

## A Boost

by Walt Sutton

Malcolm stood washing his hands in the kitchen sink. He looked out through the uneven glass of a white framed window into the garden. He was watching his wife's back. She was digging something and as she moved her shape stretched and shrunk unnervingly in the ages old glass. She was framed and moving like an animated impressionist painting, jerking motions, soundless but ceaseless action. He dried his hands and went towards the back door. He was reaching for the latch but stopped.

"By God, there's no good reason for me to go without," he said and detoured to the den to fetch his pipe and lighter. He put both into a shirt pocket and returned to the door to the garden, paused again then applied his hand to the sliding latch. His shaking fingers tugged and on the fourth try he pulled so hard that the slide gave way and flew right out of its housing, clanging on the kitchen floor. He winced and dropped his pipe as well. "Drat, damn and drat!"

He re-seated the latch, bent and retrieved his pipe, then placed his hand over a small pile of ash and pressed. The ash came away clean, mixed with his sweat, it was hot. His hand shook again, protesting a full bottle of brandy drunk last night, after dinner. His stomach was sour, his head ached even through the protection of analgesics. His whole body was strung tight and the clang from the damn latch startled him, just like all those dishes crashing down. Unfair damn-it!

It had all started innocently enough, one month before their 35th wedding anniversary. Pauline decided that after so many years their needed "a bit of a boost" as she called it. So she went to the book store and acquired a copy of Dame Geraldine Cushman's "A Marriage Means More Than Sleeping Together". She skimmed the book and was converted. This led to what Dame Cushman called coupling "exercises". Malcolm and Pauline would sit opposite each other in the den and take turns reading aloud from Dame Cushman's decidedly modern philosophy about relationships - sex and all. Malcolm wasn't always comfortable with these sessions. The Chapter on foreplay was way too long, he felt. But driven by Pauline's genuine desire to improve their lot, he trudged through each nightly reading and the inevitable discussion which followed. Dame Chapman had mercifully limited herself to thirteen chapters, so they were able to complete their work well before the grand celebration.

The meal at Fin de Siecle had been Pauline's idea. "We are passing through an exceptional threshold, Malcolm. Thirty - five years of marriage is remarkable by any standard, and Fin d' Siecle is exactly what's called for." The Maitre d' guided them like royalty through a small dining room whose tables were lit by candles poured into red glass cups like offering lamps. Malcolm and Pauline were settled into a corner table marked "Reserve". The room was full of patrons, but dark. The carpeted floor and heavy pink drapes sweeping in long arcs across huge sections of the wall quieted the scene. Malcolm looked across the table at his wife and like magic, they were alone. Pauline glowed from inside a riot of pink chiffon, her gray hair pulled to a seamless bun and her



mother's cameo broach tottered above her chest in honor of this important occasion. They ordered all six courses. A dab of pate nestled in a mushroom cap with a pinch of allspice somewhere in the mixture just to keep the tongue alert for a glass of Champagne. Then came poached Brill - Pauline's favorite fish. They stayed with the champagne; this was after all a celebration. Next came rack of lamb, resting in a pool of red wine and garlic sauce. Malcolm emboldened by the Champagne ordered a bottle of Le Vieux Telegraph, a Chateauneuf-du-Pape to wash it all down. Then they ate their greens: a tossed salad with tomato, red and green lettuces flavored with a mustard vinaigrette dressing. He ordered another bottle of the Le Vieux Telegraph. Out came the dessert tray. He let her choose for the both of them, Alexander Torte and a fresh strawberry tart with clotted cream. Eating half, they switched plates and giggled; Dame Cushman would have approved. Finally the Cheese board, cappuccino and a glass of Mark to settle the whole melange.

"All right, Malcolm my dear, I think this is our moment."

"Moment, my love?"

"You know Malcolm, the moment of deepest honesty, its time."

"Ah, yes, er Dame Cushman, deepest honesty. Of course my dear, but perhaps we could just relax, enjoy the rest of our evening and do this some other time." His tongue felt thick, his words stumbled in a wine inspired fog.

"Absolutely not, Malcolm. Tonight, the night of our thirty - fifth wedding anniversary, is exactly the right moment to break through and reassert our relationship. We must proceed energetically, Malcolm." She cleared her throat and took a short sip of the Mark. "Now, dear, so that you won't be too uncomfortable, I'll go first."

She paused, and looked directly into his eyes, fully conforming with the Cushman cannon. This exercise called "the connection of Deepest Honesty" was intended to refresh a relationship and put it on a higher level of meaningfulness, intimacy and ultimately, stability. The candle flickered in her eyes like a red semaphore, her mother's broach rose several inches as she took a deep breath and began.

"Malcolm, I love you very much, but I hate everything to do with that pipe of yours. I hate the smell, your breath, the burn marks on our couch, stinking ash trays, the dog yelping when you accidentally burn her too. I just hate it. But I do love you very much, Malcolm."

She reached across the table, took him by the hand, and squeezed, thus completing the ritual moment of Deepest Honesty.

"There, dear, now its our turn." Pauline settled back into her chair.

"I'm not so sure about this, Pauley," he mumbled.

"You must buck up, Malcolm, buck up and tell you feelings. Our marriage is at stake here, our future, our very happiness!"

He drew a pipe from his pocket, and slid open the shining black match box inscribed Fin d' Siecle. He stopped the motion as a single match was almost withdrawn and smiled at Pauline, a one sided smile as the pipe was already in his mouth. "Yes, of course", he said removing the pipe and replacing it in his pocked and fumbled the matches back to the table.

"Well, Malcolm?"



“Yes, if you insist. Pauline, dear, I love you very much” he went silent for a long moment, his eyes locked on the glass in front of him. Finally he spoke. “Love you very much but I once was sleeping with another woman, I’m afraid, dear.”

“When, Malcolm?”

“Oh, dearest, it was really nothing. Let’s see, almost twenty years ago. It only lasted for a month, Pauley. I mean, you said, Dame Cushman says that we must be honest, and I’m just doing what you, er she, said.”

“Who was she Malcolm?”

“Oh, Pauley...”

“Who was she?”

“A graduate student, you didn’t know her.”

“You slept with one of your own graduate students, Malcolm how could you?”

Her hands sprang from beneath the table, fingers locked as if to pray. Like a batter she wound up and swung fully from right to left, clearing the table with this one huge gesture grunting and screaming at the same time. The crash completely quieted the restaurant. The red candle continued to burn as it scooted across the carpet.

From outside a redwing black bird trilled returning Malcolm to the kitchen and his mission. Pauline’s garden was bounded by a ten foot hedge which protected wheelless beds bursting with midsummer energy and colors. She was at the far end of the garden. Malcolm pulled the back door shut behind him and set off across the lawn towards her. His feet settled noiselessly into the grass which was straight and trimmed like a crew cut. “Pauline, Pauley, why don’t you come in and I’ll make you some lunch, dear. Its far too hot for you to be out here working like this... dear?”

She placed her dirty red tennis shoe at the back of the pitch fork and pushed. She leveraged up a chunk of black dirt and turned it over, startling a worm and several faster creatures which scuttled back into the ground. She moved the fork back six inches and applied her tennis shoe again, grunting as she pushed. Her overalls were dirty, especially on the knees, and her whole T-shirt was wet and clinging to her skin. The gray bun held all but three truant strands of hair in place. He reached out to touch one of them.

“Pauley, dear, please come in. You’re getting burned and you must eat something.”

She left the pitchfork standing in the bed and walked to the other side of the garden her back to him all of the way. She pulled pruning shears from an oversized pocket and began severing unruly runners from a rose bush. Malcolm waited a moment then approached again.

“Look Pauley, I know I was a beast, but this whole thing was your idea.”

The shears reported a metallic “click” as a branch fell, then another, and she caught the third in her gloved hand.

“It really is too hot for you Pauley.”

Click

“I mean, I’m sorry”

Click

“Pauley”



Without turning Pauline said “get out of my garden, Malcolm.”  
“Pauley please!”

She turned on him, holding a four foot runner covered with thorns. She swung it towards his face and he jumped back. “You, sir are a bastard! Get out of my garden this minute. Leave me alone!” She menaced him again with the thorny branch. Malcolm turned, and began to retreat. He pulled the pipe from his pocket and with a flourish of his silver lighter and shaking hand he re-fired the half empty bowl. He set out for the house moving his head from side to side like a great dragon on the prowl. “Yes, well you’ll have to come in some time won’t you,” he mumbled in smoke as he headed for the back door, slowly. He thrusting his hand and the pipe head defiantly. It was like a march, the pipe hi-lighting his little the parade, one step, then another, a wedding procession gone up in smoke, he thought. Then Malcolm stumbled, his foot hit the first riser by accident. Recovering his balance, he heard her call out. Recovering his balance he turned.

“Malcolm!”

“Yes, damnit! What is it you want, Pauline?”

She stood still, hands at her side with the thorns in one and the clippers in the other. She raised the branch towards him.

“Malcolm, I, want. I want, a treaty.”

He crossed the lawn again, pipe settled in the right corner of his mouth. He was puffing so hard that the pipe gurgled, smoke poured from his mouth, nose and his whole head almost disappearing in the conflagration. He stopped three paces short of his wife, wary of the branch. “What sort of a treaty?”

She was sweating, but around her eyes appeared a rising tide of water pushing over the lower lids and spilling down her pink damp cheeks. She dropped the branch, placed the shears in her pocket and walked to the pitchfork. She grasped it in both hands, and drove it into the earth expertly shifting her wrists so that the tines opened a dark hole. “If you give me the pipe, give it to me forever, I will forgive you your graduate student.” She held out her hand towards him.

Malcolm grabbed the warm bowl protectively, soothing it and himself by rubbing fingers over the blackened wood body and puffing several gentle puffs.

“You know this is going to be nigh on to impossible, all at once like this?”

“For both of us Malcolm, it will be nearly impossible for both of us.”

“Did I hear you correctly Pauley, your part of this treaty... is to forgive and forget?”

She looked hard at him, then tipped her head slightly, a bead of sweat falling into the hole.

“Yes, Malcolm.”

“Well then.” And he reached out, handing her the pipe, its trail of parting smoke passing between them. She dropped it into the hole, and pulling out the pitch fork pushed dirt over the pipe with her tennis shoe, tamping the earth quite firmly.

