

One Day in L.A.

'So Spike, tell me, why I should hire you?'

Richard, Rick – 'call me 'Rocky" Belmonte , a small, intense, Italian / American New Yorker - the Vice President of ViSiT Media, had thrust a bottle of fizzy larger into my hand when he barked his question. The bottle was so cold that ice clung to the neck and my fingers stuck to the label. Adult Americans are not grown-ups, they like theme parks and sweet sugary food, they like their leaders to wear baseball caps and talk like all action cartoon heroes (even if what they say is crap) and they like their beer cold so you can't taste the bitterness of the wheat and hops or feel the effect of the alcohol – I gulped down the beer and smiled at Rocky. The question wasn't a total surprise, in the six previous interviews I had endured that day, all the inquisitors had fired it at me. Despite this, I still didn't have an answer – if I was them I wouldn't employ me, in fact, I wouldn't have invited me to the first interview, in Soho, London, and I certainly wouldn't have agreed to fly me out to LA for a day of interviews and a free day of R&R (all 'reasonable' expenses paid!!)

'I really understand the UK film industry, yer know - the whole computer graphics piece – I know I can get you in bed with the 'top guns' in the graphics houses' I lied

'Yeh really?' Rocky took a small sip of beer, his first, I sucked the last drop from my bottle 'Do you know Tom Naylor, Head of Pictureworld?'

'Eh no – are you in bed with him?'

'Are you frigging with me Spike?'

A waitress had conveniently appeared and presented me with a fresh bottle of beer – I dropped \$4 on her tray and took a long suck. Rocky eyed me suspiciously and took another small sip from his bottle. I didn't, know Tom Naylor, in fact, I didn't know anyone in the film industry, first hand. The total sum of my knowledge had been gleaned from a, drink laden, cramming session with my mate Dave who had made a small fortune selling over priced technology to over paid film execs for a number of years.

'We'll be in contact' Rocky's hollow parting words thrust themselves into my mind as I scrubbed the previous nights excesses from my teeth. My head hurt – what was I doing here - I'm a sculptor, an artist - a penniless artist - that's what I was doing here – I need money, I need a proper job!

One of the very best things about the USA, in my opinion, is their breakfast – a high calorie, vitamin C and caffeine infused hangover cure and one of the best things about the Holiday Inn, South Figueroa Street in downtown Los Angeles, is

that they can have it delivered to your bedroom within minutes. With this mornings breakfast I was pleased to see a copy of 'LA Herald'. I sipped the piping hot black coffee and gulped the freshly squeezed Californian orange juice and forked my way, greedily, through eggs - easy over, hash browns and mushrooms and gobbled down four heavily buttered slices of toasted , sour dough, bread whilst I turned the pages of the LA Herald.

I had 24 hours of free time – 'R&R' as Rocky had described it and I had no idea what I was going to do, other than, EVERYTHING!!. The interviews seemed a long time ago now and despite an overwhelming feeling of desperation, based on the certainty that I had failed to impress, I was determined to enjoy my brief stay in the 'City of Angels'

'LA Herald' is 20 pages of surgery adverts, 20 pages of sex adverts and 3 pages of what's on, it's a crap read if you're looking for entertainment in LA, but , if you're looking for a bottom tuck or sadomasochistic sex, or feasibly both! It's excellent. However, under a small section in the middle three pages, headed 'Gig Guide' I noticed that Eddie Izzard!, was down to play the 'Viper Rooms' that evening.

Bernette, the waitress from the previous night, had witnessed my 'interview' with Rocky and had consoled me with the offer of more fizzy beer – "on the house" when he had left

'What d'yar do?' she had asked

'I'm a sculptor'

'Geez that's cool, I'm an Opera singer'

'Fantastic' I had said, and gratefully accepted the free beer, neither of us thought this exchange at all unusual – this is LA and everyone does something else, is someone else. Bernette, as well as being an Opera singer and generous waitress was, also, absolutely stunning.

It was Bernette who had mentioned the Viper Rooms as 'the place to go', the caffeine and orange juice were working their magic and I was beginning to formulate the outline of an agenda for the day ahead. The end of the day was sorted – Johnny Depps 'Viper Rooms' on Sunset Boulevard, this is where River Phoenix had ended his days, Bernette had told me, and where, Eddie would probably die on stage that night.

With breakfast finished, and my hangover all but gone, I got on the phone to Peter.

'Hi, LA Classic Limousines, Peter speaking'

'Hi Peter, it's Spike, can you pick me up from the Holiday Inn in half an hour and take me to Santa Monica?'

Peter was not his real name, of course, in LA nobody uses their real name, anymore than limo driving had been his given career. Peter, the 55 year old sex machine with a string of well healed divorcee lovers, had once been a professional footballer and had played for Romania in the 1966 World Cup (or so he told me).

I had first met Peter two days earlier when I had emerged, blinking into the early evening West coast sunlight, from the arrivals lounge of LAX airport. Looking out from International Arrivals I had faced a row of cabs and limos, and behind them a large neon sign announcing the arrival in town (for 3 nights only) of 'Eddie Izzard' .

'Hello America and Helloooo Eddie' I shouted at the sign

'Oh Hello!' Eddie was behind me – the real thing – being swept along the by his entourage of helpers 'Nice to see you' he continued before he was tucked securely into his limo. I flushed red and felt a wave of embarrassment sweep over me but, what the hell -I had met Eddie Izzard – in LA - fantastic! – it must be a good omen for my interviews I had thought at the time?

Peter's broad grin and white teeth, shining brighter than the dazzling sunlight, had lifted my spirit after the 12 hour flight from Heathrow as much as the impromptu meeting with Eddie

'You look like a man who should travel in style' Peter had held open a rear door to his ridiculously stretched 'Hummer' limousine

'I don't think I can afford you, my friend'

I had said, looking around at the coach stop signs and watching Eddie's limo silently lurch away from the curb

'I'm going to take a Convention Centre transit – the hotel's right by it'.

Peter put a large, strong, hand on my shoulder and gave it a little squeeze

'The journey will be \$20 and my advice on LA, on life and on the ladies will be included for you free of charge my friend'

It had been impossible to say no to Peter, \$20 was a fair price, the guide to LA I had bought and read from cover to cover on the long flight stated as much and besides I had always wanted a ride in a Hummer 'Desert Storm' 4x4, the advice, I thought, I could do without

Peter set me down at the pier on the S.A.N.T.A M.O.N.I.C.A B.O.U.L.E.V.A.R.D. The gleaming white stretched Hummer attracted glances and full on stares from waddling, obscenely overweight , out-of-townies in brightly coloured shorts and T-shirts, some bearing the logo 'Fat is Freedom', and was ignored by the, toned

to perfection rollerbladers - would be singers and actors - that effortlessly glided past the entrance to the pier.

'Just take a walk' Bernette had suggested as the 'cool' thing to do with my day off 'walk along the joggers path to Malibu – you'll love it'

'Malibu and Santa Monica sit 10 miles apart on the coast of the rolling Pacific Ocean, joined by a wave of ageing hippy sun worshippers. Life in all it's glorious extremes can be found on the beach that divides these two super star towns' it had said in LA Herald.

After an hours slow, sweaty progress, I decided to turn back. The bars and café's that were sprinkled liberally on the beach around the pier had become faint shapes, a distant mirage in the shimmering heat, my throat was dry and my feet were beginning to throb. Walking, I had discovered, was not the done thing - there were even signs saying 'No Walking' which, along with the cycle and blade hire shops, I had ignored.

I could cope with the young and beautiful rollerbladers who swayed gracefully from side to side, but there were also very, very old men and women on skates. In England they would have been suitably decked out in beige from head to toe and sat on benches looking out to a cold grey sea, sucking ice cream whilst patiently waiting for God. In California, they were tottering towards me dressed in nothing more than, shorts, ill fitting vests (beneath which their sagging body

parts roamed uncontrollably), sun visors on their balding heads and luminous white sneakers on their plodding feet. Their slow, painful progress meant that the embarrassment zone (the point at which eye contact is unavoidable) began when I could distinguish their flapping skin from the flapping material of their shorts and finally ended when their wheezing was inaudible against the breaking of the sea. One old gent pointed a long bony finger at me and gasped

‘can’t you..... read....., boy,.....no walking’

‘Pardon’ I shouted after him

‘I said..... can’t.....yer....no matter’

He gave up and, no doubt, decided if he was going to make it to the pier he had better concentrate on breathing.

‘Big Deans Muscle in Café’ is a shack that sits beside the walkway that runs beneath the Santa Monica pier – a continuation of the jogging path but a stretch where it is acceptable, even desirable, that you walk - to run, skate or cycle would be to risk collision with the ‘Fat is Freedom’ brigade.

On first entering a bar, I check out the landscape, I survey the seating arrangements and the clientele. I like to be near the bar, but not at the bar, near enough so that I can exchange banter with the bar staff if I’m bored, but also far

enough away so that I can avoid this if I want to dwell, uninterrupted, in my own little world. If there are 'interesting' people I like to sit near them but just outside their zone – a chair's width is usually sufficient separation to provide privacy and intimacy in equal measures. 'Interesting' people for me come in a wide range of guises – they don't have to be of a certain age or a given gender or have a certain look – however - 25-35, female and drop dead gorgeous would certainly put them in my 'Interesting' category.

John fitted one of my criteria - he was about 28. He was also a Democrat I soon found out, a fully committed Kerry supporter with very liberal tendencies! – an hour later I was relieved when two visions of loveliness sat themselves down at the table next to us. John wasted no time....

'Have you decided which way your gonna vote?'

'Sorry!!' the girls looked startled but John, leaning over their table, needed no introduction, he was on a mission and evangelising the word of John Kerry meant he could dispense with the normal social graces

'I must apologise for my friend' I said ' – he's a big fan of the Democrats and keen to convert you, if you need converting – do you?'

'Do I what?' she was smiling, revealing slightly irregular but otherwise perfectly white teeth behind full lips which were, as far as I could tell, without

lipstick. I noticed her accent wasn't Californian, but for a second I couldn't place it

'Need converting' I stammered, slightly embarrassed

'Are you Australian?' she said, slowly folding her arms on the table and leaning, straight backed, towards me . Her smile had broadened creating dimples in the flesh beneath he impossibly high cheek bones

'Tammy, he's an Australian'

'English, actually'

'Hey that's cool'

Mid West, her accent was definitely Mid West, Texan probably. I should have guessed before she spoke, just from the way she was dressed; cut off jeans that revealed long, smooth, tanned legs that disappeared into ankle high boots the rhinestone encrusted T-Shirt that on another girl would have looked tacky but on her looked elegant and the real give away – they were both wearing Stetsons!

'From London?' Tammy was speaking, she was equally as good looking as the other girl but strawberry blonde and heavily freckled instead of brunette

'No the Cotswolds'

'Cots what?' Tammy was laughing, a wholesome cowgirl laugh, no LA pretentiousness.

'It's about 70 miles west of London'

'So Kate - that's London, right?'

'Guess so'

Kate was still holding my gaze and had answered Tammy in her soft southern drawl without looking at her. I suppose to a couple of 20 something's who had probably never left the USA (80% of Americans don't own a passport! – I had read in my tourist guide) London was perhaps the only place they had heard of in England and coming from the mid west 70 miles could be the distance between a couple of neighbouring farms

'Yeh London that's right and John here, he's from LA, are you girls from Texas?'

'You don't say' Tammy said sarcastically and Kate stood up and slapped her toned thigh so as to emphasise the stereotyping

'Yer can take the gal out of Texas but yer can't take Texas out of the gal!'

Kate laughed

'You'll be Bush supporters then?' said John

'Hey Spike have I told you about the time the US Government asked me to be a mentor for Olga Corbet?

He hadn't, but in the few days I had known Peter he had told me a 100 other stories – each one as tall as an LA skyscraper. He may well have been a pro wrestler in WWF, the Russian assassin who got shot by James Bond (Sean Connery of course) in 'From Russia with Love' and a bodyguard to President Nixon – I didn't know if they were true, and it didn't matter, the neon lights of Sunset Boulevard were drawing us to the Viper Rooms where a huge queue was already stretching two blocks

Peter swerved the Hummer in front of an approaching minibus and bumped a front tyre onto the curb to within a few feet of the two huge bouncers that framed the doorway. He made a big show of letting me out and ignored the protests from the irate minibus driver who was now depositing his shaken passengers onto the sidewalk

‘Go to the bouncer on the right – tell him your friend of Mr Izzard – from London eh – and that I his driver – go on - the guy knows me’ he whispered in my ear and gave me a firm shove in the direction of an 18 stone gorilla.

‘Hi I’m a friend of Eddie Izzards’ I announced confidently

The Hummer throbbed it’s retreat as Peter reversed it out along the line of amazed onlookers, the bouncer, seemingly unimpressed, eyed me suspiciously from behind his dark glasses. The senior executives from ViSiT Media who had hired a minibus to take them to Sunset Boulevard for the evening stood, open mouthed, staring at the spectacle that was unfolding around them

‘Name?’ demanded the bouncer

'Eh , it's eh' I stammered, Rocky Belmonte was exchanging words with his companions but he had his gaze firmly fixed on me ' It's, eh Spike Jones' I said quietly, the bouncer touched the earpiece of his headset and spoke to someone

Rocky had separated from his group, some of whom I now recognised as interviewers from the previous day, and was advancing towards me

'You're not on the guest list' the bouncer replied after what seemed like an eternity

'He probably forgot to mention me – we're old mates from London – I told him I was in town' I said quickly 'and he sent his driver - Peter to get me...eh in the Hummer' I added, Rocky was fast approaching

'Peter huh – wait there' he disappeared inside the building and left his equally massive colleague with the task of letting the long queue of people slowly dribble into the building whilst keeping a close eye on me and the stocky little guy who was striding purposely towards the front of the queue

'Stop pushing in you lille shit' A 'Hells Angel' (or the LA equivalent of one) had stepped out of the queue to accost Rocky

'Hey are you famous – should I know you?' my attention on Rocky was momentarily interrupted by a Chinese / American college girl, who was stood patiently in line with her boyfriend

'Eh I don't know' I watched as the first punch was landed on Rocky by the elaborately tattooed woman in motorcycle leather trousers and a 'Motorhead' emblazoned vest

'I'm an artist, a sculptor actually, from England' I could see my job prospects with ViSiT disappearing fast as Rocky reeled from the second, expertly struck, blow. The student told her boyfriend that I was a well known English artist and he passed this juicy gossip back down the line. By the time it reached the back of the queue where two exotic dancers from Texas and a gay Kerry supporter were standing, Rocky and his colleagues were involved in a minor brawl.

The bouncer reappeared at the same moment Kate and Tammy, looking stunning in thigh length boots and practically nothing else, ran to the front of the queue to smother me with hugs and kisses (they had been drinking!)

'Do you know this guy?' quizzed the bouncer, now obviously impressed

'Sure he's from England' said a highly excited Tammy as she planted a huge wet kiss on my cheek

'He's practically Royalty' added Kate

'Spike, what the frigging...' the second bouncer had moved in on the brawl and had Rocky firmly pinned to the ground

Before I could do anything to help Rocky get to his feet we were ushered through the door, I waved apologetically as Kate and Tammy escorted me into a small, lively and very crowded bar

'Frigging limos and frigging call girls - reasonable frigging expenses!!!'
Was all I heard before the noise of the bar blocked out Rocky's ranting.

'That's him Mr Issard – says he's your artist friend from London' the bouncer's index finger was wagging at me. Eddie squeezed himself free of his admirers and stood with his hands on hips, in front of me and the two Texan lovelies. In a hugely exaggerated gesture he threw his arms around me.

'Do I know you, you look vaguely familiar?' he whispered in my ear 'I'm a bit out of it'

'No, not really – I said hello to you at the airport – you probably don't remember, but I am an artist (sort of) from London – well near London - ish'

'Sod all that – introduce me to the girls'

'Oh – eh I thought you were, you know eh, I didn't think you...eh'

'Silly boy' he said and swept past me waving the bouncer away 'hello girls – now tell me - how do you beautiful creatures know my friend here from jolly old London town?'

'Your guys are doing good in the swimming' the barmaid in the Holiday Inn 'Oasis' pool side bar glanced up at the wide screen TV, it was mounted high up on the wall amongst the various items of baseball memorabilia. Despite a thumping headache, due in no small part to Eddies post Viper Room hospitality, I managed to follow her gaze – Ian Thorpe (Thorpedo) for Australia was going for gold in the finals of the 400m freestyle at the 2004 Athens Olympics

'Must be all that water – what with you being an island an all'

'ah ah' I nodded – conversation, even linking together small words was proving difficult and I was happy to be considered an Australian and take the small reflected glory the swimming success would bring rather than go into a long discussion on my nationality. I waited for Peter to arrive to take me to the airport, sipped at my X large orange juice and smiled to myself at the memories of the previous night. The skinny dipping with the Texan girls in the pool of

Eddies rented house up in the Bell Air; John, getting friendly with Nigel - Eddies PA (I had been right about John!) - he had eventually made it into the club having apparently stood in line for two hours waiting for brawlers to be cleared away!. And Eddie – of course, the man himself – larger than life, side splittingly funny and generous in the extreme.

The ever smiling Peter and I nodded our hellos and I sat back in the Hummer for the ride to LAX Airport. The night before had been everything Bernette said it would be and more and now Peter had another story to tell his passengers – the night he chauffeured the English comedian Eddie Izzard, two Texan Show Girls, a future Democrat President and me! around LA. I took out the envelope that had been left at reception and read the brief letter it contained – it was from Ms Sherry Lowe, Mr Richard Belmonte (Rocky) secretary

Dear Mr Jones

Thank you for your interest Blah blah blah, unfortunately your application has not been successful Blah blah blah. ViSiT Media has decided to pay your out of pocket expenses to a maximum value of \$100 Blah, blah, blah

‘What’s up Spike?’

‘Oh nothing – I’ve blown it - I didn’t get that job, that’s all’

'So we're not going to be seeing you again any time soon, eh?' I said nothing just looked out of the window at the sunshine bouncing off the plate glass of the city centre office blocks and thought heavy thoughts about the 12 hour flight back to UK, my out of pocket expenses which were way over the allowed \$100 and how I would be spending Monday and the rest of the week, month, year! looking for a job.

'Hi LA Classic Limousines, Peter speaking, oh hi, yeh, ah ha OK, Spike it's a call for you – you can take it on the handset in the back there'

I picked up the phone nervously – who would know I'm in Pete's limo - Rocky – I hoped not, or perhaps Bernette – I hoped so?

'Eh ...hello, Spike here'

'So you roll up at the club in your bloody chauffeured stretched limo – blag your way in as 'my old pal' from England and then free load off me all night.....'

'Well I eh, just – I wasn't meaning any... I just.....' my head was pounding

'Bloody marvellous'

'What, sorry....'

'Oh and by the way – thanks for introducing me to those Texan girls – they're going to be backing me on stage when I tour the Mid West – your first management task is to sort out the deal with them'

'My what...'

'And as for your mate John, well Nigel, my highly strung, highly unstable PA, has never been so happy'

'Eddie - You said Manager'

'Eh ha – MANAGER – you're just the guy I need – you're a bloody miracle worker – what are you doing now?'

'I'm on the way to the airport'

'No, for a job? Work yer know!'

'Oh, I'm between jobs!, well nothing actually!'

'Well tell the driver – what's his name – Peter isn't it – to get your arse back to my place and you can tell him he's hired for the rest of our two weeks in California' he hung up

'Peter you'll never believe it – Eddie Izzard wants me to be his Manager!'

Peter turned his head and smiled

'In LA my friend anything is possible'

The End