bucks, they hesitated and I said make it ten and they got on.

They wanted to go to Union Square and it was a bitch pedaling up Columbus Avenue. I couldn’t remember the last time I sweated so much. At Broadway I angled over to Stockton, cut through the tunnel, a little tricky with the buses, but there we were.

I was shot. I told the French kids take as much time as they wanted, the meter wouldn’t be running. I dozed off on a bench and a half hour later the kids were back, handing me the 10 bucks, saying they didn’t need the return trip. I said no problem, and to keep the money.

I took Post to Market, turned left on the Embarcadero and around Washington Street a couple flagged me down.

“Do you know Fort Point?” the man asked.

“I do,” I said. “If you mean the one right under the bridge.”

“What would the fare be, please?” the guy said.

“You know what?” I said. “Don’t worry about it, I’m headed that way anyway.” Which was partly true, the hostel was that direction, though a couple miles shy of Fort Point.

It was mostly flat but even so I started cramping on the Marina Green and apologized for having to get off the bike and stretch.

“Oh please do,” the man said. “You’ve been a magnificent guide, incidentally.”

“You certainly have,” the woman said.

I hadn’t really thought about it, but yeah I had to admit, I was giving them a

pretty good show, keeping a running commentary and casually pointing stuff out along the way.

“So very kind of you,” the man said when I dropped them at the gates of the old fort, which I told them dated back to the Civil War.

The man tried to hand me a twenty. I said, “Why don’t you hang onto that actually. This is good for me.”

The man and woman looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and went inside.

A few weeks later I was on the sidelines at Funston Field watching an adult league soccer game. It was a Saturday. An older woman was sitting nearby on a low folding chair.

“You’re a fan of the action?” I said.

“My nephew’s the goal keeper,” she said, pointing him out.

“Well it’s a beautiful sport, we didn’t play it when I was growing up.”

The woman laughed. “I pretend, but I understand little if any of the subtleties.”

“I take that back,” I said. “We played it, but only as punishment, when we didn’t line up right for P.E.”

“I’m Sophia,” she said.

“Matt,” I said.

The whistle blew and the ref yellow-carded a player. In the far corner of the park a Little League baseball game was starting up.

“That’s an interesting contraption,” Sophia said.

“I ride people around,” I said.

“Sometimes they have no idea where they’re going and neither do I. But I enjoy it.”

“I can tell.”

“You can?”

“Yes. My sense is you’re the kind of person who takes pride in their work.”

I felt like saying you don't know the half of it lady, but I said, "I can give you a ride . . . if you like."

Sophia didn't answer. The first half ended and she talked to her nephew and came back. "Okay," she was smiling. "I'll take a chance."

We walked across the grass to Chestnut Street and I helped her get squared away on the back of the bike. "What about your chair?"

"It'll be there when we return," she said. "And if not, then too bad."

I liked her spirit. "So where to?"

"Well . . . I'm thinking that Clay Street and Cherry, that might be perfect."

I was calculating hills. "That where you live?"

"I used to," Sophia said.

I figured if I went down to Van Ness I could circle around, coming up Pacific which shouldn't be too bad. Then maybe Jackson to Presidio to Clay.

It took over an hour, where driving it would take about 6 minutes, but I got her there. The house was a big squared off brick job, with ivy creeping up the front.

“You used to live here, when?” I said.

“Until my husband passed,” she said. “It’s been 8 years.”

“Oh . . . So ring the bell. Have a look around.”

“Do you think . . . that’s appropriate?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be here.”

Sophia returned a couple minutes later looking shook up. “They turned me away,” she said. “It meant nothing to them.”

“That’s sad,” I said. “Pathetic actually . . . People are so caught up in their bullshit.” I looked at my watch. “I’d buy you a drink, except I have to go pretty soon.”

“That’s perfectly fine,” she said. “I can manage. You’ve been wonderful.”

“No, I mean I’ll ride you back to Funston, that’s a given.” I *was* worried now

about building up too much speed on the hills going back down, since the thing only had foot brakes. It was a bit hairy for sure, though Sophia seemed oblivious.

When we passed Fillmore I said, "I can see your chair, all by itself. Still there."

Sophia climbed down, I'm thinking pretty nimble for an older person. "I must tell you," she said, "when I arose this morning, this wasn't how I envisioned the day."

"Well you helped me out too," I said. "I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"I know."

"Whadda you mean, you know? That I'm not ashamed, or you helped me?"

"I know you're struggling with something . . . You can let it go, we have the ability."

"I try, but I can't," I said.

"Well, you're an honest fellow."

"Anyhow . . . give you another ride tomorrow?"

“That would be grand. The beach, perhaps?”

I was sizing up hills again, picturing my options.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said.

#

I still hadn’t gotten there with Tina and was thinking it may not be headed that direction--ever--and would that be so terrible?

We had fun and she laughed at most of my jokes. She had a good appetite, enjoyed ethnic food and was always ready when I picked her up. She could talk books and politics, typically over my head but better than the alternative.

With every other girlfriend either it happened by a certain point or you moved on. This time, in the back seat of Mike’s Ford Explorer on the way to Tahoe, I said to her, “Do you want to break up after this weekend?”

“Whoa, I heard that,” Mike said. “Me too,” Penny said from the other front seat.

“Dude,” Mike said, angling his head around, “what kind of new loose screw you got this time?”

“No it’s fine,” Tina said. “It’s a reasonable request.”

I said, “I don’t believe I requested anything. I asked did you want to, is all.”

“Fuck you,” Mike said. “You put a damper on us, we haven’t even hit Colfax.”

“Honestly,” I said, “I didn’t think you guys could hear me up there. You both have the stuff in your ears.”

“So take it back,” he said. “Let’s start the weekend over.”

“Fine. Teen I’m sorry. I meant it to be funny.”

“Oh--kay,” Penny said.

Tina said, “And that’s how I interpreted it.” She whispered something in my ear . . . and the weekend took on a different feel.

Mike and Penny said they were going across the road to the lake. From the cabin there was no sign of any body of water but the printed *Welcome* card assured you there was a small lake-job back in there if you followed the service road a quarter mile.

Tina said to me, “I do that. I push buttons. Until the tables are turned.” She was closing the curtains.

I started to say: “I think I know what you’re getting at . . . but I may not . . .” and she told me don’t worry about it, and her voice was dreamier . . . and soon enough she was up against the knotty pine dresser waiting, and I figured what are you gonna do, you don’t argue.

In the shower I said, “Have to say, that was more intense than I would have predicted.” Her hair was up and I was soaping her back.

“Nothing personal--but . . . you mean?” she said.

“Right. After that last business, the cabin in Mendocino . . . the bar felt ridiculously high. Not even sure how we got on that topic, but coming home I’m thinking no way now.”

“I didn’t mind the topic. It was entertaining, the way you and Mike presented it.”

“Oh I know you didn’t . . . A friend of mine’s uncle from way back, he pointed out when guys come up short in the anatomy department--which we all do--they love to discuss that shit. It’s in the DNA, he said.”

Tina said, “What an odd correlation.” She was facing me now. “Except?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said, and it was hard to miss the expectant tone, so once again you rolled with it, though this one was admittedly a crapshoot.

Twenty minutes later she was on her way out to find Mike and Penny and that

lake, and I said I'd pass, unless she needed me for protection against bears or something, and she laughed like don't be ridiculous . . . and I couldn't tell for sure if she was laughing *at* me, since round 2 hadn't gone great.

There was however a fresh pie we'd picked up at that stand the other side of Auburn. I gave it the should I or shouldn't I and opened it up and dug in--I was pretty dang ravenous--and it sure tasted good, some fruit foundation to it but I didn't worry about which one.

I fell asleep thumbing through a coffee table book on the railroad system they had up here in the Sierras a hundred years ago, with some great black and white photographs. Until Mike and Penny and Tina came stomping back in.

"You have got," Penny said when she saw the pie a third eaten, "to be kidding me." She had her hands on her hips, I'm

thinking you never know what can hit a nerve with someone.

“Babe, take it easy,” Mike said. “The man got hungry, what do you want, we stranded him.” Winking at me like he was in on some big secret . . . and could Tina have actually said something?

After dinner Tina said it would be fun to go to a casino. Mike said sure, he’d be up for that. I said I was good here but would come along if it made it happen. Penny said she hated casinos. That for one thing her college boyfriend was a degenerate poker player.

Mike said, “Come on, I’ll run us all over to State Line. Crystal Bay. They re-did the old Biltmore nice, if you guys have never been. We’re talking twenty minutes away here.”

“It’s okay,” Tina said. “it was just a suggestion.”

“No, don’t be silly,” Mike said. “We’ll go. Let the party-poopers be.” He gave

Penny a peck on the cheek and grabbed his keys and Tina kind of shrugged and you heard the car start and they were gone.

“One thing I’ll say for the guy,” I said, “he doesn’t screw around, he makes stuff happen. Not the worst quality.”

Penny said, “We haven’t done it for like 2 months.” She was pouring herself a glass of sherry, not asking if I wanted one.

“Dang. Jeez, I assumed . . . you guys so loosey goosey and all . . .”

“That you were the one with the problem? Until earlier?”

“Oh no.”

“You know something, don’t be going all wide-eyed. There aren’t any real secrets.”

I said, “Not even when people keep their mouth shut?”

“You are naive,” she said. And a pause, and her maybe with the look now.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“Except?”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

I said, “And pardon my butting in, the first deal . . . but what’s the problem?”

“Me and Michael? I brought up something, it was dumb, I meant it lightly. He seized on it, and said he lost the urge. Temporarily.”

“Which . . . morphed into a couple months and counting.”

Penny said, “He said he's working on it.”

I said, “Funny, that expression. We were kids he’d lay it on you, same thing.”

“Really? Like when?”

“Okay, like once we were at the Russian River. This was high school. We had these two girls with us, out there in canoes. I remember them being twins.”

“Identical or fraternal?”

“You’re blunting my point. Which is they didn’t look alike at all. Mike and I

decided on the way home we got hosed with that part.”

“Okay you need to be clearer when you tell a story. You established they were twins.”

I figured instead of arguing this petty bullshit, might as well put my hand on her leg, see where that went.

“Now that’s interesting,” Penny said.

I left it there and said, “You know the river at all? Johnson’s Beach?”

“No.”

“Well, we’re talking downstream between Guerneville and Monte Rio. There’s a couple pull outs. One of them, we’re passing by and these red-neckys dudes start making comments about my twin. They had a fire going which I’m guessing you weren’t supposed to be doing.”

“What, she was statuesque or something?” Penny said.

“No, she was overweight. I’m not into body shaming anyone, but really, no way she should have been wearing a bikini.”

“Oh . . . So you guys didn’t ignore it, obviously. Otherwise there’d be no story.”

“Yeah, it got bad, one idiot in particular, and the girl tried to keep it together but then she started crying. I think her name was Alice, but don’t quote me on that, I could be way off . . . Keep in mind we met them *up* there, we didn’t know them.”

“Get to the crux of this please.”

“So Mike and me and the twins, we’ve stopped paddling, we’re bobbing around in place, and I go to Mike, do you want to do anything about this.”

“And he says he's working on it.”

“Right, how’d you guess. Sizing it up. Advancing the story, we drop the two gals on a beach further downriver, tell ‘em relax a few minutes, we’ll be back. They had some picnic tables there, it wasn’t like it was totally remote.”

“Not out of the movie Deliverance.”

“No. But our business, we leave the canoes and walk back. And not through the woods or anything, on the regular road.”

“So Mike had a plan by this point.”

“Not at all. It was like let’s take a closer look at these dipshits, see if it’s worth a confrontation. Anyhoo . . . that’s when Mike surprised me. They recognize us, and before anything gets going Mike picks up a piece of metal, something they were using to tend the fire. He hits the guy in the face with it, the main one trash-talking my twin.”

“This is Mike? . . . Are you joking?”

“I know. I’d never seen that side of him. Even now I wonder was that like a psychotic break, was he temporarily possessed by some alien force, what.”

“Well was the man okay? I mean did anyone fight back?”

“Oh no. The guy was fucked, like he might have lost an eye, I’m not kidding. We

walked back down the road, the twins were gone, maybe they thought we'd abandoned them, who knows."

"But you left the canoes."

"Good point, maybe they didn't think that. For whatever reason they're gone. Mike and I wait a while--like an hour--and then we paddle back upriver to where we rented 'em. Then we get in the car and drive home . . . That was another adventure. We get to the toll plaza, the Golden Gate Bridge, and neither of us has any cash left. Back in those days before Fast Track, that happened, they'd write down your information and send you a bill."

"So why are you telling me this? The last part."

"I'm just saying, it was one more thing piled on that day."

Penny said, "I thought the punch line was going to be: they tracked you guys down because you couldn't pay."

“What, you mean the bridge? The license plate?”

‘Unh-huh. Or the address you apparently had to give them.’

I said. “This was San Francisco now. Where Mike clocked the guy, you had an hour and a half distance on it. But fine, maybe we got a little lucky.”

“I don’t know,” Penny said. “I’ve been watching too many TV series obviously.”

“I hear you. They jump on every mistake, connect the dots. Lot of it wouldn’t happen that way, but beefs up the storyline.”

There was noise outside. Mike and Tina were coming up the stairs, laughing about something. I figured I should take my hand off Penny’s leg, though she was admittedly up a little tight against me by now.

“Hey gang,” Mike said.

“Babe let me ask you something,” Penny said. “Matt was recounting an

episode? You striking someone with a fireplace implement? You're not serious."

"Gosh," Tina said.

"Oh yeah," Mike said. "More like a tire iron though. It was interesting, the thing was damn hot, which I didn't expect, I could barely hold it, but I'd committed to it, so . . ."

"I never thought of that," I said. "That it was sort of in the fire."

"Right," Mike said. "Listen . . . Tina's not feeling that great, it turns out. She asked would it be okay if I drop her back home."

"Home . . . as in San Rafael?" Penny said.

"Yeah," Mike said. "Then I'll be back."

"That's, quite a curveball," Penny said. "But suit yourselves."

I said to Tina, "Meaning you picked up, like a medical condition, from the casino experience?"

“No we didn’t make it,” she said.
“There was a checkpoint. We ended up forgoing our plan.”

“Near King’s Beach,” Mike said. “First I thought it was night road construction. So we line up like all the other sheep. When we get close I see it’s a DUI set-up. I wasn’t entirely sure I’d be okay, so I made a U-turn.”

“Jeez,” I said. “Don’t they watch for guys doing that?”

Mike nodded. “This dude runs us down up the road. It took a while but we got out of it.”

“I expressed that I was under the weather,” Tina said, “and it had become increasingly difficult to wait.”

“But you were doing okay?” I said.

“Oh yes, I was fine.”

“I see,” Penny said. “But then that triggered the not feeling well for real.”

“Must have been the introduction of the thought,” I said. “Like when you see

someone throw up, next thing it feels like you have to too.”

“Absolutely could have been,” Tina said.

“Anyways,” Mike said. “If there’s nothing else, we’re off.”

“Safe travels,” Penny said.

“Hey I’ll give you a call,” I said to Tina.

When they were gone I re-positioned my hand on Penny. “Guy’s a trooper,” I said. “Lots of driving today.”

She said, “Wow then. Did you ever follow up, make sure the person was all right? I mean really didn’t lose an eye or something.”

“No, what for?” I said. “You would have?”

“I think so,” she said. “Do you have any others?”

“Stories?”

“Unh-huh.”

“I can find one or two probably . . .
Not sure how interesting they are.”

“They’ll be okay,” she said.

Chapter Six

I said to Al, “Would I be out of line to conclude I don’t like people?”

“Not in the least,” Al said.

We were having cocktails on the deck. Way out there you could see a sliver of ocean peaking through the fog, if you looked hard. The fact was it was dang chilly here in September, which you didn’t want to admit, Al and I both wearing shorts and t-shirts, and drinking mai-tais and slinging around the bullshit like we were in Tahiti.

“I go to a wedding down in the city,” I said. “Guy I sort of knew, from my old neighborhood in Terra Linda.”

“Wait,” Al said, “this is recent? Biscuit and I’ve been passing by every day for weeks, your vehicle’s always in the driveway.”

“You missed one. Actually you didn’t, someone picked me up. You gonna keep interrupting?”

Biscuit looked up. “The way you went high at the end,” Al said, “she thinks you’re offering a t-r-e-a-t.”

“Well let’s take care of that,” I said. “Come on girl.” And I went in the kitchen and gave her a couple mini milk bones that I’d made sure to stock up on. Al had been one of those difficult gentlemen that you thought never in a million years . . . but I couldn’t resist saying hi to Biscuit when I was fiddling around in the front yard and they came by . . . and who would have thunk Al became my best friend out here.

Which wasn't saying much, since the pool of potential friends was limited. It was a planned neighborhood designed for second-home weekend people. That changed the last few years, there were more full-timers on account of more doofuses

working remotely, but it was still pretty dead.

Either way Al was a good human, we connected. I said, “Guy I’m referring to, he went on to play college football. Louisiana Tech.”

“That’s not bad,” Al said. “I would’ve heard of him?”

“No. He didn’t get in the games. Should have gone to a JC first, developed a little more. He lit it up though in high school, I’ll give him that.”

“But you only sort of knew him?”

“Yeah, he was older, I knew his sister. That wasn’t exactly what started the altercation.”

Al said, “Okay I gotta hear this. I notice Amanda’s coming this way though . . . see her, the one with the little barbells? She likes to old-fashioned power-walk.”

“Have to admit,” I said.

“Yeah, she’s all right. We’ve been banging each other the last couple nights . . . you mind if I invite her in?”

“Jesus. You gotta be so blunt? And I thought you told me, that last business, you were done with relationships.”

“I am . . . Babe! Come up here a second.”

Amanda played it coy like he was interrupting something important, but Al waited her out and she came inside.

The first thing you couldn’t help notice, despite the baggy sweatshirt, was her sizable endowment, and I shook hands and said hello and tried to keep my eyes moving . . . and she said anything’s fine but a tropical drink did look refreshing if there was any more, and I screwed it up this time as I was blending hers--way too much orange curacao and not enough rum--but she seemed good.

Biscuit was on Amanda’s lap right away out on the deck. “How come I don’t

get that?" I said. "You guys've only been screwing around a few days."

"C'mon man, Jeez," Al said, "take it easy."

"Yeah right," I said. "Amanda, I haven't seen you before."

She said, "You mean what's my deal in a nutshell?"

"Sure. Or not's fine too."

Al said, "You've picked up a bit of an edge, dude."

"He's colorful," Amanda said, "we can use that. To answer your earlier question, my lap's softer than yours."

"O-kay," Al said. "But putting it together--Matty, does seem to me you've been in a ornery mood since the porn flick thing didn't work."

"Oh really," Amanda said.

"We're letting it all hang out, is that it," I said. "For your information--wrong, I'm glad it didn't go anywhere."

Al said, “Matt’s ex-girlfriend, she shows up and informs him she’s making anonymous porno shorts. That it pays substantially better than art modeling.”

“How *does* it work, the pay scale?” Amanda said. “I was always curious.”

“Some guy explained it to me one time,” I said, “in a bar in Manhattan Beach. He claimed he was in the industry, that they shot them in one of those multi-million dollar houses right on the Strand. Bottom line, the women earn a third more than the men.”

“Do you think he really was?” Amanda said.

“In the business? Maybe. He was pissed off enough to be convincing, that they still owed him for a couple scenes.”

“What did your friend look like?” she said.

“Not my friend. Like a beach lifeguard.”

“All righty,” Al said. “Let’s leave it right there . . . point about Matt’s actual friend, she rakes a lot of it in through Patreon. Or their version of it.”

“What does anonymous mean?”
Amanda said.

“No face,” I said. “What, you’re not telling me the wheels are turning.”

“I’m feeling the booze,” Al said,
“anyone want another.”

“Sure,” I said, “surprise us. Things can’t deteriorate much further.”

Al went in my kitchen and you heard him banging around and Amanda said,
“You’re good with it, living here full-time?”

“I get that,” I said. “My stock answer is you better rent something out here first, make sure.”

“I know. My in-laws? They built a house in Dillon Beach. Then they spent all their time driving to Petaluma. They created reasons.”

I said yep. “Your consecutive days without sun, it messes with you. You were married . . . or are?”

“Am.”

“Ah.”

Al was back with a pitcher of something that was a light greenish color, not appetizing, but it did the job. He said, “Matty’s friend, she was an entrepreneur. She wanted him to enter the industry. Join the fun, at the minimum.”

“And how so, exactly?” Amanda said.

“Participate in a couple limited flicks with her, while she was stuck out here on furlough,” I said. “What I was starting to tell Al about when you came along--more interesting--a confrontation I had down the city.”

“To clear it up first,” Al said, “Matt balked.”

“You weren’t attracted to her any more?” Amanda said. “Or you couldn’t perform under pressure?”

“You’re a tough broad,” I said. “And I use that word sarcastically, but still . . . probably a combination, I won’t deny it.”

“She got mad at him subsequently,” Al said.

“I can see it, she felt slighted,” Amanda said, “more than the business part.”

“She was using you man,” Al said. “You not playing along exposed her true colors.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said.

“Relationships can be knotty,” Amanda said. Biscuit was busy checking out something under the railing, so Amanda slid over onto Al’s lap.

Al said, “I punched a guy on account of one once, something stupid, but the good thing, I thought that got it out of my system.”

“One and done,” I said. “Possibly makes sense.”

“Yeah but then not too long after, some guy gives me the finger and passes me over the double yellow line.”

“Uh-oh,” Amanda said.

“Spare us the gory details,” I said. “Did the cops get involved?”

“No. Thankfully. But that was when I checked into therapy.”

“For real?” Amanda said. “Like a facility?”

“No. Just a weekly rotation in someone’s office. A bi-product being, have to say, she was quite voluptuous.”

“And you selected her by accident naturally,” Amanda said.

“I did, swear to God.”

“Voluptuous how?” I said.

“You know,” Al said, using his hands.

“Well,” I said, “since we’re in anything-goes mode, you have consistent taste.”

Amanda said nothing personal but she did have to use the little girls' room.

“Dog, you’re kinda killing me here,” Al said. “Not sure if it’s okay or not.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to undercut you. I ever tell you about the guy, drove the tourist boats to Alcatraz, I was best man at his wedding?”

“Go ahead. A different wedding now I take it.”

“Oh yeah, not that city thing where the idiot takes off his vest. This one was years ago.”

“He took off his suit vest to fight you? That’s pretty funny.”

“Why? Frees up your arms more.”

Amanda was back. “I heard part of that. More macho-man talk.”

“Point I was making,” I said, “Al here wanted to clarify I’m not putting any moves on you, or intending to. The guy where I was best man, that didn’t last long. Like a couple years. But then I’d run into the wife different places and my friend was suspicious we had something going.”

“What difference would it make?” Al said.

“Right. A, we didn’t, but b, it’s not his business anymore.”

“I can see it though,” Amanda said, “there’s a residual carryover. Destructive behavior could ensue.”

Al and I looked at each other. “What are you talking about?” Al said.

“Nah that’s okay,” I said, “same way my best-man guy saw it. It wrecked our friendship. I hit *Like* on his postings once in a while on Instagram.”

“What happened to the wife?” Amanda said.

“That’s the other thing. She moved to Reykjavik. The chump was still suspicious.”

“What’s that, Iceland?” Al said.

“Yeah, she met an Armenian guy playing cricket at a country club in Ojai. Far as I know they’re still there.”

“This shit’s too weird,” Al said.

Amanda said, “Did you know actually, Iceland . . . their weather is milder than Minneapolis?”

“I heard that too,” I said. “Bullshit. What happened with the therapist?”

“Well first thing I instruct her,” Al said, “don’t bring me back to the womb, none of that. Once I laid the groundwork it worked out pretty good.”

“That mean you hooked up with her?” Amanda said.

“I introduced the concept. Of course she was professional.”

“Do you think she might have wanted to?” I said. “When you stripped it all away? Reason I ask, I had a female therapist once too.”

“You boys have checkered pasts,” Amanda said.

“This was different,” I said. “I found a diary of my mom’s, she’d been schtupping around on my dad quite a bit.”

Which was not quite the way it went down. The opposite actually, but so what.

Al said, "Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"What did the therapist say?"

Amanda said.

"It didn't go great. She got nervous when I said I was going to find a particular one of my mom's affair-ees and ask some questions. I think she may have called someone on me."

"What were you going to ask the guy?" Al said.

"Wait--you mean like the police?"

Amanda said.

"Yeah well, someone shows up my house. No big thing in the end."

"Did you reach out to the guy?" Al said.

"I did. I tracked him down at a celebrity golf tournament."

"You're not gonna say he *was* one," Al said.

“No, he owned a car dealership that helped sponsor the deal. Stand-up guy actually, didn’t shy away from my questions.”

“And?” Amanda said.

“He said she was a great lay. His words. Referring to my mom.”

“Ooh,” Al said.

“So . . . that was it?” Amanda said.

“It was. It helped me get past the issue. I was tempted to go back to the therapist and tell her that’s how it worked.”

“Like a field assignment then,”
Amanda said.

“Could have gone the other way too,”
Al said.

“Is she still . . . around? Your mom?”
Amanda said.

“Oh yeah. A condo complex in Florida. She still has it going on.”

“Well,” Al said. “Anyone hungry?”

“What are you, taking over?” I said. Al was back in the kitchen trying to figure it out.

Amanda said, “I should go. I just meant to say hi.”

“Stick around. Please.”

“Really?”

“I was asking Al,” I said, “is it okay not to like people. He said sure.”

She said, “I tend not to like them either.”

“But?”

“But I don’t know . . . What happened in the city?”

“I knew this guy’s wife growing up. Just casually one summer. We were working the snack bar at the skate place. So you know how weddings are, and eventually we’re out there dancing one together. The guy charges across the floor, goes nuts.”

“Wait . . . this is the groom?”

“No, it’s his cousin’s wedding. They restrain him and I figure I better take off. Problem was, I had a ride, this gal that lives in Forestville. So there’s a park across the street and I go over there and hang out.”

“I thought you said it was the guy’s sister you knew.” Al was back. He had a chef’s apron on and was holding a tongs.

“You must be telepathic,” I said, “because after a while the sister comes over to the park.”

“So good, you had company,” Amanda said.

“We smoke a joint, why not. She lays it on me that they’re all seriously afraid of this guy, her own brother. That there have been incidents.”

“The ex-college quarterback,” Al said.

“So I say--not thinking about it too hard--why not hire someone to do something about it? She looks at me big-eyed, and pretty soon she says well it’s been real, and goes back across to the thing.”

Al said, "Except . . . you're wondering if you planted a seed . . . that could take."

"I am. I won't lie, I keep checking the local news section of the Chronicle."

"Nah, don't worry about it," he said.

"No?"

"What will be will be," Amanda said.

"One time I was helping watch an elderly woman? We're talking extremely old. There's these big fizzy tablets they use to soak their dentures in, which I didn't know. So the woman asks for one so she can eat it, and dumb me, I go along, thinking it's an antacid or something."

"That's not good," Al said.

"So of course she swallows it whole and chokes on it. I'm debating should I try the Heimlich Maneuver, but I'm afraid of destroying what's left of her rib cage, plus her organs. Her sister hears the commotion--this gal's about 90 herself--sizes up the situation, takes a couple deep breaths and says, what will be will be."

“So what happened?” I said.

“She didn’t make it.”

“Jeez,” Al said.

“What are you going to do,” Amanda said.

Al said, “The sister down in the city . . . how is she?”

“You mean . . . always been reasonably attractive I guess.”

“So . . .” he said. “Let ‘em do their thing, and if and when it plays out, look her up, see if you can, you know, connect with her.”

“Whoa.”

“Complete the cycle,” Al said.

“You think?”

“May as well cap it off, I would agree,” Amanda said.

“Is *that* what you would do,” I said.

She said, “You know something? I’m out of here.”

Al got up too. "Dude, we can entertain your needy stories up to a point. But this is bullshit."

"See ya," I said.

Chapter Seven

The plane was taxiing to the gate, everything wet out there.

“We’re a couple idiots,” I said. “Who goes to Portland for a tennis vacation?”

“It’s a camp, don’t forget,” Wendy said. “You saw the website, they have 12 indoor courts. Let’s don’t spoil it before it even starts. Please.”

This was why I didn’t particularly care for Wendy. She talked me into stuff, and her judgment was awful, and if the thing went south it was me that screwed it up.

We checked into a motel. It was the Northwest District, pleasant enough though a little over-populated. Traffic both

directions and a steady hum, which the room didn't do a great job blocking out.

"Not sure I should ask," I said, "but how'd you maneuver this place?"

"Again, we need to lighten up and take a deep breath," Wendy said. "It's part of the package deal. There were a few lodging options, this was a nice fit . . . Can we just have a good time, is that too much to ask?"

I said, "I'm going downstairs."

I checked out the pool, a reasonable sized kidney-shaped job now being pelted by raindrops. No jacuzzi spa that could I see, which was a basic foundation of any vacation. I thumbed through the tourist pamphlets in the office, and the clerk was perfectly friendly, but the curry smell coming from a back room drove me out of there.

Wendy had showered and was sitting on her towel on the edge of the bed, talking on the phone, not wearing anything. *House*

Hunters was on, and without looking away from the TV Wendy raised a finger, telling me not to interrupt her. It was clear from the conversation she was chatting with her sister Hazel, which happened pretty much every day.

I stood there and took a little inventory. It was interesting, she never sat around naked ordinarily. I had to admit her figure was impressive, and she got looks on the street when she wore certain outfits.

There was a regional manager I worked with once, when we were doing a reno on a Carl's Junior . . . spectacular body but with an odd facial expression that just didn't work. You could make a similar case for Wendy.

We had dinner at a bistro we'd gotten from the in-flight magazine, and walked around. The rain had stopped and the sky was clear and crisp and there were patches of lights in the distance. I said, "Just to

satisfy my own curiosity . . . you enjoy it when other guys check you out?”

Wendy crinkled up her face. “For God sake’s,” she said. “You’ve asked me this before.”

“I have?”

“What exactly is your problem, Matt?”

“I don’t think it’s a problem. I’d be intrigued if the answer was yes, is all.”

“Okay . . . the honest truth? I love it . . . Sometimes I even want to fuck the person who’s staring at me.”

“Wow . . . You’re not being serious though.”

“What do you think? That’s what you want to hear, so there you have it . . . What you need, and I mean it, is to get yourself out of the gutter. You’ll go further if you do.”

“Really . . . Well hey, I work hard, in case you weren’t aware of it . . . Didn’t realize I have to watch what I think or talk

about on my own time.” I wasn’t exactly at a high point but I’d taken over a guy’s plumbing and heating business, two employees, though one of them, a really good worker, was an illegal from Central America, which Wendy didn’t approve of. She was an executive recruiter, on the road 10 days a month, and made quite a bit more than me.

“Not your time, *our* time,” she said. “Thanks a lot, if that’s how you see it.”

I put my arm around her and she half-responded and I suggested we forget a cab and walk back, maybe stop for a nightcap along the way. Wendy said that would sound okay, if we didn’t have to get up early for the tennis camp.

“Jesus,” I said, “we’re going to hit a few balls around. Some guy saying ‘Nice job Mr. Grady, just a little looser in the grip if you can’ . . . We’re not winning Wimbledon.”

“This program has more to it,” she said. “Wellness sessions, yoga, nutrition. Why come all the way here if we’re not prepared?”

I didn’t argue. We were back at the motel in 10 minutes, and before she took off her coat Wendy had pulled out her phone and was texting.

I was thirsty. I said I was going to look for some club soda, and I’d be back in a few minutes.

There was more action a couple streets away. Noisy bars and lively restaurants with people eating at tables on the sidewalk under these tall heating lamps. Another block down was Lovejoy Street which had a nice vibe, and I went into Starbucks and ordered an espresso.

It was crowded, full of 20-something kids, most of them on devices, and there was nowhere to sit, so I stood at the little counter where you added milk and sugar to

your concoction. There was part of a newspaper laying around, the sports section, and I started reading the front page.

Someone said, “You’re wondering the same thing as me, right?”

I looked up and a young gal was smiling. Her hair was streaked funny, and one arm was tattooed from her wrist to her shoulder, while the other one wasn’t.

“Sorry, what same thing?” I said.

“Did we improve ourselves enough in the off-season. The Mariners . . . I mean we start off last year, we have the best record. Then after the All Star Game we collapse.”

I was trying to keep my teams and years straight. I hadn't thought of it but obviously in Portland they rooted for Seattle teams. I said, “Hold on, you made the playoffs though, didn’t you?”

“Technically yes, but we limped in . . . You’re not a Mariners fan then.”

I said I wasn't, sorry about that, I was from out of town.

"That's cool," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"It's . . . kind of an adult tennis camp that my friend found. She's pretty good, I'm just a hacker. The thought was to combine it with a visit to sunny Oregon."

"Well that would be more LA," the girl said. "Better yet Palm Springs, and even better, Arizona. Spring training's going on."

"Something I always wanted to do," I said.

"Oh, spring training is so much fun!" she said. "My dad used to take us every year for a while . . . Then my parents split up."

"Ah Jeez. Sorry."

"It's fine . . . Well, enjoy your tennis thing." And she grabbed her stuff and took off.

I put the newspaper into a recycling basket.

One summer I umpired American Legion ball in the east bay. The level of play was strong. You had rabid parents in the stands, and one game a father followed me to the parking lot, challenging a call on a tag play at the plate. The guy put his hand on me, and out of fear more than anything else, I swung at him.

He was an older father, had probably been drinking, and it took a while for him to get up, and by that time several parents and players were watching, including the guy's son, who was crying. Not too long afterward I ran into the son and the mom at a hardware store, and I wanted to say something but I didn't, and I kicked myself for it, even though what would you say?

I rooted for the kid, trying to keep an eye on his progress. After high school he went out of state, to play at a JC in Texas, but I later heard there was a drug situation

on a road trip and he got thrown off the team and expelled.

I wasn't sure why I thought of all this now, but it was what it was.

I checked my phone. Nothing direct at this hour . . . but Southwest had a late connecting deal . . . Salt Lake and then Phoenix.

I ordered a large black coffee to go, added a gooey cinnamon bun for good measure, went outside, and waited for the Uber driver.

#

The guy disappeared for a minute and when he came back he was carrying a fireplace log, and my first reaction was, so they do allow fireplaces in new construction?

Or, was the guy holding something made for pellet stoves, that fit the energy-efficient criteria.

But no . . . it looked pretty organic and had old-fashioned bark and some yellow fibrous stuff clinging to it, and I was trying to figure out exactly what was going on when the guy reared back and hit me in the head with the log.

Later on I remembered falling backward, and then that was about it.

I didn't remember the neighbors starting to gather, the ambulance arriving or the squad car pulling up as they were loading me in.

I remembered waking up when the ambulance was nearing the side entrance to the hospital, because there was a speed bump you had to go over . . . and why the heck would they have one of those?

They wheeled me in, there were people in scrubs waiting, they transferred me to a table, which hurt like hell, and they cut off my shirt and started checking things out.

Even not feeling real good I wondered, Gee, you can't take a little longer and unbutton the thing and not wreck it?

Then they went to work on the side of my forehead, there was bleeding that hadn't stopped, and they hauled me away for a CAT scan and brought me back and stitched him up.

I increasingly decided I wasn't going to die. The ER doc and nurses gave me the impression I might at first. They were in scramble, move-quick mode, the doctor calling out stuff to the others.

Now I was in a side cubicle off the main ER, and I figured this was a temporary intensive care type deal, since you were right where they could watch you, no door, and even the side wall had a big glass window.

After a half hour in that little room I felt things stabilizing in the brain . . . to an extent.

I could remember back to being a kid, and I could mostly remember moving to Manhattan Beach, but my short term memory was dicey, which scared me.

I remembered debating ringing that guy's doorbell, but nothing after that until I woke up bouncing over the speed bump.

The worst break in the chain--I had no idea, until I asked a nurse--where was I currently. What town, region, part of the country . . . and I wasn't clear on where I'd come here *from*.

Eventually the doctor came in. "Mr. Williams, I didn't introduce myself, I'm Dr. Wolfe," the guy said. "Our evaluation, besides the laceration, is you've sustained a class 4 concussion."

"Oh," I said. The Holmes part wasn't quite making sense, but I put it together . . . that they asked me my name and I must have given them my old friend Ray's.

"So," the doctor said, "considering the lingering severity of the head injury,

and the fact that it resulted from an apparent assault, we're going to admit you overnight."

"Okay hold on there," I said. "If I could get a couple things straight . . . Did I speak to the police?"

"You might have, at the scene. We have no information on that."

"How about here?"

"Generally, an incident like this, an officer will take a statement from you within the hour."

"What hour?"

The doctor said, "You'll be here a while, so no worries. May I ask why you're so concerned?"

"Well," I said. "I can't remember what happened anyway, I'm mostly going by what you told me . . . so what would I be able to add for the police?"

"I wouldn't stress over that, Mr. Holmes," he said. "It's routine."

“Ah . . . let me ask this, then. What’s my first name?”

The doctor didn’t react funny. He dealt with this stuff, no doubt. “Ken,” he said.

I said, “Okay good then . . . At least my noggin, it’s got that part right.”

“Indeed,” the doc said. “And again, rest is the optimum remedy, so don’t concern yourself with anything beyond that scope.”

“You admit me . . . that means a room and so on.”

“Of course. You’ll be right upstairs. The neurologist will be by tomorrow, and you’ll be re-evaluated.”

I said, “Well thank you. Would you have another shirt?”

“We really don’t, I’m sorry. But you can talk to our in-patient services coordinator when it is deemed appropriate to facilitate your release.”

I said, “You guys always talk like that?”

The doc at least had a sense of humor. “Depends on the med school. Some more formal than others.”

“Where’d you go?”

“I went to Vanderbilt.”

“Which is where--Nashville?”

“You got it.”

“Let me ask you this then . . . how is it living down there?”

The doctor said, “I can see you’re a spirited individual. My answer would be complicated, and would take more time than we have right now.”

“I’m looking to reinvent myself,” I said. “What happens though, I gotta keep *re-reinventing* from the last effort . . . if that makes sense.”

“Not at all,” the doctor said. “We’ll check on you in an hour.”

“Sounds good.” I tried my best to size things up.

First of all, it was interesting--and a good idea--that I apparently combined two of my favorite people's names, Ray's and Ken's . . . as opposed to laying a Matt Grady on them.

Even though here you were on the theoretically innocent receiving end of something . . . why up the radar quotient?

My mind was starting to un-fog a little more. Could they have checked my ID in the ambulance? Taken my wallet out of my pants pocket, looked inside, put it back?

I decided that was unlikely because this doc kept calling me the other name. Maybe there was some civil rights deal where they couldn't pull your ID without your permission . . . though probably not . . . and that'd be another discussion.

Bottom line . . . the thing now, would be to get the *fuck* out of here . . . if only I felt a little more up for it.

The doc was good for his word, he did check back every hour, but a couple things I was worried about happened.

First, a petite gal with a Texas accent shows up with a clipboard and a folder full of forms. I volunteered my name, Ken Holmes, and she began the process. I said, “Beyond that, I can’t give you anything, but I’m sure I’ll have it all straight tomorrow, can you come back then?”

“That’s not ideal,” the woman said, “but we at least need your insurance carrier tonight.”

I told her to make it 90 minutes in that case, that I was doing the brain exercises the doctor gave me and should be clearer on all of it.

Obviously the lady knew when I was full of baloney but she picked up the paperwork and left.

A few minutes later a policeman comes in. An older guy, uniform, no hat, not looking in a good mood, like he’d just

completed his shift and was getting ready to go home and then this pops up.

“Sorry for your situation,” the officer said, no formalities, getting right to it.

“Well I appreciate you coming by,” I lied.

“Now we have a Robert Jordan,” the cop said, flipping open a notepad, “involved in a confrontation with you. Not much to go on past that, other than what a resident said they saw.”

“What’d they see?” I said.

“How bout you tell me.”

“If I had it clear upstairs in my frontal lobe I would,” I said. “I believe I was looking for an address . . . and I might of rang the wrong bell. What’d that guy hit me with anyway?”

“So that you do remember,” the cop said. “A piece of wood.”

“Either way . . . let’s just wrap it up, how about . . . I’m not interested in pursuing anything. So can we do that?”

“No,” the cop said. “There was an alleged assault. I’m required to make a report. Otherwise, I got better places to be wiping my ass at.” Though I was pretty sure the guy didn’t have to make any report if I wasn’t pressing charges, but he had his attitude.

“But see?” I said. “That’s what I was thinking when you walked in . . . this guy’s already pissed off, he’s had enough for one day.”

“Well you’re a genius then . . . You got some ID there pal?”

I said, “Nah, not on me, no.”

The guy stopped with the pad and gave me his full attention. He said, “You some kind of prick now? I ain’t got time for this.”

And of course in the old days of police work a guy with a chip on his shoulder would make sure no one was looking, close a curtain if they had one, and stand the other guy up and make his point.

I was thinking, the big picture, that was the best way to conduct police work. A little force, when someone who should have been cooperating wasn't. Yeah, there'd be mistakes made and some people jerked around unfairly . . . but you'd solve more crimes.

Right now my concern was how *not* to cooperate.

I said, "Welp, I feel bad you made the trip. No harm, no foul though. Does that make sense?"

"No," the cop said, putting his notebook away. "I'm rolling it over to my lieutenant. His name's Selby. He'll be in touch. You'll find out, he's not as patient a man as I am."

They never bothered taking my trousers off when they treated me and when the cop left I checked the pockets, which I should have done before, but wasn't thinking great.

Back to back inside my wallet were two drivers' licenses. Matthew Grady on one, and Jeez, Jeffrey Masters the other--and dang, some guy really did do a job--not remembering who that guy was, who obviously faked the second ID for me--but you couldn't tell them apart.

In my other pocket was a bus ticket, Reno to Spokane, Washington.

Ooh boy. Now what would that be all about?

Meanwhile the wall clock in the cubicle sure wasn't wasn't very hi tech, and it was pissing me off because you heard a click when the hands moved.

The doctor showed up again and with a nurse, and they took my blood pressure and vital signs . . . and something else occurred to me.

"Doc, let me ask you this," I said, after they'd made notes on my chart, and of course a handheld device was in play now,

the nurse typing God knows what into that, and she finished and left the room.

“Certainly,” the doctor said.

“Okay, well . . . how am I overall? I mean pretty good shape and everything?”

“Excuse me?”

“No, I mean ignoring my head thingamajig . . . if I walked in here cold and you examined me . . . what would you have?”

“That’s a strange concern right now, I must admit,” the doctor said. “But your basics seem fine. Especially for a patient who’s endured a significant trauma.”

“Okay fair enough, but what do we have beyond the basics?”

“Mr. Holmes, I’m afraid you’ll need to be more specific.”

“Okay here’s the deal . . . A lab in San Francisco death-sentenced me a while back. . . which was supposedly a stage-4 deal, and grim.”

“I see,” the doc said. “And you’ve been undergoing treatment?”

“Nah. They couldn’t come up with one victim like me, who they cured with the treatment they wanted to hammer me with . . . So I said screw that bullshit . . . Sorry about my language.”

“Uh-huh,” the doctor said. “Well naturally we’d need more information.”

“You think I’m full of crap, don’t you?”

The doctor didn’t say anything.

I said, “My doc back then, he’s a friend of mine I grew up with. He had a voluptuous receptionist I was pretty sure he was banging on the side, and that strained our relationship. Once he conveyed my news, I never went back.”

I knew I was talking funny, letting it fly from the hip . . . and figuring they shot me up with multiple meds before I came to. But it was good to get some feedback from this guy.

He said, “What you point to is why we recommend against engaging practitioners who you have an outside association with.”

“Fine,” I said, “ignoring that--do I look to you like a guy on the way out?”

“Head injuries are tricky,” the doctor said, “I’m going to level with you there. We’re just scratching the surface, I’m afraid, of understanding the long term residuals. At the moment, you appear stable and relatively coherent.”

“Forget the *head* business,” I said, “could someone have fouled up my sample? Looked into the wrong microscope? Got distracted by a text message when they’re entering my name into a data bank . . . and mixed me up with someone *else*?”

“It can happen,” the doctor said. “We’re all human. If you’re concerned--and you really are not concocting this--your test sequence can be easily repeated.”

“Yeah . . . so I’ve heard,” I said, and I said thanks and the guy left.

So, putting it together . . . I'd had a rudimentary physical tonight. I was confident by now I was out of the woods, that someone *had* fucked up in the medical chain . . . but nothing jumping out moving the needle haywire was still good to hear.

I was rolling it around, could you simply get up--a little wobbly admittedly--and walk out of here . . . but before I could commit himself to the concept two orderlies appeared with a new doctor, and the doc said they were officially admitting me now and moving me to the third floor, and to take it easy.

Everyone kept telling me to rest, like a broken record . . . but wasn't there something I'd heard, when you have a concussion you try to stay awake?

There were two beds, the other one empty, and a nurse or assistant nurse came in--that was another thing, you couldn't tell what anyone *was* in this place. The orderlies were wearing the same scrubs as

the doctors, but maybe that was the idea, keep you confused so you give up and don't act difficult.

The nurse or assistant was cute, bubbly personality, big mop of blonde hair piled up high on her head.

As she was straightening out the pillows and showing me how to adjust the bed and work the TV changer I said, "I'm gonna say something, and you tell me if I'm wrong . . . your name is Kay, and you have rosy cheeks."

Kay smiled and said, "That's very perceptive of you Mr. Holmes. You read my name tag well."

"How'd I figure out the cheeks?"

"That would be a mystery," she said.

"Because my cognitive abilities, they're supposed to be impaired. But this just shows, I'm fine."

Kay kept going about her business and said, "Well you seem like a person who

wouldn't get into a fight. What happened to you?"

I said, "Are you asking me from a medical standpoint? Or just from the couch, unofficially, like someone watching Dr. Phil?"

"The second one," Kay said.

"So . . . let me out of here, and I'll buy you dinner and tell you."

"Very funny."

I said, "What you're saying is . . . that might make sense, except it's breakfast time at the moment . . . The answer to your question, I don't know what happened."

"See then? That's why we need to keep an eye on you." She wiggled her finger, pretend-scolding me.

"How about this then?" I said. "We go out the back door, down the emergency stairwell, we get in your car and you drive me to southern California . . . What would you charge me to do that?"

Kay said, "You're a nut."

“You just tell ‘em you had a little situation, and you needed a few days off, spur of the moment . . . How about two thousand dollars?”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

“Make it three. Take you about 17 hours total, there and back. Since I have it straight now, we're in Reno.”

“I must say,” she said, “this discussion, it would be considered an atypical interaction with a patient.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“Four.”

“This is outrageous,” Kay said. “And I can’t believe you’re half serious.”

You could tell the wheels were at least turning, and on some level she was addressing the possibility.

“What kind of car do you have?” I said.

“None of your business,” she said, and I enjoyed this side surfacing.

I said, "Because I might up my price, depending how comfortable the ride would be."

"You're very strange."

"You know how they conduct auctions?" I said. "Though not as much that way any more, they've pasteurized the spirit out of them now . . . I went to a real estate auction, condos that didn't sell and got repossessed?"

"And your point?"

"The auctioneer, he didn't put on any act. That used to be the best part. The: *Do I hear TWO, diddy-diddy* . . . a good auction presentation is an art form, like a top-notch horse race announcer when they're thundering down the stretch."

"Hmm," Kay said.

"What I'm getting to," I said, "at the end, the *going once, going twice* . . . *Sold.*"

"They've gotten rid of that part too?"

"No, that's still there. So here's your chance . . . Five thousand . . . Going

once . . . going twice . . . oh, sorry, time's up."

"I can't think it over at least?" Kay said.

"No. You gotta act quick, when an opportunity presents itself . . . Keep that in mind in the future, from a guy who's lived a little bit. I'm not joking."

"You don't look that old."

"I'll spot you," I said, "just tell me how to get out of here, where I'd be causing the least disruption."

Kay waited for more, and I kept my mouth shut and waited too.

She said, "You're serious, aren't you? Something tells me you were serious before too."

"Indeed. That part, you blew."

"Mr. Holmes . . . let me ask you this . . ."

"Call me Ken."

"Ken, is it you're worried, someone . . . might be looking for you?"

I hadn't thought of that angle, but this was good. I said, "That's the way it works, yeah. Unfinished business."

"Well Gosh," she said, "are you sure?"

"No I'm not," I said. "But I have a bad feeling . . . This IV, can you pull it out, for starters?"

Kay took a moment and said, "I'm sorry, I can't help you with that."

"Okay thanks anyway, you're a good sport," I said, and she was near the door, and I said, "You happen to have an extra set of scrubs or something?"

And Kay said she didn't . . . but as she was leaving the room she added over her shoulder that they kept them in the closet past the water fountain . . . and to be sure and get some rest, she'd check back in an hour.

A few minutes later I was down the hall and into the nearest stairwell, and I'd gotten the dang IV out of my forearm no problem, I'd been overthinking it, and I

had the scrubs on, which were at least an improvement over the hospital gown they'd forced on me . . . no idea where my trousers went after they moved me upstairs, but I had my shoes . . . and I'd held onto my wallet, so what more did you need really?

When you got to the bottom of the stairs you could exit on the ground level or go another flight down to the parking garage.

That seemed like a good option, keep going . . . and what it let you do was walk up the ramp, nice and civilized, if a little awkward, and then you were on the street, not having to cross the hospital grounds in full view of anyone to get there.

The only obstacle was the parking attendant, likely not used to seeing too many humans walking the ramp, but I gave the guy a smile and little salute like we knew each other, and the guy reacted okay, and then I was in the middle of the street you fed into, Staggs Boulevard, making

sure I didn't get hit by a car since it wasn't that light out yet--and Jeez, wouldn't that be something.

#

When I signed up for this internet dating thing, I didn't expect to be sitting across the table from a three-hundred-pounder in Pocatello, Idaho, but that's what was happening.

Virginia picked up a fry and told me she was glad I'd come out. "It must have taken you, what, nine-and-a-half, ten hours?" she said.

"Thirteen," I said. "Though I could have cut off forty-five minutes apparently, heading north out of Wells, risking my life on an old two-lane highway."

Virginia said, "Yes, 93, that would put you in Twin, and then Poky the back way. That's how everyone comes . . . still, thirteen, that seems long."

“Yeah, well, I stopped a bunch of times, what can I say.”

“Did you enjoy any of the stops?”

“Jesus. I guess . . . as much as you can, considering there wasn’t a whole lot to work with.”

“Which ones?”

“Criminy . . . Well, there was this one Wendy’s on I-15 . . . Not just the folks eating in the place but the kids behind the counter, all of ‘em were super-friendly . . . You come back out in the parking lot and you think you’re in a Disney technicolor movie, everything’s so clean and fresh, the lush farmland and snowcaps right there.”

“That’s LDS,” Virginia said.

“Huh?”

“Mormons. I’m one of them, supposed to be. I got out of it, thank God.”

I finished the club sandwich and wiped my fingers. “Okay let me ask you something--that frankly--would more than

piss a lot of guys off in this situation . . .
 Why the different picture?”

Virginia looked out the window onto Center Street. “I know. I’m not very attractive. That’s fine.”

“That’s beside the point,” I said, not meaning to put it exactly that way, but too bad. “We’re talking eight hundred miles here.”

“You’re saying you were entirely misled? I thought we had a very warm and candid conversation on the phone.”

“I mean Holy Mackerel . . . whose photo was that, anyway?”

“I have no idea, someone off the internet, who I felt could represent me nicely.”

“Well that’s just great.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

It was a simple old-fashioned restaurant, and there wasn’t all that much room in the booth. I remembered an incident one time at a diner in Hackensack,

New Jersey, where a heavy woman couldn't get out of the booth after she finished her meal, and the fire department had to come and un-bolt the table.

Virginia said, "Did you really play minor league baseball?"

"You know what? Let's don't turn this around."

"What was it, A-ball, rookie ball, double A . . . what?"

"Okay, it was semi-pro."

"Cause my brother-in-law Tim played, in the Brewers' system, and my ex and I, we used to drive down to spring training."

"Good for you."

"And Tim, and all of them--they had a certain look, a way about 'em, that I'm not seeing in you."

I said, "What happened to your ex?"

Virginia said, "Oh boy, what didn't happen . . . if you'd like to . . . have dinner later, or something . . . I'll get into it."

I was distracted now, thinking, could I salvage the trip, maybe drive to Jackson Hole, or circle back through Boise, see what that was about. “Come again?” I said.

“You look like your picture,” she said, “which I do appreciate.”

“Well it’s been real,” I said, picking up the check.

“Where are you staying? . . . Or are you.”

“Down the street, at the mom and pop place.” Which I had last night, but I couldn’t take it so I moved this morning to the Super 8 that was up the hill off the interstate.

Virginia got in her car, which wasn’t all that easy, I noted, and before she closed the door she said, “Thank you for lunch. And I’m sorry if I disappointed you.”

I didn’t say anything, I just gave her a long look and let it ride.

I felt marginally better after a swim and a hot tub and a nap, and I asked the young guy working the front desk of the Super 8 if there was a joint where someone like me might go to socialize.

The guy said there weren't many options, but to try a place in Chubbuck that had karaoke.

This dame had been a piece of work. But I had only myself to blame. I'd listened to Jennifer, who gave haircuts out of her house, saying that her brother in Florida had found an online match after his girlfriend dumped him, and they were going on three years.

I had been an idiot for not at least keeping it local, which would have minimized the collateral damage. You meet up with a three-hundred pounder in, say Sacramento, it's not the end of the world, maybe you stop off at a Rivercats game on the way home. But letting yourself get

duped in Idaho, that was something else again.

Yeah, I might have stretched the truth here and there on my profile--the baseball technically wasn't semi-pro, it had been a Thursday night league--but who didn't?

Deducting half your body weight off your photo though, come on.

For an Idaho bar, there was a lot less country music being performed by the karaoke competitors than I would have thought. It was mostly contemporary pop tunes with a few oldies. Occasionally a performer would send one out to someone, either in the audience or somewhere else.

My favorite competitor was a tall red-haired woman named Dawn. She was slightly flat the whole way through, but she was having fun up there on the little stage and moved nicely to the beat.

I didn't see any guy waiting for Dawn when she came back to the bar, so I figured

why not, and went over and told her she was entertaining.

“Ooh,” Dawn said, and smiled. “That must mean the singing part wasn’t that great then.”

“I’m not sure about that,” I said.

“Fair enough . . . So how’s the quality tonight, so far, in your experience?”

“I don’t have any experience. I normally try to avoid karaoke.”

“I get it,” Dawn said. “You’re here on business, just passing through, or what?”

“Yeah, killing time. I made an error of judgment, which is costing me now.”

“Mystery man,” she said.

“You don’t want to know.”

“No? . . . So what do you do?”

“That I took a week off from to be here? Plumbing and heating.” Which was unfortunately true, that was my entry back into the real world following my enforced community service episode.

“Oh,” Dawn said. “Well . . . I have a toilet that’s running, and a shower that leaks. Does that qualify?”

“Very funny.”

“Do you . . . suppose you could take a look?”

“Tonight?”

“Sure, why not?”

I had a hunch she really did want me to check out the repairs, and probably nothing more, though she was tough to read. Still, I was wide awake from my nap, and couldn’t think of anywhere in particular I needed to be.

Dawn said, “I’ll put on some tea.”

The house was a 1950’s-style brick ranch on a wide street near the college campus. The place had some charm but it was beat up. I said, “Can I sit down for a few minutes? Or do you want me to get started?”

“Please,” Dawn said, pulling out a kitchen chair. A teenage kid appeared and opened the refrigerator.

“Oh hi honey,” Dawn said. “Andy, this is--I’m sorry, what was your name again?”

“It’s not important,” I said.

“Mom, what happened to the chocolate milk?” Andy said.

“I got some tools in the trunk,” I said. “Would you have a flashlight?”

“I’ll see,” Dawn said.

“You’re a repairman?” Andy said.

“I’m not supposed to be. I’m on vacation, but your mom said things were leaking.”

It wasn’t the right way to do it, but for now, I bent the float rod downwards just a bit, which lowered the water level in the tank and stopped it from running. The shower needed a new hot water seat, which would have to be picked up.

“That’s okay then,” Dawn said. “I at least know what it is now.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow and take care of it.”

“Really? You would?”

“I’m not thrilled to be, but I have my pride, once I start a job.”

Andy was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “So what happened?” he said, “You and my mom hooked up, but then she jammed you and made you work?”

“Andy . . . !”

“No, that’s a reasonable question,” I said. “Your mom and I barely know each other though, so it wasn’t like that.”

Andy laughed and Dawn glared at him.

“So what time’s good in the morning,” I said.

“Okay let’s see, it’s Saturday, I’m on at six, home at three.”

“She’s a waitress,” Andy said.

“Honey, can you let him in? Say around ten?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it, I’ll wait until you’re off.”

“It’s okay,” Andy said.

They’d renovated the rooms at the Super 8 and I slept the best I had in a while, barely moving a muscle until the sun woke me up. Out the window you could see the freeway, but beyond that the Bannock Mountains and the Portneuf Valley stretching what felt like a hundred miles.

Yesterday had been a weird one for sure, starting with Virginia, and nothing was going to happen with Dawn, but I felt good doing the right thing and taking care of her leaks.

Andy opened the door, though it took a while. I said, “Too early. I knew that was going happen.”

He didn’t say anything and I could hear him clanging around in the kitchen as

I took care of the shower, and then fixed the toilet the right way.

“Tell your mom I put a new valve in the tank. Better technology, no need to mess around with float balls anymore.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her,” Andy said.

I had my tools packed up and was at the door. This was a good kid. It was wrong to ask, but I did anyway. “So what happened to your dad, and stuff?”

“He lives in St. Louis,” Andy said. “He got remarried.”

I regretted asking the question.

“It’s okay,” Andy said. “Do you have any kids?”

“Me? No I don’t.”

“You have a California license plate.”

“Yeah. I live in Santa Rosa.”

“My mom brings home a lot of guys,” Andy said.

I put my tool bag down and tried to come up something to say. Wanting to tell the kid, that’s got to be a shit deal, but try

not to blame your mom. What I said was,
“You play any sports?”

“Well, wrestling just ended. I wasn’t
very good and I’m not going to do it again.
Baseball’s starting up, I’m on JV’s.”

“What do you play?”

“Third. Sometimes left.”

“That’s good,” I said. “There any
games yet?”

Andy checked his phone. “The first
one . . . we got Minico, the 24th, it looks
like. At home.”

“That’s what . . . two weeks from
Thursday?”

“Something like that.”

I took a minute.

“Does it bother you when people
watch? I had trouble with that for a while,
when I played.”

“What people? You mean my mom?”

“I was thinking . . . maybe me.”

“Wow,” Andy said. “You’ll still be on
vacation then?”

“There’s a chance,” I said.

I took a long walk through downtown and a couple miles up Yellowstone which gave me some room to think.

When I got back to the hotel I asked the young guy at the desk if there was a long term discount and the guy said there was a 30-day rate, and I said I’d take it.

That night I called my boss at home, telling him I was going to need more time off. The boss asked how much more, and I said I wasn’t sure, and the boss said fine, take an extra week, but if that doesn’t work, find another job.

I hung up and stretched out and began flipping channels. I had to admit, they put out a nice spread in the morning in the lobby, you could even make your own waffles, and I was already looking forward to it.

Virginia said, “This is so much fun.”

“I’m surprised you wanted to sit behind the plate though,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“That’s the only place. You can pick up the pitches.”

“I always like it down the line. I don’t like looking through the screen.”

“Is that your friend? Forty-four?”

“It is . . . Pretty amazing thing, that was my high school number too. Basketball. He said he’d try to get it.”

“How sweet,” Virginia said. “That almost makes me cry, actually.”

“Well,” I said, “there’s another game tomorrow, and a double-header on Saturday . . . I’m planning to be at all three.”

“I am too,” Virginia said.

Chapter THREE

I said to the woman, who I knew by now as Polly, “Welp. I think we got it right. At least I hope.”

“We may not have,” Polly said.

“But?”

“You still seem convinced there’s a but,” she said.

This was getting weird, and I figured whatever. It was rough enough wasting three days on a jury, you didn’t need to clarify anything now, much less argue. Bottom line, we’d let the guy go.

We were around the corner from the courthouse in the designated lot. I thought about it yes or no--and said, “That’s my car.”

“So?” Polly said.

“So we’re done. It’s been real.”

“You’re *not* going to ask me to get a bite then. I was building up to should I risk it.”

“Jeez. I was building up to, do I want to get bossed around.”

Polly said, “You’re kinda strange.”
Standing there.

I said, “Okay I’m getting in. When I look to my right as I’m backing out--which as you can see it’s a bit tight with that pole--you’re either there or not.”

“You’re strange *and* an ass,” she said, but she got in.

I said, “My dad used to play with a guy, can’t remember his name, I think Marty something. He was colorful.”

“Excuse me, but you’re comparing that to this?” Polly said. We were in an Irish pub called the *Harp In* and the Australian Open tennis was on.

“My dad’s guy,” I said, “he had this procedure on his serve. He’d get his arms

gyrating like a couple vertical pistons, and then he'd wiggle his hips. This is all before the toss went up."

Polly said, "I like how he wiggles his hips better." Looking at the tv, some tall skinny lefthander with an eastern European name having just fired off an ace.

"Nah, see, you're mixed up. Fine, the result just then was good, but these guys, it's all about an economy of motion."

"Open-minded women notice wiggles," she said, "even if chauvinist pigs don't."

"Whoa Nellie," I said, convinced I should have trusted my original instincts and gotten the hell out of there nice and simple.

Polly said, "When you asked the judge to re-read the particular part of the testimony, what on earth was that? We're all rolling our eyes. You could tell, obviously, and you seemed to relish it."

What happened was, with the jurors deadlocked like a bunch of idiots, I figured I had the right to get testimony read back, what was the big deal.

I said, “It wasn’t the judge, it was the court clerk who re-delivered it. A judge isn’t going to stoop to that level.”

“Listen to yourself,” she said. “Out of a dozen individuals we had to sit there and listen to, it was interesting you picked that part.”

“Uh-huh. And you think you might be overreacting, just a tad? . . . Meanwhile, little distance on it now, pretty brutal actually how they pin you in there, when all’s you’re doing is your civic duty. The bad guy almost has more rights.”

Polly was watching the tennis again, the players having switched sides, the other one serving, a nice looking dark-skinned guy I’d place from Spain or Argentina. “You agree?” I said.

“Well,” she said, “it’s amusing you call him the bad guy now. Since we unanimously decided he wasn’t. Eventually.” She pulled out her phone and started tapping around and I hoped I was off the hook on the read-back critique. Polly put the phone away and said, “Or *was* it unanimous?”

“It probably was,” I said. “What, you feel some of them came around simply to conclude matters? Against their better instincts?”

“Likely so. Especially since it was clear you and the African-American gentlemen Rico weren’t going to budge, even if we drove a Mack truck over you . . . I didn’t think much of the one cop though. That I will give you.”

“The third one?”

“The second one. Please don’t fool with me, I’m not in the mood. And you’re not very funny, I’m learning.”

I was thinking if I'm that bad what are you still doing here . . . but there she was, signaling the bartender for another. It was admittedly a comfortable place, so her sticking around may have nothing to do with me. There was an old-fashioned fireplace going and other tv's spread around, one of them featuring a rugby match that was drawing a lot bigger crowd than the dumb tennis.

I said, "The women's matches, I can sometimes get into. Depending who's playing."

Polly managed a slight smile. "You're all over the place. And still an ass."

"The third cop," I said, "I had an encounter with the guy one time."

Polly considered it. "That officer made the most sense. The second, as I say, his tone didn't ring true, not to mention his timeline . . . and even the first, he was a bit mechanical, like they may have propped him up."

“The first was a rookie cop. That’s how he’s taught, guy was going by the book, disseminating his information. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Perhaps . . . but clearly you dangled your loose end to get me to ask about it, so hey, go for it if it makes you feel better.”

In my conscious mind anyway, I hadn’t thought about sleeping with Polly when we’d sort of hit it off in the little vending machines hallway halfway through the trial. She’d been carrying on about a hike she took in Mendocino on newly preserved coastal land. I peppered her with a few questions and decided she might be fun to have a drink with when this thing mercifully got wrapped up.

Now, hard to pinpoint, but her laying on the sarcasm--I was starting to feel it just a bit.

“Fine, since you ask,” I said, “That guy gave me a ticket once.”

“How come I should have known.”
Playing it cool, but I had her attention.

“A non-moving violation, but the circumstances pissed me off. I was parked in front of--you know that real estate office on Center Street, right? Next to the deli? There was road construction going on, they were laying a new sewer line, and I couldn't angle into the spot quite tight enough. A parallel parking deal.”

“So he did the right thing, citing you. Get over it.”

“He only cited me because the construction screwed him up too, with all the backup, and he wanted to blame someone. So he picked me, even though my sticking out a couple extra inches had nothing to do with the traffic issue.”

“Human nature,” Polly said.

“I came out of the real estate office as he's putting the ticket under my wiper and I calmly point out my vehicle is not the problem.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything, he finished his business and started getting back in the squad car. So I added, if he’s having a bad day--such as his girlfriend didn’t cook his eggs right--don’t take it out on ordinary citizens minding their own business.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So the mope, he does an about-face and comes back and cuffs me. It was all for show. There was nothing he could charge me with. But he made me stand there on the sidewalk, paraded me around, getting a kick out of it--and in no rush, with the road work grinding forward progress essentially to a halt.”

Polly said, “Well Gee, hard to argue that logic. Why fight traffic?”

“Then naturally I’m greeted by a few people I know. One of them a client. Not a normal, hey howya doing type thing, as it unfolded.”

“Wait. You do something where you have clients?”

“Used to . . . Make a long story short . . .”

“Please. Spare me the suspense.”

“A couple years later I join a fitness place. The one up on Nave Drive, it’s changed names a few times. But you know, like all the doofuses after Christmas, the 15 pound spare tire, the resolution . . . So I’m on a machine, leaning back, I got a personal trainer holding a clipboard going through the motions, the free session when you’re new. She gets me changing positions to the left, and on the machine next to me, grunting up a storm but not accomplishing much, is the cop . . . Ron, I found out was his name.”

“Wow. Did he recognize you?”

“Not even remotely. You need to understand, guy this full of himself, there’s no room for anyone else. And no, he didn’t recognize me during the trial either.”

“Hold on now,” she said, “that form they make us fill out--where they list the witnesses and ask if we know any of them?”

“Yeah?”

“That makes it sound like . . . you lied under oath.”

“Whatever. I could always say I didn’t know his last name. Which I did happen to find out, asking around at the front desk--Jorgensen--but that’s irrelevant.”

Polly said, “Hmm. So is that the punch line? You paid him back today by dismissing the case? So he doesn’t get credit for an arrest, or however they reward them?”

“Sure, why not,” I said.

“Uh-oh, there’s more.”

“A bit. Nothing earth-shattering, if that’s what you’re looking for, but I managed to drop a barbell on his mouth.”

Polly had swung 90 degrees sideways on her barstool. “You have got to be kidding.” The tall lefty was still firing off

aces but the Australian Open was off the radar at the moment.

“It was around the time Trump was whining about the size of his inauguration crowd . . . And don’t worry, I won’t ask about your personal politics . . . By this point I have Ron’s routine down, that on the even days--Monday, Wednesday, Friday--he does upper body work, and finishes it off with those bench presses where they lay on their back.”

“You can ask about my politics, I don’t mind,” she said.

“Anyways, guys spot other guys when they’re benching. Meaning the lifter is typically okay on his own the first 6, 7 reps . . . but if he’s going for 10, those last three can be dicey without a little assistance. You can picture the drill, I’m sure, the other guy standing there holding part of the weight--or at least ready to hold it.”

Polly didn’t say anything.

“Needless to say,” I said, “I worked my way into the loop. What I did, to make things cleaner--and have the idiot trusting me--I spotted him a session first, correctly, prior to the one where I let the thing slip . . . Ron had stepped it up too, was trying to bench over 3 that day--3 hundred--which he shouldn’t have been attempting, the fitness level wasn’t there.”

Polly took a minute. “You’re saying,” she said, “it was his own fault then.”

“Exactly right. We all need to understand our limitations.”

“And stay within the parameters.”

“Uh-huh . . . But on that other thing, that you’re hung up on why I had ‘em re-read the testimony from?”

“Okay let’s hold on here. What happened with Ron exactly?”

“What was the upshot? Well, my guess is he was sore for a while. A fair amount of blood and so forth. May have lost a few teeth in the process . . . It was

hard to tell, when he was on the witness stand, were any of those current ones replacements.”

“And . . . he never bothered you? Followed up in any way?”

“Nah. After all, it was an accident . . . Though at that point it did seem reasonable to stop going to the gym. The truth is, I can fool myself with those machines, but nothing replaces an actual sport.”

Polly considered it. “You know something, is this the liquor talking? Or did this really happen?”

“It did,” I said. “I’m not proud of it. Necessarily . . . What it sort of is, a buddy of mine, he got a terminal diagnosis. Fortunately thank God it was false, they screwed something up in the lab, or otherwise in the medical chain. But when he was out of the woods he announced it was a wakeup call--not to let shit go.”

“I see. So you embraced the same principle.”

“Somewhat, yeah. Made sense . . . But listen, once and for all on that other deal, what was wrong with the read-back of the defendant’s friend’s statement? I saw it as relevant to the mental state of the perp. The alleged perp.”

“Right,” Polly said. “Experiences at strip clubs--replete with colorful descriptions--are solid grounds for making legal determinations.”

“We’re laymen, don’t forget,” I said. “Every little piece of the puzzle helps.”

A friendly waitress asked if we were hungry yet, or still good with the drinks. I said thanks, we’d let her know in a minute.

“So?” I said to Polly.

“What’d you have in mind?”

“Well--and it normally wouldn’t be the case--but I have a little place at Bodega Bay. I’ve been renting it out, but right now it’s free.”

“Is that so . . . You’re not in that fancy neighborhood? With the golf course that doesn’t belong?”

“Yeah. Not that fancy. The good thing about the golf course, it could be worse. Less housing this way.”

“Ah. And what were you going to ask me about out there, as opposed to here?”

This was a slight curve ball, and I tried to come up with something semi-logical without stumbling around. “Well, work, for one,” I said. “Your job history and such. I’m guessing that could take a while.”

“Curious choice,” she said. “How about you start us off then?”

“Sure, if you insist . . . Well, the best job I ever had hands-down was being a bike messenger. Every day was different, no one looking over your shoulder, your walkie-talkie crackling with activity. Plus all that exercise. You were in a sweat all day long.”

“Sounds interesting,” Polly said. “I’ve had a few, but if you pin me down, the all-

around best would have been the dog walker position, in Bel Air, for a sports agent. There were perks.”

“Gee. Such as?”

“Well, a bi-product was I got to meet star athletes. Some college ones, but mainly NBA and NFL players. No need to throw out names but you’ve probably heard of a couple of them . . . Of course this was a few years back.”

“You . . . met these folks?” I said. “Or . . . it went beyond.”

“Went beyond. You know, now and then.”

I took some time. “Actually then, no need to go all the way out to Bodega Bay. Here’s fine, for continuing the discussion.”

“You’re not telling me,” Polly said, “you’re intimidated by my past.”

“Me? Not at *all* . . . See now you’re projecting.”

“Really,” she said. “I was debating it internally--is this guy going to try

something--and am I okay with it if he does.”

“Hmm. And the verdict?”

“Inconclusive.”

“Yeah, well,” I said.

Chapter Eight

I'd picked up a foreclosed house and moved in. Thing needed work, but it was on a big lot, plenty of room in back, always a bonus.

My problem was an asshole neighbor named Frank.

What started it was I wanted to build a simple paddle tennis court on the property. But the setback distance wasn't quite enough, so you needed a variance. Which was routine, so long as no neighbors within a quarter mile radius objected.

There was plenty of space between houses, and everyone was fine with it except Frank.

I tried reasoning with the guy over the phone, but that didn't work. Frank was apparently one of those people who

enjoyed telling you no. So on a Sunday afternoon I had them over, Frank and his wife Bridget, and I had someone off Craigslist helping me and we fed them tri-tip and fresh dungeness crab and cocktails, and I showed them where the court would be, throwing on a little video demonstration of paddle tennis to hopefully convince them it was harmless.

Frank said fine, but what about pickleball?

We were sitting there with a couple of brandies. “Well, what about it?” I said. “That’s a dumb game.”

Frank wasn’t stupid unfortunately, and knew his racquet sports. “What I’m seeing through the smokescreen,” he said, “is you’re sticking in a pickleball court. You say 44 by 20, those are the same dimensions. Pickleball’s too loud.”

“No,” I said. “What we’re playing is technically called *spec tennis* . . . Different

paddles, ball, scoring, everything. You saw the YouTube, it's quiet."

"I can't approve a pickleball court in the neighborhood," he said.

Frank had on a straw hat that pro golfers wear. It had a stitched white band with a custom logo. I wanted to grab the brim and angle Frank up out of the chair and toward an imaginary body of water and kick him in the ass into it.

Instead I said, "Okay then, my hole card . . . I'd like to invite you and Bridget--and your kids, whenever they're around--to use the court any time. Even at night, since we'll have lights."

"My son's in Wyoming, the daughter's in Rhode Island," Frank said. "But unlimited use? That's really something."

"It'd be my pleasure," I lied. "So . . . are we good then? That alleviate your concerns?"

“Lemme sleep on it overnight,” he said. “And thanks for the food and drink. Everything was quality.”

When they were gone the Craigslist gal helping me said, “How did it go? You clinched it, the business with your court?”

I said, “Not necessarily, but he liked your cooking. And my choice in booze. What’d that thing run me, would you say? Leaving your fee aside.”

“Why, you didn’t enjoy yourself?” she said. “I actually found the wife quite charming. We may get together, actually. Go to a museum.”

“Well whoopee,” I said.

That put the final damper on the afternoon, and she cleaned up and got out of there pretty quick.

I didn’t hear back from Frank the next day like I’d hoped, so I gave it until Tuesday afternoon and called him.

“Sorry there pal,” he said. “It’s not gonna fly.”

“Oh boy,” I said. “Bad news, to say the least . . . Is there . . . anything else, at all, I can do?”

“You tell me,” he said.

I had a safe deposit box at the bank in town. I’d stuck 40 grand in there when I set it up, as a rainy day fund. Things weren’t going as well lately, and it was currently at 18.

I let Frank’s ‘You tell me’ linger for about five minutes and went to the bank, and then straight to the prick’s house.

Bridget opened the door. “How nice to see you again, Matthew,” she said.

“Same here. I guess I missed Frank then. I thought he worked at home.”

“He went for a run,” she said, “but he’ll be back within the hour. Won’t you please come in?”

I hadn’t focused much on Bridget until now. She was petite, and kind of

perky. I thought about a movie I saw once, or maybe it was a TV show or book, but the gist of it was the main guy gets back at the other guy by making it with his wife.

I said fine but just for a second. Jazz music was playing, which I wasn't sure why but surprised me, and a motley looking dog came up on the couch and licked my hands. "Your decor's all over the place," I said.

Bridget laughed. "Which is how I like it."

"I guess Frank does too," I said. "He's an interesting guy."

She excused herself, and a blender fired up in the kitchen and she brought out margaritas on a tray with a silver bowl of nuts.

"Do you think so?" she said. "That my husband's an interesting guy? . . . I'm just playing, of course."

I said, "Maybe you're not. Anyhow, where's he jog?"

“You know, the trail, the bike path. I join him occasionally and walk. I like where it opens up and you can see the sailboats.”

“Unh. And when you’re not joining him, you ever . . . stray . . . with other people? Or what.”

Bridget shifted in her chair, but kept her cool. She said, “My, we’re angry today . . . Otherwise I’d say I beg your pardon.”

“I am in a bad mood,” I said.
“Separately, it’s a fair enough question.”

“My sense is, this pertains to your project, does it not?”

“Yeah. I’m planning to do almost all the work myself . . . It’s what I’d rather be doing, period. Pushing people’s money around, flipping properties, you want to know the truth, it’s kinda the pits.”

“Frank can be difficult,” Bridget said.
“He treats me well though.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said, drinking up.
“I’ve got a gift for him, which I’ll leave with

you. This doesn't work, I guess I'll just have to kill him."

I handed her the old briefcase I came in with, told her I didn't need it back, and got out of there.

Frank signed off on the project and I built the court. There was a party that spring to celebrate the opening, along with a little neighborhood spec tennis tournament, and Frank and Bridget were invited but didn't come.

Everything was fine until July, when I come home one day and see that a building inspector stopped by and left a card. I called the guy the next morning, I actually knew him a little bit from a Masonic Lodge deal but that didn't matter. Frank had made a new complaint about the court, that the angle of the lights extended too far off the property, and that pickleball was indeed being played on it.

“This mope,” I said, “can’t even see my house from his. He’s up the hill, where it turns.”

“I hear you,” the inspector, Conrad, said. “When they file ‘em we have to address ‘em though. It’s the nature of the beast.”

“Okay fine. The lights are exactly how I submitted them. You can check the permit paperwork. On the other thing, we play mini tennis, not pickleball, different animal . . . So that should wrap it up, no?”

“What can I say, you may have to go with dimmer bulbs,” Conrad said. “And I’ll be honest, I passed by your house on a Sunday, nothing to do with work, just coming back from dropping off the wife, and you could definitely hear the thumps.”

I wondered, would I have to make a return trip to the safe deposit box, and fork over another ten grand to this douchebag now as well?

“More like little pops,” I said. “Less noisy than even regular tennis, for sure.”

“Could be,” he said, “but right now you have a code violation. We require that you refrain from using your facility or turning on the lights until it is resolved.”

I said: “Is that right.”

“Come again?”

“I said, you sorry piece of shit,” I said, and Conrad hung up.

“It’s more difficult than one would think,” Bridget said. “I keep squibbing it off the end of the paddle.”

“You’re doing good,” I said. “Just remember, the sweet spot is closer to your body than you’re probably used to.”

We were on the court, middle of the day, and I was giving her a lesson. It was hot out. Frank was playing golf with a client.

We took a water break. I had built the courtside bench, out of reclaimed cypress, and Bridgit ran her hand over it.

“Beautiful work,” she said, “it must weigh a ton.”

“Well I like to over- rather under-build stuff,” I said. “But here’s where we’re at . . . how do I get him to mind his own business?”

“You’re asking me?” she said. “What, is that what this lesson’s about? The notion that I can soften him up?”

“Yeah, sell him on it, that was my thought,” I said. “Without necessarily having to mention this little practice session . . . Stupid idea, now that it’s unfolding.”

“I actually thought you had something else in mind, luring me over here,” she said.

“Oh. You’d be into that?”

“I don’t know . . . Just curious, you can take time off whenever you want? I thought you had an office in the city.”

“I called in sick today.”

Bridget said, “Wow, this court then, it means a lot, clearly . . . So much stress though . . . Can’t you just cool the jets for a while, and play over at the high school or something?”

I said, “Now that’s an idea . . . Too bad you don’t have the backbone to tell your husband to shove those same jets up his entitled gold-plated rear end.”

“Here’s your paddle back,” she said. “It’s been real.”

I lived most of my life in the Bay Area but had never been to downtown Brisbane, which is where Denny said to meet him, at Strang’s Bar. Denny and I knew each other since 6th grade. Denny became a San Francisco fireman, didn’t last long before going out on one of those bullshit

disabilities that they pull, and eventually hung up a shingle as a PI. Business was supposedly good.

“I don’t just want to kill the guy,” I was saying, “I want to do it right, where he knows what’s happening . . . Not like in the movies where someone shoots a guy in the back of the head, with no build-up.”

“All right take it easy,” Denny said. “This is your emotions talking, which I get. But some stupid tennis court? It ain’t even close to being worth it.”

“Either I have to move to Florida, start fresh, or this guy can’t be walking around anymore. How it is right now, I can’t get past it.”

“Why Florida?”

“I don’t know, I like it there, the idea.”

“Y’ever been?”

“Not physically . . . but the beaches, the pace, they agree with me. You don’t need a sweater.”

“Florida’s way over-rated,” Denny said. “Me and a colleague, we spent three weeks there working a missing person’s. Gal from up your neck of the woods in fact.”

“Jeez. Did you find her?”

“Oh yeah, mid-life crisis type deal, no big thing . . . Like I was saying though, I saw more Florida than I needed to.”

“Okay anyhow . . .” I said. “What about my thing?”

“I can have someone speak to him, is one way,” Denny said. “Could backfire on you though, this scum sounding like one of those educated guys who knows his rights.”

“So what’s another way?”

“Off the record? . . . Some type accident is probably your best bet . . . Though those aren’t nearly as clean as they used to be.”

“What’s that mean?”

“The forensics they got now, the security cameras all over the place? Not to

mention cell phones obviously? . . . You gotta be a lot more careful with accidents these days, is what I'm telling you."

Denny ordered another beer and made a playful comment to the female bartender about her outfit, and she smiled and went along with it. I said I was good.

Of the two bikes hanging in the garage the mountain bike was a no-brainer over the road bike, but I hated to use it since it had been expensive and it still did a nice job getting me up into the hills when I wanted a good workout.

Last time I was in L.A. it seemed half the beach boardwalk was riding these peculiar-looking, extra-fat-tire cruisers that looked like they weighed about 200 pounds, and I roamed around online. Target had two models. I liked the simple no-gear one better but decided the 7-speed version would be more effective, since you could get it going fast quicker. I drove to

the San Rafael store and picked one up and it just barely fit in the trunk of the vehicle with the seats down.

Now the thing to do was establish Frank's running schedule. Or . . . why not check the trail on the way home? It was twenty to five, same time frame as when I'd dropped off the ten grand and the motherfucker was out jogging, so you never know.

There were a dozen cars in the trailhead parking lot, two of them Range Rovers and I was pretty sure the navy blue one was Frank's. I took the bike out, adjusted the seat, and circled around the parking lot, thinking what to do.

Soon enough, Frank shows up, walking. He sees me and says, "Hey there pal."

I didn't say anything.

"My cool down," Frank said. "The last two hundred yards. At my age you have to pay attention to these things . . . What's

that, a regular bicycle? It looks like half a motorcycle.”

“I’m going to run you over with it,” I said, “and see what happens. Since killing you is not a realistic option.”

“That’s funny,” Frank said. “Hey listen, on your thing, I’m gonna let it go.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I called the town guy, told him we worked it out.”

“Gee . . . So they’re clearing the violation?”

“He said so, yeah . . . What opened my eyes was my wife, you hitting some balls with her, she said it was fun . . . How’d that happen, anyhow?”

“Why don’t you ask her.”

“She can be a piece of work, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well, so can a lot people.”

“I can see that,” Frank said. “Listen, I’ll catch you later.”

I thought it would be prudent to get myself a good-quality helmet for a little added insurance, in case I ended up running over Frank anyway.

#

Things stabilized for a while and I lived with a gal named Janine. Then Janine surprised a grizzly bear on a high trail north of Logan Pass in Glacier National Park.

The female bear inspected her, pawed her a couple times and bit her on the shoulder, before losing interest and moving on.

They helicoptered Janine and her hiking partner off the trail and took her to a hospital in Kalispell. They said it was a warning bite thank God, that a grizzly's real bite is twice as powerful as a lion's. Someone explained it as pounds per square inch of bite pressure.

Everything looked decent for a couple days until a staph infection took over and Janine died two weeks later.

An hour after she passed, Janine's hiking partner Rose sat down with me in the Grieving Lounge at the hospital. She told me she might as well put this out there sooner than later, that she and Janine had a relationship going on.

I listened, nodded, and thanked her for her candor. As I thought about it, fair enough. It wasn't rocket science, the two of them together weeks at a time on various adventure outings, including an Appalachian Trail effort.

Though that one, when Janine got home she vowed that was it for hiking, she was switching to bicycle touring. But that didn't happen. A month being back, taking long leisurely swims at the town pool, she said she found her mojo again.

Something else Rose mentioned, that section of high trail in northeastern Glacier

Park, there were warnings posted. There'd been a recent close call. Also they weren't carrying bear spray Rose said, which was recommended by the rangers.

I again nodded. You weren't going to challenge it . . . did one of you override the other on the safety business, and who. What difference did it make.

I was thinking I heard of a device that hikers could use to avoid surprising animals--though I could have been imagining it. Too late obviously but I mentioned it to Rose as we got up and embraced, why not, going forward, and she thanked me but said she'd probably be moving to Adelaide now, where her sister is . . . and I said oh? . . . and she said yeah, she was headed there a while back but met Janine and that sidetracked it.

I assumed that was Australia and didn't ask and I said well don't be a stranger.

So that was that.

A couple we hung out with, Bill and Haley, took it hard, and their first reaction was I or someone needed to sue the living daylights out of the medical people. Others chimed in that no way that should have happened.

There were letters from attorneys. One was from a guy in Cincinnati. I tossed them all except for that one, and called him out of curiosity.

“We have a summer cabin up there, is the reason,” the Cincinnati attorney said. “Outside Columbia Falls. It’s been in the family since the 60’s. I pick up local news.”

“Must be nice,” I said. “These fires we got in California, going on 4 years now--PGE cutting power, the evacuations, the assorted bullshit--it’s getting old in a hurry.”

“You’re saying,” the guy said, “you may be looking to shift gears. I can throw it out there, being real honest, it’s not bad

here. Checks most of the boxes. Louisville too, I'd put her same category."

"I was thinking of Montana."

"I know you were. Wouldn't recommend it full time. There's an adjustment."

I said, "My girlfriend and I, we'd watch that lottery millionaire home show-- not just watch but pay attention, take some notes."

"I hear you," the guy said. "Leave it alone right now."

"No kneejerk reactions, you're saying."

"No. Take it from me."

I wasn't curious enough to ask about that, but I said, "Well you're a good man. You haven't tried to talk me into suing anybody. Maybe that's coming up, but I appreciate the little boost to my day."

The guy said, "Okay hold on a second . . ."

And I waited.

“All right, I thought about it,” he said. “Why don’t you come out and visit. We have room.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. All you do, lemme know your flight. I got it from there.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No I’m not . . . Sometimes you have to go with your gut, and just do shit.”

I said, “You mean offer shit.”

“That too.”

I said, “I don’t love flying . . . but maybe, I could rent a car. I have a bunch of points with Enterprise.”

“Even better,” he said, “and puts you at ease, something goes wrong it’s not your problem. You throw it on cruise control and enjoy the countryside.”

“Well we’ll see,” I said, and the guy said fine and we hung up.

And of course that’d be insane . . . a nice impromptu gesture from this person,

except you had plenty on your plate not to mention didn't know him from Adam.

But a couple weeks went by and the house started getting to me, and I didn't rent the car--the Dodge Charger burned a little oil but she ran fine, she only had 79,000 miles on her and that's what you got her for, the open road--and on a Wednesday morning without telling anyone I hunkered down and drove straight through to Phoenix.

That's how I liked to do it, if you're in the car anyway, crank out the big miles . . . and Janine fought me on that, she wanted to break trips up short, driving wore her out, which never made sense to me when the woman could hike 25 miles in a day like a dual-piston machine.

The thought was drop in on Patrick, guy I met at a stock car race years ago, and kill a few days, see where it led . . . but Patrick sounded preoccupied when I called

him from a breakfast place in Scottsdale--so maybe you lay off.

Just for fun, I googled it, Phoenix to Cincinnati. They gave you two routes, both starting with I-40 up to Gallup and across New Mexico, then the option at Oklahoma City to jump on 44 and angle north through St. Louis and Indy, or stay on 40 to Knoxville, pick up 75.

It all sounded okay, I'd never driven any of it, and when the friendly waitress name-tagged Meg refilled my coffee I asked for a recommendation. She got big-eyed like she had no idea and didn't want to give me wrong information but said she'd check with someone who might know, and when she came back she told me well, there was a construction zone on 44 west of Tulsa the person said, that could really put you in a foul mood.

I said she could come with me, if she didn't have anything else going on, and she played along, and reminded me the

breakfast specials ended at 10:30 if I wanted to time it on the way back.

I told Meg sorry about the joking around, that I was being an idiot, and she wished me a good trip and threw in that I didn't look like an idiot--which fired me up a little for no logical reason, and I grabbed a toothpick at the register and stepped back out into the sunshine.

Hmm, well . . . she'd called it a trip, as though it was a done deal, and I'd been referring to it that way myself, otherwise why put people out and make them analyze it for you . . . so here you were, you might have to go through with this.

I considered it for a couple minutes and called the Cincinnati lawyer--guy's name was Greg--figuring if the guy hesitates at all, forget it, but Greg said he was glad I called, and to please excuse him because he's walking into a courthouse, but he'd see me in three days.

So . . . but one thing you'd better do, I realized ten miles down the road, was call Bill and Hailey, who were concerned how I was doing mentally, made me promise to check in regularly--and I pulled off at a rest stop.

Haley didn't pick up and I left a short message, "Hiya. I'm on a little road trip here, you know, clear the cobwebs. Don't worry about a thing, I'll talk to you soon."

Bill did pick up unfortunately and was like, What the HECK. Dude you're WHERE?

I got off as diplomatically as I could, before he started up on suing the doctors again.

So there was that . . . and I shut off the phone and stuck it in the glove compartment until I rolled into Cincinnati four days later.

I got sidetracked a day by Loretta Lynn's place in Hurricane Mills, the roadside signs breaking you down,

detouring you to it. I always enjoyed Sissy Spacek in the movie role, plus easy to forget that Tommy Lee Jones was the husband.

The tour and hospitality were great, and if you wanted they put you up overnight in a cabin on the ranch for a hundred bucks, so I went with that too.

Now Greg asked where I was presently and I said the Holiday Inn Express on Rybolt Road, I'd checked in an hour ago, just had a little swim.

"You're fighting me already," Greg said. "We got an in-law set-up in the basement, wide open. You even have your own entrance around the side."

"Hey man," I said, "you're over the top generous. I don't like to impose."

"And you like your privacy."

I said, "But here's the deal. Can I at least buy you and your family dinner?"

"So, like a one and done."

“Jeez . . . didn’t mean to insult you. You got me off my ass. Have to say, I feel better, more bounce in my step.”

He said, “The zen of the open road?”

“No doubt something to do with it, yeah.”

Greg said he’d check with his wife and when he called back he said 6:30 his house, no discussion. He added that she was inviting someone else, to round it out.

“Okay now hold on,” I said.

“Hey you’re a big boy,” Greg said. “And you never know.”

The house was simple but had been redone inside. There was plenty of space between lots, and there were old-growth trees up and down the block.

Greg’s wife Sue introduced me to Frances, and by dessert we had it kind of rolling, and I invited her back to the Holiday Inn Express. Not to spend the night, but to hear more about her experiences chronicling the Shoshone tribe

in eastern Idaho, including learning the language.

“Dumb question,” I said, “but any similarity to western languages at all?”

“There are no dumb questions,” Frances said. And the way she put it, her tone, her look, her smile . . . it was very nice.

I weighed a few things. Then I said, “I ran this by someone else, in reverse. It didn’t work. But would you want to have breakfast with me in Scottsdale?”

“Sure,” she said.

“You’re saying . . . no follow up questions? No strings attached? No . . . you’re fucking crazy?”

“Unh-uh.”

“Oh . . . So you think? . . . I mean I better let a couple people know, I guess.”

“You can invite them to join us,” Frances said.

“Nah, that’s not going be practical . . . necessarily. I apologize, just give me a minute, I want to formulate this.”

“I’ll go out by the pool,” she said.

“No we’re good, please don’t.” I called Haley.

“Hi, me again,” I said. “Listen, can you give this message to Bill as well?”

Haley said now I’m worried.

“Don’t be silly,” I said, “nothing like that . . . Just an update, that I drove from Phoenix to Cincinnati--and now I’m headed back to Phoenix, Scottsdale--and it’s possible I’ll be switching it up once more, meaning back to Cincy . . . depending.” I didn’t look at Frances.

There was some silence on Haley’s end. She said, “Matt, are you a fucking lunatic? What on earth is going on?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Hale, take it easy, sort of a new friend type deal is all . . . listen, I’ll catch you later, my phone’s on, love you guys.”

“Sorry about that,” I said to Frances.

“Where were we?”

“How did it go?” she said.

“Uneven. They’ll recover.”

“But you’re phone’s on? You just threw it in your suitcase.”

“Good point, maybe not. Our more important issue--before you come to your senses and realize what you’re doing--which route do we take. One has a road construction issue, apparently.”

“I don’t mind road construction,” she said.

“No?”

“No.”

“Oh,” I said. “Taking it a step further--do you *prefer* road construction?”

“You’re *kinda* goofy,” she said. “What do you recommend for breakfast?”

“All depends,” I said.

#

I'd put a couple conclusions together and now was saddled with a very unpleasant task.

It was harder to find neighborhood hardware stores but there was one on Lombard, run by a Chinese family, a mixture of household goods and basic hardware stuff, along with a couple aisles of Asian food.

It was Friday morning, a glistening bright day in the city for February, though apparently they'd gotten a foot of snow overnight at Tahoe.

I found some decent wire, it reminded me of baling wire like they use on hay, or tying fences. The main thing, it was flexible enough, and I had the guy cut a nice three-foot length.

You didn't want to skimp on the gloves, and they had a brand that had extra heavy-duty padding, both the palm and fingers, and even the back--and they were a

little bulky when you slipped them on, but well worth it.

And oh yeah . . . the roll of duct tape, don't forget that.

So there you were . . . I was all set, and nothing to do now except drive over to Castro Valley.

The rental car I'd picked up was a basic Honda Civic, but it seemed sufficient, and I threw some warm clothes in back and stuck the hardware supplies in the center console . . . and 40 minutes later I was dealing with Errol's community gate, the bottom of the hill, the houses up above.

I wasn't positive he'd be around. I was going by what Errol told me the other night, that he worked at home Monday Wednesday Friday, and you hoped nothing threw that out of whack today.

Errol had been one of my bosses years ago, when I was a teenager working a summer job as a bicycle messenger. Now he'd done something very bad.

I leaned out the driver's window to where the console was, where visitors called up to the residents, and I took a moment and punched in Errol's code.

No answer. I gave it another 30 seconds and tried it again.

Errol's voice came on the intercom: "What do you need."

And I picked up the handset that was part of the apparatus.

I said, "Dude I'm trying to help you here. Let me in." I hated the word dude but it popped out.

There was no more conversation, and I was hanging onto the headset, and a good minute went by and the buzzer sounded and the heavy security gate swung open, and I drove up the hill and pulled into Errol's driveway.

He opened the door, no smiles today, not like he was going to challenge or attack me, but making it clear I didn't belong here now.

I pointed inside and said, “You mind?”

“I do,” Errol said, leaving it there.

“Here’s the thing,” I said. “I’m not your enemy. You have some options, I know you do.”

And I brushed past him into the house, Errol only making a half-hearted effort to stop me, and he followed me in and closed the door . . . and as he was doing that I smashed him over the head with the flashlight I pulled out of my rear pants pocket.

It was one of those heavy-duty jobs, the kind the police used at one time, that took 6 full-sized batteries and could double as a night stick, or at least some kind of improvised weapon.

I’d picked that up from an ex-tenant who stiffed me on the rent and left his belongings in the apartment. The flashlight had been in a kitchen drawer.

Either way, Errol was in some trouble, but wobbling, trying to get up, and I smashed him with the thing again.

“Let’s go,” I said. “In the car.”

Errol got back to a sitting position and I found a towel and brought it along. Let him at least dab his wounds, though it was more an impact thing, the guy taking some blunt force for sure. A cut was part of it, I could see now, but no serious blood.

Errol was stunned the way you see a fighter on TV staggering around when they don’t know quite where they are or what just connected with them, and I was able to guide him by the arm, resistance free, into the passenger seat.

“Make sure you put your belt on,” I said, and he made a small motion toward where you pulled the belt, and didn’t go any further with it.

Before I started the engine, I took the duct tape out of console, taped Errol’s wrists together, and it was a bit of a pain in

the neck, but I reached way down and got his ankles as well.

“You can relax now for a while,” I said, easing it out of the driveway, onto Fox Ridge Drive, a right turn on Strobridge to the 580 ramp, then picking up the 680 interchange business through Walnut Creek-Concord, and connecting with I-80 at Fairfield.

“So far so good,” I said. “I’m turning into a grumpy old man, but I can’t tolerate traffic any more. How about you?”

Errol was staring straight ahead. He’d come around a bit, his eyes were showing some recognition.

I had to take a leak by the time we hit the Sacramento bypass toward Reno, and I considered stopping somewhere real quick, you could probably work it . . . but I better not fool around.

It wasn’t until around Colfax that Errol initiated his first bit of conversation.

He said, “If I might ask, where are we going?”

“And the second part of that?” I said, “and what are you doing with me?”

Errol didn’t say anything.

“You ever a Boy Scout?” I said.

He shook his head very slightly.

“You’re gonna require some winter survival skills. Snow-type ones. What I’ll be doing, is letting you off in the mountains. You’re going to need to keep your wits about you, and it’s up to you, how bad you want it.”

He was looking at me more wide-eyed.

I continued. “You’ve always been fair to me. And that’s why I’m giving you a chance . . . Jeez, good thing it’s not snowing, currently, otherwise we’d need chains right now.”

Which was true, I hadn’t thought of that. Meanwhile, dang, there was a fair amount of snow this winter, it was up

pretty high already on the sides of the road from the snowplow, and you still had 45 minutes and a couple thousand feet of elevation before you got to Donner Summit.

I said, “But you let me down. An old colleague from the newspaper business laid a tip on me, and I put it together . . . Inconceivable as it was . . . I wished I never asked him about the case, honestly.”

Errol said, “Please Matt. I can’t expect you to understand. Everything just . . . got away from me that night.”

“I understand. Like a perfect storm.”

He didn’t say anything.

It was good to hear the guy confess, in actual words. I was pretty sure I could go through with it even if I didn’t get that out of him just now, but still.

What I meant by *it*--no, I wasn’t going to be dropping the guy off in the woods, letting him test his winter survival skills.

The bogus nonsense I was feeding him--he better be ready to dust off his Boy Scout stuff--that was to relax him--hopefully--so he wouldn't be fighting me for his life on the way into the woods.

At least until you get the baling wire around his throat, then yeah, all bets would be off.

We exited Highway 80 onto Soda Springs Road. I was familiar with the area, I'd been coming up here since I was a kid, a little skiing, a little summer stuff. There'd been a rental cabin I'd gone in on once at Northstar, 10 people, though there was a party at the end and it got crashed, and that was a mess.

From the exit, the human activity was on the south side. That's where you had your Sugar Bowl ski resort, and if you stayed that direction you'd wind your way down to Donner Lake.

If you crossed over though, the north side of I-80, there wasn't much, it got

remote in a hurry. I had some memories of mountain biking over here, though once in perfect conditions, the middle of summer, I took an inadvertent wrong turn off the trail and realized it a couple hundred yards in-- and I had a heckuva time finding that trail again, and plenty of crazy thoughts swirled around before I got there.

I drove a couple miles and turned onto a side road. This was going to be tricky, since they'd plowed the main road, but not this one. This is when you wish you'd thought ahead, rented a Subaru, Jesus--or at least something with front wheel drive.

Though the Honda was handling it okay, and maybe I was mixed up, and I said to Errol, "This thing got front wheel drive? Do you know?"

"I believe it does," Errol said, very faintly.

So that was good then, and you couldn't have laid out better timing, the

afternoon was getting on, it was starting to get a little dark, which it tended to do real early in the mountains.

No one around, no houses, no cabins, no vehicles in the distance . . . nothing.

So I turned off the engine.

Errol sat there rigid, facing forward.

It occurred to me who am I kidding, this guy sees right through my bullshit, and is expecting the worst.

We'll find out.

Off to the right was a cut-through in a stand of pines, and then it closed in again on you and opened up in back, and you could see just a bit of light filtering into the spot back there, which looked clean and simple and logical. The snow was thick along the way, but you could handle it.

I got out and opened Errol's door, and I had to help him out, on account of the wrists and ankles being locked together with the duct tape . . . and Errol started

hopping ahead, as though he knew where I wanted to go.

I thought back to an incident one day on the job at Speed-King delivery service, where I had been the teenage bike messenger. I was a pretty conscientious worker, and I didn't screw up a delivery very often.

On this one day, I did. I was supposed to pick something up at Number Two Embarcadero Center, and take it to the 38th floor of the Bank of America building, on California and Kearny.

But my brain wasn't working right, and instead I dropped the package on the 38th floor of the Transamerica Building. They didn't seem to be expecting it there, but I didn't think much of it, and they signed for it and that was that.

The shift ended and I was back in the Speed-King offices on Pier 7, checking out for the day, and Errol is on the phone and puts his hand up toward me.

The woman from the Bank of America building company is on the line, and it wasn't *any* company, it was Roche, Winston and Meyer, one of the most respected law firms in the city, and needless to say, a huge account for Speed-King. And apparently the package I screwed up was a legal document that had to be filed that day in court.

Errol asked me about it, I realized my mistake and explained what happened, and for a minute Errol stood there with the receiver held out to the side, and you could hear the woman yelling.

Finally the conversation concluded, and Errol winked at me and told me don't worry about it. I found out later, through the grapevine, the woman insisted the messenger be fired if Speed-King ever wanted any more business from them, and Errol had calmly informed her that that wasn't going to happen.

I looked at the guy ahead in the woods now, and told him to come back.

We drove out to Highway 80 again, I got back on it headed east, toward Reno, and five minutes later I took the downtown Truckee exit.

I went south on old Brockway Road, and it felt like we were heading out into *different* wilderness now, except I veered onto North Shore, and then a little left turn, and the Honda came to a stop in front of the Truckee Police Department.

I cut off the tape on Errol's hands, then his feet.

"Take care of it," I said, and I watched him slowly go inside.

After a couple minutes, it seemed okay to leave. You could head back down toward Sacramento, probably get most of the way out of the mountains before it was completely dark.

Then again you had the town of Truckee, with an old main street, some

character to it, a few establishments. A little bit of a bar scene.

I was thinking, maybe there's a game on, you get into a conversation with someone. I could use that now.

#

I was taking a surfing lesson, and halfway through I'm thinking this is the dumbest idea I ever had.

The concept was shaky to start with, trying to learn a tricky water sport in your 30's, but I'd let a couple people talk me into it, that something fresh and in nature would be beneficial . . . and okay fine, they meant well.

My big mistake was booking Tammy as the instructor.

Tammy could surf her head off and she seemed to have a nice personality--until now--and she'd looked perfectly presentable in her shorts and tanktop,

when the waitress introduced us officially in the Crow's Nest last night.

So I got duped, and here I was.

There were other instructors if you researched it, but the two most visible ones were an old guy and a kid who was probably in high school.

Neither seemed as appealing to spend 90 minutes with as Tammy.

We were halfway into the lesson and she had me on the sand, we hadn't gone near the water yet, and I was on my chest on top of an old-style giant surfboard and she was making me stand up and lie back down.

Going on like 500 times now.

My stomach muscles were in spasm and my knees where all chaffed up and my wrists felt like they'd both been sprained, and even my chin was taking a beating from repeatedly having to contact the board.

I said, "I'm starting to think of it a different way."

"Well that's your first mistake," Tammy said, "trying to apply thought to the core fundamental of the sport."

"Yeah, well," I said. "My thought, was do you have a bikini on underneath that stuff? If you did--or maybe it doesn't even matter, you can leave on your full attire--but how about I watch you demonstrate the actual sport for a while?"

"You're wasting time," she said. "We'll never get into the water today at this rate."

I said, "I didn't even think about it, but are those yoga pants? Plenty of cross-over these days."

"You ask a lot of questions. You need to be more single-minded if you expect to prosper in a new pursuit."

"You're getting formal on me," I said. "Which tips your hand, that you're not local. Originally."

“That’s an interesting take. If I was going to place *you*, I’d say you’re from Tarzana.”

“I don’t even know where that is. But I’ll make you a deal. Let’s knock this stuff off, and go have lunch.”

Tammy said, “And? . . . I’m waiting to hear how that’s a deal.”

“I’ll figure it out on the way up there. Then you’ll see.”

She said, “Well you’re becoming uncooperative, that much is obvious.”

“That’s your interpretation. I’m shot here. I haven’t been worked this hard since junior high school.”

Tammy suggested finishing off the session with some easy jogging in that case, pointing out that I could lose a few pounds in the mid-section, which would help with the standing up and maintaining your balance on a board.

I said, “I like that place up past the sunglasses shop. King’s Highway Grill, I think it is?”

“The fusion one?”

“See, you didn’t change the subject, so I can tell you’re interested. When’s your next lesson?”

She said she didn’t have another one today so she supposed she couldn’t back out of it, the offer, and we thankfully left the beach and headed up the hill, though walking on cement, I felt different body parts hurting.

We started with a couple tropical drinks with the little umbrellas sticking out of the glasses and I said Cheers and thanks for putting up with a poor student.

Tammy said I wasn’t a poor student, just an indifferent one.

“What happened to the surfboard?” I said. “You just leave it there?”

“Yeah.”

“Too big and heavy, you mean? No one’ll steal it?”

She laughed. “That’s the hope. Though I do lock my door at night.”

“You’re saying, don’t underestimate the wealthy? They’re unpredictable like the rest of us?”

“I’m saying, you don’t hear of a lot around here, but I make it a policy to watch my back, wherever I am.”

“Oh yeah? Where’s that been, you’re referring to?”

“I was born and raised in Cleveland,” she said. “But getting back to what you mentioned--what did they do to you in junior high, that you pretend to be so traumatized by?”

“Ah, we had this PE teacher. Not worth going into the specifics. Bottom line, he tortured us for three years. And every day you were afraid he was going to embarrass you on top of it.”

“We had one of those too.”

“Nah, not this guy you didn’t. He’d be in jail today, probably. Or at the minimum, bankrupt from all the lawsuits.”

“Gosh.”

“Times were different, and it wasn’t the worst thing to make it through that stuff. Even my friend Ray, who was very defiant back then, he says kids today have it too easy.”

Tammy said, “How did Ray turn out?”

“Not great. Ray’s on hemodialysis.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But he’s had an eventful life, is my impression. I think he was in some trouble. Kind of matured his way out of it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Good old-fashioned trouble . . . Not the light version.”

“What’s the light version? You mean drugs? And some petty theft tied in?”

“Yeah, none of *that*. The real thing . . . He got me a gun once.”

I watched for Tammy's reaction, and I figured that should bring her down a notch, more to my level and hopefully lose some of the surf-instructor attitude.

“Wow . . . Tell me about it.”

And this was the thing. When something stalls or isn't proceeding as smoothly as you like, throw in a gun.

I picked that tip up from a movie director, who made action-thriller type films. I saw the guy featured on TV, the local news.

I remembered where I was too--in a motel in West Lafayette, Indiana, when I was driving cross-country.

The director was a hometown boy made good and he was giving a talk that night at Purdue University, in town, and I didn't have anything better to do so I went, and the guy was pretty entertaining.

And yep, his little gun philosophy made sense, and I figured you could apply variations of that to situations. You didn't

necessarily need to bring a gun seriously into it, you just needed some shock value.

“Just that he got me one,” I said.
“Nothing real interesting beyond that.”

“Well . . . did anything . . . like, happen?” she said.

“Not a big deal. It seemed like a sensible idea, but I didn’t ending up requiring it.”

“Then that’s not a good end to the story at all.”

She was expressing some frustration, and I couldn’t help wondering, in a more intimate setting, did she bring a similar approach to the table that needed to be resolved . . .

Then I was daydreaming, gravitating from Tammy to some business up in San Francisco that I’d been dodging, and she started looking at me funny.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I was rearranging a few things . . . What was your question?”

Tammy said, “It was more of a statement. That your story petered out.”

I said, “When it comes down to it, I’m a chicken.”

“But something must have precipitated it. People don’t go up to their friends--as a routine matter--and say, ‘Oh by the way, let me borrow your gun for the weekend’.”

“You’re loosening up. If I asked you to come back to my place, what would you say?”

“I’d say no.”

“Well, that’s good then . . . In fact I respect you for it.”

“You seem slightly off,” she said.

“Not in the worst way though?”

“I don’t know. You’re interesting at least. And a little mysterious.”

“I just remembered something. It wouldn’t work anyway.”

“What wouldn’t?”

“You coming back with me. I gave up my bedroom.”

“Now you’re losing me,” she said. “But the gun business . . . that really did just peter out?”

“Pretty much. Yep.”

“Hmm. Do you still have it?”

“It’s possible . . .”

“Can you at least give me a clue?”

I said, “Do you like dangerous guys?”

“Now you’re all over the place,” she said. “But maybe I do.”

“How about Ned Mancuso? He fit in there too?”

This was a guy, admittedly a colorful character, who I’d met a few times and didn’t trust.

She said, “I think I know who you’re referring to. I’ve seen him at the Crow’s Nest.”

Meaning, she knew him pretty well, would be my guess, but no point pursuing that.

“Anyhow,” I said, “yeah, there’s a guy and a gal, a bit down on their luck. I kind of underestimated their relationship, thought it was a negative, but now I see there’s something there. So I gave ‘em the bedroom.”

“I’m not following you. But it sounds kind of you, although that’s quite a jump. You’re saying you’re on the couch?”

“Yeah, that or the recliner . . . Amazing how easily you fall asleep in those things. You know what I’m talking about, the huge, padded Costco jobs?”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes to recharge the batteries. After what you put me through today, I’m gonna need extra.”

“I meant how long have you had the sleeping arrangement, letting the two people take over.”

“Oh. Just a couple days . . . But so I have it straight, *why* couldn’t we go in the

ocean? Isn't that what you do when you surf?"

"I think I explained it clearly. Would you want to be Van Halen on stage before you learned your basic scales?"

"That's a terrible example," I said. "You need to come up with a better one."

"Maybe next time."

"See? I roped you in. At least enough to have lunch with me again."

"Possibly."

I said, "You have a good gig. And you do a conscientious job with it. It's nice to be an authority figure."

"What's your deal?" she said.

"I'm sort of a journalist, if you pin me down . . . and I pull out some fancy terminology to back it up."

"Gee," she said. "Now *I'm* impressed. I'm trying to get a blog off the ground. On women's surfing. I'm looking for advertising, the whole nine yards. Do you

think you could take a look at it, give me some feedback?’

“Honestly, blogs may have peaked,” I said, “but I guess, if you need me to.”

It was better to finish things off with the upper hand, so I was glad I regained control there.

The throwing in the gun business, that was a lot more dicey these days, the political climate . . . you had to be careful and use that card selectively.

Some women were drawn to dangerous guys, that was a fact. You took that into account, rolled with it, and sometimes it worked.

More fun being a fake journalist though, you could make stuff up, embellish it. The hard-nosed act, you were limited, and you’d set the bar high.

#

I said to the guy next to me, “The difference, in your opinion? Between her and the ones in the record stores?”

“First of all, my friend,” the guy said, “there *are* no more record stores.”

“That’s a point well taken,” I said, “so forget that. I guess I just mean talent-wise.”

“I’d give her a B-plus,” he said. “Great range though, I’m hearing two octaves.”

The guy finished his beer and picked up his plastic cup of quarters and headed back to the slot machines.

I could tell the man did know a little something about music, from a couple of comments he made . . . but then how could you only give her a B-plus if her range is so impressive?

The band performed two more and took a break. The four of them coming down from the small stage into the bar area . . . a guitar player, keys guy, drummer and the female vocalist. And of course these days the keyboard person could synthesize

the heck out of nearly any sound they were trying to emulate, from a bluegrass banjo to a line of tubas in a marching band, to a dang full orchestra.

They were called *Luella and the Capris* on the electronic sign at the entrance to the lounge, though you had to be quick to read it because there was other stuff rotated in . . . Texas Hold-em seats open, progressive slots jackpot updates, the blackjack tournament taking final entries, the all-you-can-eat king crab legs tonight in the buffet.

Luella was at a table with the drummer, both of them roaming around their phones.

I thought, well . . . and went over there and sat down.

The drummer didn't pay attention, and Luella finished her business before she looked up and said, "Well, *that's* direct . . . we don't mind, as long as you're a fan." Following it with a nice-enough smile.

“You’re really Luella?” I said.

“No, Terri,” she said, deadpan.

“Why?”

“So once people get past that voice . . . you have some spunk as well.”

Terri said, “That’s what my husband said when we met. Not in those exact words.”

Oh boy, the husband card right away.

“He one of the band guys then?” I said.

“My hubby? No, no. That would never work.”

“Either way, I didn’t mean to be cozying up to you, if you got the wrong impression . . . you’ve been kind of blowing me away up there though. Echoing a few great voices. Karen Carpenter, the main one.”

Terri gave me her full attention for the first time and said, “Well now I’m impressed . . . Not everyone comes up to

me and picks that out. She's an idol of mine."

"She had that calm, clear voice," I said. "Straight and pure and angelic. The exact opposite of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, who never sang a straight note."

"Wow, you are so right . . . So I might as well ask, what other great voices did I remind you of?"

"Two others. Harder to pinpoint, just bits and pieces jumping out, but I was thinking Patsy Cline, and Linda Ronstadt."

"Well I'll take both of those," Terri said. "The problem now, are you going to stick around for the third set?"

"Why? I shouldn't?"

"No, it's just you've upped the ante on me. The pressure's on."

I appreciated the humor, and she seemed like a good-natured person, but what did you really know.

I said, "A couple things I always wonder, when I hear a terrific lounge act like yours. The first thing, dumb question, but you can't all live here, right?"

"No, Reno."

"You're kidding. That's like, 4 hours."

"They put us up for the gig. We do three-night minimums. We're headed to Wendover next. Then Tonopah. What was the other question?"

"What the difference is . . . you, and the big stars."

"You mean you can't tell?"

"No."

"That's very nice of you . . . The answer is, the backstory, for one."

I asked what that meant and she said they had to tune up but stick around and she might get into it.

I decided I didn't have any other pressing engagements tonight, so why not?

What I was doing here unfortunately, in Bingham, Nevada, three-quarters of the way across the state, was hiding out.

Though I liked to think of it as keeping a low profile--temporarily--which was less dramatic.

I was residing currently at the Quality Inn next door to the casino. I'd started off at the Super 8, but rational or not, I felt more exposed out there on 227, so day before yesterday I switched it up.

From the Quality Inn you hopped out your door, crossed the parking lot about eight steps and right into the The Palermo, through the side entrance where they spun the big wheel of fortune, which they called the Wizard Of Odds.

You kept going and you were in good hands, had to admit.

Five restaurants, a 24-hour Starbucks, an observation area on the mezzanine level where you could sit under a massive glass dome and look out at the

wide open spaces and mountains in the distance.

The lounge every evening, kicking off the live music at 4, with a couple late shows after that, one of which was Terri's *Luella and the Capris* act.

You had cocktail waitresses scurrying around at all hours in what were supposed to be lacey Roman tunics, though there wasn't a whole lot to them, political correctness not a factor inside the casino.

In keeping with the theme of the place, there were fountains and a hanging garden and a fake Roman column you could bump into about every two feet, everything oversized. You even had a bowling alley and an indoor mini-golf setup and a mechanical bull, if you were a fan of that stuff.

Essentially, you could spend all day in here, and all night too if you wanted or couldn't sleep. You could eat and drink almost for free, between the bargain buffet

and the complimentary appetizers they came around with in the lounge, which were pretty darn tasty, and honestly, the place was worth it for the people-watching alone.

I had always liked casinos, and The Palermo had a different feel than most of the Reno and Vegas ones, a little cozier, despite it being pretty huge and going all out with the glitzy Roman element.

Of course the one thing I wasn't interested in was gambling, which every last detail in the place was engineered to have you *do*, but that didn't matter, you could enjoy all the perks without participating and nobody ever bothered you.

It had been kind of a snap decision there, back in Manhattan Beach, that disappearing for a while might not be the worst idea.

It was the middle of the night and there weren't a lot of options, and at the

depot on 7th Street in downtown L.A. I bought a one-way ticket to Chicago.

And actually, the Greyhound experience wasn't as terrible as I anticipated, mainly because the snow was so beautiful in the Sierras.

One of the passengers said they'd had a fresh two feet, and you could see snowplows all over the side roads.

I had no idea what I'd do in Chicago, but then someone got sick halfway across Nevada and the bus pulled onto the shoulder and people started helping a woman.

The gal rallied, and we started up again but later you heard the driver on the CB radio, a medical emergency, and when we pulled into Bingham there was an ambulance waiting and an announcement that everyone could get off for a few minutes.

I walked around, maybe a three-block radius from the station, and when I got back the bus was gone.

I considered talking to someone at the counter, but the town seemed okay and I let it go and stuck around.

That was two weeks ago . . . and here you were, in the main lounge of The Palermo, the third and final set winding down from *Luella and the Capris*.

And yeah, you really could pick out the Karen Carpenter in Terri's voice.

They finished it off with a country song I didn't recognize but the audience did, and they gave them a nice ovation by casino lounge standards, and a few minutes later Terri was back in the bar area, same table, same guy with her, the drummer, both fooling with their devices. Terri had changed into jeans and a sweatshirt.

She saw me coming and held up her hand like just give me a second and wrapped up whatever electronic activity

was so urgent, and said, “You sat through it. My impression was you wouldn’t be. So did I maintain my standard?”

“Honestly?” I said. “I kept waiting for you to drop down a notch, but you never did.”

“Well it’s a gig,” she said, giving it a playful shrug . . . which I interpreted as no, it wasn’t New York City or even the Vegas strip, but one does one’s best.

“Why’d you think I wouldn’t stick it out though?” I said.

“Because no one stays put for the whole show. Unless they’re real drunk and can’t move.”

“That’s a fair point, given the distractions in here . . . what about that backstory?”

“What about it?”

“Well, I was asking you a question . . . and now I realize it was a little sensitive, so that’s my fault.”

“No, I’m fooling with you,” she said. “There’s breaks in this business . . . and there’s luck, there’s timing, there’s who you sleep with.” I’m thinking Jeez, this may be a little too much information now.

“In my particular case,” Terri continued, “I did have a recording deal once. Capitol Records, the old round tower building you still see from the freeway passing through Hollywood? . . . Re-hab got in the way.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear any of it, including the last part.

“Well the good thing about that, then,” I said, “and this’ll come out wrong . . . but it justifies my judgment. I mean I must have a pretty dang good ear after all.”

Terri shook her head and said, “You’re starting to emerge as a little irritating. What’s *your* backstory?”

I wasn’t quite ready for this, and realized I should have had a standard

answer prepared . . . but honestly since I'd been holed up here no one asked me that.

There was plenty of *how's your day going?* and *having any luck at the tables?* type stuff, but no one diving deeper. Which was refreshing.

I said, "I don't have any good backstory. I'm trying to re-invent myself."

"From what?"

"Well first thing," I said, making it up on the fly, "from living in New Jersey."

"What part?" the drummer-guy said, the first time he'd opened his mouth, me assuming he hadn't been listening.

"Teaneck . . . are you from back there too?"

"Down the shore, yeah," the guy said. "Not *from* there, but spent a lot of years . . . You remember when AC first opened?"

He was referring to Atlantic City of course, which I had only been to once, no idea when it opened but I nodded yeah.

“Those days,” the guy said, “the music business, you had the Philly, New York, AC triangle . . . All dried up now.”

“You wouldn’t know it by looking at him,” Terri said, “but Carl played with some big names. Michael Jackson, for one.”

“Ho-ly Toledo,” I said.

“Not *with* him,” Carl said.

“Everything was overdubbed. I never met the man.”

“That was *Bad* though, right? The album?” Terri said.

Carl shook his head. “After that. *Dangerous*. Two tracks. That’s when drum machines were taking over, but they wanted studio guys in addition.”

I said, “Jeez, I’m in rarified company, I’m not kidding.”

“What’d you do in Teaneck?” Terri said.

“Okay that’s enough about me,” I said.

“I get where he’s coming from,” Carl said, “Jersey’s not that exciting.”

“So are you passing through then, live here, what?” she said.

“I’m running,” I said.

“Now that’s a pretty unsatisfying answer,” she said. “Not much depth to it at all.”

“It’s a good answer,” Carl said. “Let’s play some cards.”

So I followed them to the tables, and Terri and Carl weren’t good gamblers, and pretty soon they were both buying more chips, never a good sign.

I thought about saying something, like how about we get a cup of coffee and let me make a couple suggestions . . . but I didn’t, I said goodnight and cashed in the 20 dollars of chips I’d been pushing around and went across the parking lot to my room at the Quality Inn.

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

"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, who'd shown up from New York. Ralph Salvatore.

Finch was asking for a show of hands.

We were in his motel room, which he rented long-term. He was pacing around holding a clipboard, these two gals Rosie and Holly on the bed and Ned and I and

Ralph in these folding chairs that Finch 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, we got railroaded into a writing class. Or I did, and told Ned to join the fun, and amazingly he did, and he recruited Rosie.

We found out Finch was a semi-famous writer once. Holly looked at him as a mentor, and I felt bad for the old guy and tried 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, man it was stuffy in here. I’d complied with Finch’s

first assignment and written a one paragraph summary of a novel *I* could see someone writing about *me*.

It wasn't very good, I hoped I wouldn't get laughed at--but okay, it could be interesting to hear what the others came up with--and Rosie stood 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 and I assumed they were waiting for more--which I was too--and then it took Rosie a minute to sit back down, which added to the possibility--but no.

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.

I 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,” I said.

“I agree,” Ralph said, who you didn’t expect to hear from. “But 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 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," I 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," I said, "and has the partner, but can't."

“Or mentally maybe too,” Rosie said. “She wants to . . . how you call . . . 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?” I 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.”

I 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 her, “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.”

I 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.”

“Only reason I ask,” Ned 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," I said.

"I'd love to announce 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," I 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. 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,” I said, “but I have to go next.”

“So your honest opinion is worse?” Ned 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, “Matt, can you conclude for us tonight?”

“Do I have to stand?” I 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 Matt,” 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 Matthew 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 over-think 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, and I was afraid Finch was going to continue on this tangent, especially if anyone prompted him further.

“Okay we get it,” I 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," I 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 I 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 regulation in Manhattan Beach where you had to walk your bike on 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, Terrance," 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 I watched Ralph and Ned get into a car together. I couldn't pinpoint it, but I felt a little nervous for Ned . . . and meanwhile I figured that's what a good instructor does, he keeps you off-balance.

#

I was at an art session.

"Just so long as you know," the model said, "I charge twenty-five dollars each for those."

The guy lowered his phone. "You've got to be kidding," he said. "I've been coming to these sessions, eight, nine months, you're the first one's got a problem with it."

A woman chimed in. "We use the photos so we can finish the paintings accurately, back in our studios. That's all it is."

The organizer, an older guy with a beard, said, "I do have to admit, I can understand it if this were nude. But clothed, are you sure?"

"I'm sorry," the model said. "Feel free to take all the pictures you want, but that's how I work it."

"Okay fine," the first guy said. "Can I at least keep the one I took? I didn't know your policy."

I was set up in the back where less people would see my painting. This was ticking me off. I said, "Not sure what part

of it you don't understand. Delete the photo."

The dozen artists turned from their easels. I gave the guy a little look and after a moment he pushed a couple buttons and everyone got back down to business.

At the break, the model walked back and said, "Thank you for defending me on that. It's Aimee."

"Matt. Lot of 'em aren't serious artists is my guess, their pace is slow, they're not used to having to finish it in one session."

Aimee was studying mine. "That's not much of a rendition," she said. "There's a freshness to it, but really, it's pretty bad."

"A question of taste," I said. "Maybe I'm trying to portray the Nordic in you, the severity with which you dish out regulations."

"I'm Italian," she said.

"Fine," I said. "You got what, another forty-five minutes? Then I know a good restaurant, it's walking distance."

"Sounds complicated," she said, "but I guess I could handle coffee."

We went to Peet's on Ellis Street, which I regretted because it was crowded and we had to stand at one of those high round tables. Aimee had changed into jeans and a baggy sweater.

I said, "I liked the pose outfit better."

She said, "So that's what it's all about."

"What do you mean?"

"I get that sometimes. Guys just want to look, they put a few marks on the canvas while they're at it. Especially when it's a nude."

"Wait a second, you do those too?"

"I do. Tuesday nights at the College of Marin. Painting and Composition II."

"Jeez . . . So you're okay with that then. I'm trying to picture it."

"The first time, I'm not kidding, I needed two glasses of wine before I got out

there, and it was a 10 am class. Now it's just a job."

"So what do you do? Otherwise."

"Well my boyfriend and I, we'd love to start a restaurant. I know that sounds out of bounds."

"Not at all. The Marina Safeway, everyone used to run around with overflowing shopping carts. Now they're picking up a specialty item here and there, because they all eat out . . . He good with you going nude, and whatever?"

"Of course he is."

"Or he's not," I said.

"Maybe you're right," Aimee said.
"You can come Tuesday if you want. No one'll know, you'll just blend in."

That night at Weatherbee's on Chestnut I said to Mitch, the bartender, "You think it's okay that I go to art classes essentially to enjoy the female models?"

"Gee," Mitch said, "I didn't know you had a background."

I said, "In junior high school we had a woodshop teacher who liked to incorporate art. I tried to do a drawing of the tablesaw. You couldn't make out that it was a piece of machinery, but the guy came around put some touches on it, and it won an end-of-the-year award."

"Are they attractive?" Mitch said.

"Not classically, the ones I've seen. But there's something about the situation."

"I know. Presenting themselves. There's gotta be a subliminal aspect to it."

"That, or they don't have a better way to pay the rent."

"But the other thing too," Mitch said.

The College of Marin session was in a regular classroom except with the desks pulled out of there and replaced by easels. There were deep sinks in the hall and

storage racks overflowing with paintings on stretcher bars.

I was surprised that the door was wide open, thinking Jeez, people on their way to other night classes could look in and see a naked woman unless they closed it before they got started, and even then you had that little window.

I was about ten minutes late, which was the idea, and I found a corner spot and unpacked my stuff. Everyone was talking, even the ones fiddling with their devices, which was half the class, until a young-guy teacher showed up and announced that tonight the emphasis was on color and value, specifically integrating the backdrop with the figure.

A woman in a white terrycloth robe who I hadn't noticed climbed onto the little platform up front and took off the robe. She had a feathered Indian headdress on and a minimal black wrap down below. For an

hour and a half she shifted through a series of reclining and standing poses.

I did my best to keep up with the pace, not trying to depict the model with any clarity because I couldn't, especially in these ten-minute poses, though I wouldn't have been able to anyway.

A timer went off and the model put on the robe and a pair of running shoes and went out into the hall carrying her bag. The young professor came around, rapidly assessing each student's work. I had my final piece on the easel and seven more laying on the floor, all 16 x 20 inch sheets of thick art paper.

The professor scanned my efforts, pointed to one on the floor and said, "That one's good", and moved on. I studied the painting and couldn't see anything that separated it from the rest of my group.

People started packing up and I said to a middle-aged woman in front of me,

"Wait a minute. There's going to be another model, right?"

The woman smiled and said, "You certainly have plenty of energy. As it is, it takes me a couple hours to unwind. Nope, that's it."

"Wow. I was told a model named Aimee would be here tonight."

"Hun, to be honest," she said, "I probably know who you're talking about, but I can't keep any of their names straight."

"Blonde hair probably pulled back, long legs, no nonsense?"

"Oh, yes. We have her frequently."

Tonight's model was back in the room, changed and wearing a ski jacket, wrapping it up with the young professor. I waited and followed her out the door.

"Pardon me, was this Aimee's night?" I said.

"It was," the model said, friendly. "Why, it didn't work with me?"

"Well, I guess one of mine worked, at least better than the others. I realize now I made you darker than you are."

"Aimee asked me to sub. I'm on the list."

I said, "Would you happen to have her phone number?"

The model took a good look at me. "You're not like a pervert or something, are you?"

"Aimee invited me tonight is all," I said. "I don't really know her, I just met her in the city."

"I don't know why I believe you," she said, rifling through her phone. "Here. Just don't tell her where you got it."

Traffic was stop-and-go coming up Waldo Grade toward the bridge, so I called Aimee. "That class you directed me to, in Kentfield. What happened?"

"Ooh, sorry about that," she said.

"That it?"

"Well I got it covered didn't I?" She sounded like she was drinking.

"You did, it was all good, I enjoyed it," I said, thinking what the hell am I doing here.

Aimee said, "Something happened."

"What do you mean?"

"How about I meet you?"

"Not sure that's the greatest idea at this point . . . But if you need to, I live in the Marina. I'm not doing any more driving tonight."

"How about that place Mel's?" she said.

"On Lombard? I guess," I said.

Aimee's hair was down and messy and it looked like she'd been crying.

"I'll be honest," I said, "you look and also sound kind of fucked up."

"I got in an argument with my boyfriend," she said. "It was a bad one, loud. I was scrambling around the

apartment closing windows to keep it down. Then he hit me."

"God damn it."

"It's over. He grabbed some clothes and left for the night. I'm not scared or anything."

"Where is he now?"

"Probably his friend Hal's. We've argued before, but it's never been this intense. It had to do with the sessions."

"Keep going."

"Well I asked him point blank, are you sure you're okay with me taking my clothes off for strangers?"

"And what?"

"He wasn't happy. Not about me taking the clothes off or not, that wasn't the issue, but me questioning him about it again. For some reason that set him off."

I said, "Where does Hal live?"

"On 24th Street."

"What's the address?"

"Oh no," Aimee said. "It's not like that."

"Here's the thing," I said. "You want me sitting up all night in front of the TV mad, or you want me to let him know someone knows, is all?"

"Unh-uh, sorry. I'm not sure what I was looking for, meeting you, but you aren't going there."

I said, "Either give me the address or I'll file a police report."

"Oh my God . . . I don't know the address . . . It's a white building on the Mission side of South Van Ness . . . There's a dumpster in front of the one next door . . . Jesus."

"What apartment?"

"You figure it out . . . Holy Crap."

"Where'd he hit you?"

"Right here. But why, does it matter?"

"Maybe it's the light, I'm not seeing much."

"I've been icing it," she said.

Whenever I was on South Van Ness I thought of the movie American Graffiti, that they filmed parts of at a drive-in that was no longer there. In fact it was the original Mel's. The surviving Mel's locations played up the movie, going all out with black and white stills and memorabilia, but where Ron Howard and Richard Dreyfuss pulled up and went inside in fictitious 1962, where the camera angle shut out the rest of the city and made you think it was a small town in the Central Valley, was the one on South Van Ness.

Parking was brutal and I squeezed into a spot three blocks away. I rang some bells at random and after a minute one guy opened a second-story window and I asked which apartment was Hal's, and the guy said he thought it was 6 and buzzed me in.

Hal opened the door wearing boxers and a t-shirt and rubbing his eyes. I said, "I

don't like to bother you, but Hal, right? My name's Matt."

"Yes?"

"You know an Aimee."

The guy froze. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, nothing like that. I wanted to speak to her boyfriend though."

"Well that's me," Hal said.

"Oh."

"You might as well come in. Ignore the mess. I don't last too long in the evening, as you can see. With global trading they got me going in middle of the night."

"They're an investment bank?"

"Yeah, Perrin Jericho, on Clay. Don't get me wrong, the pay's great, but now and then you do question the MBA route."

"I read something though, right? Wall Street's supposed to be cracking down on that, piling the hours on the new guys."

"They'll work around it. Just like playing football in high school. They have optional summer practices but if you don't

show up you're in the doghouse. What about Aimee?"

"Nothing, except I met her at an art class and she said her boyfriend hit her today."

"She *said* that? You sure?"

"I don't know. According to her, the boyfriend went to Hal's."

"Fuck," Hal said.

"What?"

"We did have an argument, but I was at work. She called me bent out of shape, asking should she quit her modeling gig."

"What'd you tell her?"

"That I didn't care for it. I mean I had sort of liked it, the idea of it, until we'd been going out a few weeks . . . What, you came over here to punch me in the face?"

I said, "Not exactly sure. It just hit a nerve."

"Well I haven't even seen Aimee for a couple of days," Hal said. "Frankly, she scares me sometimes. She distorts things."

There were footsteps in the hall and the door opened and an unshaved kid came in wearing a backpack and a Carolina Panthers hat. "You mind if I crash here tonight?" he said to Hal.

Hal said fine. The kid extended his hand. "I'm Kenny, by the way."

I took a moment to visualize it in slow motion, the way my uncle taught me, the compact extension and the clean follow-through, before I reared back and caught the guy flush on the chin, the guy on the ground as I got out of there, not flying but fast enough.

#

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. I couldn't pinpoint any of them, but flowering

cactuses, cottonwoods, velvet mesquite and night blooming cereus might qualify.

I'd admittedly gotten a little thrown off there in a guy's condo, 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 I figured might as well check the pool area, pick up a loose Time Magazine, whatever.

You could make out a few figures lounging around the main pool, a couple yellowish lights on at this hour . . . and this had been the case another time I 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 I thought Jeez should I bother her . . . but you could at least say hi.

“Well you’re a night owl,” she said, closing the book, same perky smile as from the courts.

I took it as a signal to sit down for a minute and I 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 usually as well,” she said.

“What I’m getting to--the ocean air makes a difference, 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? I reminded myself to stop complaining, this gal had probably 40 years on me, and look at her going strong.

“33 but not important. 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?”

I 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,” I said. “Too many James Pattersons.”

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.

I said, “I’m going to bore you, but I’m kinda trying to write one of those myself.”

“Really.” 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 Richard 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.”

I said, “I was either telling someone, or thinking it to myself . . . you have a spark, you know that?”

Lucy laughed. “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,” I 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. Unhuh." 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 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," I 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.

I wasn't sure myself. My understanding was the instructor back in Manhattan Beach, Finch, suggested taking a week off, following some fireworks. Not sure if it fell apart after that, I hadn't checked in.

I 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. If it's boring, I might fall asleep right here in this chaise lounge, which is fine too." She gave me a playful wink.

I 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.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking, but 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,” I 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 such?”

“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.”

I said, "I feel like you know me pretty well. You're on my 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," I said, "but then on late night radio--when you can't sleep--like now--various guests 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 is reasonable."

"You'd think. Did you ever watch the old show Run For Your Life with Ben Gazzarra?"

"Oh yes. I haven't heard that one mentioned in years."

"Way before my time but I started looking at it on YouTube. 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. "And each episode was independent, correct?"

"Right, standalones," I said. "So they're making suggestions--my guy's offspring--like go experience New Zealand, go snorkeling in the Caribbean . . . 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 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 30th high school reunion, and that guy remembers it again, and starts telling his wife about it, laughing.”

“No,” Lucy said.

“Right,” I said, “not enough. I think I’m gonna go with him zeroing in on the sub-human who stiffed his brother out of 169,000 dollars, and has gotten away with it, la-di-da, for several decades.”

Lucy thought about it. “That’s better. As the reader, I’d be more apt to 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 Bobby 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 minute. “I saw one of those myself,” she said, “hovering over a silver mine in New Mexico.”

There was a serious tone to it, and I didn’t say anything.

“With my dad,” she said, her voice cracking just a bit. “I was four.”

I waited, in case there was a punch line, and there wasn't . . . and I took her hand, and she was good with it, and we sat there.

I thought of a story I was going to tell her earlier but hadn't, where heading home from a picnic I 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 me of it.

