

# Casting Shadows

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## *Venice, California 1996*

I sit on a concrete block, smoking, ruminating. *How did this happen? How did it all fall apart so quickly? I mean, one minute I'm a hot shot entrepreneur and the next I'm squatting in a house that's about to be torn-*

The phone number hits my inbox. I hop over the remnants of my tragically ahead-of-its-time e-commerce venture, whip out the trash front bag door, and cruise down to my new office: a sticky, Venice Beach payphone.

Unlike me, Phil is a successful Silicon Valley executive cashing in on stock options. But despite our class disparity, we've got something in common. We're both jocks. Closet cases. Undetectable. His confident surfer-drawl washes over me like the crest of a wave. He sounds just like the guys I hang out with at the beach. My anxiety settles to a simmer. I'm not alone.

Phil's about ten years older than me. He's married with four young kids. He says he's never hired a male escort. Sure, he's been looking for a while, but after seeing photos of me and my yard sale surfboard, he insists that I'm the first real athlete he's seen in the business - the first guy with whom he feels a connection.

Phil has a secret that he claims to have never discussed with anyone until now. Long as he can remember, he's been inexplicably aroused by sports injuries.

I find a couple of websites devoted to worshipping broken limbs on the mend, and there are photos galore. A woman with a mullet crutches through Wal Mart. A tiny Asian

man in an elbow cast orders a Big Mac. No, this kink is hardly the sole property of my new best buddy. I'm sort of intrigued.

For our first meeting, Phil pulls up to the San Diego bus station in a snazzy rental car. *I wonder if I'll be attracted to him.* I get a flash of his pearly whites and big forehead through the passenger seat window. Still can't tell. I get in the car, shake his hand, and buckle up. My adrenal gland squirts a heavy dose of ephedrine into my bloodstream. The whole thing's a big rush, like sports.

Phil drives to a suburban delicatessen where he parks, leans over the leather armrest, straps a splint onto my leg, hands me two wooden crutches, and suggests that I go order some lunch.

I toddle across the parking lot while concerns with my own pleasure, my own level of physical attraction toward Phil, get kicked around on the asphalt with the pebbles. I push open the door with the crutch's rubber bumper, twist through the glass door, and make my way over to the counter. "Chicken salad sandwich and a crème soda, please."

"\$9.57, honey," says the cashier, a dead ringer for Florence Jean Castleberry.

"Sure, no problem," I lean on my crutch and fumble with my wallet.

"Let me help," Flo zips around and picks up my tray in a motherly fuss. "Where are you sitting, sweetie?"

Phil's brown Cole Haans tap anxiously on the linoleum floor.

Flo sets down my food. She raises a suspicious eyebrow.

Eyes darting between us, Phil forces out a preoccupied, "Uh, yeah, hi."

Flo walks away.

"Dude, that was so hot," whispers Phil. "Dontcha think?"

I open wide for the sandwich. *Do I agree? Was it hot? It's not like I got an erection or anything. I don't know, I guess it was hot.* "Totally," I say with loaded chipmunk cheeks.

Phil exhales, leans back in his chair, and crosses his tanned arms behind his head. He seems relaxed for the first time since he picked me up. I must have done something right. I proceed to open up, downloading the important parts of my life, like I always do, to anyone who appears to be listening.

"I'm going to a conference in Manhattan in a couple of months," he interrupts. "How 'bout I fly you out there and put a *real* cast on your leg?"

"Sure" I say, crunching celery bits, "Sounds fun."

I have no idea what to charge for the afternoon's benign charade. In my mind, Phil and I share secrets, which basically makes him my (only) friend. Besides, I'd only entered my name to that escort directory in order to send traffic to the Ten Bucks to See the Naked Surfer site that I'd thrown up for survival. Luckily, Phil slips me five hundred dollars when he drops me off at the Greyhound station.

I white-knuckle the bills from San Diego to L.A. but when I transfer westbound my grip loosens and my jaw relaxes. Then I feel weightless, like I'm lifting right off that bus seat and out that tiny sliver of window. Five hundred is just enough for me to move off the street and into that little studio I've been eyeballing - the one right on the sand with enough room for a futon AND a computer - the one that is about to become my stage for the next calendar year as I broadcast my life to the entire world.

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Okay, I admit it. Even before I plug it in, that smooth little ball-camera made my dick jump. Turns out I'm not only a closet homosexual but a budding exhibitionist to boot. And thirty minutes after rubbing my junk into the little glass eye, my inbox is clogged with credit card receipts and what seems like hundreds of emails from guys around the world telling me I AM HOT.

I feel like I've punched a hole in the universe. All the attention I ever wanted from my brother, my father, my coaches - served up in a matter of minutes. *Who needs Hollywood? I just hit the center!* I wipe the lube off my hands, pull up my faded blue lightning bolt board shorts, and stumble out the door in a daze. Heart pounding, I rollerblade to the far end of the pier and draw in a huge breath of salty air. There I watch droves of Hispanic families making their weekly mass exodus from the sand. On either side of me, old anglers cast fishing lines. I tower in the middle of them, a big blond alien on wheels.

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Cyber peep show technology is in its infancy, and almost immediately, fellow geeks swarm in to build banners that link me all over the web. I send out a Surf and Sex Report, announcing weekly ocean conditions and show times. Dissected into parts and squeezed through the wires, my club membership numbers soar as the general public begins purchasing home computers and cashing in on free AOL hours.

I am living large, riding high on a steady diet of wheat grass, waves, and 70's porn. When I'm not on camera, I am mixing techno music on my laptop or eating soft tacos at the end of Washington Blvd. I am always in shorts. I don't ever want this to end.

I email my biological family on the East Coast and announce “I finally realize what I am. An artist!”

Silence.

But no matter, I am at an all-time creative high. I enhance my shows with cheeky themes and supporting props. In Campout, I stealthily emerge from my sleeping bag with a flashlight before beating off. In Working Stiff, I pose like a salesman in my old button down shirt before beating off. In Super Heroes, three-inch Aquaman and Superman action figures battle it out on my rod before - well, you get the picture. I hold up perky little signs like, “Hey Walter, thanks for the pie!” and “This one’s for you, Tatsuro!” Pretty soon I am selling used underwear and ziplocked body fluids, translating my website into Kanji, and doubling my schedule to accommodate four major time zones. I am sun-drenched, sea-salted, and Alive when the phone rings.

“How’s that leg feeling?” Phil pants excitedly. “You hurt it pretty badly, huh?”

“Oh man, it hurts real bad, dude. I think it might be broken.” My voice cracks. It’s the first I’ve used it in weeks.

“Well, we need to get you into a cast immediately,” he says. “I know a great doctor in Manhattan. How’s next Tuesday?”

### ***New York City***

I am exhausted but ecstatic while being whipped in a taxi around the dark parks and lit up sky-scrapers. Phil, still in a dressed in a pressed olive suit from his conference, meets me in the lobby. We take the elevator to his suite where I set up my laptop and camera. I give him a Yankees cap, turn his back to the camera, and, as if commissioned

by the Manhattan Medical Channel itself, I web-cast the casting - live from the Plaza Fucking Hotel in New York City.

I lean back and relax in the shadows while he slathers cold goop over my thick, muscled thigh. In the silence I realize that for the first time in months I am not an object. I am not alone on my little stage, looking the other way as faceless voyeurs privately project their fantasies. I am another artist's canvas, and this works for me today. I am being used for some sort of higher purpose that neither of us knows anything about.

Once the black fiberglass is set and the camera is off, Phil takes me to dinner and a Sandra Bernhardt show. Hanging ten paces behind me, Phil watches as notoriously aggressive New Yorkers make way for the injured surfer. Turns out the public attention is the thing that *really* sends Phil into orbit. When we return to the room, he jacks off in a chair while I remind him of the blue haired lady that held the door open and the handsome young usher that asked, "What happened to your leg?"

That night Phil and I sleep in a king size bed with a healthy three feet of space between us. My knee itches and I can't turn over on my side. But even so, there is something strangely comforting about being restrained. With my options limited, I am safe somehow. Or maybe it's the thousand-count sheets.

We repeat the evening's performance twice in three days and the whole time, Phil never comes onto me. I've grown so accustomed to regularly scheduled masturbation so by the third night, I'm horny like a sailor. *Why isn't he hitting on me? Why isn't he making me show off for him?* Money from the casting session is rolling in but I miss my voyeurs. I am convinced there's something wrong with me, like I'm dirty or Gay or something. I need to get back online.

At three a.m. on the morning before take-off, I wake to a strange sensation. As I lay on my back with my eyes open to the darkness, it dawns on me that Phil is quietly humping my cast. With the hard black barrier eliminating any possible sensation, my mind drifts toward metaphor of the things that keep men apart - wives, religious doctrine, social mores, waitresses named Flo - or could it be something deeper? A state of being that they are all so quick to label *homophobia or the closet* when it in fact, exists *outside* the realm of liberal politics: the simple desire to *be* a man despite the fact that one *desires* men.

Of course neither of us ever addresses the incident (that would be way too girly!), so other than the drama of lugging huge Hefty bags of cast scraps through the crowded lobby, we part discretely.

Riding back through the city, this time in a fancy limousine, I can just imagine that Phil is satisfied, eager to return home and love up his wife and little surfer babies. And me? Well I just clutch my bills and gaze out the window thinking of the beach, my webcam, and the little taco stand down the street. Staring at the endless herd of worker-bees buzzing about Fifth Avenue in their crisp white shirts and shiny black shoes, I'm Steve McQueen in my blue jeans. I am the international man of mystery. I have a secret, and boy is it a doozy.