

BURNING UP



By: The Acton Road Book Club

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a grain of dust.

-Nietzsche

You just never know. That is the bottom line. It could be because there is some higher power that has the final say. It could be because we are just a tiny little spec of insignificant in a much bigger meaning, thus, our existence, decisions, actions and realities just don't matter. Could we all be planning and plotting and stressing and striving for absolutely nothing? Planet Earth as we know it, could just be a spec of dust on a chipmunk's tale that has been run over by a vehicle, washed down a sewer, and on the way out to an ocean that of course dwarfs the Atlantic, as we know it. Is it all just a waste of time? Honest, I have not been smoking pot, gave that up a long while back. I thought I had plans to pursue and needed to be of sound mind to get to my destination. Ha! Now I don't do drugs and I am even more lost and confused than when I did. Ok, let me get off that slippery slope, and come back to our here and now. Crap, I am right back to "you just never know."

The meeting had just begun. Another one of my boss's "boondoggles." Three days down in Newport Rhode Island where a bunch of the "too successful for their own good," and the "want to be too successful and am willing to do anything to get there" type men have gathered. Oh, there are a few token women, of course. The "too successful for their own good" types would never be stupid enough to have an all male gathering. They need to be perceived as the "progressive" thinkers who actually value women and consider them equals. They always consider perception. They are the masters of perception. Two words can sum up the bunch of "too successful for their own good"; those two words are Perception and hormones. That was true then, and holds true today.

I'm 45 years old today. Happy birthday to me. I was 25 at that fateful meeting. 25, married for 1 year with no kids, a wonderful husband, and I was full of ambition. I was too stupid back then to know how pathetically naive and inexperienced I was. All the planning and plotting I was in the midst of, to build the "perfect life," was about to be blown away by love.

He was gorgeous, and right then and there...I decided I didn't like him. To be brutally honest, I think I decided not to like him, out of self-defense. No way would this guy ever be interested in me. He was probably just a complete womanizing pompous ass who would suck as a father to his children and would expect his trophy wife to maintain her fake blonde hair and slender physique forever. Of course, I didn't know if he was married, and I didn't know if he had children. I was just guessing. All I knew was his name was Thomas, he was the most successful guy at this conference, and it was ever so important to my boss that Thomas enjoyed himself and thought highly of our team. That's where this token comes in handy.

(JEM:)

Alison took the seat next to me, exhaling deeply and rolling her eyes like she was about to embark on some dreaded mission. She must hate these conferences even more than me. Why wouldn't she...everyone secretly competing and embellishing their short list of pathetic accomplishments in hopes of furthering their careers and getting laid at the same time. Everyone except me, that is. My shallow colleagues are impressed by the size of my bank account and getting laid was never a problem for me. I have turned the art of perception into a success story, both in and out of bed. No one knows the real story. Even I'm a little fuzzy on some of the details.

As I turned towards Alison to initiate some small talk, I noticed the antique emerald ring on her right hand as she crossed her arms in front of her. Momentarily, I felt as if I had lost the ability to breath. My heart began pounding so loudly that I was sure Alison could hear it. I had seen that ring before.

She saw me ogling her ring and winked at me coyly and said, "Nice, isn't it?" I tried to play it off, "What's that?"

"You're staring at my ring."

"Was I? Sorry." I lied and spit out, "I was thinking about my presentation for tomorrow. I guess I was zoning out." Which was somewhat true, I was a bit nervous about tomorrow.

"Sure you were. I know what you were really thinking. Yes, it's real and I earned every karat, Lynda Lyons."

"Yeah, how's that?" Although I already knew. That same ring was offered to me 3-months ago, along with the promise of a huge raise and a promotion.

Allison made up some crap about being left the ring by her wealthy, widowed, old aunt, who had no children. She'd cared for her aunt through her fading years and sucked up as much as she could.

"Sucked up" is right, but not to her aunt. Henry, our boss, liked women who did that. The only thing staying in the way of her promotion is that she's a complete idiot and Henry's boss, actually expects results from his managers.

I had turned down Henry in April, but made him a counter offer, one that could put him ahead of his fellow rival at the company and earn me my promotion. That and I wouldn't report him to HR for sexual harassment. I don't know why I let him off the hook, maybe it was because he saved my ass when I first started. Or maybe it was because I didn't want to ruin his career. I owed my job to Henry.

It all depended on Newport. This conference was where I was going to make my move and win that promotion. The "Fasten your seatbelt" light went on and we were on our final decent into T.F. Green airport. I cut my conversation with Alison short and made up some excuse of having to check the directions to the hotel, as I was responsible for getting us there.

Newport in July, simply gorgeous! Beautiful weather, a hotel right on the ocean and all expenses paid, not that I couldn't afford it. Granted, it wasn't going to be a whole lot of fun as the conference wasn't just some meet and greet mixer. I had prepared for this weekend for three months solid. It would

have been nice if my husband could have been here. We never had our honeymoon as my work schedule just never allowed it.

Alison and I arrived at the resort hotel and immediately Henry came over with the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes on. That's when I first met Thomas. He was known as a self-made man who could buy and sell our company many times over but didn't as he wasn't interested in adding more dimensions to his already diverse business. It was my job this weekend to convince him to hire our team and gain his business. It was everyone else's job at the conference to steal him away.

Henry introduced both of us to Thomas who then whispered a request in my ear.

(JS:)

Thomas's request made me flush and hopefully not blush! I took a quick look in the mirror hanging on the hall wall. I sighed in relief that my inside emotions didn't display my thoughts. His request stunned me since I thought that it was something that only came true in those romance novels plastered in every airport bookstore. I had to remind myself at that moment that I was a newly wed and had an adoring husband at home waiting to pleasure me when my work schedule let up or if it ever would...but Thomas was here now and with his temptations. I had to shut him down or did I?

My head started spinning. I heard the voice of Sister Leo Margaret with the parochial school guilt lecturing us what young ladies should and shouldn't do. Thomas stood there waiting for me to speak and looking at me with his sky blue eyes. My husband was hundreds of miles away. I thought of this promotion and how it would bump my salary up a notch to the next tax bracket and enable us to get a loan approved for our dream house. I thought to myself that Tom's request would just be for one time, one night. I finally spoke and said to Thomas "It's a bit warm in here; let's take a walk along the beach."

(???)

The hotel lobby was teeming with people and we had to weave ourselves through the crowd and out the french doors to the terrace. We headed down the stairs toward the water. It was mid-day and the sun was brilliant. I wished that I had my sunglasses with me as I stopped to remove my high heels. I realized that maybe I should have left my shoes on when the sand started to scorch the soles of my feet. I found myself almost in a slow jog toward the water. As we neared the water's edge I kept thinking that this thing with Thomas is going to be a big mistake but I kept pushing my thoughts aside to focus on what he was saying.

"I've heard a lot about you Lynda, and I would very much like to get to know you," Thomas said. "Henry says that he couldn't survive without you; is that true?" I turned to face him and was blinded by the sun. Just when I was about to answer, my foot twisted in a small hole in the sand and I fell hard on the ground. For a moment I felt nothing and then the pain in my ankle seared through my foot. Yes it's true what they say; at that moment; I saw a whole constellation of stars and then Mickey Mouse.

Thomas knelt down beside me. I could feel his warm breath on my neck. “Are you all right?” “I don’t know,” I said, spitting out some sand stuck to the corners of my mouth. “I don’t think I can walk.” Oh my god, I thought, what am I going to do now! Before I could think of anything else to say, Thomas tenderly placed his hands under my knees and around my shoulders and lifted me up. He carried me to a beach chair nearby and knelt down beside me examining my ankle. Looking down I realized that it didn’t look good. My ankle was already turning shades of blue and purple. Thomas looked up and gave me a reassuring smile. “I’ll try to find a hotel employee for some ice.” “I’ll be right back.” All I could think of was how was I going to do my presentation in the morning with a twisted ankle.

As I sat awkwardly in my chair, I sensed something out of the corner of my eye. Turning my head, I saw a woman and a man leaving one of the hotel rooms on the ground level. It took me a minute to focus and I cupped my hands over my eyes to block the sun. The woman was smoothing her hair with her hand because of the swirling breeze and I noticed the ring on her hand glistened in the sun. I realized that it was Alison. The chubby profile of the man was definitely Henry. His shirt billowed in the breeze making him look like the Pillsbury Dough Boy or maybe even the Michelin Tire Man. They were deep in conversation, laughing and whispering as they maneuvered along the walkway. They walked so close together it looked like they were holding each other up. I wished I could hear what they were saying; but dismissed the thought of moving closer when I looked down at my bloated ankle.

When I looked up again, I noticed another man that seemed to be following them from a distance. I had never seen him before and I unexpectedly got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. He was dressed in a black sweatshirt jacket and jeans and walked with a slight limp. His skin was colorless and pockmarked and his greasy hair was slicked back in a ponytail. One hand was tucked into his sweatshirt pocket. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I watched as Alison and Henry turned the corner of the building with the man trailing at a distance. Suddenly, a hand touched my shoulder.

(CFS:)

I jerked around, wincing at the sharp pain in my ankle. I was prepared to be very annoyed with anyone at that point. Crap! Allison and Henry had wasted no time in visiting his room. We had left them just moments ago in the hotel lobby! If that wasn’t enough, the sun was now unbearable. When we flew out of Rochester this morning, it was mild for July and I hadn’t anticipated the suffocating heat of Newport. Isn’t it supposed to be cool on the ocean? This afternoon’s opening reception was noted as “Business Attire” and I was dressed appropriately. Trapped on the scorching sand, I was tempted to shed layers of polyester right down to my teddy. Rage toward our corporate dress code banning “bare legs” rose up in me as my ankle throbbed in the confines of my Ralph Lauren pantyhose. It was not my plan to hang out on the beach after power dressing for a Newport conference. Every detail was perfect, leading-edge 1988. Quiet and refined, my dress was one color, textured with small shiny diamond shapes. Billowy three-quarter sleeves ended in cuffs fastened with small pearl buttons. The bodice and skirt gathered at the waist and gracefully defined my shape as I moved. I’d traded the bangs and moussed up layers of my “Flash Dance” coif for something more “Princess Di.” This weekend represented my career power play. But stunning or not, at the moment I was sweating against the inset waistband and came close to ripping the damn bulky shoulder pads from their Velcro anchors.

To ramp up the torture, now I had to turn my attention to this guy who, towering above me, was woefully unprepared for my growing anger. What was he selling? Dressed in black, his mirrored sunglasses reflected my sorry self as he flashed a badge and grunted “Special Agent Smith, USFWS” then in government-speak began to unreel a request for my cooperation. Something about being able to trust me and granting immunity from prosecution, clearly a bizarre mistake. Sweat trickled down my back as I tried to ignore the hammering in my swollen ankle. I squeezed my eyes shut as he droned on “...we can protect you but we need your help...” the sound of his voice grew hushed until I heard only a mere buzzing. A white coldness enveloped me before everything went dark.

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Faintly, I could hear “What is your name? Can you tell me your name?” repeated in my left ear as I slowly wrestled out of my thick mental fog. “Oh my god,” I thought. “That’s Thomas! He must think I’m a complete idiot.” Still, it took effort for me to slur out “Lynda Kimberly Lyons.” What a loser, did I just say my full legal name? Slowing, my brain worked the world back into sense and I assessed the situation.

True to his word, Thomas had returned with ice only to discover me out cold. Satisfied that I knew who I was and had only fainted, he softly spoke “Breathe deeply and take a few minutes before we get you back to the hotel.”

I groaned, touching my fingers to my temples, trying hard not to throw up. “I had the most bizarre dream — no...hallucination...just before I fainted. Is that normal?”

Thomas reached down and tugged at something beneath me. I felt the blood drain from my face again as I recognized agent what’s-his-name’s jacket spread under me on the sand. I lay stunned, unable to speak.

“I don’t know how much Agent Smith filled you in on, but we’re fine,” he offered, trying to reassure me.

“Fine?” I thought. Apparently there was a lot more that I needed to learn. Thomas motioned to one of the beach attendants to bring a bottle of spring water which he tipped between my lips in small sips. When I felt steady enough, he helped me into the beach chair and began to explain.

“Your boss Henry is currently under surveillance as part of a multi-year undercover investigation conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Branch of Special Operations. It’s called Project Primate and I’m part of the team. Throughout the past year, we’ve polished my undercover identity as a successful industry leader in order to attract the attention of your boss and have an opportunity to get close to him and his associates. They’ve been doing deals trafficking in protected animals, specifically Sifakas, one of the world’s few matriarchal primates. His operations are actually based in Madagascar.”

“His operations?” I repeated, incredulously. This guy Henry was incapable of loading his own slide projector carousel for a presentation let alone masterminding carefully crafted operations.

“Oh, trust me,” continued Thomas, “he’s as predictable as any small time crook. That’s how we knew that it was you we needed to recruit.”

“Me? How?”

“Henry reads like a page out of the Seedy Supervisor Manual. We knew that he’d try to hook me up with his most attractive, bright direct report in order to manipulate my business his way. He couldn’t be more transparent or predictable.”

I was flattered at his description of me but angry to learn that I was part of Henry’s low-life agenda.

“How’s the ankle?” asked Thomas.

I hadn’t noticed it for a while, a good sign. The soothing ice seemed to have slowed the swelling. Thomas fished a couple of Tylenol from his pocket. “Does your stomach feel settled enough to take these?”

I gratefully washed them down with the water.

“We need to move you out of the sun, Lynda. Can you manage if I help?”

Progress was slow as I hobbled past the tennis courts, Thomas’s arm around my waist. “Look, I really broke protocol revealing this to you before Agent Smith had gotten his immunity affidavit signed.” His voice was tinged with frustration. “Can you swear to me that you will speak to no one about this? We can take care of the paperwork later.”

I assure him it was fine as I contemplated how far reaching the long arm of our government was. Wasn’t the warring between those two “I” countries in the middle east keeping our agents behind the acronyms busy enough? I couldn’t imagine them showing up here in Newport. So much for my plans for a promotion and dreams of a bigger house.

I turned to Thomas. “You can trust me, I swear. Then I stopped suddenly, nearly pulling Thomas over. “Wait! I just remembered something.” I said. “I saw some shady looking guy who seemed to be following Henry. He was creepy, scary looking.”

Thomas sighed then admitted that this was dangerous business. “That could have been East-side Eddy Catalano. Our guys have been keeping tabs on him but it’s possible that he could have given them the slip and driven up here from the city.”

We don’t expect Henry to do a drop this weekend, here in Newport. Of course he may have had complications with his courier. He uses international travelers to smuggle in the animals. They’re called “moles” and we believe that they use special protective pouches to make them appear to be like any other pregnant woman. They sometimes travel with small children to make their disguise even more realistic. The monkeys are highly endangered and fetch a lot of money on the black market so the moles are paid well.

“Moles and monkeys? Sounds like a real menagerie.” I said.

“Well, technically the Sifakas aren’t monkeys, they’re lemurs.” Thomas explained. “But it’s simpler just to call them monkeys when we deal with airline and customs personnel.

Something may be going down soon if you're right about the New York boys being here. Given the present danger, you need to understand that it's your choice to help the team. On the other hand, if you don't, we can't guarantee immunity or protect you.

I looked up at his handsome face and thought that there could be nothing more exciting than this. "I'm in. What happens next?"

"Hopefully those painkillers will kick in." he whispered, his blue eyes gazing down at me through sensuous eyelashes, "We need to get you off this ankle so you'll be fresh and rested for our big display of...uh...attraction. It needs to be believable when you spend the night in my suite.

MGR

And what a luxurious suite it was! Complete with French doors opening to the balcony and overlooking the ocean. As I walked in the most exquisite red and gold Oriental rug cushioned my feet. The curtains, sofas and bedding were all of the finest white silk. In the corner was a gold rococo mirror which reflected our image. Not bad at all! Whatever pain I had suffered that afternoon was gone. My ankle no longer hurt and the swelling disappeared.

Thomas James Bond guided me by the arm around the spacious suite. The wall was curved behind the bed and Renoir's *The Dance at Bougival* was painted on it. Classical music was playing on the stereo and I could feel my body relax with a warm tingly feeling. Thomas reached his hand to me and asked me to dance. I felt like Ginger flowing across the room with Fred Astaire. What a dancer! I could have danced with him forever. Then he stopped and said, "Let me show you something that I am passionate about." and grabbed the remote and clicked it. He showed a video of six dancing Sifakas. How bleeping terrific! Those creatures were dancing and hopping happily together as if the dance were choreographed. Then he proceeded to babble on and on about how Sifakas are indris from Madagascar, how their fur is long and silky and have a black endearing face. Evidently, since he has been on this assignment he felt like he was called to protect the beautiful and endangered Sifakas.

Suddenly I heard a knock, and as Thomas looked towards the door he quickly walked me to the door of the adjoining suite. My suite. Then I heard the sound of the lock.

LAR

The voices on the other side of the door were soft and currently uninteresting. I was totally exhausted from this day: Thomas, Henry and Allison, Agent Smith. What was going on? Was I stuck inside of some cheap dime novel? I was beginning to think so.

Fatigue took over and I lay on a lounge. Slowly I faded into a quiet slumber. Seemed like only a few minutes later when I woke up to loud voices from the other side of the door. I got up and put my ear to the door to learn what I could! The sounds rose and fell but I really couldn't make much sense of the conversation. After a few minutes I started to wander around the room.

My luggage had been moved to this room already. Who did that? Was it Agent Smith? My clothing was unpacked and in the drawers and closets. Even though this was all a bit eerie it was also exciting and invigorating. Slowly, I walked around the room letting my fingers linger on the books, magazines, desktop and computer keys. Must have pressed too hard on the keys. Up popped a screen. I leaned over to study what it was. Could it be? NO, it could NOT be. It was

the web page for my husband's company. What was going on? What was I involved in?

CMT

I sat down in a daze thinking; did I really know everything about my husband Nick or is there more? He's a CPA; Nick's business is debits and credits; then Lynda found herself uttering out loud, it's a very black and white accountable job! Isn't it? Can he really be involved in this scam somehow?

Nick and I met a year and half ago through dates-on-line. We only dated six months before he proposed to me and the next thing you know we are standing before the justice of the peace saying; "I do". Since I was working sixty hours a week to climb the corporate ladder, it was relief not to have to plan a wedding. Besides Nick didn't have any immediate family; his parents died in a car crash when he was a child and he has no siblings. That's all I know about his family history. It didn't matter to me since my estranged family is rarely in touch except for holiday card exchanges and an occasional phone call. We're rather disconnected! So, Nick is my family!

I grab my cell phone to call Nick and as I dial the last number I hang up since I am at a loss of what to say to him. After all, I had promised Thomas that I would not discuss this investigation with anyone or he said no immunity or protection. And why do I personally need immunity and protection? Is Nick in some kind of trouble? That's it! Thomas has to do some explaining right now! Lynda storms out of her room and knocks on Thomas' door.

SGS

My mind's a total whirl. Just 12 hours earlier the biggest excitement in my life involved decisions about breakfast cereal. On the 4th knock, Thomas opens the door. Pleasantries take a back seat as I barge past him and begin to pace. "What does Nick have to do with this?" I blurt out in rapid fire concern. "Tell me everything before I agree to help anyone. I have to know the truth."

Thomas sits on the bed and runs his fingers through his thick main of black hair, beginning at his temples and slowly ending at the back of this neck. "Stay focused" I tell myself. "Must stay focused."

"Nick's a good guy with a strong will to survive" Thomas begins.

"Survive? Survive what?" My blood pressure is pounding in my throat.

"Remember the Sifakas monkeys I told you about?"

"Oh, please, I don't give a 'rat's' about the monkeys. Just tell me what's wrong with Nick!" I can't stand the not knowing.

"A group of Stanford scientists believe they've found a cure for AIDS. Nick does not have AIDS, but he and his department at A.E.M – Advanced Exploratory Medicine - do have more than a vested interest in the cure. Bone marrow, a.k.a. "Tequilla," from Sifakas monkeys, has proven successful at retarding the growth of AIDS cells. But the FDA, and their very long arm of government support, are less than enthusiastic about severing any pharmaceutical cash flows. They've made that perfectly clear to Nick."

"Damn it, Thomas!! Tell me what's going on with Nick?" I parrot for the 3rd time.

"Nick's in danger." Thomas replies with obvious apprehension.

MM

Nick! My Nick in danger? My heart pounds with fear.

All thoughts of a romantic interlude with Thomas vanishes as my concern for Nick grows.

“How?” “Why?” “What is the danger?” I cry.

Thomas begins to tell me of Nick’s involvement with the A.E.M. project. As I listen, I think, “How could I be so blind! Here I am, thinking my husband is an ordinary CPA and he is really a high playing manipulator of world economy.”

Thomas tells me Nick’s role is to leak classified information out to certain well-placed individuals in the stock market to affect the price of the soon to be released anti-AIDS drug. By manipulating the market, certain individuals, Henry being one of them, will make a fortune.

Nick is working with the agency to lull Henry and his cohorts into a false sense of security so they can be caught working the market and exposed.

Nick has been passing on false information so that these men will buy up more stock thus affecting the worldwide price.

The danger comes to Nick when we expose Henry and his friends. Nick will also be exposed, thus becoming an immediate target to those who will lose their fortunes when the drug is found to be affected by an unforeseen change in the Sifakas blood composition. Nick’s life will be in danger as they will blame him for their financial failures.

“I,” says Thomas, “am supposed to be the decoy and make a very substantial purchase of the stock so we can actually control the price.”

“Nick has been undercover now for five months. Since you are Nick’s wife, and he has been spending so much time away from his new bride, it should be easy to convince Henry that Nick is allowing you to lure me into the scheme. It is important that Eddie Cataldo and the NY mob think Nick’s on the up and up. And with Henry’s illicit behavior, it will be easy to convince them, that you and I are having a dalliance too.

Once the scam is exposed, we will need to spirit you both out of the country to keep you safe until you can testify,” Thomas concludes.

Our role, Thomas, Nick’s and mine, is to bring them down.

“Five months, five months, my husband has been involved that long and I, his new bride, has suspected nothing. But now at least, I could understand the sometimes late nights and the occasional absent weekends.”

How could Thomas and I maneuver to save my Nick? At least I could enjoy myself while pretending to seduce Thomas. Of course a few shots of tequila would help to loosen me up. But then there’s that wooden spoon....

CMW-

That was the last thought I had as I fainted one more time, and yes – again - Thomas’ incredible arms were there to catch me. I was awakened with a cold wet face cloth moving around my face, down my neck, and startled awake as it moved toward my chest.

“well its about time” Thomas greeted me with. “now don’t go fainting again – as this is about the extent of my medical expertise”. At which point Thomas got up, went into my bathroom and began to run a bath. This gave me a quick moment to collect my thoughts. First thought was - why is my shirt unbuttoned down to my bra? Second thought - what the heck is going on?

Thomas quickly returned. “So, dinner is in an hour – but obviously you are in no condition to attend. How about we just order in tonight?”

“We?” I questioned.

“Well, you don’t think I’m going to leave you alone do you? You are a mess and need some caretaking - - and I do believe you have chosen me as your caretaker.” Thomas proudly announced.

Indignantly I retorted “I don’t think a twisted ankle hardly makes me an invalid in need of caretaking. Also – there is no way I can miss dinner tonight – my boss would kill me!”

“Ha! Honestly - -after your delusional rant on the beach, followed by the twisted ankle and passing out - -I do believe most folks will understand that you are not quite up for dinner tonight. As a matter of fact, I am pretty sure Henry would be a lot more comfortable if you weren’t there. He was a little mortified during your tirade about him being a monkey thief on the brink of bringing down the US economy and on his way to jail. That was creative Lynda! The program director for this week is going to be hard pressed to compete with the entertainment you provided right off the bat this afternoon.”

My head was spinning and I was burning up – just dripping sweat. At the same time – all I wanted to do was get under the comforter to warm up. Right then Thomas felt my head and said “hey, you are still burning up. Why don’t you go take a bath and see if you can cool down a bit. The Tylenol should be kicking in shortly as well. There is a bathrobe on the back of the bathroom door. I will be here if you need any help – just call”.

Before my next protest, Thomas helped me out of bed, putting my arm around his neck –I could not help but notice his bulking neck and shoulder muscles, or his spicy scent – a mixture of fresh air and cinnamon. Off to the bathroom I hopped. I shut the door – undressed and slid into the bath Thomas had running for me – pink little bath bubbles and all. I really needed to gather my thoughts.

So, there are no monkeys – No police – no suspicious conversations on the other side of doors? This has all just been fever produced delusions? Crap – do I have swine flu, monkey flu? Worse thought- -is Thomas really in my room right now – or is that just another delusion. Gosh I hope this one is real! No I don’t – what am I talking about!??? Nick is perfect – there is no room for Thomas – nor should he be in my room. I have to get rid of him. As soon as I get out of this tub...I will thank him kindly and have him go.

I really need to call my wife soon – thought Thomas. No doubt she is freaking out that I never called when my flight landed this morning. I hate all the checking in that she demands I do with the charade that she cares. All she wants to do is track my every move and make sure no one else is getting their paws on my money. Ugh – Let me get this over with!

I took a deep breath and dialed. “hello” she said in her whiny Jersey princess accent. “Hi hun – its me - -just wanted to let you know I have arrived and all is well”. On and on she went about her pathetic day – sleeping through the kids going to school – her nail and hair appointments – her lunch at the club – and her struggles with helping the kids with their math homework this afternoon. Well – they are in 3rd and 5th grade – so I understand how that genius struggles with it. If it’s not about pocketbooks, shoes or make-up – Cami will be of no added value. It was the usual one sided conversation – her blathering on and on – never once pausing to ask how I am – just talking at me – no longer with me. It’s amazing how Cami makes me feel completely smothered and lonely all at the same time. I asked to talk to the kids – but she had already hustled them off to bed. I hate it when she does that. She knows talking to the kids is the one highlight of my day and she cant even give me that. Ok – I’m done listening to this. “hey – I have

to go –Im late for our kick off dinner meeting” Just then Lynda came out of the bathroom. Did she hear me say that?? Gosh I hope not. I hung up the phone.

I finished my bath and was starting to regain my bearings. I put on my robe and as I came out of the bathroom I caught the end of a call that Thomas was on – he mentioned that he was in fact going to dinner. I was relieved and hugely disappointed all at once.

“hey there – feeling any better”? Thomas asked. All the while - he could feel his heart beating wildly as he was looking at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was not model perfect – but there was something about Lynda that just kept him staring longer than he should. He was usually so much smoother.

“I do thanks. But I am really exhausted. Im glad to hear your going to dinner – as Im just going to call it a day and go to bed” I said.

Thomas was glad, even relieved that Lynda felt better. Not quite sure why he cared so much - that is not exactly his normal mode of operation. He was also strangely disappointed that he didn’t have an excuse to stay any longer.

“Ok – well – that’s probably a good idea. You have had quite a day.” Thomas said. Scrambling to figure out how he can see again soon – he added “I will be checking in on you later and if you need anything, anything at all – please call my cell” at which point he walked over to the desk in my room – grabbing a paper and pen, writing down his number and walking it over to my night stand.

I could barely get out a “thanks” – before Thomas left through our adjoining room door. He pulled it slightly shut – but did not fully close it which I thought was a little brazen. I went over to shut and lock the door, but stopped. I justified it to myself– for safety sake I should probably keep it open in case the fever returns. Even though I knew my fever would return – then next time I laid my eyes on Thomas.

Into bed I crawled and immediately started to recap the day in my mind. Mostly I found myself trying to recapture every word that came off of Thomas’ perfect lips, every move he made and every touch. I did not call home to Nick – I just drifted off to sleep.

A little after 11, There was a light knock on my door and I heard a “hello – how is my patient?” from Thomas. There he was - holding a shake in one hand and a bottle of Tylenol in his other. I sat up in bed and he pulled a chair right up to my side.

Twenty years later, Thomas is still by my side.

Epilogue: by Joanie Markinac

So, although it was a long time ago, I remember that evening and my assignment to entertain Thomas like it was only yesterday. It involved a monkey, two shots of tequila and a wooden spoon. The memory should have faded by now but, to this day, it makes me grimace, then smile, then grimace, then smile again...mental note to self: It’s been a long time since I visited the zoo...Another mental note to self: I really should retire that wooden spoon from kitchen use.

