

South Harbour

3000 words

Matt stepped out the door for his afternoon walk. 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 Matt 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 that informed 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 here. 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 Matt was headed, but he 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 they had. 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 his 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 Matt wasn't particularly worried about the virus and didn't take many precautions himself, but it was the idea of outsiders coming in ignoring them that hit a nerve.

At any rate . . . he 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 Matt went over and said hi, and she said hi back, trying to keep it nonchalant in front of her friends, and Matt said what are you *doing* here?

Deena got out and they talked for a minute and Matt invited her over for a little happy hour, told her bring whoever she wants, and he gave her the address and they 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 he tried to put the moves on her once in college. He was at the JC and she was at Arizona State but back for Thanksgiving break--and they had an okay time but the moves didn't work.

Matt got home and checked his inventory and figured there were enough odds and ends that you could maybe 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 Matt gave it the big smile and waved them in.

It was a little awkward at first, Matt announcing that his 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?" Matt 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,” Matt 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,” Matt 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.”

“Whoo,” 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.

Matt cleared his 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 for a while 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,” Matt 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 Matt, “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.

Matt 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 clients. 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 Matt could have been imagining it but he detected a slight purr in her delivery,

and he 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?"

Matt 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?"

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

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

Over the railing Matt could see a guy he 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," he 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."

Matt 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,” Matt 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.”

Matt 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.”

Matt 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 more of a *photo* art model now . . . Well that's good, you've carved out a niche."

"Actually I evolved a bit further. I make shorts."

Matt looked at her a moment to make sure she was serious. "Yeah?" he said, and his 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.”

Matt was pretty sure *back end* wasn’t the image that he momentarily flashed on, but still. He 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 all out of stock now. Have you looked on Amazon?”

Matt said he hadn’t, but he got the gist, you had all the work from home and Zoom type shit gobbling up the electronics . . . but he 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,” Matt 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.”

Matt held onto that one for a minute, and before he 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.”

Matt 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.

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

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

He 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,” Matt 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 them.

Matt 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.