*El Gusto Es Mio*

Heading west on West Chester Pike in Newtown Square, Steve Piasecki makes a right turn onto Charles Ellis Lane.

Charles E. Ellis was born in Philadelphia in 1835. He made a fortune in the lumber business during Philadelphia’s housing boom during the last half of the nineteenth century.

But after the turn of the century, in 1909, doctors diagnosed him with a debilitating and incurable disease. Two weeks later he crawled into bed with a revolver – and blew his brains out.

His last will and testament yielded four-million dollars to create a trust fund to fulfill his lifelong dream of establishing a private boarding school for orphaned girls.

The school opened in another location in 1919, then moved onto 234 acres in Newtown Square four years later – adjacent to the du Pont estate. Twenty years later, the Ellis trust purchased 60 additional acres from the du Pont family to complete its sprawling campus.

But over the following five decades, like so many private schools of that era, social reforms eroded the school’s principles and ate into its finances. On June 11, 1977, the Ellis School held its 45th, and final, commencement.

Now called the Ellis Preserve, the land morphed into an interesting amalgam of 100-year-old stone buildings, glass and chrome ultra-modern corporate headquarters, and a subdivision of expensive townhouses, stylish condominiums, and elegant mansions.

System Applications and Products in Data Processing – SAP for short – occupies one of the glass and chrome corporate centers.

When Steve pulls up to the entrance to SAP, he finds an extraordinarily attractive brunette female standing on the sidewalk. She looks to be in her mid-20s and she’s standing next to a suitcase on wheels.

He gets out of his SUV, walks around to the rear of the vehicle, and opens the hatch. She’s already waiting for him, and they exchange pleasantries as he loads her suitcase aboard.

By the time he’s back behind the wheel, she’s settled into the passenger seat in back, on the passenger side.

Steve quickly learns she’s going to the airport and flying back to her home in Argentina, outside of Buenos Aires. She’s flying on American Airlines.

“You’re pretty sharp,” Steve says, “aren’t you?”

“Why do you say that?” she says in a voice with a smile attached, yet without a trace of an accent.

“I’m a freelance crime writer,” he says, “and I profile everyone. I’m getting pretty good at it, if I say so myself.”

“Then I thank you.”

“What *do* you do?” he asks.

“I am a computer engineer.”

“Like I said,” Steve says. “You’re pretty sharp – and it shows.”

Her phone rings and interrupts the conversation. She answers the call and starts speaking in Spanish.

Several minutes pass.

They’re halfway to the airport when it sounds to Steve as if she’s finished with the call.

“*¿Ha terminado de hablar?*” he asks.

“*Entonces,*” she says in a surprised tone, “*habla español, ¿verdad?*”

“*Un poco,*” Steve says, then switches back to English. “I lived on Puerto Rico for six months.”

“When?”

“About a year ago,” he says. “But I’m better at listening than talking. I have to think of what I want to say in English, then translate it into Spanish in my head, before I can get the words out in Spanish. So I’m not very quick at speaking, but I can usually figure out what’s being said.”

After some more small talk, Steve asks for a history lesson about Argentina, and she complies. She not only fills him in about the history of Argentina, but also about the geography and contemporary social climate of her native country.

Like Steve sensed, she’s pretty sharp – and very informative.

They’re now approaching the airport’s departure area. The International Terminal is the first terminal on the right, and the American Airlines gate is moderately active.

Steve threads the Suburban in and around other vehicles, some parked and some moving slowly, as he pulls over to the right and parks close to the first gate.

He gets out and walks around to the rear of the vehicle. He lifts the hatch and removes her suitcase.

“Watch your toes,” he says as he places the suitcase on the ground near her feet.-

“Thank you,” she says with a smile. “You made this an enjoyable ride.”

“*El gusto es mío,*” he says.

They smile warmly, then part ways.

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As soon as Steve gets back behind the wheel, he ends Valentina’s trip on the driver’s app. Ready to go home, he starts to tap the phone to call My Friend, but his app pings with a new request.

“Shit.” He automatically accepts the request. He sees it’s from someone named Juan at the International Arrival Terminal, also American Airlines. That’s part of the same terminal and less than 100 yards from where he’s sitting right now.

But he must exit the airport, swing all the way around on a service road, and then re-enter the airport. That process turns these 100 yards into a little more than a mile.

Once on the service road, Steve calls My Friend and tells him he just got another ride.

“How did that happen?” My Friend asks.

“Forgot to shut the app off,” Steve says. “You still wanta do pizza?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Steve says. “I’m hungry.”

As Steve ends the call, he’s approaching the International Arrivals Terminal for American Airlines. He slows down and starts looking for a candidate who looks like someone named Juan.

In these situations, this Juan person has already been advised about the make, model, and color of the vehicle that’s coming to pick him up. So he should recognize Steve’s vehicle before Steve recognizes him.

And such is so.

A tall man is standing amidst a crowd of passengers standing on the sidewalk. It’s Juan Valdez, the Colombian Invisible. Today, he’s dressed like a businessman – dark suit and tie, white shirt, and classic dark fedora hat. He spots Steve’s reddish Chevy Suburban, takes a step toward it, and starts waving.

Steve veers the SUV over toward the curb, weaving between other cars, vans, and buses trying to pick up other passengers. He’s soon close enough to see a suitcase next to the man.

Steve parks, then gets out of the SUV and hustles around to the rear of the vehicle.

His passenger arrives at the same time.

As soon as Steve lifts the hatch, the man loads his suitcase into the back of the SUV before Steve has a chance to load it.

“Thanks,” Steve says.

“You are welcome,” Juan Valdez says in English – no accent.

“Watch your head,” Steve says before closing the hatch. “Where are you coming in from?”

“Colombia.”

“No kidding,” Steve says. “Never been there. Of course I’ve never been anywhere in South America.”

The men quit talking and start walking in opposite directions. Steve moves along the driver’s side of the Suburban toward the driver’s door while Juan Valdez moves along the other side to the rear passenger’s door.

By the time Steve climbs back behind the wheel, Juan Valdez is settled in back, and taking out his cell phone to make a call.

The reflection of the phone in the rearview mirror catches Steve’s eye. It looks like an iPhone, but different. It’s black and very shiny, with big, bright white letters, all in caps, trademarking the back of the phone. The man’s hand is partially blocking the trademark, so Steve can only see part of it in reverse:



Steve tries to memorize the image, then punches the driver’s app to start the trip. He sees their destination for the first time: Lancaster Avenue in Villanova.

“Ready?” Steve asks.

“Yes, sir.”

Steve pulls away and begins exiting the airport onto southbound I-95. It’s an easy twenty-one-minute ride from here. In five miles, he’ll reach the exit onto the Blue Route. From there, it’s a straight shot north to Villanova.

“*¿Aló?*” Juan Valdez says into the phone.

So that’s how they say hello in Columbia, Steve concludes. In Puerto Rico, they usually say *hola* … or *bueno* … or just plain hello in English. Steve keeps eavesdropping.

“*El barco se fue,*” Juan Valdez says, “*de Chile, ¿verdad?*”

Steve picks up something about a boat leaving from Chile.

“*Este tarde,*” Valdez says, “*de Valparaiso.*”

The ship left this afternoon. From Valparaiso – must be a city in Chile.

“*¿Cuánto tiempo tenemos para prepararnos?*”

How much time do we have to get ready?

“*Trece días. Bueno.*”

Thirteen days.

“*Por favor, dígame que tendremos las seis mil kilos estarán listos en doce días.*”

Something about six thousand kilos being ready in twelve days.

“*Bueno - eso es todo lo que quería saber.*”

That’s all he wanted to know.

“*Te llamare mañana,*” Juan Valdez says to end the call.

While they ride in silence for the next ten minutes, Steve’s imagination takes over. He begins wondering about what he just heard. Was his passenger talking about a drug deal? No way – but 6,000 kilos. What else could it be? I mean, to begin with, who in the United States talks in terms of kilos? Nobody but drug dealers, usually. And his passenger *is* from Colombia – the cocaine production capital of the world.

Steve believes he just profiled a major drug dealer and a major drug deal going down. Then he sees the sign for his exit, flips on the turn signal and starts slowing down. Less than a minute later, he’s turning onto Lancaster Avenue.

“How long until we arrive?” Juan Valdez breaks the silence.

“About three or four minutes,” Steve says. “Maybe a little longer if we catch any red lights.”

Juan Valdez pulls his phone back out and makes a quick call to say he will be there if about five minutes.

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Less than a mile away, they reach the destination. It’s an upscale shopping center on the Mainline.

Steve makes a left into the parking lot. He sees a few cars scattered here and there, but most of the shops look dark – like they’re closed. Then, near the back of the first building, Steve spots one shop with its lights still on.

A short man, Hispanic looking, exits the shop. He steps onto the sidewalk and starts waving at the Suburban.

The Suburban pulls to the curb next to the man and stops.

“Be careful getting out,” Steve says. “That first step’s a long one.”

Steve’s out of the SUV in a flash and heading toward the rear of the vehicle. He wins the race to the suitcase this time, opens the hatch and removes it.

“Watch your toes,” he says as he sets the suitcase on the ground about a foot from his passenger’s feet.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve says. “Thank *you*.”

As Steve gets back inside the Suburban, he watches the two men enter the shop. And he sees *Tesoros de Mexico* written across the tinted shop window in large black and gold lettering.

Steve pulls away, makes a U-turn, and exits the shopping center. As soon as he’s back on the Blue Route, he calls My Friend.

“On my way,” Steve says into the phone. “Should be there in twenty-five minutes.”

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