

## *Excerpts*

Most of this story takes place in the communities along the coast just north of San Diego. “North County,” as it’s called, refers to the northern part of San Diego County with an aggregate population a bit less than half that of San Diego. It’s known for its affluent residents, especially in the beach communities of Del Mar, Solana Beach, Cardiff-by-the-Sea, Encinitas, and Carlsbad, as well as in the inland communities of Olivenhain and Rancho Santa Fe.

A lot of good, salt-of-the-earth, family-loving and God-fearing people live here. But nobody wants to read about them. Much more interesting are the lives of those whose moral compasses are a bit more fluid. They say that money is power, and that power corrupts, so the result can be a mix of twisted ideals and bizarre behavior, especially when it comes to relationships. It’s hard to dream here, or have much of an imagination, because that which you dream or imagine is already being played out by somebody in real life. It’s a reality show of sorts, of which I have become a part!

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*Match.com has been good to me*, I nearly said out loud, as I weaved my way north on Interstate 5 toward Del Mar.

“The Five,” as it’s called, will take you from the Mexican border crossing at Tijuana, Baja California and San Ysidro, CA all the way north to the Canadian border crossing at Blaine, Washington and Surrey, British Columbia. Fortunately, my travels were only taking me as far as Del Mar to meet my next Match.com victim. I realize that “victim” is a crass way to refer to my future soulmate, but I’ve found that a sense of humor goes a long way in the online dating world.

There had been disappointments along the way, like the women who’d posted pictures of someone else to reel me in, or those not-so-few who posted pictures of themselves but twenty years younger.

*What the hell were they thinking?*

I’ve heard that men do some quite dishonest things as well, especially when it comes to pictures, age and well, wealth. This was Southern California after all, where as a man, you flaunted your wealth even if it didn’t exist. And if you were actually wealthy, it pretty much gave you license to behave however you wanted and to ignore the collateral damage along the way.

*How’s that for cynicism?*

It’s actually an awesome place to live, especially for the weather, which on this mid-February day had been a typical sunny “winter” day, with even more brilliant blue skies than in summer.

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I strode into the Poseidon for our 5:00 p.m. ocean view rendezvous. In my mid-fifties and still very active, I felt like I could compete with just about anybody. So, on this day, I was meeting a

forty-four year-old with two young boys. Maybe I could demonstrate a tolerance and a patience with young kids that my previous girlfriends had not.

*You're so full of shit*, I laughed to myself. Danielle was her name, and she texted me that she would be a few minutes late, as do the ladies almost 100% of the time.

*Fine with me, just gives me a chance to have a quick drink to loosen up and get into character.*

As she passed the hostess stand and emerged disoriented into the dimly lit bar, I saw immediately that Danielle was every bit as pretty as her pictures. We greeted each other awkwardly with the customary hug while she blurted out,

“Hi Richard, I’m Danielle!” in a high-pitched voice that really didn’t fit the package.

“Hi Danielle, you look great!” I said with nervous laughter, lacking anything more articulate to contribute as I was overwhelmed with her beauty- not the tall, blond bombshell type- but rather the petite, cuddly, sexy goddess with bronze skin tone who I briefly held easily in my arms.

“So do you!” she responded, in that same shrill voice while slowly backing away from my embrace just far enough to examine me head to toe.

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One of Danielle’s favorite places for dinner and drinks in the Del Mar / Rancho Santa Fe corridor was an upscale Italian restaurant called Cucina Enoteca. “Cucina,” as it’s known by locals, is housed in a two-story, 8,500 square-foot building in Del Mar’s Flower Hill Promenade, perfectly situated off The Five and equidistant from Del Mar and Rancho Santa Fe. It’s also conveniently located between the Del Mar Racetrack and the San Diego Polo Club, making it a brilliant choice of location and an absolute gold mine.

I must be honest- while I’ve now been to Cucina too many times to count, I think I’ve only sat in the restaurant section once or twice. It’s a pleasant and uneventful dining experience, with excellent food and service, and all that most of Cucina’s visitors ever see. But the real significance of Cucina- its “raison d’être”- its life’s blood- is the social dining area.

Twenty-five guests can sit cozily at the bar with another fifteen around the open kitchen. Add to that another twenty patrons can be seated at each of the two long social dining tables, where Tony can usually be found. Then there is standing room for those sucking down drinks and ogling the crowd for a total of a hundred and ten to a hundred and twenty Homo SoCalians on any given night. No wonder it’s so popular with the local singles, especially during the busy horse racing season or after polo matches.

While the restaurant crowd is totally oblivious to what goes on in the social dining area, the bartenders, waiters, waitresses, and regulars are dialed in. This was the lion’s den, the chapel, the petri dish if-you-will... and the center of the action for many of us at one time or another. Singles, married affairs, liars, manipulators, cold-hearted men and sly, ambitious women- everything, and everybody- seemed to pass through Cucina at some point or another.

Danielle introduced me to a world of beautiful people on the outside but whose deceit and dysfunctionality existed largely on the inside. One by one she told me her stories as she, prior to her divorce, had spent five years living in Rancho Santa Fe and frequented places like Cucina before and after her divorce. “See that woman in the blue skirt?” she would ask while nodding cautiously across the room, “Train Wreck!” she would whisper, and then she would tell the story.

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On my next visit to Cucina, I arrived solo. It was a busy night, and after giving up my seat next to Tony I struck up a conversation with a friend- an acquaintance, really, as I knew his name and we were on Facebook together- and we shared a few laughs. While standing in the open, triangular space between the bar, social dining tables, and the open kitchen, a woman walked by who really didn't seem to fit in with the regular crowd.

She was younger, maybe early to mid-30's, not particularly dressed up, wearing jeans and a plain off-white T-shirt. She was tall and slender, blond, very attractive actually, and a welcome sight even though she was at least twenty years younger than me (precisely because she was twenty years younger!).

My friend and I didn't interact with her at all, but we watched her as she slinked away, leaving her spot at the bar, then around the open kitchen and back to the farthest corner, presumably to the bathroom. As she found her way back to her seat at the bar, she had to pass through our visual forcefield. Nothing seemed very out of the ordinary, and while we did both look at her, which was unavoidable given the logistics, I wouldn't say that we gawked. Our tongues had remained firmly attached and inside our mouths.

But after just a few minutes she got up and walked right over to us, offered no greeting of any kind, and stated emphatically, “I have a boyfriend and I'm not going home with either of you fuckers!”

Just like that she said it. So, I asked, “Why are we ‘fuckers?’”

To which she replied, “Just attitude,” and then darted determinedly back to the safety of her bar seat.

*Even for Cucina, that was strange. Did it mean that we were so obviously looking to hook up that she was just taunting us? Had she already been hit on too many times since she arrived? Or was she just “Bat Shit Crazy?”*

Right about the time we had almost forgotten her, she stopped back by for an encore, announcing, “My boyfriend's in real estate,” as if that were news. And given that my friend and probably half of the people in the social dining area and bar were realtors, it was certainly underwhelming news.

We kept an eye on her though, trying not to be “fuckers,” but she was definitely acting peculiar. Hyper, bouncing along the long bar and pestering the bartenders at various points

along the way. We next heard that she'd been "cut off"- no more drinks- and soon after the flow of booze dried up, she vanished.

Bat shit crazy was the conclusion, at least by me and the other fucker.

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As things between Danielle and me seemed to be dissolving before my very eyes, the talk of past suiters, admirers, and well, creeps, increased. She described a man named David who had taken a special interest in her both before and after her divorce. According to Danielle, in all the Rancho Santa Fe events, of which there were many, he often ogled her in a very conspicuous manner.

She said that Creepy David had called her when she was married, and once she was divorced, he began calling and texting incessantly, begging her to go out for drinks or for an exquisite dinner, emphasizing "exquisite" and promising that she wouldn't regret it. She agreed to drinks and they met at Nick and G's in Rancho Santa Fe, classy and rather safe as typically there's not a large crowd in the bar, especially on weekdays.

Not really an attractive guy, a bit overweight, poor skin complexion, and with perhaps a Mediterranean or Middle Eastern nose; he carried himself with confidence, as he surveyed the other villagers- customers, hostesses, waiters, and bartenders- with disdain, while maintaining a faint smirk just noticeable enough that you knew he was totally indifferent to anyone but himself and, in this moment, Danielle.

She looked delectable, and you could see it in his eyes. They started with small talk, catching up on the weather, kids, recent events, and how gorgeous and sexy Danielle looked. "Danielle, I find you an extremely sexy and desirable woman," he hissed, "the only kind of woman who gets to spend time with me. I typically get whatever I want since I'm worth hundreds of millions of dollars, but I can assure you we will both benefit from this."

"Benefit from what?" she thought.

"I can support you and your boys. You'll never have to worry about money again. I can send your boys to the best Ivy League schools. It's easy for me. You would only have to commit to being available when I want you, that's all. What do you say?"

Danielle was a smart cookie and maintained a poker face. She was somehow exhilarated, although she knew that this wasn't the relationship she wanted. It clearly had not been a marriage proposal. He didn't want to be a husband and father, rather he wanted to exchange his money for her companionship and sex; and she wasn't going to give it up solely for money, which meant nothing to him. Nevertheless, it was an interesting experience for her.

She told him, "No," politely, which he ignored. And now that he'd made it clear what he wanted, he got more graphic with his personal life and the women who visited him at night-

mostly younger women who enjoyed his place, his booze, and whatever else he was serving- and stayed until late, he boasted.

“TMI,” she thought to herself.

But they were nothing like her, he clarified with a wolfish grin.

“And he needed a trip to the dentist,” she thought with a smile.

She finally got out of there and went along with her evening. David continued to contact her, and the two even met up a second time for a complete replay of meeting one. Nothing really new to the story this time, yet still she endured his arrogant, self-centered spiel about his life, his wealth, women who constantly came over to his place late at night, and how much he fantasized about her.

I wonder how many women Creepy David must have met to conclude an arrangement like the one he offered to Danielle. I mean, there must have been some positive reinforcement, a certain percentage of women who rewarded him for his efforts or else the words wouldn't flow so effortlessly from his mouth. Or maybe it started there and morphed into “coming by my house late at night,” and nobody ever went to the Ivy League. I'm pretty sure the education of today's youth wasn't high on his priority list. But Danielle sure was.

And a guy like that could certainly afford escort services 24/7, of which there is no shortage in North County. So maybe it wasn't the hotness or the sex but rather the game, the hunt, the conquest. Perhaps that's the most intriguing element of the process with companionship and sex only secondary. One thing for sure, there is no shortage of guys like Creepy David working the available market.