

CHAPTER ONE: THE GAME IS A FOOT

Yeah, well, it's me again. Hey, it's only been a short while since we last hung out. Not too bad, considering our previous hiatus lasted twenty-seven years, am I right? And actually, it might've been even shorter if not for some stuff that happened in-between. But, first things first.

Holly got home after seeing our daughter Jacqueline and her beau, Taylor Butterwood, off to Yosemite. We had a busy time after that for most of the summer, which seems odd for a couple of semi-retired young farts. Went to a bunch of Padres games (kicked the shit out of the hated Dodgers in a couple of them), rode our bikes up and down the coast, even drove out to the desert for what turned out to be an abbreviated hike, given that the temperature reached 193° in the shade. Okay, I'm kidding, it was only 153°. Mostly good times, ya think?

Then, as the summer waned, my good buddy, Phil Melkowitz and his wife, Jennifer—Holly's cousin, remember?—talked us into going line dancing at a local senior center. Let me rephrase that: they talked *Holly* into going, and she convinced me by pointing out that I might need to sleep in the backyard for a couple of nights if I didn't go, so how could I refuse? Now you gotta understand, dancing and me are not compatible. I couldn't do a decent jig if Doc Holliday fired bullets at my feet from his Colt .45. The only reality show I'd qualify for would be *Dancing with the Maladroits*. Think about a spastic marionette. Okay, you've got the picture, right?

But a bit of practice to a YouTube video and some encouraging words from my bride and I was **good to go**. Her words, not mine.

So, you ask, how did it all play out? How good was I to go? Well, about two minutes in I bumped into ninety-six-year-old Henrietta Mumphrey—best line dancer at the senior center, they told me—and drop-kicked her across half the room. Phil managed to break her fall with a sprawling save but sprained his ankle in the process, and as I went to help them, I stepped on Holly's foot, which swelled up like that Storm guy in *Big Trouble in Little China*. I was asked none-too-politely to exit the dance floor by the facilitator and a whole lot of other participants, which had to be a given anyway, considering Holly's Fay Wray scream and Phil's excessive use of questionable language. At least I didn't have to dance anymore.

So for the next week or so Jennifer and I catered to the whims of our respective mates as they lounged with ice packs on their ow-ees. Smart-ass Phil would send me texts every so often with the names of various Personal Injury Attorneys in the greater San Diego area. I'm sure he thought that was funny as hell. I mean, he's my best buddy of a gazillion years, and now sort of a relative, so I'm sure he wouldn't sue me...would he?

Anyway, with Holly working from home and with me being her dutiful slave, I couldn't slip out to get back on the Ultimate Bike Path for a while. Considering what happened the last time, I started to worry that the Old Guy and his bunch might forget about me, despite him swearing that would never happen again, so I put it to the test and tuned to *Telemundo* on the tube .Yep, I could understand every word of the current soap opera. (“*María va a tener el bebé de Juan, a pesar de que él es un hombre sin testículos.*”) The UT17 still worked. Then, I checked my sock drawer to make sure the Bukko hadn't been beamed up. Still there, behind a pair of *Jurassic World* socks, a gag gift from good buddy Phil, who said that the Dilophosaurus pictured on them reminded him of me. Tell the truth, I too could see a slight resemblance.

Anyway, those were promising signs, and an even better one happened a few days ago, just as I stepped out of the shower. Words appeared on the steamy mirror:

READY TO GET BACK, JACK? – O.G.

“Yeah, real soon,” I whispered into the ether, relieved that my favorite alien wasn't off doing something that involved maggots or fecal matter or cockroach larvae or something along those lines. Or maybe he was, but he always said that my intrepid exploits along the *mbuva lun gallee* had priority.

Then, yesterday, Holly informed me that the threat of amputation no longer existed, that her foot felt much better, and she would be headed into work the next morning for a **meeting**, one of the mainstays of the corporate world. At 7:30 a.m., no less. Ah-ha! In the steamy mirror I wrote:

8:30 A.M. TOMORROW

He responded with a crude image of a thumbs-up (I taught him that), and we didn't have to say **where** to meet. We both knew. So do you guys.

So this morning Holly toddled off to work, and Camp Pendleton is where I'm headed to now, driving up the Coast Highway—screw the freeway—and you're coming with me, of course. But before we get there, I've got one more thing to tell you.

This is kind of a sad note. Remember Sadie Melman, the Woman of a Thousand *Oys*, my late mom's best friend? Well, she passed away last week at the ripe old age of ninety-three. I only found out because her daughter, Harriet Rosenkranz, emailed me Sadie's obituary. Harriet, who also lives at Centurion Village in South Florida, knew that her mother's updates gave me **great nachis**—her words—and offered to continue the tradition. I thanked her and said that she didn't have to go to all that trouble. She wrote *Have a nice life, Mister Miller*. Whew!

Every so often the Marines tested heavy ordnance on Camp Pendleton. You could hear the blasts and feel the shaking around most of San Diego County. Those were the days I rode my bike southward, or opted for long walks on the beach. It didn't appear they would be warming up the big guns today, although something that happened at the entrance made me wonder.

The crisply dressed Marine at the gate—he looked to be about twelve years old, and I **swear** he had been cloned from a guard that I remembered from twenty-seven years ago—checked my DBIDS Recreational Bicycle pass/credential, but instead of the usual breathless “HaveagooddaySIR!” he asked, “AreyougoinguptoLasPulgasRoadSIR?”

I wasn't, but he didn't need to know that. “Uh, yeah...why?”

“Turnleftnotrightdon'twentyoublownupSIR!”

Hub? Blown up? Does that mean they're testing ordnance? “Okay, where exactly shouldn't I...”

Ah-ha, the kid cracked a smile! A tiny one, but I could tell. First guy or gal I ever saw here with a sense of humor.

“JustkiddinghaveanicedaySIR!” He waved me through.

So, the next shocker occurred shortly thereafter, when I made the turn onto Stuart Mesa Road and glanced up the steep hill. Oh great, this had to be the largest number of seniors that I'd ever seen here, a line that stretched at least an eighth of a mile. They had to come from every assisted living and memory care facility in Oceanside and surrounding towns. What was it, the **Annual Make it to the End Without Meeting Your End** ride? Forget the bike lane, I'd have to ride up in the road, possibly dodging Humvees or Joint Light Tactical Vehicles or whatever. Well, it was either that or wait a couple of days until all of them reached the top. I started up the hill.

Yeah, I know, I'll be an old fart too one day. (I intend to remain a *young* fart for as long as I can.) So I have to give these folks credit. The thousand or so—give or take—at the end of the line had already gotten off their bikes and were inching along on their tennis shoes, but hey, they were smiling and chatting and seemed to be enjoying the (interminable) nice weather. The 7,236 elders—give or take—in the middle remained on their bikes, huffing and puffing as they made slow but steady progress. Three young women and two guys—all garbed in white, likely nurses or aides from some of the aforementioned senior facilities—rode with them, their backpacks probably stuffed with defibrillators and canisters of oxygen. A wise choice, ya think?

And at the forefront, separated from the pack by fifty yards, rode about a dozen—for real—elderly jocks, most of them from the same senior place that I'd often encountered on previous rides. All of their past efforts had really paid off. None of them appeared to be in immediate need of CPR, especially the pair in the lead: yep, Dottie and Carl.

In all the times I'd seen them I can't recall this anything-but-blissfully married couple riding side by side. One usually followed the other. This time an energized Carl held his position as the leader of the pack. He even belted out a chorus of that golden oldie by the Shangri-las.

“He's such an asshole, isn't he, sonny?” Dottie sighed as I rode past, and yeah, she performed her usual bump-and-grind.

“Hey Dottie,” the hyper Carl hollered over his shoulder, “I’m horny and can’t wait to get back to the abode later. Like Jesse Ventura once said, I’m a Sexual Tyrannosaurus!”

“You’re right about one thing, Carl,” Dottie countered, “you *are* a fucking dinosaur!”

I got the hell out of there, *fast*.

Okay, I did slow down a bit before reaching the top of the hill, because after all I *am* a young fart, and I needed to conserve energy before hitting the *mbuva lun gallee*. But I had practically gotten there anyway, so it wasn’t a big deal. The lone eucalyptus tree—the Starting Point—came into view quickly, and the Old Guy, standing alongside his ten-speed Schwinn World relic, waved vigorously.

“Halloo Jack!” he yelled, sort of like I hadn’t seen him in twenty-seven years, rather than not too long ago, when this whole adventure began once again.

I almost didn’t want to respond, because as usual he was dressed rather inappropriately, not just for bicycling but for life itself. Other riders, as well as drivers going in and out of the Lincoln Military Stuart Mesa Housing development, were taking note. He wore what amounted to an orange prison jumpsuit and a pair of blindingly white tennis shoes. What the hey!

“Jack, it’s wonderful to see you again,” he said as I pulled up in front of him. “I hope you and your female... Uh, is something wrong?”

He must’ve noticed my scrunched-up face as I pointed at his outfit. “What’s with this—”

“Yes, is in not amazing?” he interrupted. “During a brief Study Group hiatus I visited the garden world of Hernia Prime for some...” Finger into ear. “...R & R.” Finger out. “I attended a reception at the Governor’s residence, where chance saw to it that I saved the poor fellow from an assassination attempt. In appreciation he awarded me this outfit, which is only worn by Hernians of the highest caste. I am honored to wear such a splendid garment!”

Yeah, I hated to burst his bubble, but what the hey. “When you get back to your Study Group, I suggest you *study* an American television series called *Orange is the New Black*. I think you’ll—”

“Why wait?” he interrupted again. (Did I teach him the art of rudeness?) He closed his eyes and raised both hands to the sky, which drew the stares and comments of even more passersby. I backed away a few steps as he held that pose for what felt like an hour but had to be only twenty seconds or so.

“Oh dear!” he suddenly exclaimed as his hands fell to his sides. “I see what you mean. Thank you, Jack.”

“You checked out one of the episodes?” I asked.

“I absorbed all of them. Yes, I must do something about this.”

He *absorbed* over ninety episodes of that show? Okay, but before I could even get my head around that, something odd happened. The Old Guy began to spin like a dervish in warp speed. I expected him to wink out at any moment. It only lasted a few seconds, and when he came to an abrupt stop—okay, this really weirded me out—he was dressed in gnarly jeans, a pair of brown deck shoes, and a tee-shirt that read, **I’m Not Over the Hill Yet—It’s Too Fucking Hard to Climb It**. I gotta say, at least it was less subtle than a prison jumpsuit.

“How...how did you—”

“Part of the half you wouldn’t understand,” he interrupted...*again!* “Now, I do believe it is time you returned to the *mbuva lun gallee*, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. But there’s only one problem.”

This was the closest I ever saw him come to a perfect Mr. Spock cock of the eyebrow. “Oh?”

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the first two groups of seniors, both of which had just summited the mountain and now stopped to exchange information about next of kin and preferred mortuary. “Check out what’s farther down the hill.”

The Old Guy closed his eyes and peered at the heavens for a moment before looking at me again. “Yes, I see what you mean. We will just have to be patient. So, Jack, how’s the family? How are your Padres doing? Isn’t this lovely weather? Do those gas prices not suck?”

Hub? “Excuse me?”

“We of the Study Group recently checked out the art of **small talk**. Uh, did I not do it correctly?”

“You did okay. But why don’t you and the boys spend some useful time checking out another hill I can go down, one without a million people using it all the time? There are plenty of hills in this neck of the woods.”

He shook his head. As usual I thought something rattled. “As I’ve told you in the past, only certain hills can deposit you on the *mbuwa lun gallee* without incident. Or have you forgotten what happened when you went down the...” Finger in. “...Torrey Pines grade?” Finger out.

Whoa, surprise! “You...knew about that?”

“We learned of it after the fact. But I...” Finger in. “...covered your ass...” Finger out. “...so nothing came of it. Anyway, we have been doing our research, and so far we’ve come across only one that matches the perfection of the Stuart Mesa hill.”

“Okay, see? One is all we need. Where is it?”

“It is on the outskirts of Bison Breath, Nebraska, about two miles from—”

“Wait a minute!” I interrupted...finally. “You need to narrow your search parameters to this area of Southern California, not the whole freaking country.”

Finger in again. “Ah yes, how could we be so unwise?” Finger out. “That is not exactly in your...neck of the woods. We will limit it to places you can easily reach. But for now...”

He indicated the bike lane on the other side of the road, where the third contingent of seniors—the ones on foot—had just reached the top of what they probably thought of as K-9. Their earlier camaraderie had been replaced by some heavy breathing, but give ’em credit, they were all ambulatory, and they brushed off the dutiful aides who attempted to provide them with oxygen, defibrillators, bottled water, and other life-saving tools. As one they mounted their bikes and pedaled off to join the others on their northward journey.

“Yeah, great,” I muttered, “but there are probably—”

“Go, Jack!” the Old Guy shouted. “You have nine seconds all to yourself!”

Okay, that interruption didn’t bother me. Wow, a big nine seconds! Without so much as an *à plus tard alligator* or a *vaya con dios* I tore ass down the Stuart Mesa hill, and those nine seconds passed rather quickly, because far below I saw a FedEx truck making its turn onto the road as I hit the necessary speed and shifted into the 22nd gear...