



The Inflection Point
A Novelette

Steve Jackowski

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DEDICATION

To Karen Noël, my helicopter

Other Works by Steve Jackowski

Novels

The Swimmer (2022)

The Misogynist (2019)

The 15th Juror (2018)

L'Ombre de Dieu (2017)

The Shadow of God (2014)

The Silicon Lathe (2013)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

My stories tend to have quite a few characters so to make things easier for you, here's a list of the main characters in *The Inflection Point*:

Sam Jennings – dying of cancer

Sharon Gardner – 1st wife

Kathy Newsom – current wife

Heather Henshaw 2nd wife

Vanessa Engles - 3rd wife

Veronica Wilson – Primary care doctor

Dr. Patel – oncologist

CHAPTER 1

“Everyone dies alone.”
- Blaise Pascal

The diagnosis was brutal: three months. He would be dead in three months.

Sam stepped into the parking lot and looked for his car. It was gone. He was struck by a sense of *déjà vu*. For several months he'd had dreams with a recurring theme. He returns to a parking garage or a parking lot and discovers his car is missing. Many of the dreams were intricate with complex auto thefts others were just baffling. He'd recounted most to his wife Kathy, and she had laughed at each, suggesting that his obsession with his Audi had him so fearful of losing it that it was disturbing his sleep.

But this time, his beautiful Audi etron truly was gone. And this time, there was no mystery. Kathy had taken it and left him there alone, facing his fatal diagnosis.

No. That was unfair. She was angry, justifiably so. When Dr. Patel had told them that Sam had perhaps three months without treatment, or possibly a few more with chemotherapy, Sam had stated flatly that he wouldn't do chemo. Kathy had stormed out.

And her anger was justified. Not only had he rejected treatment without any discussion, he'd ignored the symptoms for over a year and had ignored Kathy's pleas to get them checked out. And now, after nearly twenty years together, he was going to leave her. And it was really his fault.

On the other hand, there wasn't a cure for pancreatic cancer. His doom was preordained. But, had it been caught early, he might have been around for a few years instead of just a few months. No. He had no one to blame but himself. Or maybe his primary care physician, Dr. Veronica Wilson. He remembered his last visit a little over a year ago.

"Your A1C is a bit high. You're headed towards type 2 diabetes. With a BMI of twenty-eight, you need to lose ten pounds. Reduce your sugar intake – no fruit juices, candy, sweets, and exercise more."

"I'm sorry. Did you read the questionnaire I completed?"

"Uh. What do you mean?"

"Look, I exercise at least an hour and a half a day. If it's surfable, I do a twenty-minute yoga warm-up and spend two to

three hours in the water. On non-survable days, I do a forty-five minute yoga session and then follow it with at least an hour on a stationary bike. In addition, I usually walk at least a couple of miles a day. Add in hiking, dancing, skiing, whitewater kayaking – I don't see how I could exercise more.

“My diet is whole grains, vegetables, fish, and occasionally some chicken or turkey. No red meat. And, I don't drink fruit juices or eat refined carbohydrates, add sugar to anything or eat candy, aside from two small pieces of dark chocolate most evenings.

“And as for losing weight, I think this BMI thing is bogus. My body fat is thirteen percent. I don't get why you doctors rely on BMI when people have so many different body types. I don't see how losing weight would be beneficial to me.”

“I hear this all the time. My patients claim their high BMI is due to muscle. They say they exercise all the time. But it's just wishful thinking. No. BMI is the best tool we have for assessing how weight will affect your health. You need to drop weight, reduce carbs, and exercise more. Period.”

Sam left Dr. Wilson's office stunned. Her assessment was that basically he was a liar. And that one visit had shaken his faith in the medical community.

Looking back, he'd been stupid. One doctor wasn't all doctors. And while he was a bit worried about his higher-than-normal A1C number, he thought reducing his wine consumption or cutting his late-night dark chocolate would bring down that number. He didn't really ask why, in someone so active who didn't consume refined sugars at all, why that A1C number was high.

As Dr. Patel explained, pancreatic cancer was so fatal because for most people, by the time it became symptomatic, it was too late. Researchers had recently discovered that one of the earliest indicators was blood sugar levels. Nearly half of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer had been recently diagnosed with diabetes. So, if blood sugar levels were unexplainably high, it was worth looking deeper. Unfortunately, Dr. Patel explained, with the current state of our medical system, most general practitioners and family medicine physicians didn't have the time or the resources to do more than make high-level assessments. And even then, they were often so over-loaded and stressed,

required to complete a certain number of procedures and diagnoses (like pre-diabetes), that they frequently took the easiest path.

In Sam's case, it was even worse. As athletic as he was, most of the normal symptoms were masked. Fatigue didn't seem to be abnormal – he liked to work himself into exhaustion. With his huge calorie intake, his eating a bit less didn't seem unusual and pleased Kathy. And, he attributed the gradual weight loss to his reduction of alcohol and chocolate. Dr. Wilson would have been pleased, right?

As he later learned from Dr. Patel, drinking alcohol actually lowers blood sugar. No. The high A1C in a very athletic person was at least a yellow flag and Dr. Wilson should have known better than to write this off as typical pre-diabetes.

And yet, Sam wasn't surprised by the diagnosis. He'd known something was wrong. He just didn't know what. The body he had always counted on to keep him safe during his extreme sports was showing flaws. "Age is finally catching up with you, too," his friends chided. He'd written off the intermittent abdominal pains and itchy skin, and didn't think his light colored stools were anything to worry about (you're supposed to worry about dark stools, right?). It was only the past few weeks where he really was fatigued, and the pain didn't go away, that he had to admit something was wrong.

Sam finally told Kathy he was ready to see a doctor. She'd been pushing him for months. And so they went to urgent care and the very nice doc there ordered some tests and then referred them to Dr. Patel.

He also didn't tell Kathy about his other dreams; the ones where he went in for countless medical tests which all concluded that he had a terminal illness. In some ways the dreams had prepared him. At first he'd wake up in the night with his heart racing, terrified. But after several months, he slept through the night and though he remembered his dreams, they didn't frighten him anymore.

So, after all the tests and the imaging, the Stage 4 diagnosis of pancreatic cancer with inoperable metastases of the peritoneum (the membrane lining the abdomen and covering many internal organs), was no real surprise. Kathy had been hopeful. Sam had been pessimistic.

The sound of an approaching spaceship interrupted Sam's reflections. The etron pulled up next to him. He opened the door and climbed in next to his devastated wife. Her eyes were swollen and she looked completely exhausted.

"We talked about this possibility," Sam began, gently placing his hand on her thigh.

"Not now. Okay?"

"Okay."

Kathy drove them to the parking lot for Steamer's Lane near the Santa Cruz lighthouse, one of Sam's favorite surf spots. They got out of the car and sat together on one of the benches looking out at the surf and the Monterey Peninsula some twenty-five miles across the bay.

The barking of sea lions echoed from under the Santa Cruz wharf while sea otters dove for crabs and urchins in the nearby kelp beds. The surf was moderately crowded. Not too bad for a late September afternoon. The four to six foot south swell was hitting the point perfectly and Sam recognized several of his friends winding their way through the throng of groms (adolescent or younger surfers) on the inside. He was going to miss this.

It wasn't that he would miss it once he was gone. His physical decline had begun. He was in pain most of the time. He'd been out a few times in the past weeks, but his sessions hadn't gone well. He just wasn't strong enough. While he could still go out on a boogie board with fins, he knew that it wouldn't be long before he couldn't get into his beloved ocean again – at least not until they scattered his ashes there.

Sam had been surfing for decades, longer than most surfers had been alive. It was something he'd wanted to do from the first time he saw it when his military family was stationed in Hawaii. His parents thought he was too young so he learned to body surf. Ultimately, when they ended up in California, he'd become obsessed with surfing and it had become the most important part of his life.

At one point, visiting his mentor uncle, he lamented that while he loved being at the University taking countless classes in every subject imaginable, he was getting pressure from the administration to commit to a major and to move on. But he really didn't know what he wanted to do with his life.

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His uncle posed the insightful question, “If you could do anything in the world, what would it be?”

“Surf!” Sam had responded.

Without even raising an eyebrow, his uncle asked, “Is there any money in it?”

Sam had a friend who owned a surf shop but he wasn’t doing very well. And in those days, competitions paid little and sponsorships really didn’t exist. So Sam had to admit that there wasn’t any money in surfing – that he couldn’t make a living at it.

“In that case, I suggest you take some time off from school, go somewhere that you can surf your heart out, and then you’ll know exactly what you want to do with your life.”

Returning to the University, Sam stopped in at his friend’s surf shop to discuss where he might go. As he entered, he spotted the latest issue of Surfer Magazine with a picture of what looked like the Banzai Pipeline on the cover – nothing new. Except that across the top in capital letters was ‘FRANCE!’.

For the rest of the quarter, Sam worked two part time jobs in addition to his class load. During the summer, he bargained for a room in a sorority house in exchange for some maintenance work while he worked two full time jobs, saving almost every penny of his earnings.

That September, he requested a two-quarter leave of absence and made his way to the Basque region of France. Five months later, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to make enough money to return to the Basque region to write novels and surf. But then life got in the way.

“Are you scared?” Kathy asked, interrupting Sam’s reflections.

“It’s funny,” Sam replied, gazing lovingly at his overwhelmed wife. “On a rational level, I’m terrified. We have the perfect life and I don’t want that to end. I only know life. I’d like to think it’s like going to sleep, but even when I think about it that way, I’m terrified.

“On the other hand, and this seems backwards to me, emotionally, aside for the horrible sadness and guilt I feel for leaving you and for being too stupid to see a doctor sooner, I’m not frightened at all. I guess I mean that it goes back and forth.

“You know, you’re supposed to go through five stages of grief as you approach death. I think I was in denial for a long time but somehow knew. I may have gone through much of that process because I was having these dreams about being terminally ill.”

“And you didn’t tell me about them?”

“I’m sorry Kathy. I’m an idiot. I didn’t want to burden you with unreasonable fears. Or, if they were reasonable, as I suspected they were, I didn’t want you to worry –“

“You self-righteous son –“

“Yeah. I know. You have every right to be angry. And I guess this is the part I’m most afraid of. I don’t want to be alone and I’m afraid you’ll leave me.”

“You’re afraid I’ll leave you!? I’m your helicopter.”

Sam pulled his sobbing wife closer. She had been his helicopter. When they met, he had just gone through a devastating divorce and was severely depressed, contemplating suicide. But once he and Kathy started dancing together, life got much better. Feeling grateful that she’d helped him back from the brink, he told her the joke about the old man who was ordered to evacuate his home as flood waters were approaching.

The old man told the young officer who offered him a ride that he was going to stay: “The Lord will save me.” As the flood waters rose, emergency services came by in a boat but once again he refused to leave. “The Lord will save me,” he announced. As the waters rose and flooded the top floor of his house, he climbed to the roof. A helicopter approached and the crew tried to convince him to get on board. But again, he refused, “The Lord will save me.” Unfortunately, the surging waters swept him

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away and he drowned.

In Heaven, he asked, “Lord, I had faith in you. Why didn’t you save me?” God replied, “Well, I sent an officer in a car, emergency services in a boat, and a helicopter.

And yes. Kathy was his helicopter. She’d saved him and ever since, he knew viscerally that he owed her his life.

He hoped that the last eighteen years had been as good for her as it had been for him.

They watched the surfers as the sun began to set. Scrutinizing her husband’s face, it was clear to Kathy that Sam was making a stupid effort to hide substantial pain.

“I need to pee,” she announced. “Let’s go home.”

They wound their way along Westcliff Drive towards the setting sun. Kathy made her way to the bathroom, took a minute, flushed the toilet to be convincing, then returned with a bottle of Sam’s pain meds.

Kathy and Sam lived in a reverse floor plan home a block off Westcliff Drive in Santa Cruz. A reverse floor plan means that the kitchen, living room, dining room, etc. are upstairs while most of the bedrooms were downstairs. Kathy and Sam's master bedroom was also located on the second floor from which you could see Monterey, Pacific Grove, and the Santa Lucia Mountains some forty miles away.

As Sam's health had begun to deteriorate, they had installed a stair lift so that Sam could go up and down more easily. That had worked well for a few weeks. Kathy was able to take Sam down to the multi-use path along the ocean most days. But now, only a bit over eight weeks since that fateful meeting with Dr. Patel, Sam was confined to their bed. Kathy was grateful for the long term care insurance they'd almost cancelled as the premiums rose. The company had been more than gracious and paid for in-home care for Sam's remaining days.

The floor plan of the house made life much easier. When he could eat, which was becoming increasingly rare, the kitchen was only steps away. In the bedroom, Sam was hooked up to multiple drips: saline to keep him hydrated and morphine to reduce the pain. Both the homecare nurses and Kathy could adjust the amount of morphine. At times, Sam was perfectly lucid but he was increasingly delirious or asleep.

Throughout their marriage, Sam had recounted his dreams to Kathy. It surprised her that he could remember them, and in such detail. Based on a sleep study she had done a year before, she knew she dreamt but over their last eighteen years together, she may have remembered one or two. And with fleeting recollection, her descriptions were hit and miss.

Not so with Sam. And some of his dreams were so long. It would often take him five or ten minutes to tell her what he had dreamt. He had a lot of recurring dreams though usually they weren't exactly the same. Something would be different. The color of a car, the place, the people.

But if those dreams were vivid, at least Sam knew they were dreams. The last couple of weeks, his dreams seemed real. Sam was having difficulty recognizing that they were, in fact, dreams.

Sam was awake. Kathy made her way over to the chair beside

the bed and stroked his forehead.

“I was really there,” he began. “I’m sure it wasn’t a dream. Do you think that there are parallel realities and that when we die, we continue living in another reality?”

Kathy tried to hide her surprise. Sam was a confirmed atheist. He had always talked about how our brains contain who we are. Suffer brain damage and you become less than you were before. Suffer brain death and you were erased. It was logical and scary. Kathy had never been sure how Sam could live with such a hopeless philosophy.

But Sam claimed that even if he were wrong, living as if death were the end made him a better person. You couldn’t be redeemed. Your sins could not be forgiven. You were your life, mistakes, sins, and successes, and to be a good person, you needed to avoid mistakes, remain ethical, and work hard to make the world a better place for those around you and, if possible, beyond.

At the beginning of their relationship, they’d discussed this ideal of ‘ethics’. Kathy had asked that if there were no God, who determined what was ethical? Sam’s take was quite simple. Although he wasn’t a physician, the basic rule, according to Sam was ‘First do no harm’. He believed that if everyone lived by that credo alone, the world would be a much better place. And Kathy had to agree. Whether it was lying, cheating, stealing, fighting, or leading people astray, that was doing harm. Several of the Commandments seem to be included in ‘First do no harm’.

But Sam’s philosophy went beyond that first rule though he emphasized that that one, as simple as it was, was sufficient.

His next one, was that if you have the means, whether emotional, physical, financial, or just had the time, try to make the world a better place.

Sam’s life hadn’t been easy. From an abusive father to two crazy marriages, he had tried to live by his philosophy and had suffered for it. While quite successful in business, his ethics were such that he never became a multi-billionaire. He believed that to reach that level, you had to make others suffer. As some of his ‘more-successful’ peers had chided, Sam just didn’t have what it took to be truly successful.

But ask his former employees, his former students, and even his ex-wives, and they’d all agree that Sam had made their lives

much better. He would be missed.

“I don’t know Sam,” Kathy responded. “I suppose it’s possible that there are parallel realities. I’ve read some interesting articles that quite a few physicists seem to think so, but I’ve never seen the practical application of it even if it were true.”

Looking over at her husband, Kathy recognized that he was completely lucid. She didn’t fully understand how this happened, but she knew that it wouldn’t last long. Sometimes he was there for five minutes; at others, half an hour or so. She didn’t want to miss any of them.

“Hungry?” she asked hopefully.

“Fudge brownie ice cream and a big glass of water sounds good. I don’t know why I’m so thirsty. I mean I’m on a saline drip.”

Kathy went to the kitchen and returned with a sizeable bowl of ice cream, a spoon, and a large glass of water. She set up a tray, placing both within reach and dug the spoon into the luscious dark softening frozen dessert.

“You first!” Sam ordered, smiling.

Kathy dutifully savored the rich ice cream. She’d added a few pounds these last weeks. But sharing a calorie-dense meal with her husband was a treat and she was sure she’d drop them after – No. She wasn’t going there. Not yet.

The next spoonful was Sam’s. You could see his features relax as he closed his eyes, fully enjoying one of his favorite foods. Kathy offered him water after he swallowed.

“I know it sounds crazy. And logically, I know it can’t be real, but it feels so real. I honestly think I’m travelling out of my body to a different reality. Do you think it’s possible?”

How should she respond? While Kathy wasn’t religious in any formal sense, she did believe in God and some sort of afterlife. But her beliefs, such as they were, tended to the Christian concepts of Heaven and Hell. Well, maybe not Hell. Maybe it was just because she’d been raised in a conservative Christian household. She’d moved on, but not completely.

Kathy decided to be honest. She owed Sam that much.

“Anything is possible, but I think it’s unlikely. I mean, physically, you haven’t left the bed. And, you’ve always had these very vivid dreams. Can you imagine that all dreams are actually trips to another dimension? I certainly don’t think I’ve been

travelling.

“My guess is that with the meds, and as you have said, with your deterioration, your already vivid dreams are just becoming more intense.”

“Yeah. Logically, I think exactly the same thing. But these dreams are so real that at times I’m having a hard time telling what’s a dream and what’s real. But one thing I know. You’re real.”

Kathy tried not to cry but then decided, why not? They’d shared everything. Sam had seen her cry before. And if ever there were an occasion to cry, this was certainly one of them.

“Ah, more ice cream please?” Sam pseudo-begged, rating a chuckle from Kathy. “Don’t forget: you first.”

After following Sam’s orders, Kathy suggested Sam tell her about his latest dream.

“Well, it’s kind of strange. My dreams seem to be hopping around in time. One dream is from my childhood, and the next from my recent past. Those childhood dreams seem to be moving forward in time while the others are moving backward. My last one was about my divorce from Vanessa. Actually, it wasn’t about the divorce. It was about my return from France to an empty house. I really felt like I was reliving it.”

Independent of this particular dream, Kathy knew quite a bit about what happened with Vanessa. Sam’s previous marriage with Heather Henshaw had been having difficulty. The two had been separated for about a month, but talked to each other every day. Vanessa, frustrated in her own marriage with a philandering husband who spent every cent they earned on his toys, was looking for a way out. This handsome, brilliant technologist seemed to be the ticket so she did what she could to seduce Sam. Ultimately, she succeeded.

Vanessa came with two children, much to the delight of Sam who had always wanted a family. The oldest girl had some psychological problems having discovered the body of her baby sister at age three and then having been molested by a baby sitter a few years later.

Since Vanessa was just starting her career as a teacher, Sam took care of the house and became the primary care-giver for the kids: getting them ready and to school, picking them up, taking them to school events and doctors’ appointments, and helping

them with their homework. Sam reveled in being a dad.

While she seemed better, soon after reaching puberty, the oldest began accusing teachers of favoritism, then stalking, then abuse. It wasn't until after she left for college that Vanessa and Sam discovered these accusations were false. This came to light on two occasions: the first, when she accused a professor, who had critiqued one of her essays, of sexual assault. He was forced to resign. And then later when she established a long-distance intimate relationship with a young man on social media only to have him arrested when he came, invited, to visit her. Other incidents followed with a common theme. Vanessa and Sam did some detective work and after contacting the daughter's friends and following up with school officials, they discovered the truth. Their daughter went out of her way to destroy people's lives if they even hinted at crossing her. She'd learned that as an attractive young woman, she could claim harassment or abuse and would be believed first. This fell apart for the school when she accused an, unknown to her, gay professor of rape after he'd given her an 'F' on a midterm exam. She was suspended and the school recommended counseling.

She was readmitted the next term and seemed better for the first semester.

Shortly thereafter, while stoned out of her mind on drugs, she turned to her lover and saw Sam. The next day, she called Vanessa and told her that either Vanessa would leave Sam or she would never speak to her again.

Vanessa proposed counseling, but the daughter reiterated her demands. No. Not demands. An ultimatum.

Sam tried to talk with her. They'd been so close since he had come into the family. But she refused to take his calls. He thought that if she saw him in person, things might get back to normal so he flew to the East Coast and knocked on her dormitory door. The daughter answered the door wearing nothing but panties and started screaming. Her roommate, who was just down the hall ran over and pulled Sam aside. They had met at the beginning of the term and she knew who Sam was.

"She's been having a really hard time lately. She's finally seeing a counselor who's helping her with her addiction problem but she needs time. You really need to go and wait for her to contact you."

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Sam left and tried to call Vanessa who didn't pick up. He left a voicemail as he made his way back to the airport. She called back just as he took his seat on the plane.

"That was a mistake," he lamented.

"You don't know how bad it is," Vanessa confirmed. "I think she needs psychiatric help. I'm not sure how that will work. She won't come here while you're around."

They discussed options and Sam decided to take several weeks off for a trip to France, to a place he'd visited some thirty years before. He'd hoped that this would give them both some space to try to resolve things without him in the way.

When he returned from his trip, he found an empty house. There were light rectangles on the walls where artwork had hung and it looked like there had been a recent party with confetti, and beer and wine bottles and glasses everywhere.

Sam and Vanessa saw each other a few times but when the daughter found out, she got violent. Vanessa decided that divorce was the only solution.

A year or so later, Sam received a message from Vanessa apologizing. The daughter had been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, an incurable psychological problem that made her narcissistic and manipulative.

Kathy had spoken with some of the couple's friends and surprisingly, most of the women didn't have anything positive to say about Vanessa. They had found her self-centered and manipulative, and suspected that her marriage to Sam was one of convenience. She'd been able to escape her previous marriage, have her children raised in a supportive, financially stable environment, then bail on Sam, taking more than half of their assets.

Kathy looked over at her husband. He'd certainly lived an interesting life. The marriage to Vanessa was just one episode.

Sam took one more bite of ice cream and told Kathy his dream.

Just like in real life, I had gone to France to give Vanessa and her daughter some space, hoping that my time away would help them resolve their issues with me. And just like in real life, while in France, I'd surfed several hours a day, ran for miles along the coast, and worked out constantly. I wrote like a fiend late at night, completing the first draft of my first novel.

When I left France, I was in the best shape of my life. I may have been fifty, but I felt better than I ever had – at least physically.

I came back on a Sunday, tanned and strong, hoping beyond hope that Vanessa and I would still be together.

I half expected her to be at the airport but she wasn't there. I called an airport shuttle and arrived home, expecting to see her car in the driveway. Only mine was there.

I entered the house and was shocked at the disaster inside. Not only were there the remnants of a party, there was a hole in the wall where the front door had been slammed against it as well as holes that looked like someone had taken a hammer to them.

Maybe it was the jetlag but after setting up my computer and going through a few work emails, I fell asleep in my office/loft.

Something woke me up. It was dark but I could clearly hear the sounds of lovemaking in the living room just below me. It wasn't Vanessa. It was her youngest daughter.

I didn't want to disturb or frighten them so I tried to go back to sleep but ended up basically holding my breath, attempting to be as quiet as possible. They left the house an hour later and I spent most of a sleepless night cleaning up.

I had sent an email to Vanessa letting her know that I was back, asking if we could get together. She proposed meeting for lunch at our favorite restaurant.

I got there first and watched her arrive. She looked a bit tentative as she entered and scanned the dining room. But when she saw me, she rushed over. I started to get up for a hug, but she gently pushed me back into my chair, smiling.

As I caught my breath, I examined my wife. She had always been amazingly fit, conducting aerobic classes on weekends and dancing with me two or three nights a week. But now she looked haggard, stressed. And physically, something was missing. That

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energy.

Vanessa caught me up on her job and her youngest daughter's acceptance into an Environmental Studies program at an Oregon university, carefully avoiding anything about her eldest. At that point, I really thought of her as 'our' eldest, but I began to get the message.

Vanessa listened, enthralled as I recounted my adventures in France and said she wished we could have gone together. I made the mistake of suggesting we still could and she burst into tears.

After lunch, she walked me to my car. I opened the door and turned back to say goodbye when she leaped into my arms, hugging me fiercely. She quickly found my lips, then slid one hand up under my shirt as the other reached lower. The kiss overwhelmed me and at that minute, I knew we were still together. Suddenly we heard a shout.

"Vanessa! What the fuck do you think you're doing? We talked about this. Get over here. Now!"

Vanessa mumbled that she was sorry and she and her older sister disappeared.

“I don’t know,” Sam continued. “I feel like I’m supposed to have learned something from this dream. It was almost exactly like it was in real life – at least as I remember it. But I feel like I had an opportunity to do something different but I can’t see it.

“Should I have stayed in France? Would that have made a difference in my life? I guess that if I’d given up on getting back together with Vanessa, my life would have been very different. Of course the company might have failed and wouldn’t have been sold a couple of years later for enough to retire on. And I wouldn’t have met you.

“Maybe I should have run after her and told her sister to fuck off. But knowing her sister and looking back at the forces in her family that lined up against us, or at least me, I suspect Vanessa wouldn’t have had the guts to stay with me. Then again, I never had a problem standing up to her sister who actually often seemed intimidated by me.

“Our household was the only one in the family where a woman didn’t completely dominate her husband. I know they thought that Vanessa was weak and that this fantasy by our daughter – sorry, Vanessa’s daughter – was good justification for wresting her away from me.”

“So why didn’t you go after her?” Kathy asked, intrigued.

“Weird. I never asked myself that.”

“What did you feel in your dream?”

Sam looked pensive for a moment, then frowned.

“I felt that if Vanessa wasn’t strong enough to stand up to her sister to preserve our marriage, it wasn’t worth chasing after her.”

“I think you have your answer.”

Sam nodded and half smiled. Then a wave of pain surged across his face.

“Should I increase the morphine dose a bit?”

“Yes. Please.”

Kathy held Sam’s hand as the pain slowly subsided. Then, he drifted off into what looked like a peaceful sleep.

Kathy stepped out of the bedroom and sat down on the sofa facing the cold fireplace. She too had had a dream and weirdly, not only did she remember it, but there was a parallel to Sam’s.

She was back at the dance studio where they’d met. It was

that night. She felt like she was waiting for someone, expecting someone to show up and dance with her – not one of the regular leaders. But he never came. Kathy finished her dance lesson and went home. Her phone rang and Sergio, a man she had met on a dating site, asked if she was available for a drink.

They'd previously had one date where she found him a bit full of himself. This time, the date went better and he invited her back to his house. They'd made love. He wasn't a great lover but his penis was the biggest she'd ever seen. Her orgasm was completely unexpected as the sex was quick and he was snoring moments later. No cuddling, no afterglow. It seemed pretty mechanical.

Kathy slipped out of bed and Sergio didn't even notice. She didn't leave a note and drove home wondering if this is what life had in store for her.

The weird thing was that in real life, she had dated Sergio. And the sex scene had happened. But she'd danced with Sam that night and couldn't stop thinking about Sam as she'd headed home from Sergio's.

In real life, that night was her last with Sergio. And, almost two months later, as Sam recognized that his marriage was truly over, the depth of her friendship with him moved to the next level. He still had bouts of depression, but they seemed to be more about the loss of his family than of Vanessa specifically. And, truth be told, it took him a while before he actually fell in love with her. But he did. And when he did, he told her that she was his helicopter. They'd flown away together and never went back.

Kathy got up and lit the fireplace. She poured herself a glass of wine, checked on her sleeping husband and sat down with a good book to escape an unbearable reality.

The agonizing days passed with what had become almost a routine. Sam's lucid periods continually diminished. Some days he slept, waking only for something to eat and trips to the bathroom. Others, he was awake several times. But the trend was obvious.

Today, Kathy was semi-reclined on the loveseat in their bedroom reading a novel from the Independent Bookseller's Top Ten list. She'd been reading so much lately that she'd actually created a website and a blog with reviews of each book she finished. Over the past weeks, she'd gained a surprising following and had been invited to speak at three local book clubs. She'd never thought of herself as a writer, but she had to admit that this was fun.

She got up to check on Sam and to her surprise, he was awake and lucid. Ice cream was on the menu again as Sam got ready to tell Kathy about his latest dream.

"I really feel like I was back in the past. This time, I was only nine years old."

Kathy knew quite a bit about Sam's adult life: his businesses, sports, and failed marriages, but they'd never gone into detail about his childhood.

She knew that he was a military brat, the son an enlisted man in the Air Force. She knew that his father worked in Intelligence and had unusual hours. She knew that Sam's father demanded thirty minutes of massage from Sam each day. Kathy was happy about that one. Sam's hands were magic and the massages he gave her rivaled some of the best she'd had from professionals.

But Sam's father was also abusive. Sam hadn't seen or spoken to him in decades. And while he occasionally expressed some tentative regrets over not seeing his father before he passed away at eighty-five, Sam seemed at peace with his decision to have erased his father from his life.

Sam had talked about some of what he perceived as his peculiarities which he attributed to what he called 'the Military Brat Syndrome'. He'd written a blog about it a few years ago which still received hundreds of visits and countless comments each week.

His basic theory was that kids of military personnel grew up

moving from place to place, often experiencing dramatic changes every two to three years. They were always outsiders. They came into communities where people had known each other from birth. And they were only going to be there temporarily.

Friendships were temporary. They all had expiration dates. The local kids knew it and the military brats came to accept that nothing was permanent. Ultimately, the kids learned to expect and even desire change in their lives. For some, it was a need to change places as they had done as kids. For others, it was changing jobs. For Sam, it was changing relationships. No matter how good a relationship was, Sam stepped out after two to three years. Ultimately he recognized the pattern and made a real effort to not move on – something that didn't always work out for the best.

On the other side though, his theory was that in spite of this instability, military brats adapted well to change. They had broader perspective about people and cultures and were much more tolerant. At least in Sam's case, he was tolerant, perhaps too tolerant. Sam tried to explain away even people's worst behaviors. Yes. Kathy appreciated Sam's patience. But at times, it almost seemed like he avoided standing up to people.

“So tell me about your dream. I don't know much about your childhood.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writer, extreme sports enthusiast, serial entrepreneur, technologist.

Born into a military family, Steve traveled extensively throughout the US and overseas, attending fifteen schools before graduating from High School. After studying mathematics, computer science, comparative literature and French at the University of California, Steve began his career with IBM as a software engineer. He later founded three successful high-tech startups.

A former competition hang glider pilot, Steve continues to surf, ski, kayak whitewater, and dance Salsa with his wife Karen whenever possible.

Steve divides his time between Santa Cruz, California and the Basque Region of France.

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