

## GYM MISFORTUNES

A string of misfortunes characterized his life, he thought, not disasters, not catastrophes, just misfortunes. A long string over six decades not counting his childhood when he didn't know better. He wondered if he knew better now.

He had not often used the word misfortune, He typed it into the Google box: "bad fortune or ill luck" and condition resulting from such, etc.

--Yeah," he said to himself, "that fits."

He was working at his desk, a big piece of furniture he had rescued from the discard heap nearly a half century ago. Various woods with rose wood being the most interesting, and a writing area that closed up on a angle, not a roll top but an angled top. It was in need of repair because so much of the wood, having dried out over the years, had begun to crack. Other repairs were also needed, but unlike other old wood furniture that he owned he had never refinished the desk and had left the patina to develop, He loved this monster, even though he seldom worked at it any more. Wrong height for computers. One of the sad adjustments necessary in the modern world.

Truthfully it had never been easy to work at. But it was glorious to sit at and stand around. He remembered when they had given a party one Saturday night back in his university days, the wife of a colleague was sitting in the Captain's chair at the desk and he was leaning on the top of the desk with his arms folded. He knew a little about her background. She had grown up in New York City, had spent her childhood in museum and department store, had graduated from Georgia Tech in computer science when it was in its infancy and had left Atlanta reluctantly when her husband took a job at the university. She had never adjusted. She was tall and lanky with gorgeous black hair pulled back into a pony-tail and nearly perfect facial features. She was smarter than most at the party, and she was alternately lively and morose. Wasn't hard to be morose with her forehead-slapping husband. Incompetent as a scholar but totally unaware of his incompetence. As he listened, he was chastising himself for feeling as lustful as he did. The monster desk, which she had admired, kept him from lifting her out of the chair and dancing into their own world at their own tempo. Less than a year later she left the forehead slapper with her daughters and was not heard from after that.

Sam closed down the computer. He had a book to pick up at a bookstore near the university. Since he had given up his car years ago, he had a 20 minute bus ride ahead of him. He got up from the desk and before heading upstairs he stopped in front of the mirror by the weight-lifting equipment. He had built his own weight area after local neighborhood gym had closed. He was vainer than he'd ever admit. He liked having that big mirror on the wall.

He had once confessed to a lady who was then just a friend and had asked why he did so many squats that he was insanely vain about his butt, he couldn't bear to think that he might develop one of those minuscule butts or even worse one of those slant butts that afflict old guys. After they had become lovers and before she'll told him it was over because he was taking her some place she'd never been before she'd remarked his butt was still in tack. He'd come to realize hers wasn't. Not just a male problem apparently.

Sam had lived in an apartment post-divorce until his condo was ready. It had mirrors floor to ceiling in the two bedrooms and the great room. The apartment had been designed for the son of

the owner of the building. It was seven stories high with a balcony. The son later committed suicide by leaping for a balcony in a different apartment. The circumstances were never revealed so speculation filled the void. Sam had never heard that the mirrors had anything to do with the suicide. After he had first toured the apartment he had asked the agent why all the mirrors, and she had replied to make the room seem more spacious. He had to grant that. The mirrors were off-putting at first but became a part of his new life. Added the sense of space to be sure, but also invited him to look regularly and approvingly at himself. He had never adopted the refrain “Mirror, Mirror on the wall” – that struck him as worse than vanity, more like insanity.

Sam had already worked out earlier in the day. He seldom missed a day. For most of a decade he had worked out at East Coast, a ten-minute walk from his condo. He had bought the condo after his divorce and before his retirement from the university. It meant a commute to the university but Sam loved living in Old Town, one of the city’s original neighborhoods. His condo was in an enclave several blocks from the main thoroughfares, and without certain zoning rules this small community would have been sold for commercial development.

At the same time that he moved into the city he gave up tennis and on the spur of the moment – a trait he knew well – he joined the gym. The sign said “Special, Trial Three-Month Membership”, and he decided to check it out. As he walked through the door, he was startled to recognize the face behind the counter. It was Shank, whom Sam had known as a kid in the suburbs. His dad owned the gas station where they bought gas and had oil changes. Shank, a troubled kid, especially after his dad died from a heart attack in his early fifties, had served some time for involuntary vehicular homicide.

Sam walked up to the desk, introduced himself and was surprised that Shank remembered. He asked about his mother who had worked at the station only to learn that she was helping to run the office of his businesses. Businesses? Shank explained he had set up several businesses including this gym. Lifting, he said, had saved his life, presumably a reference to his prison time, and he had always wanted to open one. They walked around, Shank answered all of Sam’s questions with directness and clarity that would never have been possible with the kid Shank, and after they returned to the desk, Sam said,

---“OK, I’ll try it if you can set me up with a trainer.”

---“You’re on,” said Shank as an attractive woman came up along side of him. He introduced her as his wife, Dianna. Sam learned she was a national archery champion. Sam shook hands with her as Shank with relish said to his wife,

---“We’ll let him join even though he knows too much.”

Dianna had no idea, and Sam tried to reassure her.

---“Grey-haired guys have low recall,” then added,

---“I used to patronize his dad’s garage.”

Dianna looked somewhat relieved. There was history in this introduction that she may have preferred not to know more about.

Sam signed the papers, handed Dianna his credit card, and set up an appointment for the next day with a trainer named Scotty. All three shook hands, and Sam left. Over the next few years he, Shank and Dianna would have numerous conversations. Dianna was quiet-spoken and more reserved than one might expect in a national-champion personality. She had dark, deep-set eyes that made you pay attention when she was talking to you. She never said more than necessary. Sam often wondered if those deep-set eyes somehow made a better archer. Their lives were not trouble-free. Shank met Dianna by accident, fell in love, and not only left his wife to marry Dianna but also built her an archery studio where she could practice as well as teach. As generous as Shank with everyone, his ex was not happy with any of this and had held up first the divorce and then the property settlement for months. The divorce part was recently resolved after which Dianna and Shank got married quietly, but the property part was still being contested. Once in a while when Sam asked how things were going, Shank intoned “shitty”. Sam would move on. That’s all he needed to know.

Shank had told Sam that the gym would change not only his body but his life. Sam doubted that would happen, but he admired how people he knew developed these commitments to things as life-changing. Somehow Sam had missed that class. His body did change, if nothing his neck size went from 15½ to 17½. His life, that remained an open question.

Sam started his lifting phase the next day with Scotty, an undergrad from the university. Sam was totally unprepared for what Scotty asked him to do. They talked for a few minutes. Scotty wanted to know what Sam wanted to accomplish. Quite honestly Sam didn’t know. Obviously Scotty had heard that answer before. The answer to the next question was no, he’d never tried weights. Was he game? Why not.

On the way to the dumbbell rack Scotty explained he asked that questions because most of the older clients came to the gym to use the Nautilus equipment or to take the aerobic classes. Sam noticed right away a division in the gym. On one side facing the windows along the street were dozens of machines with names like StairMaster and Cross-Trainer. On the other side were the free weights. The mood, the conversation, the movement were different in the two areas. Scotty picked up a couple of 10-pound dumbbells and asked Sam to sit on the bench and face the mirror. Of course all three walls in the weight area were mirrored. Scotty instructed Sam on how to raise the dumbbells to the height of his shoulders, to raise them slowly until his arms were fully extended over his head, to lower them just as slowly until the hands holding the dumbbells were slightly above his shoulders, then to repeat the routine.

---“Watch yourself in the mirror,” said Scotty with emphasis. ”Not unlike tennis. Form is absolutely essential.”

Scotty had never seen Sam’s by-the-seat-of-his-pants tennis game. His opponents often slammed down their rackets as he ran down a ball and flicked it past them while they stood watching. It was clear to Sam from the beginning that form in weight-lifting was of a different magnitude.

Set a number for the routine, say, five for now, and set a number for how many times you’ll do that routine, say three. Take a rest in-between. Try to separate work on each muscle by a couple of days – upper abdomen today, lower tomorrow, legs and lower back the next before you return to upper abdomen. There is overlap in working muscle groups but setting specific days for each group will help you achieve your goals with injuries.

Sam could see that ten-pound weights were puny compared to what the guy on the bench next to him was using for the shoulder press – 50 pounders. Scotty missed very little.

---“Don’t be thinking about the size of the dumbbells. Stay small for the next month with all the routines I’m going to show you and stay disciplined. Form, form, form. You will also notice he has a spotter. Absolutely essential as you push up the weights. You can ask another lifter or a trainer. You have to learn how to spot. Always ask the lifter how and when he wants you to intercede.”

For the next hour Scotty showed Sam how to work three muscle groups. In two days they’d do another muscle group and continue until they had covered all the muscle groups. Then, according to Scotty, they would spend the rest of the month repeating each routines until Sam felt comfortable with them. At the end of the month Sam would be on his own.

He thanked Scotty, shook hands with Shank going past the desk and left. It was exhilarating and utterly baffling to Sam. He remembers that day as if it were yesterday. He felt hooked, although he reminded himself that was one of his worst habit – jumping into only to drown.

He had missed the gym and his circle of friends since it closed. He did not miss the overhang of so much life in the gym. Shank sold the gym after he and Dianna had split. She failed to return home after a competition. Shank was devastated. Sam had suggested a beer a couple nights before the last day, and Shank at first hesitating said,

---“With you I’ll go.”

They talked for hours, actually closed the bar. Shank was richer than he had ever expected to be. He owned the building and the property and he sold East Coast for more than a million. One of those mixed commercial/residential developments, he said. He had taken care of his mom plus his younger sister whom Sam had forgotten about.

---“So what about yourself?” asked Sam.

---“I’ve got my kids to help keep on the straight and narrow, and I’m thinking about finishing my education. What do you think, Prof?”

---“Not what I expected,” said Sam, “but you have the equipment upstairs to do it. The problem no matter age is willpower and adaptation. Those are unknown variables. What do you have to lose by taking the risk? Remember what you told me about what would happen after I joined the gym?”

---“I told everyone that. Is it true? I’m not sure. The cross-currents, the under-tows in a gym are unpredictable and can be destructive. I met Dianna in a gym, a different one, a couple of years before you and I got reacquainted. East Coast plus the archery studio ended up devouring us.” came an unexpected answer.

---“Yeah, tell me about it,” said Sam with half a smile.

---“I know, you’ve got caught in some of the worse, I could observe that. I think in one case you saved each other,” he said as the smile he was famous for returned for the first time.

They parted, and during the past year they had run into each other several times. Shank was now officially a student at the university. Sam had no doubt Shank would make it despite all the cross-currents and under-tows that university life also entailed.

He dismissed himself from the mirror, mirror on the wall and headed upstairs to shower and dress. He had never figured out after four years here whether he had two or three flights of stairs. He knew he had 30 steps.

He was still thinking about his gym opera. He finished his month with Scotty and began to show up every day between five and six pm..He had a trim body because he had played singles tennis for 25 years at the university club and had given it up because his singles game was slipping and his interest in doubles was zilch. Nothing was more boring than standing and waiting for the ball in doubles. Trim yes but not especially strong. He talked to Scotty frequently. Every once in a while Scotty came over and gently corrected Sam’s form. They became gym friends.

Scotty was the son of a local Baptist minister, who worked out at the gym and was not pleased that his son was living with another trainer, Chris. She was strong and shapely and single-minded. They talked mostly about classes and occasionally about their families. Both were earnest about their studies, and they were frustrated with their families. They loved the gym and if Scotty didn’t have any clients they worked out together. Chris had once observed,

---“It’s our terrain, we know it well, it protects us.”

Sam knew what had occasioned that remark. Sam also came to realize that conversation was an important part of the gym. The reasons, he speculated, were that lots of people in the gym found their way there, as Shank had suggested, because they needed relief from some personal pain - pain to relieve pain – and less profoundly lifters between routines easily fell into conversations.

Sam knew in short order he had become a gym rat. He preferred the gym crowd to his academic peers, although one or two people, whom he knew from the university, were big lifters. Ned, a classicist, was about 5’6” and far stronger than he looked. He came in the early morning so that Sam only saw him occasionally. His most impressive routine was the leg press. Ten to 12 plates on each side and a thrust that was amazing, and he did 10 or 12 reps.

---“This will not get you promoted, Sam, being a smelly, cocky gym rat,” said Ned one late afternoon, having altered his schedule.

---“Promotion long since gone,” said Sam. “Did you ever look at the list of assholes on promotion and tenure committees?”

---“Thanks for the dignified designation. Guess who’s on the college committee this year?” shot back Ned.

---“I would apologize because you’re not an asshole as far as I know, but let’s hold judgment until you’ve performed,” came back Sam. “I do have hope in your case. A 24-plater is a good sign.”

---“Seriously,” said Ned, “why you were not promoted to full came up recently in a conversation.”

---“Not a conversation in the gym, I’m sure,” answered Sam. “No interest. It’s a silly system. Look at your department. Gerry, who can barely read Greek, got tenure and promotion on chutzpah, and Joe, whose language skills are extraordinary, but who is outspoken about suffering fools, most especially Gerry, is still an associate.”

---“I can’t justify that case,” replied Ned, “you know my feelings about chutzpah and extraordinary, but you’d have no trouble. The Dean loves your last book – all over the Citation Index.”

---“So now my achievement is the Citation-Index count? I like you better as a lifter, not as an apologist for the Dean or the Citation Index. Quite honestly, now that I’m divorced and on my own I don’t need the money and I don’t want the senior-professor shit. Sitting in a room with Goldstern or Arminghouse for five minutes would drive me to desperate acts. It’s that simple.”

---“You make a strong case, counselor. Lifting and lawyering have much in common – keep your eyes on the mirror,” Ned said smiling and patting Sam on the shoulder and heading off to Smith Cage.

Sam knew that despite his talk Ned was one of the Dean’s friendly adversaries, one of those faculty member who criticized but wanted to stay onboard. Sam had never learned that game. The Dean, for the first time in his years at the university, was smarter than the faculty and knew how to use people like Ned. Did Ned or others like him know that?

Usually university business was not part of his conversation at the gym. Because he was as tenacious in his workouts as he had been in tennis, no talent just tenaciousness, the big lifters began to greet him when he arrived, drew him into their conversations and asked him to spot from time to time. He liked being asked, but he still kept his distance. He was not used to close friends. He knew how to talk the language of the big lifters, many of whom had never gone beyond high school and had jobs as truck drivers, grease monkeys, prison guards and construction workers. He knew their language because he had grown up in a large, extended family of miners, farmers, loggers and laborers, few of whom had much interest in anything outside their narrow confines. This crowd was different because they were urban – more aware and less fearful of the outside world – but still the conversations reminded him of what he could remember about his childhood and teen years.

As he jumped into his shower, he found himself thinking about one of his favorite lifting companions over the years at Easy Coast. Kipp was about ten years younger, and among the late middle-agers he was the strongest. Also stronger than many of the younger lifters, some of whom including his own son were trying to bulk up too fast in some cases with some outside help. Kipp was old-school. Time, attentiveness to form and will were the keys to adding mass. He said more than once to Sam, they fall apart either from the crap they’re taking or the routines they’re following. He had been lifting since his teen years when he had quit school and started driving truck. He made his own benches and racks. He bought plates and dumbbells secondhand from nefarious characters – his words not mine. He had a local welder fashion some bar to work well with his short body. He started a small-trucking company in his twenties and the structure

that he built to house and to service his trucks had a corner for lifting, which he did almost every day. He had joined the gym when he and his wife sold their house and moved into an apartment a few streets away. Thirty years after starting the company he still drove a truck almost every day. His lifter-son also drove truck, but had no business sense and preferred to travel with his girl friend whose job often took her away from the city. Kipp resisted retiring because he had no idea what he would do. A dedicated lifter but never an all-day gym rat.

As he pulled the towel off the hook, Sam realized why he was still thinking about Kipp. Kipp was not entirely comfortable in the gym. For a guy who had spent most of his life lifting in his garage largely by himself or with his son the pace in the gym was different. Sometimes you had to wait for the equipment you wanted or seek out a spotter if you decided to go heavy rather than shout to your son or a co-worker or talk to people you didn't know. Kipp had begun in a garage and moved to a gym; Sam had started in a gym and moved to his home. He doubted Kipp ever missed the gym as he did. Kipp was always happy to see Sam in the gym because that meant one of his gym frustrations was eliminated. That didn't necessarily make the gym more amenable to him.

Kipp's life certainly wasn't without its own misfortunes. His wife had died a couple of years after they moved into the city. Sam met her shortly after her death. After hundreds of evenings in the gym Sam knew a lot about the last few years of Kipp's life. He had been devoted to his wife but he never understood how she could let her life go to hell. She was overweight, fought diabetes and refused to change her ways. She ate too much and exercised too little. Sam usually listened without saying much. Kipp knew little about Sam's life, although he teased Sam about how many women he knew in the gym. He knew some of the young women because his son and his friends would show up at Kipp's house to drink beer. And Kipp was not impressed with this generation.

---"Keep your distance from gym chicks," he said to Sam from time to time. "You have too good of a life to screw around."

It was hard to impress Kipp. Like Sam's father and uncles.

Finally Kipp sold his business. He was moving several hundred miles away to be among his brothers and sisters and family again. On their farewell night they went out for a beer. Kipp was both sad and pissed: sad that he had to leave and pissed that he felt some inner-need to reconnect with siblings he had only seen a few times a year. Sam was sure the embrace at the end of the evening was hard for Kipp, and it was symbolic because it was the absolute end of their friendship. Once in a while Sam saw his son in town, but he never asked about his dad. His son was one of the young gym Turks that his dad railed against. Kipp couldn't understand why they were destroying their bodies any more than why his wife had destroyed hers. I always suspected that Kipp was once a young Turk but smart about his body.

As he creamed his face to shave, he found himself looking in a mirror again. In an odd way he was content, not happy, but content. He hadn't tried to stay in touch with Kipp, no agreement at the end to do so. He was wondering if he should have. He chuckled as he thought about one routine he spotted for Kipp. The first time, it paralyzed Sam with fear. Kipp arched his body with his feet flat on the floor and the back of his shoulders flat on a bench; he lifted a hundred pound dumbbell with both hands over his face and slowly lowered it behind his head to its nadir and

then slowly raised it to its apogee. He did this as many as 10 times. Sam was there in case Kipp couldn't lift it anymore. That never happened. Kipp knew – good lifters sensed what was happening in the reaction of the muscles, not in the reflection of the mirror, he often reminded Sam. Kipp never had a mirror in the garage and seldom used one in the gym. What Sam knew was a hundred-pound dumbbell was goddamn heavy, and as he finished shaving he recalled that he had to use two hands to carry one. He also recalled another of Kipp's favorite observations – one hundred pounds is heavy no matter how you're lifting it. The young Turks would have laughed at that as they shot for the stratosphere. Sam knew what Kipp meant. Some days a hundred pounds felt like a thousand. Kipp was the smartest lifter Sam had ever known.

He was now dressed in his ten-year-old casuals – how he hated buying clothes and sprinted down about 15 steps to the front door. He checked for keys, wallet, phone and bus pass and to see that he had zipped up, an ever-growing item of forgetfulness. He had about five minute to get to the bus stop. So handy now to call up the location of his bus on his cell. He had time.

On the bus he checked his email with his cell. Nothing. He usually brought something to read on bus trips but not tonight. He'll have something to read on the way home. It was a rather uninspiring urban ride along the outskirts of the city and into the heart of the university neighborhood by way of strip malls and discount stores.

Sam did come back to the old neighborhood much anymore. Mainly this bookstore was his last tie. SHELVES was its name, and when it was just a bookstore in an old turn-of-the-century structure on a street that had more pedestrian traffic than any other. It was more than a bookstore now. It included a coffee bar on one side of the bookstore, a sandwich and soup shop on the other side and just recently added a massage and yoga studio in the building behind the book shop and linked by an atrium with tables and chairs. It's now known as SHELVES ETC. The owners of this commercial mélange were two former students, Allie and Brett. They had both taken two of Sam's courses, and it was in the second course was where met and hatched the ideas of SHELVES. It was also where they came out. Sam tried to buy all this reading material there, and over the years he had been one of their many devoted customers.

The bus stopped almost in front of the book shop. When Sam exited the bus, he had to come to terms again with that rhythm of student street life that was missing where he lived. He entered the bookstore and found it almost as busy as the street. Allie was at the checkout, and when she saw him she shouted Sammy, Sammy, a name that was seldom used anywhere else. He walked up to the counter, and they embraced rather awkwardly over the counter.

---“How are you Sammy, and I've got your book,” said Allie. It was not that she meant to talk so loudly, rather she was a large woman with a booming bass voice. She placed the book on the corner of the counter.

---“Hi Allie, how are you, and thanks. Boy, the nice weather has brought everyone out and in.”

---“Including you, my dear mentor and sage,” retorted Allie, as Sam handed her a fifty.

Just then Brett walked out of the office and came around the desk and planted a kiss on Sam's cheek. She was a tall, fine-bowed woman with flaming red hair.

---“How are you Sam?” in a voice he could barely hear.

---“I’m well, thanks, and you?”

---“Ready for the break.”

---“A night like this with people overflowing from the streets must warm the cockles of your heart.”

---“Sammy, accountants don’t have cockles or hearts,” was the reply in a dour voice. Brett was an accounting major who knew a lot about the non-accounting world, probably as well read as Allie.

---“You can say that again,” came a much bigger sound. Allie handed Sam his change. “And here’s a free coffee for the guy who introduced to Peet’s years ago.”

Sam had been drinking Peet’s since the 70s, and their bar was the only one to serve Peet’s under franchise in the city.

---“Thank you my dear, I will use it right away. This is the only place I know where I can buy *The Savage Detectives* and Swedish body oils and Vichysoise and Peet’s. You know, if you built residences over head, I could live here and never leave.”

---“Actually we modeled that, Sammy,” said Brett. “And we found out we’d lose all our female customers with you lurking around the premises.”

---“Touché,” said Sam. These kids got sharper with age, unlike most of the rest of us.

---“Not your standard reading fare, Sammy,” said Allie.

Sam took a close look for the first time at the cover and his eyes burst open like a spring tulip. Tamara, not a name he had ever heard her called..

---“She used to live here, had a health store in Old Town, belonged to the same gym. I knew her as Tammy, I didn’t know her name was Tamara. She moved to California and obviously ran into some troubled times. She emailed me that she had written about those times.”

---“A beautiful woman,” said Brett who was peering literally over Sam’s shoulder.

---“She was, and this may be a sad read,” responded Sam and then,

---“If I’m going to drink some coffee, I’d better do it now or it will be straight to the Bourbon,” as he embraced Brett and then Allie.

---“We’re having a reading at the end of the month by one of your favorites, John B.,” said Allie as Sam started to turn.

---“Balaban?” said Sam slightly off balance from twisting two ways at once.

---“Steady there old man. That’s him. He just signed on this morning. You’ll get a flyer plus a dinner invitation,” added Brett.

---“The last time I went to a poetry reading of his, we had too many scotches before the reading, and he had most of them. He was brilliant. It’s been a few years. I’m still looking for that book of his Vietnam War poems. It’s out of print. You could open a used-book boutique to go with everything else,” said Sam

---“We could put you in charge, but then you’d be hanging around all the time. Poor model standard deviations again,” replied Brett.

Sam was thinking, memory overload in the last five hours. Was that what old age was about.

---“It’s the 29<sup>th</sup> if you think you can remember,” said Brett, as she winked and walked toward the office.

---“Thanks Brett, a good slap in the face always helps. I’m off to Peet Land,” retorted Sam half way to the coffee bar.

---“Love ye, Sammy,” shouted Allie.

The coffee bar was full. All the chairs were taken but there were a few empty spaces along the stand-up counter along one wall. With his espresso in hand, he found a space, set down the cup and looked at the book. Tamara. I don’t know a Tamara, he said to himself. Then he looked up at the poster with the Roy DeCarava’s Coltrane photo that Sam gave them when they opened the coffee bar. Tamara, Kipp, Shank, John B – too much.

He was home an hour later.

Like many evenings in his twilight years he seldom cooked a meal any more. Breakfast, the main meal mid-day and something plus some alcohol at night. He poured a glass of inexpensive pinot noire from Bourgogne rather than Bordeaux – Domaine Maurice Écard, Les Perrieres – which he had opened at lunch. Ron’s suggestion. He loved having The Plum and ron in the neighborhood. He remembered reading somewhere that opening a Bourgogne was always a gamble. This one paid off.

---“It will cheer you up,” Ron had said with a smile as if Sam looked that morning in need of cheering up. A bit on the light side but that was the point. A richer taste, though, than he had expected.

Music choice a problem. He occasionally watched “The Worst Person in the World” at this hour, but not in the mood tonight. Sam had never figured out how Obermann avoided lawsuits. He chose a Fred Hersch disc – “Night & the Music – not dreamy, a bit edgy, especially Hersch’s own pieces. He had never seen Hersch in live concert. It remained a wish.

Back in the kitchen he poked around in the fridge. Finally he pulled out some triple crème, unwrapped it and put it on a tray. He had a baguette bought fresh in the morning and stored in his marvelous Eva Solo bread box – some sort of engineering magic that actually kept bread eatable for several days. He pulled off a hunk and returned the rest to the box. Then he remembered he had fresh strawberries in the fridge fruit drawer, opened the fridge again, grabbed a few and dropped them on the tray. He headed back to the Great Room, laid the tray on the coffee table, where he had laid the book and plucked down into the sofa.

For the next two hours he was unexpectedly engrossed in Tammy's book. Not a bad book as such books go. No complaining, no whining, an acceptance for what had happened with a tinge of sadness. He learned a lot about Bi-Polar conditions. He knew he was not maniacal but had always wondered if he was borderline depressive. Based on Tammy's descriptions, which sounded awfully authentic to him, he decided he wasn't.

He learned a lot about her growing up, which he had never asked her about and she had never volunteered to talk about. Dysfunctional family to say the least. Not particularly religious but heavily rule-bound. Rules and procedures for everything. Her two brothers, again unknown to Sam, had a rough time as teens and had virtually disappeared from Tammy's life.

In San Francisco she had done well the first year. She met and married a doctor, was promoted to VP and fell right into the life of the city. And then it began to unravel. She had to quit her job as she became unpredictable and unreliable. Her doctor-husband stuck by her side, and when she wrote the book they were still married. She dedicated it to him. She wrote something toward the end that Sam couldn't drop. The tray was mostly empty and the wine had been drunk without much memory of what he had consumed. He turned off the light.

Sam had become a late retiree, late in life, seldom in bed before midnight. It was Friday so no Stewart or Colbert. Sam still believed that a hundred good laughs daily kept you healthy. He was not sure what a hundred emotion-laden memories did for your health. He walked over to the sliding glass door to check out the night sky, something he did every clear night. His telescope was sitting by the door. He opened the door wide and walked out onto the balcony. He knew what was in the sky this week. He had observed Saturn with clear, visible rings a few nights earlier. Saturn was not his planet – too much order and discipline. Had it become Tammy's?

That line toward the end of the book had not moved from the edge of his mind. He brought it center, forward.

---“Confessing to God doesn't work. Confessing to yourself not perfect but more useful.”

She had once responded to a question of her own design about confessing to God.

The question was “why, Sam, do we push ourselves with the weights?”

As he leaned on the railing of the balcony, Sam thought about that question again. Was being in the gym a need to improve the body or a compulsion to escape from life? It will change your life, he recalled Shank's words. He like Tammy and many others kept trying to push up the weights. At his age he should be concentrating on endurance by reps, not bulk by plates. After all he had given up tennis because he couldn't run down every ball anymore. He knew the rep hand had not been dealt yet.

He had answered Tammy's question with, “Singing C'est Moi' from center stage.”

---“Singing what,” Tammy had asked?

He explained by pinpointing the key words – “Climb a wall, Cleave a dragon, Swim a moat” – and then he sang the refrain, much to his own surprise “C'est Moi, C'est Moi, C'est Moi.”

Up went her hand, and he stopped. And feeling a bit sheepish he had added,

---“I can’t do anything big because the moi in me is small,” and asked, “and your reason?”

---“Because I can’t confess to God,” came her reply smoothly and without hesitation. She had thought about this before just as he had thought about Lancelot’s song.

How different the answers. He had to ask,

---“Are you religious?” because he didn’t know.

---“No. The emphasis should be on confession.”

Now the confession line appeared in the book.

Sam reentered the Great Room. He knew he was going to sit on the sofa and think about Tammy, yes Tammy, but also Ashe and Sasha, all terrain he had covered so many nights before.

Tammy and Sam had met in the gym, and their friendship had revolved around plates, spotting and mirrors. There was a turning point a few months after they had met. They were working on bench presses and spotting each other. They never made prior arrangements to meet, as many lifters did. All the big lifters had buddies they worked out with regularly. In our case, if one of us didn’t show, it was simply assumed that something had come up.

Rob was her husband, also a big lifter. Sam had known Rob’s son from an earlier marriage and only a few years younger than Tammy before he actually met Rob and Tammy. Even before he had met them he had noticed that they never spotted for each other. Sometimes Rob’s son spotted for his step-mother, but they seldom talked. Then, one day while Sam and Tammy were working on parallel benches, she shouted to him.

---“Sam, I need a spotter. Can you help me?”

---“Sure thing,” as he walked over to her bench, not knowing she knew his name..

He could guess her weight, but she much more than that on the bar.

---“At 3 or 4 I may need help. Keep your fingers under the bar, but let me struggle before you touch the bar. I don’t need any help getting it started.”

She was dead on, at 4 he let the bar rest lightly on his fingers. She lifted it as high as her arms would allow and then lowered it in the rack. Nearly perfect form.

---“Good job,” said Sam with jealousy in his head if not in his voice. “I’m Sam, and I guess you know my name.”

---“Everyone knows your name. You’re a *cause célèbre* in this gym. You had the right touch. I always knew you would,” as she patted his arm. “You’re now on call.”

Rob was well-connected locally but not well-informed. Tammy was his third wife and he was her second husband. Within weeks of that first spotting Sam learned that divorce three and two were in the works. Rob never had a clue until she said she was leaving him because she preferred to fool around than live with him. Joining the gym hadn’t saved their marriage if that had ever

been a consideration. After they split Rob had quit the gym and his son was scarce, but she stayed with it.

A few weeks later while spotting her for the bench press, she looked up at him and said,

---“You’re wound up like a top, so shoot.”

---“A top?”

---“You heard me, a top, the fingers....” She said.

---“It’s her,” Sam pointing to a woman by the aerobic-studio door.

---“OK, this is another one of your gym chick disasters, isn’t it. It’s dinner at 8, I’ll pick you up, 20 minutes before, be ready. I’ve got some things to do between now and then. And so do you. I don’t like gym smells outside the facilities.” She kissed him on the cheek.

This was an unexpected turn in their friendship. Once in a while they had a coffee outside the gym, but that was it.

She left, Sam did a few more routines since he had a ten-minute walk home, and besides he had to think about what was going to happen. He did some limpy squats, grabbed his towel and his jacket and headed to the door. Shank and his wife were at the desk.

---“So what have we done to deserve such an early exit? It’s not 7 yet,” inquired Shank with a totally straight face.

---“Dinner invitation. Much to my surprise,” said Sam.

---“No one else is surprised, Sam, but it’s nice that way, isn’t it?” said Dianna, giving Shank a hug and departing before Sam thought of something to say.

---“They always know, especially gym females, before we do,” said Shank, patting him on the shoulder.

He was ready at 7:30, watched a report on the latest market disasters, and thought in the face of romantic and financial disasters I seem incapable of adjusting. He saw her Audi - a gift from Rob - pull into his unused spot, and in few minutes he was buckled into the passenger seat.

---“You smell good,” she observed as she pulled out onto the street.

---“You know, I worry about smells. Don’t old guys develop offensive odors that can’t be eradicated or controlled? he asked.

---“You’ve not smelled old women?”

---“Don’t hang around that much. Best to change the subject since it’s not of immediate concern.”

---“Agreed.”

She drove more slowly and .deliberately than he had expected. And, he thought, she looks radiant despite what was becoming a contested divorce. She seemed to know where they was headed so he didn't inquire..

Sam had never seriously entertained the idea of asking Tammy out. Now he was wondering why he hadn't. He knew he was afraid to. They had drunk coffee together after working out when neither was much worth looking at. Actually she hated coffee bars – pretentious and depressing – but as she often said to him,

---“Tell me one of your stories while I stare at my coffee.”

He knew nothing about her taste in restaurants, and although she knew his reputation for knowing where one could buy the best food and wine, she was mum. After 15 minutes or so she pulled into a lot next to a sign “American Roadhouse” in a neighborhood next to his but where he almost never traveled to.

---“Tonight it's American Fusion, although they call it Roadhouse,” she announced.

Sam never knew what fusion meant in food or jazz, but he kept his mouth shut.

She had made reservations, and they were seated not far from the open kitchen.

---“You'll find it's not as noisy as it should be, and I don't know why,” she said while unbuttoning her jacket.

---“Please note that your beautiful purple linen blouse matches up well with my tattered orange cotton shirt,” said Sam, looking at the menu.

---“No time to dignify that with an answer, here's the waiter.”

The young waiter introduced himself and asked if we were ready to order.

---“I'll have the meatloaf, and so will he, since I'm paying. And bring us a good red Bordeaux.”

After the waiter left, Tammy continued her thought:

---“Some French vintner is having heart failure as we drink his darling red with American meat loaf.”

---“You don't mind meatloaf, do you?” she continued. “No fish for you. You're looking a bit wall-eyed tonight,”

---“I should have met and married you years ago,” Sam said with a smile of utter contentment.

Her cell – one of her cells – went off.

---“Excuse me,” she said.

---“Jon,” she said into the cell. “Can we do this in 30 second? I'm entertaining.”

There was a pause.

---“OK. Shoot.” After no more than ten seconds, she said, “No. Not a part of the package. We’ve been over and over this. No dice. Sorry. We’ll talk tomorrow.” Off went the cell.

---“Divorce stuff. It never ends. My cells are off now. Is yours, Sam?” she asked.

---“I hired an attorney who was an ex-Marine and drank a vial of blood for breakfast. She took care of it,” said Sam as he clicked his cell off.

---“I want her name for the next time, but not tonight.”

The wine arrived in a carafe with an empty bottle. The label said Chateau Cantenac, Saint-Emilion Grand Cru.

---“Wow!” uttered Sam. “Is this on the wine list?”

---“No,” said the waiter. “The owners recommend it. It’s from their personal collection.”

---“How big is their cave,” asked Sam.

---“The restaurant cave has tens of thousands, and their own, no one knows,” replied the waiter.

He was impressed that the restaurant had the good sense to decant the bottle. The waiter poured a little into a glass and handed it to Tammy because she had put in the order.

---“Him,” she said softly. “He knows, I just order because I can’t help myself.”

He swirled, sniffed – all the necessary moves – but he pretty much knew how it would taste. He was sure it needed more time, but a single decanting would serve it well. And he was right. He put down his glass.

---“You’ve done a good job,” he said to the waiter. “Thanks, and please thank the owners.”

---“Take that as a compliment,” Tammy injected. “He knows.”

The waiter poured two glasses and left. They lifted their glasses, and she said,

---“To next week.”

---“I like to look ahead – the past is such a train wreck,” he said. They both drank from their glasses.

---“It will go well with the meatloaf,” she said bemusedly.

---“So why the furrows and the fidgety fingers? Or is that a standard characteristic of all PhDs?” she asked with her eyes set squarely on his.

---“Never done a survey. The crap has been piling up, but it’s my crap, of my own making. Right now I feel a little liberated from the crap barrel. Thanks,” Sam raised his glass again..

---“Think libertine, not liberated. You’ve never made a pass at me, although we talk about relationships all the time. It’s always someone else,” she said.

---“I’m afraid...”

---“It will happen but not tonight,” she cut in.

---“What’s the latest with you?” he asked.

---“The end is near.” She replied. “We met yesterday with the lawyers and settled most outstanding issues. He finally came to his senses that I didn’t want any of the common property that was never common. It was his. What I brought to the marriage I retained as did he. It may have been a club of sorts that he thought he could use, but he knew better all along. I told him afterwards I was sorry for the mess in our lives and I would make an effort to stay in touch. I really did feel sad in a way I never expected.”

---“They say that some grief is necessary. I often confused anger, betrayal and grief, but somehow they fell into place as they were supposed to,” said Sam.

---“Your marriage was long, mine wasn’t. For me those feelings seem out of place,” said Tammy as the meal arrived.

---“No reviews, please,” she said.

---“Actually it deserves a review,” said Sam after he tasted the meatloaf and the garlic mashed potatoes.

---“Let’s eat the food and talk about other things,” came back Tammy.

---“So the aerobics flash – what’s her name? - has turned you into a nut case.” she continued.

---“In love with a woman who has a body like yours, not as muscular because she doesn’t lift,” he said somewhat sheepishly.

---“You’re right about the body business. That’s why I have my eye on her. Of course how many years and kids separate our bodies?”

---“Not as many years as separates me and her. Besides she’s engaged. And apparently from what she told me the other night she’s feeling a little unstable... again, that would be, again.”

---“Again?”

Sam changed his position on the sofa and folded his arms his head. He felt the Sasha factor at work again. At one point, now several years ago, he had come to feel deeply about her. Since Tammy left he had worked hard to purge those feelings. But the residue had a way of activating inflating. He pressed a button on the CD remote and picked up Marcus Roberts playing “West Side Story.”

---“Again,” said Sam, loosening up with a second glass of Bordeaux.

---“I don’t know the whole story, but last week she admitted herself to the treatment center on the edge of the city. She said it was not the first time. I said I was surprised, and I asked how she was doing. ‘Surprised or shocked?’ was her query before she said I’m still feeling a little wobbly.

I suppose I looked a bit shocked. I had no idea what was going on. And that was the end of the conversation. What should I have said?"

Tammy had been watching him closely. "There's more you're not fessing up to?"

---"How do you know? How many times has this happened," as he put down his fork and drank some wine.

---"Because you're terrible at lying and deceiving, and any woman who cares about her ass picks up on that right away. It's who you are. Don't fret it."

---"I haven't told you all because it's all so strange. I had seen hers walk through the gym to and from her aerobics classes. One day I met her downtown, and she was on crutches. I had been warned that she could be distant with people. I came along side of her and said don't be alarmed but I have seen you at East Coast. Are you ok? Can I carry your bag since we're headed in the same direction? She was actually grateful and handed me her bag. She explained it was an operation on her knee to correct an old soccer injury. She asked my name and said she was known as Sasha. A few block later she said this was her stop – a doctor's office. I asked if she had a way home even though I didn't have a car, and she said her grad advisor with whom she was doing research was picking her up. They had some data to get through at the lab. And the next time I saw her was weeks later in the gym. I didn't talk to her, but on the way out she waved. I was pleased she had remembered. During the few weeks, as you have observed, we've talked when I wasn't talking to you or Rob or Shelia or...."

---"You've always been a social animal in the gym. People marvel that you get as much of a workout as you do," she interrupted.

---"I know. Tiff...."

---"The one who runs the pizza shop?"

---"Right. One night when I stopped for a pizza, she shouted to the staff, 'Hide, this guy will socialize us out of business.'"

---"Did you have a fling with her?" queried the Tammy across the table.

---"No. She said to me that if I weren't such an old fart, she'd take me into the storeroom for a good time. Must say that would have been a first."

Tammy was laughing. "They come at you in all ways, don't they? So go on. I know there's more"

---"The next thing was an email with an attachment. She wrote 'Next time you're munching on oreos – we had talked about oreos - here's a little mind vacation for you.'"

---"A mine or mind vacation?"

---"Mind," Sam pointing to his head.

---"You have it memorized, don't you?"

---“I have it memorized. So what does that tell you?” responded Sam.

---“Ill fortune.”

---“Thanks. The attachment was a Do It Yourself Cowboy/Western Songs. Lines with blanks and columns below from which you chose phrases for the blanks.”

---“Gottcha. I’ve seen them,” she said as the desert of fresh strawberries and cream arrived and his espresso. “Are you into cowboy music?”

---“I am modestly. My granddaddy was a fiddler. I still have the fiddle, hand-made, more than 100 years old.”

---“We’ll fiddle some other time. How did you fill in the blanks?”

---“I tended to pick the funniest or most absurd. Was I suppose to take it seriously? I had a good laugh. I sent her my reply.”

---“And...”

---“She sent me an email that must have been written at 5 am...”

---“How would you know. You don’t get up till noon.”

---“OK, OK, fair point. Anyway the email said ‘I think you answered all the questions the way you should have. I need your help with some data. Can we get together at my office on Friday, aay noon.’ Something to that effect. I wrote back that I’d be there.”

-----“And you didn’t say anything to me about this until now? You’re fuckin in deep, aren’t you,” she scolded. “Should I guess what’s coming?” Now Tammy was glaring.

---“You may or may not. It surprised me. I arrived, she opened the door, I walked with a Hi, she closed the door quickly without a word and started toward me with a look that was riveting. A step from me, she opened her arms...” Sam stopped.

---“So?”

---“A knock at the door. Her eyes literally turned crimson, she swung around, I stepped back as far as I could and her mind being more alert than mine she grabbed some papers, which she clutched in her when opened the door. It was a colleague. She introduced me, and her colleague said something like could I use your help, meaning me. I was there about an hour, got everyone’s dataset squared away, and left with thanks from the colleague but not Sasha. When you saw us together yesterday I had asked about the research about which I learned nothing. Instead as she walked away from me she said she was heading to Chicago to visit family and meet her fiancé to finalize plans. That’s the story,” as Sam finished his coffee.

---“Let’s get out here. Let’s take a walk. Let me put my arm in yours. You don’t mind do you?”

---“Objection, your honor!”

---“Overruled.”

We walked a hundred feet or so before either of us spoke. Finally she said,

---“You can’t help yourself, you keep falling in love, they can’t help themselves or you, they disappear. Trust me. I can’t blame you because you know my history. I’m different in that they fall in love with me, we fuck and then I tell them that’s it, no more. I’m still looking.”

---“All I get is a disappearing act, right?” said Sam, not feeling especially pleased.

---“How many times has this happened to you?”

---“I’ve lost track. The hardest one to deal with was Ashe.”

---“I know you think of yourself a fool, but console yourself, you’re not enough of a fool to turn crazy. You actually live a full life. You may feel foolish and sad and pissed and whatever, but none of this may not be affecting you as deeply as you like to imply in your stories. Since I’ve known you, you’ve dated two or three women, right?”

---“A couple of times with each. Believe me, it feels deep, but I too have wondered how deep. In some ways the thought that I’m only fooling myself makes me feel worse. True, the sadness, the loss, all those negatives seem to live in a self-contained corner somewhere outside my day-to-day life. Maybe that’s why I keep letting myself find someone new to fall for. I’m not in touch with that corner. It’s becoming embarrassing at my age.”

---“OK, we’re both exhausted over relationship talk.”

She threw her arms around Sam and whispered, “we’ll find our way.” And kissed him on the cheek.

They headed for her car back in the lot.

He remembered as he turned her book over in his hands that after the meatloaf and the Grand Cru he did not see Tammy or Sasha. And he also remembered his fantasy machine kicked into high gear not as much about the absence of Tammy as about Sasha.

He smiled to himself as he thought how he had fully admitted fantasies into life back in his married years when he had met but never bedded down Christiana. She kept him at arm’s length, and after years during which he had forbade himself from fantasizing, he commenced doing it. Now it was a part, a healthy part, he had concluded, of his life. The problem was that his fantasies belonged to his 20’s. His fantasies never seemed to have much to do with his real age. Well, indirectly they could. The possibility that Sasha, then 25 or 26, would become his lover was beyond the pale. Perhaps these fantasies weren’t healthy. He could explain to himself why he felt silly and sometimes worse, but he couldn’t prevent them.

And that was what had been happening with Sasha, as it had happened earlier to Ashe. After a week’s absence Sasha was standing by the aerobics studio when Sam walked into the gym. He ambled over to say hello, but before he could utter a word, she said without looking at him, “Don’t talk to me ever.” With that she turned and walked away. Stunned and embarrassed was how he felt. He walked back in the dumbbell rack to begin his workout. He decided to keep it light not sure how he would perform. He talked to a few friends, none of whom were close enough to know what happened, finished his workout and left.

He kept to himself, tried to work, got some work done and wondered.

A few days later Tammy was back. He walked up to her, hoping not for a repeat dismissal.

---“Oh, I’m glad to see you. Are you ready? How about some shoulder presses?”

After Sam’s first set, with her hands on his shoulders, she said:

---“Two things to tell you: first, I’m leaving next week for good, I’m moving to San Francisco, your city. I’m going to work for the home office. And you’re right, what a city! I thought you were full of shit, but you weren’t, at least not about Frisco.”

---“I should be jealous and angry, but I’m not. By the way they don’t like Frisco. Next?” responded Sam who was actually feeling dread.

---“Your shoulders muscles are like cables. So, what’s happened?”

It didn’t take long to tell her.

“You don’t have a shot with her. Gorgeous body, that I can see. Perhaps fun to be with, that I can’t attest to. You feel silly about the way you got involved and the way she sucked you in and spit you out, and you should. Not pretty. But she’s screwed up, I think it’s more than pre-wedding jitters, she’s screwing you up in the process. And I think it was intentional for some dark reason. We’ve got more workout to do. Let’s go.”

They finished, she walked around and pressed his shoulders and said,

---“That’s a little better.”

---“I’m leaving Monday, the movers are coming in Friday and let’s try to find some time,” she threw out quickly as they headed to the door.

---“I have no plans,” he said as they reached the desk.

At the desk she told Shank it was her last time, and she would pay off the contract.

Shank said, “Nothing owed and any time you’re back in town you have the use of the gym.” Obviously Shank knew the story. He asked no further questions. They embraced.

Sam opened the door and saw her tears.

---“No words, right now. This is hard as hell. I’ll call.” And turned toward her car.

Sam worked out by himself the rest of the week. On Thursday he worked out in the morning because he had a dental appointment in the late afternoon. When he walked in and after signing sheet at the desk he walked toward an empty bench with a rack. He loaded two 45-pound plates on the bar to warm up with for some bench presses. He did 10 reps, got up, walked behind the bench and picked up another 45-pound plate. When he turned around to add the plate to the bar, he found himself fixed in the stare or glare of Sasha. He had noticed a man with his back to him leaning over a woman when he was first loading his bar. Now he knew the woman was Sasha and the man who had switched places with her on the bench was Scotty.

No doubt about it. Ten feet away and looking straight and hard at him. She was tense, hands on her hips, not visibly angry, almost beckoning and certainly not listening, as she should have been, to Scotty lying on the bench and explaining the technique of the bench press. He thought about that moment in her office. Then as now she was not staring off into space.

Sam decided not to back down, even though he had to balance a plate between his hands, and he locked his eyes on hers. They held this stance for seconds, until Scotty had racked the bar and was getting up. She turned away, and Sam slid the plate unto the bar and added a second plate to the other side. He was lying down when he heard Scotty's voice, "Good to see you, Sam. Do you a spotter. Sasha might want to learn."

---"Not today, but thanks," he replied, as he thought a bit of a risk to ask her to spot.

He didn't need a spotter today because he was not lifting to failure. Shortly afterwards she left the gym. Scotty had another client and moved to the other side of the gym. Later in a conversation with Shank the next day, Saturday morning, Sam learned something more about the day before. Earlier in the week Sasha had given notice to Shank, her last day to be following Wednesday, so she could return to Chicago for her wedding. Shank and Dianna, having employed her for years and apparently having to put up with more than they should have, had invited her to a farewell dinner scheduled for last night at a local pub. Shank told Sam she never showed, never called. They couldn't reach her. They actually drove to her apartment building, but her car wasn't in the lot and no one answered their ring. Nor did she show up to teach her class this morning. And then he added, almost offhandedly, another disappearance. Shank told Sam that she probably was on her way to Chicago. Sam was not about to relate his strange encounter with her yesterday, not yet at least. He was worried, although he was not sure what to worry about.

Sam left and arrived home in time for the Saturday Opera – Handel, unfortunately, an opera composer he was not enthusiastic about. He ate some lunch at his desk as he closed in on the last chapter of the manuscript he'd been reviewing, and by the time the opera had finished he had written his comments about what the manuscript needed to be publishable.

After the opera he talked to a long-time friend who announced he had decided to bite the bullet, retire and begin the life that Sam had, the life that made everyone envious.

---"You know how to make my day – the pacesetter," Sam replied.

They hung up just as the doorbell rang. Lacking a peep-hole, he opened the door forthwith – and there stood Tammy with a bag from The Plum and a small case.

---"Hi," she said, "I'm coming in and I'm staying all night."

---"Good thing we have a room available," answered Sam backing away from the doorway..

---"I was hoping it would be occupied," she shot back and kissed him on the lips.

---"I think we can arrange that," as he took the Plum bag.

In the kitchen Sam removed chilled champagne, paté, a fresh baguette, strawberries and a roast chicken with onion rings of all things because she knew he loved rings.

---“By the way Ron sends his best. This bottle is from that big, temperature-controlled, glass room where admission is restricted.”

---“What a choice. Bollinger 1999. A champagne that spent lots of time on its lees, so they say. I can’t afford it. If he lets people like you in there, the whole system falls apart.”

She kicked his shin.

---“I can’t believe this is happening, but I’m willing to suspend belief forever.”

---“Ever is too long. Open the champagne, and no more talk about lees, besides we both wear Levis. I’ll open the paté and cut the bread. We may never get to the rest.”

Off went her shoes, down came the hair, and they took life up on the sofa with some light jazz. Since Sam hated drapes, blinds, etc., the evening light was among his favorite companions. Tony Bennett was singing. Soon he’ll get to “Left My Heart,” thought Sam.

--“You know, Sammy, as all your young lovers call you, I’m scared about what’s coming, more so than I want to admit,” said Tammy as she curled up against his body, her champagne in her right hand and his in his left. “Really scared.”

---“So how does the scariness feel?” he asked as he caressed her leg with his free hand.

---“You know, I’ve been on my own since 18. My parents pretty much disowned me, although we stayed in touch. My bothers, an even sadder story. I’ve pushed myself into people’s lives to get what I thought I needed. Slept my way to middle management. Decided at some point I wanted to do what I’m now doing. I hate to think I was born to sell, but that seems to be the case. In a way you’re a salesman, aren’t you? Peddling all those ideas. Are ideas any more noble than health products? Anyway I married Rob because I thought I could settle down with him, be truly secure for the first time in my life and keep a degree of that free spiritedness that I seem to crave. It’s didn’t work almost from day one. He’s not mean, just out of it. Frisco is as big a jump as I’ve ever made. Responsibilities I have no training for, loneliness I’m not looking forward to and a new place where everyone is wired differently. I’m scared, Sammy.”

---“Will it help if I stay in touch, maybe even make a visit?” said Sam.

---“Staying touch, yes, a visit, I’m not sure. Don’t be offended,” she kissed him.

---“Not offended. I’m scared in my way because I’m not sure how to fill the void. I’ve got more voids than I want to deal with.”

The night light became more intrusive. They were both gazing through the sliding glass door.

---“Our relationship is the oddest of my life. We’ll fuck tonight, but why haven’t either of us been driven to do before this? I hadn’t really thought about it before this week. Is the end to what we’ve been doing for the last year in need of some proper burial?”

---“A bit morbid for me, but yes, I don’t think we can just embrace and say good-by. There’s too much there, all those reps, spots, coffees, conversations need more than just a good-by. As close

as I felt to you, I never thought that being lovers was part of the contract. Somehow without abetting it we're letting it happen," said Sam.

Tammy moved away, set down her flute, turned to Sam, ran both hands across his face, and said ever so quietly, "Right on, Sammy, right on."

She got up and said "I'm hungry, and I'm going to let you wait on me. You fix the chicken while I walk through the Condo and look at the art – being the connoisseur I am I can say you have some crazy stuff. Probably why we'll never live together."

Sam laughed, throw out his arm, Tammy pulled him up and then close and they kissed for a while gently but full of emotion. "Chicken it is, my earthen goddess," said Sam as they disengaged.

The music had stopped – Tony had sung "Left my Heart" twice for some reason on the disc – why let go of a good thing, mused Sam. He finished the plates with sliced chicken covered with a spicy lemon sauce, basically of butter and juice, that he could whip up in his sleep, a slice of the baguette, onion rings leaning up against each other with a spot of ketchup for dipping next to them, and a small nest of imported Nyon olives and cornichons, which he always had in his fridge. In a separate dish with two forks were the strawberries, stemmed and dripping with heavy cream, which he also always had in his fridge.

"So, my dear Sammy, the story of Ashe in a frame," as she showed him the "Happy Birthday Sammy" that hung on his office wall.

Murray McLauchlan was singing "Do You Dream of Being Somebody", the next disc in the CD Player.

---"I'll bet you have a version already." said Sam, while standing next to the Bistro Table with a tray that had two plates and a dish of strawberries. He was curious how this would play out.

---"A one-sentence story. She was in love, so were you, impossibly so."

---"You read what's on the back?" asked Sam now leaning with tray on the Bistro Table and looking at the berries in case they tried to escape, to avoid the Tammy eye-lock.

---"I did. Let me repeat," as she turned over the frame: "I love you so much', 'I hope you see as much strength and beauty in your being as I do', need I go on?"

---"No, because I have it memorized," said Sam, almost in a whisper.

---"I might have known," as she walked over to Sam and without touching the tray reached up to kiss him.

They walked into the Great Room.

---"Sofa or table," inquired Sam.

---"Sofa, if you're up to it, we don't have a lot of cuddle time left," said Tammy.

They set their plates on the table in front of the sofa, and Tammy placed the frame upside down with the message that Ashe had pasted to the back in full view.

---“Do you still pine?” asked Tammy after a few minutes.

---“I do a bit, I think about her every day, I’m resigned. I send her a B-day greeting once a year, and that’s it. She never responds, has been out of touch for years.”

Tammy knew there was an Ashe, but none of the details until now. No one knew the details except Ashe and Sam. That was obviously changing.

---“The only love letter?” asked Tammy.

---“One of several,” said Sam.

---“You have them all memorized, don’t you?”

---“I do,” in what sounded like a wedding vow.

---“And you met at East Coast as with so many of your fatal relationships?” said Tammy more gently than the words implied.

---“Right. At the water cooler, next to the leg press. I had noticed her before. She taught aerobics and only occasionally worked with weights. She was using the leg press to lean on. As I walked up to the water cooler she said ‘You’ve been hanging out here a lot.’ I nodded. I was surprised that she had noticed. But surprise came to be her middle name instead of Suzanne. We introduced ourselves.”

---“Sam,’ she said, ‘I don’t know any Sams.’”

---“Not a handle I’ve always gotten along with,’ was what I answered, what I often answer.”

---“Then she said ‘I may change it, say Sammy, no Samuel,’ with a glint in her eye and a tilt in her voice that I would discover were her trademarks, She shook my outstretched hand and before turning away said, ‘We’ll talk, Samuel, you and I will talk, and peace.’ And we did for several years and from several different locations.”

---“That’s how it began,” said Sam.

---“You never fucked her?”

---“Never. No physical contact except socially-acceptable embraces. I would never have risked it. Besides she always had boyfriends,” replied Sam.

---“So how did it end?”

---“A disappearance. She and her boyfriend moved the Rockies. What’s in the frame came from there by mail while we were still in touch. I remember a telephone conversation after that, and then silence.”

---“You know where she is now?”

---“I do. I have an email address and a cell number. I know she’s married. I live with the memories more comfortably than I once did. Sasha can turn on the fantasy machine because our relationship or lack thereof was so strange. With Ashe I have piles of good memories. I still write about her in my journals because I don’t want to let go completely. You can figure out why from the message in front you. Her short love letters were unlike anything anyone had ever written me,” said Sam with some emotion in his voice.

---“I believe you. It’s time to put it back on the wall.” Tammy picked up the frame and headed off to the office. Sam cleaned up the plates and went into the kitchen. The music had stopped and the Condo was quiet. Back in the living room they embraced and she whispered into his ear,

---“Your bed, my lord.”

They made love for hours. Sam knew her body would be firm and solid. He was surprised how soft her love-making was. Sensual in way he had never experienced. She asked him if old guys always had long erections. He said that he never discussed his sex history. She laughed and reassured him that hers was an open book.

“I want more,” she said as she flipped around and the love-making started again from a different direction. He grew hard, and she began to pulsate. His hands squeezed her shoulders, her legs his head, the gasps for air were as erotic as the acts themselves. They both felt the power of pure, raw emotion, tempered in no way by restraint or boundary. An explosion. His penis had let go, as she pressed hard, harder, hardest against his lips. Then it was over. She lay her head on his abs,

---“All muscle,” he heard her whisper as she caressed his thighs. Her legs remained around his head, and he could have said the same thing. He did not want to let go of her or let her go. Every once in a while an after-shock in her body. Simultaneously they corrected their positions, and Tammy said,

---“Sammy, I love you. Let’s leave it at that.”

They lay together with her body draped over his for a long time. Their talk was in bits and drabs. He knew she was happy as he was, not a common word in his cynical vocabulary.

At brunch, which Sam prepared, well past 1 PM, Sam said he’d like to finish another story.

---“You have my total attention. About Sasha, no?”

Sam knew by now not to be surprised. It didn’t take him long to recount the event involving Sasha. He noticed that Tammy listened intently to every word. When he finished, she folded her hands and said:

---“She’s lost, but she’ll find her bearings again. Right now, I’m not prepared to be hard on her. I’ve got my own life to square away.”

She took Sam’s hand,

---“Thanks Sammy, this is hard for me and without sounding like an egomaniac it’s hard for you. We’ll be in touch again but not until I’m settled in California. Please give me a hug and a kiss and walk me to the car.”

And that's what happened.

How many years later with Tammy's book lying on the table in the dark of the room and the light of the moon, Sam said to himself again, the most delicious night in bed with any woman he had ever known. In the past when he thought about that night, he would tear up. Not tonight. The book, more specifically that line, had somehow closed the circle. He had known for months, certainly since the closing of East Coast, that the fantasy machine had turned off almost completely. He still sent Ashe a B-Day greetings with no response expected. Her B-Day greeting still hung in his study. Sasha was mostly a jagged memory. With Tammy it had been real, never fantasy. It had ended almost abruptly as he had begun, but it was still real and can't be erased, shouldn't be erased.

He got up, walked over to the sliding glass door and out onto the balcony. The near-full moon was incandescently bright and masked most of the starlight. The Condo was quiet. Not even any street traffic could be heard. Utter and complete silence for the moment.

For the last hour or more he had done what he had done often before - retraced a turbulent time in his life. Shank, he recalled, had told him years ago that the gym would change his life. It certainly complicated his life. Tammy seemed to know what Sam did not. Gym rats become lovers, and lovers can have separate destinies. It took Sam a long time to figure that out. The gym life presented a path that he had embraced fully, almost compulsively, even though he had said to himself more than once since the gym closed and shortly after Tammy moved to the West Coast that had his gym life been some other kind of life, he'd be musing over a totally different series of events and romances and misfortunes. He had no regrets about his gym life, more physical and emotional pain than he had expected or for that matter preferred, but here he was, still fumbling about but oddly better prepared to fumble.

We lock ourselves into routes and routines, thought Sam, and seldom prepare to be denied access. At some point we're all denied access.

Tammy had changed his moorings. After she left and with no more than a half dozen emails and no phone calls between them, Sam redoubled his effort to finish a manuscript that he had been contracted to do years before, and he did turn it in much to the surprise of his agent. And Tammy had pushed his libido into some recess he couldn't find. Without the gym but more essentially without Tammy the rhythm of his life had changed. The "Confess to God" episode had occurred after they had made joyous love and then slept in each other's arms for several hours. But as he stood on the balcony he knew "C'est Moi" was deadlier than dead. Confessing to god was also dead.

He had followed her dictum - let's leave it there. He remembered how stomach-wrenching it was as he walked her to car. Was it for her? Both stared at their feet as if they might fall off. Then she left, not a word by either.

He wanted to write or call, but what would he say? She had often supplied the words when he couldn't. Could she or would she do it again? He had no idea. He decided to leave that for tomorrow or the day after or the day after that or...never.

He closed the sliding glass door, grabbed his cell in case he had a heart attack and could still call someone and walked toward his stairs.

As he climbed the staircase to the most spacious bedroom he had ever known, he remembered that tomorrow night he was having dinner with the local gallery owners through whom he had built his small art collection. A dinner party for a young sculptor who made giant metal pieces and exquisitely small jewelry items. She was a whiz with a welding torch, having learned to use it in the mining town she grew up in, Arlene had told Sam on the phone, and she added, you'll love her and her work. Her show was to open in a few days. He had no doubt he would attend the opening regardless of what happened tomorrow night. Another miner's kid who was carving out a different life but had never completely let go. Sam understood that, the son of a miner and yet spent his adult life writing about mining.

Confessions did not prevent misfortunes.