

SPOTTING FOR TAMMY

by

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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."

It had long ago forgotten all those Sunday-School lessons on how evil turned to good and sorrow to joy and dark to light. He wasn't sure that humans ever learned lessons well enough to know what to do with them. Gloom and doom his academic colleagues had described him, that is, when he had colleagues. Hadn't had any for years since retirement, if not before, and he was better off for it.

"What bullshit we endure simply because it's so easy to make up what you want believe to be true and right and it's hard to be self-critical after you've stated your declarations," he said to himself, then he laughed. "Bullshitting with bullshit," his tobacco-chewing uncle used to say in response to almost everyone.

He was not in a bad mood today or right now. Just venting a little. It felt good every once in a while. It was easier to joke about misfortunes at this stage in his life. Greater solitude, not absolute solitude – no hermit was he – just less engagement, more caution.

For most of the day he'd been 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 it wasn't suited to the technological revolution. 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 museums and department stores, 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

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incompetence. As the desk proprietor was listening to her and surveying her seated physique – from her face enframed in black, across a close-fitting, straw-colored, splendidly-tailored dress that acknowledged the winter that was present, not the spring that was coming, to her thin but shapely legs, now crossed but when extended beckoned – 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 a new world at a new tempo. Less than a year later she fled the forehead slapper with her daughters and was not heard from after that. He still had the image barely.

Sam closed down the laptop. 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 one local neighborhood gym after another had closed. He was vainer than he'd ever admit. He liked having that big mirror on the wall. And this was not the first time. He fretted more about his butt disappearing than admiring the muscle groups that he could actually show off, if he wanted to.

He had once confessed to a lady who was then just a friend and who 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 from a balcony in a different apartment. The circumstances were never revealed, so speculation filled the void. He was gay, he was insane, he hated his father, he loved his coke. Sam had never heard that the mirrors had anything directly to do with the suicide, and during his stay he never experienced any malevolent forces or vibes that would cause him to abandon reality. 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 never recalled reciting aloud the refrain "Mirror, Mirror on the wall" – worse than vanity, more like insanity – and yet he knew he'd thought about it.

Sam had already worked out earlier in the day. He seldom missed a day. For most of a decade he had worked out at Olde Towne Workouts, 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 by bus 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.

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About the 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 Red, whom Sam had known as a kid in the suburbs. His dad had serviced his car. His dad died from a heart attack in his early fifties. Red found himself in trouble with the law, but Sam did not know the details. The garage was closed after his dad’s death.

Sam walked up to the desk, introduced himself and was surprised that Red remembered. Sam asked about Red’s mother who had worked at the garage and was surprised to learn she was helping to run the office of his businesses. Businesses? Red explained he owned several businesses including this gym. Lifting, he said, had saved his life, presumably a reference to his more troubled years, and he had always wanted to open a gym. They walked around, Red answered all of Sam’s questions with directness and clarity that would never have been possible with the kid Red, 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 Red, 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. They shook hands, as Red said in all seriousness to his wife,

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

Dianna had no idea, and Sam tried to reassure her. Sam wanted to say red-headed guys are troublemakers, but he caught himself. Instead he gently informed Dianna,

---“I used to patronize his dad’s garage, and I knew Red when he was a kid. I’ll bet he’s lost his nickname Red, actually Red 2, because his dad was Red 1.”

Both Red and Dianna laughed, and 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 couple of years Sam, Red (as an adult his name was Paul) 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. Red 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 Red 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 Red got married quietly, but the property part was still being contested. Once in a while when Sam asked how things were going, Red intoned

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“shitty”. Sam would move on. That’s all he needed to know. As it turned out, however, it took a toll on Dianna.

Red 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. Over time his body began to change in shape and tone, and several years later, when he was trying to find a new shirt to wear at his nephew’s wedding, he discovered that his neck size had swelled from 15½ to 17½. Some life changes too but he wasn’t sure they were related to lifting...they seemed too familiar.

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 X-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 ten-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, like Sam’s old apartment. 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, but, more importantly, don’t lose track of what you’re doing and how you feel,” said Scotty with emphasis. ”Not unlike tennis. Form is absolutely essential.”

Scotty had never seen Sam’s by-his-seat-of-the-pants tennis game. His opponents often slammed down their rackets, as he ran down a ball that had point written all over it and flicked it past them while they stood watching and he had little concern for form. What mattered in his tennis game was getting to the ball, returning it, setting up for next shot, etc. Form...he knew good form in tennis but he was not a practitioner. That’s what drove his opponents crazy and made the club’s instructor, now deceased but for years a good friend, howl as he watched from the sidelines. It was clear to Sam, however, from the beginning that form in weight-lifting was of a different magnitude.

Sam tried to remember Scotty’s advice from the first days:

---“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 group by a couple of days – upper abdomen today, lower tomorrow, legs and lower back the next before

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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 without 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 – fifty pounders. Scotty missed very little.

---“Don’t be thinking about the size of the dumbbells or you’ll become a dumbbell.” Sam loved Scotty’s sense of humor.

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

---“With you I’ll go.”

They talked for hours, actually closed the bar. Red was richer than he had ever expected to be. He owned the building and the property and he sold Olde Towne 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 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 the 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

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before you and I got reacquainted. Olde Towne plus the archery studio ended up devouring us,” came an unexpected answer.

---“Life-changing is always problematic,” 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 several times. Red was now officially a student at the university. Sam had no doubt Red 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 almost a decade here whether he had two or three flights of stairs. He knew he had 30 steps.

He was still thinking about the gym. He finished his month with Scotty and began to show up every day between five and six pm. He had a trim body then because he had played singles tennis for twenty-five 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. Now he had a lifter’s body. Trim would not describe it. What happened to him and his body was not what he expected, but the lifters and trainers who saw him work out knew what was happening. During his gym time, even after Scotty had let him loose on his own, Sam and Scotty often chatted, and every once in a while Scotty came over and gently corrected Sam’s form or suggested a different technique. Sam became a gym rat on two levels. He was there, and he learned quickly what lifters should and should not do. He liked the routine of working out with others but also having the choice of others or himself. He never got to the point of competing with others, but, as he had in tennis, he was competing with himself. In the course of this he got bigger, weighing more than he ever had, but he was bigger because he was adding mass and strength. His physician was amazed and sometimes expressed concern at the rise in weight, but they both agreed there were no signs of strain or dislocation and body fat was minimal, more the result of aging than anything else. Sam was not a diet freak so the occasional junk food and a powerful sweet tooth probably added a few pounds. Within a year, probably less, he was quite at home in the gym.

Sam and Scotty remained friends. Scotty was the younger 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. Sam, Scotty and Chris 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 as diligently as any of the competitive lifters. Sam knew better than to disturb them when they were absorbed in their routines. Chris had once observed,

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

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

Sam knew in short order he had been accepted as 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 five feet, six inches, and far stronger than he looked. He came in early, between six and seven, so that Sam only ran into him occasionally. His most impressive routine was the leg press. Ten to twelve plates on each side and a thrust that was amazing, and he did ten or twelve reps.

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

---“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,” retorted Sam, who was known for testing his colleagues, even those he liked. “I do have hope in your case. A twenty-four-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 tenured and promoted 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 CitationIndex.”

---“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 way out, I don’t need the money and I don’t want the senior-professor shit. Sitting in a room full of Goldsterns or Arminghouses for five minutes would drive me to desperate acts. It’s that simple.”

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---“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 current Dean, for the first time in his years at the university, was smarter than the faculty and knew how to use people like Ned. He actually liked the Dean but not the system even under an enlightened dean.

University business was seldom part of the 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 remained on the edge of the big-lifter crowd. Too much conversation took away from his concentration, and concentration was still an essential part of his learning. Besides, he was not used to close friends. He knew the talk of the heavy lifters most of whom were not academics. They had not 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. The gym crowd was different because they were mainly urban folks. They were more aware of and engaged in the external world, but they were equally fearful of that world, especially as it was shaped by the university, an overpowering force in the city. Still, their 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 Olde Towne. Kip 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. Kip 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 bars and racks 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. Kip 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 Kip. Kip was not entirely comfortable in the gym. For a guy who had spent most of his life lifting in his garage

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largely by himself or with his son, the pace in the gym was different. At times you had to wait for the equipment you wanted or seek out a spotter if you decided to go heavy. He was shy about waiting or asking among people he didn't know. He was used to being around his son or other drivers but was shy about the gym crowd, even though he was among fellow heavy-lifters who respected him. Kip had begun in a garage and moved to a gym; Sam had started in a gym and moved to his home. He doubted Kip would ever miss the gym as much he did. Kip was always glad to see Sam in the gym because they shared not only age but a background. Sam knew about trucks and hauling and drivers; he could have been a driver in the garage. For the moment that made the gym more amenable to him.

Kip'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 him shortly after her death. After hundreds of evenings in the gym Sam knew a lot about the last few years of Kip's life. He had been devoted to his wife but he never understood how she could let her life go to hell. She ate too much and exercised too little and refused to change. Sam listened without asking too many questions or delivering any judgments. He remembered Red's enthusiastic inspiration: "The gym will change your body and your life." Change, yes, but unpredictably so. In his conversations with Kip Sam sensed at times that the gym had actually become a barrier between Kip and his wife. Speculation, but in their many conversations, more casual than intimate, if followed closely, there was a hint of tension. Kip believed in conditioning, and she was not interested. That was more or less the extent of what Sam knew. Kip knew more about Sam's life because Sam was more open and used his own life experiences to tell stories or make comments in ways that Kip never could or would. Kip would occasionally drop his shyness to ask what men always ask and what he liked to tease Sam about:

---"Where's the woman in your life?" And then he would add, "The women in the gym want to talk to you all the time. Are you afraid to ask one of them out?"

Sam would laugh and whisper to Kip,

---"I've known them all in a prior life."

The fact was that Kip knew some of them better than Sam because they drank beer with Kip's son in Kip's basement. And Kip was not impressed with this generation.

---"Best to keep your distance from gym chicks," he advised in his more solemn moments. "You have too good a life to screw around."

Advice he never took to heart. Kip was right about what to avoid in a proper hoist and what to avoid in life.

Finally, Kip 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. Kip 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

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evening was hard for Kip, 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. Kip couldn't understand why they were destroying their bodies any more than why his wife had destroyed hers. Sam always suspected that Kip 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 Kip, 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 Kip. The first time, it paralyzed Sam with fear. Kip 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 Kip couldn't lift it anymore. That never happened. Kip knew – good lifters sensed what was happening in the reaction of the muscles, not in the reflections of the mirror, he often reminded Sam. Kip 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 Kip's favorite observations – “One hundred pounds is heavy no matter how you're lifting it or, more importantly, who's lifting it. Be attentive.” The young Turks would have laughed at that as they shot for the stratosphere. Sam knew what Kip meant. Some days a hundred pounds felt like a thousand. Kip was the smartest lifter Sam had ever known.

He was now dressed in his ten-year-old casuals – how he hated buying clothes – and he sprinted down the fifteen steps or so 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 ten minutes to get to the bus stop. The mobile bus locator was so handy – he knew where the bus was and how long before it would arrive. 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 didn't come back to the old neighborhood much anymore. Mainly this bookstore was his last tie. SHELVES was its name, and when it first opened, 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 had evolved into 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 a new handsome structure behind the original building, completely restored in all its grandeur, 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 where they met and hatched the ideas of

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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 bookshop. 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 or by anyone 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 counter and planted a kiss on Sam’s cheek. She was a tall, fine-boned woman with flaming red hair.

---“How are you, Sam?” in a voice he could barely hear. Such contrasts, he had noted long ago.

---“Chipper, thanks, and you?”

---“Ready for the break.”

---“A night like this with people overflowing from the streets must warm the cockles of your wallet, if such exist.”

---“Sammy, accountants don’t allow cockles on their wallets,” 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, who had taken the English lit track.

---“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 us to Peet’s years ago.”

Sam had been drinking Peet’s since the late 60s, and their bar was the only Peet’s franchise in the city or the region. And the traffic was steady to heavy.

---“Thank you my dear, I will use it right away. This is the only place I know where I can buy all of Roberto Bolaño and Swedish body oils and Vichyssoise and Peet’s. You know, if you built residences overhead, 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.”

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

---“Not your standard reading fare, Sammy,” said Allie, as she picked up the book to put it in his backpack.

With the book mid-air Sam took hold of Allie’s arm.

---“Whoa,” he said, as his eyes popped open like a tulip’s spring bloom.

---“Not what you expected. I can see that, my dear,” said Brett, after Allie had put the book in Sam’s hands.

---“Not the name I expected. 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 eventually wrote this book, what I’m assuming is a memoir. I would never have guessed she wanted to write a book about her life, although it is a life worth writing about. I found out about it – you’re right, Allie, memoirs not my usual fare – because after our long recess she emailed me that she had turned author and written about times I may remember.”

---“A beautiful woman,” said Brett who was peering literally over Sam’s shoulder. “Will you be a subject in the memoir? Let’s know. We may want to invite her to do a public reading.”

Sam opened the book to the Table of Contents, and there was a Chapter entitled “My Spotter”.

---“Ah...oh, I may need that coffee *tout de suite*, or can I get a shot of Bourbon?” Sam said in a voice that felt like quavering, as he read the word Sam in the first sentence.

---“A reading is definitely on,” said Allie, as she picked up the book-order form and handed it to Brett. Brett and Sam moved aside so Allie could wait on the next customer.

Holding the book open to that page, Brett and Sam read on for a few more sentences.

---“I think, Sammy, you’re in for some deep-memory digging tonight.”

Brett gave him a hug and pointed him toward the Peet’s....

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

---“Balaban?” said Sam slightly off balance from twisting two ways at once, toward Peet’s and back toward the counter, and juggling two authors in his head, John and Tamara.

---“Steady there old man. That’s the John. 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,” replied Sam, having steadied himself, “We had too many scotches before the reading, and he had most of them. He was brilliant. It’s been a

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few years. I'm still looking for his book of Vietnam-War poems. It's out of print. Your next venture – a boutique for used, out-of-print-book.”

---“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 for the last five hours and for the next five hours as well.

---“It's the twenty-ninth, if you can remember,” said Brett, as she winked and she tapped one cheek and kissed the other before walking back toward the office.

---“Thanks, Brett, a tap and a kiss always help. I'm off to Peet Land,” said 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. He decided not to open the book again until he was home. He needed more secure surroundings than offered by a coffee bar, even as he drank an espresso he knew so well. Her email was typical of her intended mysteriousness. “It will unfold but you'll have to wait and watch” was hidden behind the two sentences contained in her email.. He looked up at the SFMOMA poster with the Roy DeCarava's Coltrane photo that Sam had given them when they opened the coffee bar. It too carried memories.

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 to justify the alcohol at night. He poured a glass of inexpensive pinot noire from Bourgogne rather than a Bordeaux – Domaine Maurice Écard, Les Perrieres – which he had opened last night. Rod's suggestion. He loved having The Plum and Rod 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 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. He never watched TV because it interfered with listening and vegetating. Just vegetating had a new name and new prominence: DNE at work, a part of the brain larger than the cognitive regions, once ignored as inactive, now being viewed as a place of refurbishment. Vegetating gives it free reign. 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.

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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 baguettes eatable for more than a day. He pulled off a hunk and returned the rest to the box. Then, he remembered he had fresh strawberries in the 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 plunked down into the sofa. With a certain fear and trepidation, it was time to read, to let the mystery resolve itself, if it could.

For the next two hours he was unexpectedly engrossed in Tammy's book. It was one thing to read a memoir in which the reader played no role; quite another when the reader was a part of the story. Even if Sam had played no part, Tammy's memoir worked for him because it had no complaining, no whining, no sudden self-revelations, no tearful do-overs that doomed most memoirs. Acceptance for what had happened with a tinge of sadness. Like all of us, she had memories she wanted to exploit fully and others she wanted to treat obliquely. She made good choices, but the most amazing attribute was how well she wrote. Like a good poem, her memoir transcended a description of the detail. It was not simply her writing down her life but it was her portraying that life.

She had done well in California since leaving the East. Her company had spun off its online sales service as a separate entity and she was one of the principals. An IPO was planned, and as a principle, she stood to make a small fortune. Sam wondered if she would quit then. There were hints of other adventures she was mapping out for herself.

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.

He knew her life was not all peaches and cream before her departure and it hadn't been afterwards either. She had remained single, although she had romances because she talked about them as if they were a part of a life. She talked about her guys straightforwardly without revealing the most intimate. But there were intimate moments that belonged in the narrative, and there they were. She wrote something toward the end that Sam reread several times. They were words he heard and remembered from their time.

---“Confessing to God doesn't work. Confessing to yourself and your spotter not perfect but better.”

The tray was mostly empty and the wine had been drunk without much memory of what he had consumed. Sam returned the tray to the kitchen and refilled the wine glass, unusual for him. He had some thinking and recollecting to do. He had responded to Tammy's email in her style with a couple sentences, expressing surprise and anticipation. The surprise went beyond anything he could have anticipated.

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Sam had become a late-night retiree, late in life, seldom in bed before midnight. It was Friday, but that hardly mattered. In retirement weekdays versus weekends had disappeared from his life. There were days and nights, and, of course, they still had their names, but they had assumed an equal stature. How funny to think that once Monday was washday all the way to Sunday, church day, and now his laundry was done for him on whatever day and church had never done anything for him. The arrangement of the days must have implied a healthy way to live one's life. Now Sam 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 was feeling inundated, joyously so, but inundated nonetheless. With his refurbished wine glass he walked over to the sliding glass door that he'd forgotten was open. He slide the screen door to the side and stepped out onto the balcony. He realized that he had been so engrossed in *No Confessin'* that he ignored the night sounds that now roared back into his head and mingled with the memories. It was much cooler than it had been, sweater weather, nothing worse. His telescope was sitting by the door, but he was too preoccupied to set it up. He knew what was in the sky this week. When he looked up, he saw Saturn chasing the moon. A few nights before the city's night sky was so clear he could see clearly the rings. Saturn was not his planet – enclosed by those ever-shifting rings. Being enclosed was not his thing. Nor was it Tammy's?

---“Confessing to God doesn't work. Confessing to yourself and your spotter not perfect but better.”

Those words came back like the roar of the night. He chastised himself because he buried them too deeply. They were now on the surface where they belonged.

What her memoirs did not describe was how those lines had evolved. Tammy had spoken them during one of their many talks that had begun with her question – she was a fount of questions – “Why, Sam, do we push ourselves so hard with these ugly, ungainly weights?”

As he leaned on the railing of the balcony, Sam thought about her question. He recalled they had talked about escape, coming-to-terms, that-change-your-life thing, reassurance. That was the first night, he also recalled, that he came to see not just a beautiful and, yes, sexy, body but a person who was thinking and questioning, not the way Sam did, but with as much import and depth. They did push up the weights, all the time. Reps were uninteresting. Failure was what they sought and ironically tried to escape. That had changed since she left and the gym closed. Sam now concentrated on endurance by reps, not bulk by plates. After all, he had given up tennis because he couldn't run down every ball anymore. When he built his own weight-lifting area, without friends, without Tammy, to spot, Sam knew repetition and endurance replaced heavier and heavier. Plates and dumbbells exercised their own magic...was it ultimately evil? “Be attentive, listen to your muscles, instead of watching them” he heard Kip's voice from somewhere deep inside.

When she asked, Sam had answered Tammy's question facetiously by singing *C'est Moi'* from Camelot.

Tammy had looked and listened with a deepening scowl.

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---“Am I supposed to be pleased or impressed or enthralled by that?”

He had turned sheepish and tried to explain the key words – “Climb a wall, Cleave a dragon, Swim a moat” – and then he repeated without singling the refrain, “C’est Moi, C’est Moi, C’est Moi.”

---“How long do I have to wait for *moi* to climb my wall, cleave my dragon and swim my moat? I’m in a hurry, and I’m not sure you’re up to the task, buddy.”

---“I’ve been found out. I can’t do anything big because the moi in me is really small....”

---“And that’s why you lift weighs?”

---“*Oui* 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.”

And here it was again.

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, old terrain he was once preoccupied with but less so lately.

Her Chapter “The Spotter” was not just about Sam. Tammy had other spotters in her gym and romantic world, none of which surprised Sam. She had been lifting longer than Sam and in several other cities. But the Chapter began and ended with Sam – his name was there in print, no disguising or angling, no, what she said about Sam was on the mark and what she said about herself was also. Everyone who read it would know without a moment’s thought they became lovers.

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 their case, if one 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.

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---“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 had much more than that on the bar.

---“At three or four 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 four 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 became invisible, 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 eight, I’ll pick you up, twenty 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. Red and his wife were at the desk.

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

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---“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 Red a hug and departing before Sam thought of something to say.

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

He was ready at seven-thirty, watched a report on the latest market disasters, and thought in the face of so many romantic and financial disasters, “Shit, I’ve survived, and tonight I thrive.” He saw an Audi, pull up and then he saw her behind the wheel. He surveyed the nifty color - deep blue, like her eyes - 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 them that much. Best to change the subject since it’s not of immediate concern.”

---“Agreed.”

---“An the Audi? I’d have never guessed but it suits you, especially the color.”

---“Are you flirting?” she asked without taking her eyes from the street. “A gift. My last gift. To keep me in the corral. It didn’t work. From here on out we’re dealing with attachments rather than gifts, if you know what I mean.”

---“I do. Not fun. Will it be smooth?”

---“Anything in life smooth, my sweet man, anything?”

---“Your Audi...”

---“Should I rough it up for you a bit so that you can’t forget our impoverished lives?” as she stopped for a light.

She drove more slowly and .deliberately than he had expected. And, he thought, she looks radiant despite what was becoming a nasty 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,

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---“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 fifteen 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 they were ready to order.

After the waiter left, Tammy continued her thought:

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 thirty 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.

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---“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 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.”

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

---“To next week.”

---“I like to look ahead – train wrecks can be cleared,” he said. They both drank from their glasses.

---“It will go well with the meatloaf,” she said bemusedly, followed by, “So why the furrows?”

---“Standard PhD demeanor?” he answered as she let her wickedly-intense eyes grab his. “Can you imagine a professor without a furrowed brow?”

She reached across the table and tried to unfurrow his brow without much success.

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---“Just wondering what you might look like with a plainer forehead. I’ve decided I like the furrows. More menacing.”

---“Menacing? ‘Wine menaces/builds fences/isolates lovers/never hovers.’”

---“You just made that up? What the hell does it mean ‘never hovers’? Tammy asks, rubbing the back of his hand.

---“I haven’t a clue...I think I read it on some wine barrel, painted there by a fellow wine-maker – I used to be one, a pretty good one actually – whose wife left him because he spent so much time doing wine with his friends including the only female in the group...they had fucked through several vintages until she dumped him for another wine-maker...he blamed the wine somehow. That’s the best I can recollect.”

---“If you pronounce ‘libertine’ slightly differently, don’t you rhyme with ‘wine’, oh professor. I as recently called a libertine...I had to look it up...I am except the online dictionary referred to men...I’m here to announce, not only are we ‘liberated’ but we’ve become ‘libertined’...a poor country girl can make up words too!”

They both laughed, just as the meatloaf arrived. It really was something different from American meatloaf. It was small chunks of splendid beef, probably filet, with some breadcrumbs, spices, onions, and egg covered by a thin butter-based pastry. For a moment, after the first taste, Sam sat in silence and then sipped some wine.

---“Perfect,” he said quietly but resolutely.

---“Does it hover?” she asked.

---“Indeed, and it menaces, and you might want to be alert...”

---“I’m hardly worried, my lifting pal, I don’t want to take you down, although I might anyway.”

---“You’ve never made a pass at me, although we touch all the time, we breathe the same air, we look into each other’s eyes, and finally I’ve noticed you like my breast.”

Sam almost gulped, but he didn’t want to waste good wine.

---“I do like your breasts, although I’m a man of butts-and-legs, both of which you excel at. Beyond that, I suppose I have to answer I never thought to make a pass....”

---“We talk about relationships all the time. Always someone else’s. Never got around to us, even though we spend hours within inches of each other.” she said wistfully.

---“I’m afraid....”

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

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He could only think to squeeze her hand and smile into eyes that were flashing. “I suppose that allows me to inquire further what’s the latest with you?” he said.

---“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 haven’t been. For me those feelings are hard to get my arms around,” said Tammy. “No reviews, please.”

---“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 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 realized he’d told the Sasha story over and over again to himself to try to figure it out, but not the Tammy story. It didn’t have to be retold. There was no figuring out. He loved their story, even with the ending that had to be. He recalled how hard in those first weeks he had to work to adjust to Tammy’s departure. Departures sucked in any event, and he had to work hard with a pile of them in his life. Tammy’s was different from the others. It was not the ending but the missing. He wasn’t sure how much he missed Sasha; he missed an ending that he could understand. With Tammy they talked about the ending, and when it came...well, it came. They made a vow to let it happen and not to forget. He hadn’t forgotten, he assumed she hadn’t forgotten, but hadn’t both of them sort of forgotten? Memories more joyous than troubled. Tucked away without any reason to reassess. His memories of Tammy were curiously interlaced with memories and fantasies about Sasha, and, yes, Ashe. For the first time in how long, the “full monty” everyone piling into his Great Room.

He pressed a button on the CD remote and picked up Luciana Souza singing her own song, *Once Again*...“All alone/I stayed too long/Or I left too soon.” With Luciana’s haunting voice in the background, Sam picked up his recollecting of that first dinner with Tammy.

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---“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 Olde Towne. 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 Sheila 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”

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---“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 five am....”

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

---“For some women I’ll get up before noon...you shouldn’t count on it.”

---“We’ll just be starting at noon...the story, please.”

---“Delicious thought. 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, say 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 at noon....I’m always punctual....”

---“For your funeral this time....”

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---“Almost. I knocked, she opened the door instantly...she must have been standing on the other side with her hand on the knob. I said “Hi”, as she literally pulled me into a darkened room, locked the door, and without a word, as I stood in the center of her small office, she turned and started walking toward me. I could barely see her face in the shadows, but what I could see startled me. Not sinister so much as a menacing “You’re in my world now”. A step from me, she opened her arms....” Sam stopped.

---“And she died. Daytime soap ending. So?”

---“A knock at the door. Her eyes literally turned crimson, she swung around, I stepped back as far as I could into an obscure corner. Her mind more alert than mine, she turned on the light and grabbed some papers, which she clutched in her when opened the door. It was her mentor. She introduced me, and her mentor must have known who I was there and maybe why I was there...I don’t know...because he sat down as if we were expected to have a discussion about her dataset, the reason I thought I was there. I heard her say in a steel-hard tone... “You’re early.” The mentor said nothing. And for the next hour, we were serious and in one case angry scholars at work and when we finished, her mentor walked me to the door...not a word from Sasha who was now standing, arms folded, in the corner I had previously occupied...and thanked me for solving the problem, which I wasn’t sure I’d solved.”

---“He’s screwing her, and he was protecting his turf.”

---“I’d expect that answer from my male-lifting friends...she’s engaged and all that”

---“He’s not here, her mentor and you are. You’re the buffer, no, the fallback. And she may like you in a way she doesn’t like her mentor.”

---“We’ll never know, will we?”

---“Why do you say that. You’re still here, and she’s still here, at least as of this afternoon. You were talking to her.”

---“Did you see her walk away from me? She said she was heading to Chicago to visit family and meet her fiancé to finalize plans. And, her final words were, ‘Forget it.’ Does that fit with your ending?” Sam said, as he took the last sip of his espresso and looked unabashedly at Tammy. He also realized that Tammy was probably right.

---“Forget it? Forget what? You, the other guy, the gym...her feelings?”

---“Your guess is as good as mine. I assume something was supposed to happen in her office and didn’t, and I am blamed. What do you think?”

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

---“Objection, your honor!”

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---“Overruled.”

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

---“You were in her sights, buddy, and she was going to pull the trigger that afternoon in her own crazy way. Who knows what would have happened if her open arms had not been interrupted. My guess is that would have been the start of another tortuous ride. Her mentor was not about to let you have her, and her fiancé would have arrived here the next day. And you and I wouldn’t be walking in the cool of the evening.”

She turned and pulled him into a kiss.

---“What you missed with her is about to be redeemed several times over. I intend to follow through.”

A few minutes later after the kiss had ended (and his erection too) she said,

---“You manage somehow to deal with this relationship shit, don’t you?”

---“I guess I do. Is the implication of the question, how?”

---“I suppose, Herr Professor. It’s in all our lives to varying degrees. The shit smells one way when you’re fucking up the relationship – I’m going through that part right now – and it smells another way when the relationship is fucking you up – I’ve been there too. I can’t blame you, Sam, she’s hot, beautiful, young, smart and crazy. It’s the combination that’s explosive, but we all want it. In some curious way I believe you when you say you lusted but would not cross the line. Except in that darkened office, if she had kissed you, you two would have been undressed in thirty second, fuckin’ on the desk, on the floor, up against the book shelves. The room would have become a volcano. That was her plan, not yours. You had a deal with yourself, you stuck to it and you got kneecapped instead of screwed.”

---“May I....”

---“No, you may not,” as she guided him across the intersection.

---“By your own admission, Sam, you’re out of it, and you are. Your gym buddies – your so-called gym buddies – talk behind your back. ‘Despite his preaching, he’s fuckin’ her.’ It’s the same story in every lifter’s gym. ‘Everyone getting ass except me.’ The lifter’s lament...to borrow from you literary types...actually “The Lifter’s Lament” was published in *Lifting Today*, a rag I doubt you’ve ever read and a lament that dealt with something different but related...what happens when people spend hours and hours staring at their bodies in mirrors. You and I love the gym, Sam, we love showing off our bodies, we can lose track of who we are and aren’t and we want to get screwed and we think we’re getting screwed. It all boils in the same pot. Lecture done.”

As Sam recalled these conversations and encounters, now years later and after having read about Tammy’s fate, he realized he missed her, more than he missed Sasha, Tammy had fallen into a

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memory crevice that should have been reserved for Sasha. He had turned Sasha's story over in his mind so many times with silly rearrangements and endings and in the meantime had forgotten the story that needed no new arrangements or endings.

They continued their walk for blocks, their sauntering steps broken by moments of kisses.

---“Here we are, Sam. In the middle of messes. We're both lifters, we know that feeling of uncertainty, as the bar reaches for its apex, and of relief, as it lowers itself. It's always better with a spotter, isn't it Sam, especially when she has firm boobs, yearning lips and an arched cunt, right Sam?”

---“In that order? What about fingers caressing the bar?”

They kissed for the longest time on another corner, this city's version of “Hollywood and Vine”, well, it was busy enough to be H and V.

---“OK, we've exhausted relationship talk. We'll find our way. I want to emphasize the we.”

They headed back to her car at the restaurant.

He remembered, as he turned her book over in his hands, that night after the meatloaf, the *Grand Cru*, the kiss-filled walk full of laments, he did not see Tammy or Sasha for days. Sasha he knew was in Chicago, but Tammy? And he also remembered in those days his fantasy machine kicked into high gear, again about the absence of Sasha.

He had lived a life full of love and hate for fantasies. They were taboo in the household he grew up in...the devil's playground. It was the real that impinged and governed. In his married years, when marriage was becoming a burden, fantasies became his escape. Christiana became a huge fantasy among the earliest Sam had allowed himself. Before that, tiny ones, which he tried immediately to erase. It took so long for him to break away from the devil cant. The had met at a food market, and from the first meeting they tried to find as many ways as their married lives would permit to meet. They hugged, walked arm-in-arm and kissed but never fucked. They knew the complications. The fantasies paid no attention to the complications; they just boiled over; they were too big for the pot. At that point, to try to corral these fantasies, Sam began to keep a journal. Whenever he reread the entries, he was amazed how deep and alive his fantasy world had grown. He worried that he might start talking about them in his sleep, although his ex never paid any attention to what he said anyway. He was guilty of violating both sets of vows by asking Christiana to become his lover. Christiana said no, even after she confessed she loved him. One night during an overnight stay at Sam's house they became divorced, she embraced him at the top of the stairs and said,

---“Two women are in love with you in this house. Well, at least one, very much.”

And later, a simple,

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---“I love you,” as she rolled up the car window, the last time they saw each other. Their lovemaking remained only words and inspired fantasies.

Words can register as much as acts and feed the fantasy mill. Was it healthy or not? After Christiana disappeared and then his wife, he was fantasy-free for months, maybe longer. No interest. He made all sorts of other vows, which he kept to for longer than he had expected. He worked hard and prepared for his retirement. He'd sold the house and eventually moved into the Old Town condo. He continued to write daily in his journals. He was not shy about writing on what he had gone and where he was in his life, but the writing was driven not by his imagination, rather by his determination to keep to the facts. He tried to find Christiana after her divorce, but all the leads turned up empty. He had surprised himself because he was not upset by his failure to track her down, as if motion was all he motion.

Contentment and solitude seemed to suit him. Not a hermit by any means. Once retired, his week could fill up with gallery openings, concert engagements, restaurant samplings and museums exhibits along with his writing assignments. Joining the gym altered the routine. A new circle of friends and a new round of imponderables.

It was dark and late, the CD-player was quiet, Luciana having finished with her own sadnesses. the absence of Sasha and Tammy was....A week later 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 ever talk to me again.” With that she turned and walked away. Stunned and embarrassed was how he felt. He walked to the the dumbbell rack – an appropriate location – 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.

Not that he hadn't been warned. “Forget it” was not that far from “Don't ever”. She had finished him off in her own style. He could not smile then, but he could smile now.

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, and I may become such to your regret. By the way they don't like Frisco. Next?” responded Sam who was actually feeling dread.

---“Your shoulders muscles are like cables. So, what happened?” Tammy missed so little.

It didn't take long to tell her.

Spotting for Tammy

---“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. I need a spotter.”

They finished, and after Tammy got up from the bench, she walked around and pressed Sam’s 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 Red it was her last time, and she would pay off the contract.

Red said, “Nothing owed and any time you’re back in town you have the use of the gym.” Obviously Red 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’m just going to arrive. Be ready.” And she headed to 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 forty-fivers on the bar to warm up with for some bench presses. He did ten reps, got up, walked behind the bench and picked up another forty-five-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, a mixture of anger and despair in her face, 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. This was even more intense, close to sinister. Then, as now, she was not just staring off into space. She was trying to make something work.

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 need a spotter. Sasha might want to learn.”

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---“Not today, but thanks,” Sam replied, as he said under his breathe, “A bit of a risk....”

Shortly afterwards, she finished up with Scotty and left the gym, never to return. The next day, Saturday morning, in a conversation with Red, Sam learned the rest of the story. Earlier in the week Sasha had given notice to Red, her last aerobics class set for Thursday evening so she could return to Chicago for her wedding. The workout with Scotty in the morning was meant to teach her a little about lifting, which she seldom tried. Red and Dianna, having employed her for more than a year and apparently having to put up with more than they should have, still invited her to a farewell dinner scheduled for Friday night at a local pub.

---“She never showed, never called. We couldn’t reach her,” Red said, with a hint of anger. “We actually drove to her apartment building to make she was okay, but her car wasn’t in the lot and no one answered their ring.”

They concluded she was hiding or she had left town. She never picked up her final check, although she had met her final class the night before. And then Red added, almost offhandedly,

---“Her disappearance were more frequent than her appearances.”

Sam was not about to relate his own strange encounter with her on Thursday morning, but he thought it all fit.

Sam had left the gym 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 for a press, 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 – I’m the pacesetter, the *avant-garde*, the guy who lives inside himself!” 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 how he loved rings.

Spotting for Tammy

---“By the way Rod 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 eighteen. My parents pretty much disowned me, although we resumed contact in their final years. My bothers, an even sadder story. Dissolutes. 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 also 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 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, possibly, a visit, I’m not sure. Don’t be offended. I have things to work through, you’re part of that working through, I have to be on my own without a spotter right now.” She kissed him.

---“Not offended. I’m scared in my own 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.

Spotting for Tammy

---“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 for most of the time we’ve spotted for each other. Tonight I want it Sammy, all night, you in my arms and more. Is this where we’ve been heading for the last year? Another burial but a proper one?”

---“A bit morbid for me, but yes, I don’t think we can just embrace and say good-bye. There’s too much there, all those reps, spots, coffees, conversations need more than just a good-bye. God, I’ll miss you, Tammy.”

---“As close as I felt to you, being your lover was not part of the original contract. Somehow, without abetting it, I was letting it happen on its own. Not like me. I like being in charge of myself. Well...Sammy...I’ve torn up the original contract. I’m going to make it happen...I’m abetting because...because...Sammy...because I love you...I haven’t used those words since...I can’t remember...I don’t want to...they feel right, right now...”

---“I’m also a mess right now, Sam, and I’ll bet you are too. Somehow both the lifter and the spotter let go of the bar, and there it hangs, mid-air, its weight menacing, its course unknown....”

Tammy turned away, set down her flute, turned back to Sam, ran both hands across his face, and said ever so quietly, “We have so few hours, but let’s take our time. The bar can’t hang there forever, every movement is important to me right now, everything you say, everything you don’t say...I have no idea where these words are coming from....”

---“Let them flow. Yes, I’m a mess, I can see the bar, but maybe we’re floating above it, out of harm’s way....”

They kissed softly, as if every touch had a life of its own....

When they separated, she dropped her eyes and said as softly as the kisses,

---“Harm’s way’ is my middle name, Sam, I don’t want it to become yours. You’ve had your heart sliced up before and I’m not sure...goddamn, Sam, hearts are such messy things...what we give away we can’t ever take back...it ain’t a pretty thought in this moment I want to be so special....”

Without finishing 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 stuff that matches your instability. Crazy lovers, crazy art. Probably why you’re beyond redemption.”

Sam laughed, throw out his arm, Tammy pulled him up and pushed him toward the kitchen.

---“Chicken it is, my earthen goddess,” said Sam.

Sam remembered that while he was playing chef, the CD was playing Tony singing “Left my Heart” twice, not once but twice, for some reason on the disc Why let go of this recollection, mused Sam, sitting on the same sofa where they had left the bar hanging along with their hearts.

Spotting for Tammy

In the kitchen he had 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 is in a frame,” as she showed him the “Happy Birthday Samuel” 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 in your head.” said Sam, standing next to the Bistro Table with a tray that had two plates and a dish of strawberries in hand. He was curious how this would play out.

---“A one-sentence story. She was in love, so were you, impossibly so. But you know that story. I wish I could be more original.”

---“You’ve read what’s on the back...” Sam declared rather than asking, setting down the tray on the Bistro Table for fear he might drop it 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, pulled his face up and toward hers and kissed him.

Sam collected himself and the tray , and 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.”

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 know the answer but you need to hear the question.”

---“I do, I think about her every day, I’m resigned. I can deal with her memory in a way I can’t with others. She was never nasty. I can’t explain her disappearance, but I know it’s what she had to do. That side of her I knew well. In some way like you...she had to chart her own course. I

Spotting for Tammy

kept telling myself, “Do not disturb” but I did disturb in small ways. I don’t know now after so many years whether to feel ashamed about that. I still send her a greeting once a year on her birthday, and that’s about it. That’s more than I should intrude. She doesn’t respond, and that’s the reaffirmation I need to remind me to keep the memory but let her be.”

Tammy had known 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 it began at Olde Towne gym, like so many of your fatal relationships?” said Tammy more gently than the words implied.

---“‘Life-changing’, as Red would say, and then life-despairing, as the gods would dictate.”

---“You know how uncomfortable I am with gods. So, do I tell the story I’ve made up in my head – shit, I’m taking on all your bad habits – or are you going to do the honors. Keep it short. We have plans.”

---“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. 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?”

Spotting for Tammy

---“A fading out. She and her boyfriend moved. What’s in the frame came from one of several places they lived 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 deeply-etched memories. Ashe is a pile of good memories. I still write about her in my journals because I don’t want to let go completely. These are not fantasies, which I’m prone to write when pining. With Ashe I simply write about memories...pasta dinners, running the dogs in the woods, celebrating birthdays and drinking coffee, lots of coffee, sometimes feasting on Dare’s lemon cremes. The message you just read is a kicker, to say the least. Her short love letters were unlike anything anyone had ever written me,” said Sam with more firmness in his voice than he had expected. “Not another Sasha. There’s a new ending, by the way.”

---“You’ve written those memories down many times in many versions, haven’t you, Samuel?” she said with a twinkle.

---“You betcha. It will sound repetitious to anyone who ever ventures through my journals, but it’s cheaper than a therapy.”

---“I believe you. It’s time to put it back on the wall, and Sasha must bide her time.” 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. They embraced, and she whispered into his ear,

---“Your bed, my lord.”

They made love for hours. Sam knew her body well, the outside at least, but the inside was pure pleasure, unlike anything he had anticipated. The firmness, the tautness he could see in every press or curl at the gym soften in her love-making. She had whispered in his ear after her first climax,

---“Spot for me again, Sam, I’m hoisting the bar again, sorry, it’s still my turn,” and it was. His thighs gently squeezed her head, her thighs his head, the gasps for air were as erotic as the acts themselves. Raw emotion but so pure, tempered in no way by restraint or boundary, that boundlessness that everyone wanted, never admitting it. An explosion. Then, quiet

---“All muscle,” he heard her whisper as she caressed his thighs. Entangled though their bodies were, one of her legs under his head and one of his under hers, the mood inside and outside was utter fulfillment. It felt so gentle and natural.

---“What Are You Doing The Rest of Your Life?” Sam began singing, more talking, whispering since he really couldn’t sing, and Tammy began to tap out the beat on his thigh.

Spotting for Tammy

They knew the answer as far as they could see in their lives. They could read each other's mind, they could feel each other's joy, they could register each other's fear. Simultaneously, as if on cue, they corrected their positions, and they melted into each other. Tammy in a voice he'd not heard before said,

---"Sammy, I love you...I love you...no modifiers...I love you...and because we must 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 their cynical vocabularies.

---"We've lifted, we've spotted, we've joked, and now we've fucked. I was taught to confess, but then I began to ask why should I. Confessing means I'm sorry. I'm not sorry, Sam, not in the least. I wanted you. I'm ready to live with the consequence of wanting you. You have to do the same. Kiss me quietly and softly, please, and we'll take it from there...."

At brunch, which Sam prepared, well past one o'clock, when Tammy reminded him he had another story to finish but he should not dawdle.

It didn't take him long to recount the event involving Sasha. 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, so fuckin' hard for this nail-tough gym rat, and without sounding like an egomaniac it's gonna be hard for you. We'll be in touch again, but we don't know the time or place. Please give me a hug and a kiss and walk me to the car."

And that's what happened.

With Tammy's book lying on the table in the dark of the room and the light of the moon, Sam realized he'd forgotten how torn up he was for weeks after Tammy's exit. He would look for her in her Audi, on his sofa and, of course, in the morning light that showered his bedroom. They had exchanged no more than a half dozen emails and had never dialed up or texted into their cells. Then, all contact ceased until several weeks ago when he opened her email. He had responded with a few lines. He didn't expect an answer, and there wasn't any, but Sam knew a thread was seeking a new eyelet.

Tammy had changed his moorings. And she had pushed his libido into some recess he didn't know about. Just as well. In his sorrow Sam had redoubled his effort to finish a manuscript that he had been contracted to do years before, and he did just that, turning it in, to the surprise of his agent, a few months later. And much to his own surprise, he signed a contract for a new book, now nearly finished. His infamous fantasy machine had been operating on very low voltage.

Spotting for Tammy

Every once in a while it revved up but not for long. He still sent Ashe birthday greetings with no response expected and none received. Her framed hand-drawn card still hung in his study. He could still repeat what was written on the back. He would never quit missing her. Sasha was mostly a jagged memory, the few good moments mixed in with an ugly ending. And Tammy...no fantasy could replace the real, and because it was real, it had fallen in line with his real world, not his fantasy world, regrettably perhaps, it was what was and not what he tried to make up. It also got lost in that never-ending whirlpool of day-to-day living, but never permanently lost.

Tammy had broken the fantasy cycle. Not the ending that either wanted, but the ending that two restless souls had not deceived themselves about. When he thought about Tammy, unlike the fantasies he had created, he knew the answer to the question, “Why couldn’t we hold onto each other?” They had to try to add another “forty-five” or two to the bar. He’d added a couple more plates, and then he’d quit adding. He was wondering if Tammy had done the same. Was the book her epiphany? He’d not known about the book, and yet she’d made certain he knew.

Had he dishonored Tammy’s memory by not doing more to stay in touch?

---“No,” he said to himself, “Spotting long-distance doesn’t work.”

When the gym closed, another chapter entered this ever-thickening book. Routines and rhythms changed again. He was lifting by himself. Hip, a big lifter, had coined that phrase, “A hundred pounds always feels heavy.” On his own, away from the crowd, he’d discovered how heavy it was. It was a regular attainment, but it had also become a self-imposed limit. He could still exceed it but seldom trusted himself without a spotter.

The “Confess to God” comment, now the book’s ending, began as a remark in the gym and had evolved into a “summing up”. Confessing to God still had no future for either. You have to learn to stumble through, perhaps with grace, and you can’t make up stuff forever.

He got up, walked over to close the sliding glass door that he had left slightly ajar and looked out into a near-full moon, incandescently bright, casting his shadow across the wooden floor of the Great Room and masking most of the starlight. The Condo was quiet. It was very late, very late indeed. Not even any street traffic could be heard. Utter and complete silence for the moment.

He allowed his mind to break the silence. For the evening and well into this night, he had read and then reconstructed a time in his life that knew turbulence and pleasure. The gym had changed his life, to be sure, and complicated it at the same time. Tammy seemed to know better than Sam, perhaps even Red, how gym rats become lovers but never partners. 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, 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.

They had followed her dictum – “Let’s leave it at that”. He remembered how stomach-wrenching it was as he walked her to her car. The tears gushed, rolled down, flooded...lots of water. They

Spotting for Tammy

stood in a puddle, staring down at their feet, willing them not to move any further, and, then, she left, not a word by either. In his own experience time apart became exactly that.

He relit the computer screen and reopened her email of several weeks ago? It was then he saw a phone number. How could he have missed that. She had often slipped things by him, and she had done it again. He decided to text her, San Francisco being three hours behind. Without thinking it through, he typed in

---“I’m coming.”

Even after he sent it, he felt no regret, his common stance with spur-of-the-moment decisions. Be wary of expectations. He had grown up with that, and unfortunately for much of his life he remained caught in its web.

---“If nothing else,” he said to himself, as he turned off the computer and picked up his cell, “she may find it humorous.” Half way up those fifteen or so steps, the screen lit up.

---“I know.”

In the most spacious bedroom he had ever known, filled with moonlit and memories, he felt overcome, quite literally overcome. He knew he’s never used that word, and now he knew what it meant.

He decided to schedule the trip right then and there, take his chances, in the middle of the night, on his cell, regardless of the cost – he may even fly First-Class. He sat on the edge of the bed with just the light of his BlackBerry and the light of a moon that seemed to grow ever brighter, and within minutes he was set for a reverse-red-eye, East to West, arriving for breakfast tomorrow, Breakfast with Tammy. He texted California,

---“Breakfast tomorrow?”

Within seconds, a reply,

--- “Table set” and then a PS, “Scratch ‘Let’s leave it at that.’”

Spotting for Tammy beats Confessing to God.

PS: A reading was held several months later at SHELVES, ETC, Tammy wowed, Allie and Brett beamed, Sammy blushed, as his name echoed across the room filled with friends and strangers and as a Mayflower semi rumbled across I-80.