



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."

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.”

I was nine years old. I had just changed schools - again. It was late in the school year with only a few weeks to go. They had put me in a combined fourth and fifth grade class. I was in fourth grade. Sitting in the front row was Colette. She had long blond hair and unusually green eyes. I found her exotic. I'd noticed girls before, and had had a crush on my first grade teacher, but I'd never felt attracted to a girl like this. Unfortunately, she was in the fifth grade and even though we were in the same class, as I quickly learned, fifth graders didn't play or even talk to fourth graders. And, worse for me, I was new. These kids had known each other most of their lives. I don't think anyone really paid attention to me. On the other hand, I'd only been there for a few days.

Today was the quiz day. I didn't really know what that meant since it wasn't what you'd think of as a real test. First up was geography.

The first two kids in the first row stood up. The teacher pointed at a map of the United States and asked what State she was pointing at. Whichever kid answered correctly first moved to the next student's desk. That kid stood up and the teacher pointed to another State. The winner moved on.

Having moved so much, I think I had an unfair advantage. So when it came to my turn, I won, then kept winning all through the class. The fifth graders looked shocked. Much to my embarrassment, the teacher was effusive in her praise of our new genius student.

Next was spelling. And, once again, I won.

This went on with each subject. I glanced over at Colette and she actually smiled at me. I don't know what I had visions of, being only nine, but I felt excited, like someone in this new place saw and appreciated me. Maybe I wouldn't be an outsider this time.

The last one was math.

This time, Colette made her way through the class beating everyone. I was the last one. She stood next to me and glanced over nervously. I don't think I consciously thought about losing on purpose. That sort of thing had never occurred to me. I always just did my best. And, of course I beat Colette.

The Inflection Point

She burst into tears.

I didn't really understand what I'd done. The other girls in the class gave me dirty looks. Even the teacher looked at me differently.

Suddenly, the nickname 'the Brain' landed on me. Ultimately, it followed me through my childhood into high school. But at that point it was a label. I was teased mercilessly. Fortunately, school was out a few weeks later and we moved again before the next school year started.

“I think I find this dream more confusing than the others. I mean, they’re all so real. I honestly feel like I have some control over what happens and if I change the past, the future would be different. I know that sounds crazy.”

Kathy smiled. “Crazy? No. Not crazy. I think it’s more hopeful. And right now, I’m glad you can find solace by reflecting on your dreams, and I guess, your past.”

“Yeah. But what was I supposed to take away from this one? Was I supposed to not do my best? To let Collette win?”

“Well, like last time, I’ll ask the same question. What did you feel?”

Sam was silent for a moment and closed his eyes. Kathy thought he had fallen back to sleep when he opened his eyes suddenly.

“I felt that if I’d let her win, we could have become friends, maybe more. I’m not sure what that means for a nine-year-old. But then again, we moved a few months later. It couldn’t really have gone anywhere.

“Maybe the lesson for me was about letting others win. In real life, that didn’t happen for a long time. I was largely oblivious to others’ feelings. I think I believed that like me, everyone did their best and at times, some did better than others. I don’t think as saw it as ‘better’ in the sense of more value. But at the same time, I knew that I was good.

“You didn’t know me when I was really arrogant. Things had always gone my way up until my divorce from Heather and then another with Vanessa. Although I didn’t think of myself as perfect, I certainly strived for perfection and believed that I could succeed at anything I wanted to pursue. Then, with the divorce from Vanessa, I lost all faith in myself. I didn’t see it coming and couldn’t imagine how I’d screwed up so badly. The most important things in my life, the most important people that I’d worked so hard to help and to cherish – they were just gone. I almost let my business fail. I almost let down my team who depended on me for their livelihoods. And I seriously considered suicide.”

Kathy knew all this. She’d been there to pick up the pieces of a shattered Sam Jennings.

The Inflection Point

“But coming back to the dream, what do you think it meant with respect to your divorce from Vanessa?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was a message about my cluelessness and the arrogance that was such a part of me, even at that young age. Maybe if I’d learned early that you have to be more aware of your impact on others’ feelings – maybe it would have all been different. Maybe I would have been a different person.”

Sam had retired three years after selling his last startup and had started writing full time. Well, full time was an exaggeration. Sam wrote when he felt like it, often going days or weeks between writing sessions. He filled his time with surfing and working out. He told Kathy that he was lonely. He really didn't want to go back to work as a technologist. What he wanted was to spend more time with her. He helped her position her accounting business for sale and once Kathy had sold her company a few years later, the two spent most of their time travelling. They'd purchased a small home in the mountains not too far from their favorite ski resort, and an apartment in the Basque Region of France, walking distance from the surf that Sam had fallen in love with decades earlier. It had been his dream to return to this magical area where the towering Pyrenees met the Atlantic Ocean on the border of France and Spain.

After finishing his first novel, Sam had tried to get it published. He contacted several literary agents but got no positive responses. Frustrated, he sent the book out for independent review, and after receiving five-star reviews from multiple reputable agencies, submitted his book and the reviews to both agents and directly to several publishers. No luck.

Along the way, Sam had connected with several authors. None were making a living off their writing. Those who signed with a publisher typically only saw a few percent of the sales. They lamented the fact that the publishers expected them to do the marketing and promotion of their books themselves. The industry was suffering and there was no money available to market new authors' books.

As Sam explained to Kathy, he was retired and didn't want to take up a full time job marketing his books, so he decided to self-publish and see how things went. Now, several years and six novels later, Sam had a following of a few hundred people who seemed to love his books.

With Sam sleeping through most days, Kathy had a lot of time on her hands. Thinking back on Sam's publishing challenges, and having exhausted most of the best-seller lists, Kathy decided to branch out into self-published authors. Many of the books she found were excellent. Quite a few were terrible, and most needed

an editor. She pulled no punches in her reviews. Her blog site made it easy for people to contact her and while a few of her negative reviews generated nasty responses, the vast majority of authors contacted her to thank her for her critiques. They often said that they desperately needed someone who could give them an honest opinion about their work. Her criticisms and suggestions helped make them better writers.

And then her blog really began to take off. Authors whose books received great reviews saw their sales increase dramatically. Within just a few weeks, Kathy had thousands of followers. She'd been contacted by several companies offering to pay for advertising on her website and then by authors offering to pay for her reviews. For now, Kathy was happy to do this as a hobby but it was nice to know that if she wanted to, she might even be able to make a living off of her new-found interest.

Checking on Sam, she found him sleeping restlessly. Clearly he was dreaming and it looked like it might not be the most pleasant of dreams. She briefly debated trying to wake him but decided to let his mind do whatever work it seemed to need to do. She went back to her computer and wrote a scathing review of a science fiction novel where the author not only didn't edit the book, but had all the science completely wrong.

Two hours later she checked in on Sam and he seemed to be waking up. She sat down beside him. Sensing her presence, Sam seized her hand.

"Am I back?"

"Sam, you were never away. You've been here all the time. It was just another of your dreams."

"Oh. Thank God!"

"Want to tell me about it?"

"Yeah. But I think I finally realized something. I didn't remember that this happened, but this dream explains a lot. It really did happen and I remember it clearly now. I didn't know I had repressed memories."

"This sounds serious."

"I guess it is. It explains a part of me, an obsession I've had ever since. First, I want you to know how much I've appreciated the physical side of our relationship."

Kathy took a deep breath. Yes. Even after all these years together, their sex life hadn't slowed down. They both seemed to

have well-matched needs. That had never been the case before. Her previous partners had been excited at the beginning of their relationships, but frequency had dropped off over time, much to Kathy's frustration.

But Kathy knew the reason for what most would call her above-normal sex drive. She'd been a victim of abuse. Her much older step-brother started sexually abusing her when she was only ten years old. It went on for years. She'd tried to tell her stepmother but the woman refused to believe her.

As she learned during years of therapy, it was rare for sexual abuse victims to have normal sex lives, or for that matter, normal relationships.

On the sexual side, most went to one extreme or the other, either being almost obsessed with sex or shunning it altogether. Most either became extremely submissive in their personal and professional relationships, or became aggressive to compensate for having been so dominated. Only after years of therapy and two divorces did Kathy realize that she fell into the aggressive and sexually active groups. She'd brought most of the negative aspects into line and ultimately settled down into a very happy life with Sam.

Kathy suspected she knew what was coming.

It was the summer after that last dream. My father had been stationed in Omaha, Nebraska where he worked for the Air Force at SAC – the Strategic Air Command – you know, where parts of Dr. Strangelove were filmed?

Anyway, it was our last night there. We were going to drive to California the next day to see my grandparents before flying to Hawaii for my father's next assignment at Hickam Air Force Base.

My parents took me and my sister to some friends' house where they were going to play poker. There was another family there too. My sister was the only girl and after snacks, they put her to bed. The other kids were older, probably twelve or thirteen. Three boys. I didn't know them but I was sent to play with them in one of their bedrooms upstairs.

I was a bit shy, being three or four years younger. Somehow, they knew about my nickname, The Brain. Since none went to my school, I'm not sure how they knew but I was embarrassed. They asked me questions, mostly about science, then laughed when I gave them the right answers. At some point one of them asked me if I knew what fucking was. I'd never heard the word and said no.

They all laughed hysterically.

"Well," one of them said. "We're going to have a squirrel fight. You can join in if you want."

"What's a squirrel fight?" I asked innocently.

They laughed again and one of them said, "You try to grab somebody's nuts."

I still didn't get it.

They shook their heads and one pushed the other onto the bed. The third jumped on the second and they fell in a heap on the bed, grabbing and poking each other.

At first, I couldn't see what was going on, but I ultimately saw one grab the other's bottom and reach between his legs to the front. He howled in pain or maybe pleasure. The third grabbed the second by the crotch and he too howled. At that point, there was a knock at the door and the mother peeked in.

"Is everything okay in here?" She asked.

"It sure is."

“Yeah, we’re just as frisky as little squirrels.”

“Okay. But keep it down a bit.”

She left and they turned to me.

“You can keep a secret, right, Brain?”

“Ah. Sure. I guess.”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone what goes on here tonight. Okay?”

I was only nine and I don’t think I understood what a moral dilemma was but I did know that kids kept a lot of secrets from their parents and as far as I knew, no harm had ever come of it, so I agreed.

“Okay then. Come on over. Try to grab somebody’s nuts.

I did. But was unsuccessful. The boys were too big for me and had an easy time grabbing mine.

Before I knew what was happening, they’d pulled down my pants and pushed me face down on the bed.

“This is going to be even more fun,” one exclaimed.

He climbed on top of me and started rubbing something hard into my bottom. It didn’t hurt. It was just going up and down between my cheeks. Then it got wet. Another followed suit and then the third.

They let me up and I turned to see the three of them with their pants off. I’d never seen naked boys before and I’d never seen an erection. One still had an erection.

“You want to try that with us?” he asked.

“Nah. The Brain is too little. His dick would never work.”

They all laughed again and I felt embarrassed. I was too little. They were older and knew a lot more than I did.

A little while later, there was a knock at the door.

“Remember. It’s a secret.”

My mom was there and we left.

My sister was asleep. My father carried her to the car and put her on the floor of the backseat behind my mom. I crawled into the space behind my father’s seat and fell asleep. I had a lot of weird dreams. In one, I was using my penis like a machine gun, shooting at boys who were laughing at me because it was so small that I couldn’t hit them.

We drove straight to California, stopping only for gas and fast food. My parents rotated driving. One would sleep while the other drove.

The Inflection Point

We arrived at my grandparent's house the next evening. My aunt and uncle were there along with my three cousins. The adults set up a card game while the kids were put to bed. I went to bed with my cousin who was a couple of years younger than I was. During the night, I snuggled up against him and started rubbing myself against his bottom. He woke and immediately ran into the other room to his parents.

"Sam is trying to put his penis in my bottom!"

The adults looked at me, amused. I was the most embarrassed I'd ever been in my life.

"You stop fooling around!" my father ordered. "Now go to bed and go to sleep!"

I had more weird dreams and when I woke up in the morning, my parents and my uncle and aunt were gone. According to my grandparents, they'd decided to drive to Las Vegas and would be back the next day. In the meantime, my sister and I, along with my cousins, would be staying with them.

“You know, I remember the part at my grandparent’s house. I felt embarrassed by what I’d done and even though I became really close to my uncle and aunt over the years. Even though my uncle became my mentor and we had amazing political and philosophical discussions through my college years, I always wondered if he remembered what I’d done or tried to do to his son.

“But the other thing that struck me at the time was that my cousin had no qualms about telling his parents what happened. Over the years that followed, I saw that he and his siblings always told their parents everything.

“My sister and I didn’t see that much of our parents – at least it seemed like they were away a lot. My father often worked nights and would sleep through the day, only awake for me to do his massage, to have dinner, then to take off again.

“My mom worked. When my father didn’t work nights, he often went bowling. He was very good and was even on TV several times. But I know he earned a lot of money in what he called ‘midnight pot games’. Each bowler would put some money in the pot and the winner would take all.

“My sister and I slept in the bowling alleys during the pot games.

“Anyway, I didn’t remember what happened with the boys in Omaha. But now I think I see why I became obsessed with sex at an early age and why it’s been that way through my entire adult life.”

Kathy nodded. “You were sexualized at a very early age. It sets the stage for unhealthy attitudes as you get older. It’s a battle that people who’ve been abused have to fight.”

“Yeah. But it was harder for you. A boy obsessed with sex is normal. Just adolescent hormones out of control. But a girl? We’ve talked a lot about what you went through. I’ve tried to understand. As weird as it sounds, just this dream has helped me understand not only why I am the way I am, but what the real impact of that kind of abuse can cause on others. On you.”

“So in the other dreams you’ve told me about, you felt you had the chance to change things. Did this one feel the same way?”

Sam thought about it for a moment.

“No. I guess I could have said no to the squirrel fight. I could have told my parents what happened like my cousin did. But realistically, I never talked to my parents. I didn’t tell them about my days at school let alone any problems I had like being called ‘The Brain’.

“No. I think this dream was just to help me understand myself and how I ended up where I did, particularly the huge mistakes I made because of sex. Maybe if I’d remembered this incident and had connected it to my behavior, maybe I would have made very different choices.”

He had been completely lucid as he talked about his dream and then, without any obvious signs, Sam was asleep again.

Like everyone else, Kathy had heard that people’s lives passed before their eyes in moments before their deaths. Was this what was happening to Sam? Was reviewing his life helping him put things in order before the end?

Kathy was surprised that now, after months of almost clinical depression, she could think about Sam’s death without losing it. Sure, she had put on a good face, but in reality, she’d been horribly sad. And like dying people, she, too, had gone through the stages of grief. And with the passage of these last months, she finally accepted that Sam, the love of her life, would soon be gone.

That last dream must have taken its toll on Sam or maybe just the opposite. Maybe he was getting some resolution. Either way, it had been two days since Kathy and Sam had actually had a conversation. The nurses had upped his meds based on his delirious ramblings and Sam had slept, and slept.

Checking on him as she did at least a dozen times a day, Kathy was surprised to find him completely awake and lucid.

“I had another very bad dream. A nightmare. It scared me.”

Kathy came over and tried to snuggle up to her frightened husband.

“I’m here,” she soothed. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

Sam took a deep breath.

“Ice cream?” he begged with puppy dog eyes and an exaggerated turned-down mouth.

Kathy laughed. It had been a while. He’d always been a joker, up until...

Kathy got the ice cream and savored what she knew would probably be one of the last times they’d share this treat.

“I feel better. I needed that. I know I used to say that about sex, but right now, this is the best I can do.”

Kathy held back the tears.

“You know, a lot of people think ice cream is better than sex,” she responded. “But since I met you, I’d never say that.”

Sam smiled.

“Okay. Here goes.

“You know that Heather was killed by Jesse, her next husband, right?”

Kathy had heard the story. Sam’s marriage to Heather Henshaw was a fascinating tale. He’d used it as the basis for his most popular novel.

Sam had met Heather Henshaw at a hang gliding competition. She was senior at UC Berkeley and had been accepted to Boalt Law School, one of the most prestigious in the country. Sam was a few years older, having recently left IBM to join a startup in the Silicon Valley as a young Vice President of Engineering. He was almost a year into a divorce from Sharon, his first wife. From what Sam had told her. He and Sharon came from similar economic backgrounds – lower middle class – and seemed to be a

perfect fit. They were both active, very smart, loved word games and puzzles, and had both recently taken up hang gliding. Sharon was a few years older and worked as a German teacher at the local High School. Sam was a year or two into his first job at IBM. The only issue in their marriage was Sharon's mother who believed that women should not work outside the home. She believed that sex was a duty which a woman must fulfill to bear children. A woman who enjoyed sex was a whore. She called Sharon multiple times a day asking when she would become a grandmother.

While Kathy didn't really know the whole story, it seemed like the mother-in-law drove them apart. Feeling completely at her wits' end, Sharon presented Sam with a unique gift on their first anniversary: a book entitled 'How to do your own Divorce in California'. Sam didn't know if she was serious.

They had a long discussion where Sharon explained that she had major issues to resolve. She had signed up for therapy but honestly believed that she couldn't get past her problems while married. She needed to get her mother off her back.

It was an amicable divorce but from what Kathy could see, Sam had major regrets about it. It seemed like a turning point in Sam's life.

So, during a hang gliding competition, Sam met Heather Henshaw. Over the course of their courtship, he discovered something strangely fascinating about her. At the end of an evening out, he often stayed to tuck her in to her bed before returning home some thirty minutes away. One night, she started talking in her sleep. At least that what Sam assumed. Over the course of the next weeks, the 'little girl', as he came to call her, had long discussions with Sam often lasting late into the night. But he never saw her during the day. It was just Heather talking in her sleep.

Then one day, after a particularly stressful family party, Heather's face and demeanor changed. She suddenly looked stunned to find herself there. And she spoke in the little girl's voice asking Sam to take her home. Along the way, she fell asleep and when she awoke, Heather was back with no recollection of what had happened.

This repeated itself regularly. In one unusual event, they were heading back from a weekend camping trip with Jesse, a very

close friend. Heather was asleep in the back. Suddenly she started speaking, but it was the little girl. She had no problem talking with Jesse who quickly recognized that this wasn't Heather.

Jesse was a practicing psychiatrist and later told Sam that up until that moment he'd never believed in multiple personalities, more recently called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Both Jesse and Sam did research on the disorder and discovered that a well-known psychiatrist had opened trauma centers and had quite a few successes with DID. Most, if not all cases, resulted from major psychological trauma at a young age.

Sam and Jesse tried to convince Heather to seek treatment but she categorically refused to believe that she had any problems.

Over the course of the next few years, Sam and Jesse encountered a British version of Heather and well into their marriage, Sam met a violent persona who called herself Jane.

It was almost three years into their relationship that Sam and Heather were married. The night before the wedding, Sam knew that it was the wrong thing to do. He wasn't a psychiatrist. He had stayed in the relationship because he found Heather and her alternates fascinating. He really should call off the wedding.

But looking back, Sam remembered how he'd bailed on relationships after two to three years: two and a half years with Sharon, apparently almost three years with his previous girlfriend. He convinced himself that it was just the Military Brat Syndrome raising its ugly head again and he went through with the ceremony.

The marriage was rocky. They had great times and horrible times. In one of many near disasters, Sam noticed large withdrawals from their joint bank account. He confronted Heather who denied taking the money. It occurred to him that maybe it was one of the other personalities, and that Heather really didn't remember, but ultimately he caught her buying drugs. Cocaine.

And she drank. A lot. Years later, a psychiatrist explained that she was self-medicating. Cocaine to bring her up, alcohol to bring her back down. A vicious cycle for anyone. A looming disaster for someone with major psychological problems.

One night, while Heather was spending a weekend at their cabin in the mountains, Sam got a call asking him to drive up and

take her to hospital. Heather was suicidal and couldn't stop the terrible dreams that assaulted her.

He made the three-hour drive and then returned to Santa Cruz where he took her to the Behavioral Health ward. She was admitted. The next day, in her first session with the lead psychiatrist, she seemed perfectly rational. The psychiatrist seriously considered releasing her but then decided to ask a very simple question: 'What if I decide to keep you here?'

Heather changed. She became a monster, in no way resembling the attractive young woman who started the session. She attacked the doctor and ultimately it took four orderlies to restrain her.

A day later, against the advice of the psychiatrist, Heather's mother had her released, promising that she would supervise Heather. She didn't. Sam tried to convince her that Heather needed help but she stated flatly that her daughter was fine until she met Sam; that Sam was gaslighting her.

The marriage went downhill from there with Heather's mother pushing for divorce. And the divorce dragged on for four years, depleting their savings. From what Sam had said, the personalities disagreed about the divorce and if it progressed, one would intervene and fire their attorney. Then they'd restart the process. Ultimately, the judge told Heather and her new attorney that if she didn't settle that day, she'd rule and it wouldn't be pleasant for Heather. She'd wasted too much of the court's time. One of the personalities signed the negotiated settlement.

A few years later, Heather married Jesse and they moved to the cabin in the mountains which she had won in the divorce.

Heather wasn't bitter about the divorce. At one point, she contacted Sam to see if he could help her sister start a new business. She told Sam that he was the love of her life and that she wished they had been able to make their marriage work. No. She didn't have DID. She had an unusual form of Bipolar Disorder and was taking medication for it. She and Jesse were happy.

Sam and Heather lost touch. But when Sam wrote a psychological thriller that involved a character very much like Heather, he wanted her to read it before he published it.

He tried to track her down and came across an article stating that she had been the victim of a murder-suicide. In complete

disbelief and denial, Sam tried to find out what had happened. All he got from the police reports was that Heather was found in her car, apparently about to leave the cabin. She died from multiple gunshot wounds to the abdomen. Her husband Jesse was found inside the cabin, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

12

“I was there!”

“I’m sorry Sam. You were where?”

“I was at the cabin. Heather and Jesse were there and they were arguing. Heather got violent but I don’t think it was Heather. It was Jane. She stomped into the bedroom and came out brandishing a pistol. It was the same one she threatened me with during our long, drawn-out divorce.”

“I don’t think you ever told me that she threatened you with a gun.”

“Sorry. Anyway, Heather or maybe it was Jane, pushed Jesse down and raced out the door shouting that she was going to kill herself. She got in the car and started the engine. Jesse raced out and pulled the door open. They fought for control of the gun and it went off, twice. The little girl appeared. She said she was frightened but that at least Jane, the violent one, was dead. And then she closed her eyes.”

Sam was sobbing. He had just witnessed the violent death of a woman he had loved. For him, it had happened only moments before.

When he settled down, Kathy asked.

“So what happened to Jesse?”

“I tried to tell him that it wasn’t his fault. He was a wonderful guy. But he couldn’t see or hear me.”

And then, in an agonized almost screech, Sam cried, “He went into the house and shot himself.”

“I wonder if that’s what really happened,” Kathy mused, holding Sam’s trembling hand.

“I know it did. I was there. I was, wasn’t I?”

“No Sam. It was a dream.”

“But in my other dreams, I have a choice to make. If I wasn’t really there, what could I have done?”

“Nothing. You couldn’t have done anything. Heather’s was a tragic story. I think you’ve wondered what could have happened. If Jesse was as wonderful a person as you think he was, the idea that he murdered Heather then killed himself just wouldn’t make sense. My guess is that your mind is trying to resolve this and now it makes sense to you.”

“I wish I could contact the Sheriff’s department and talk to

them about the case.”

“I wish you could too,” Kathy lamented, now crying as well.

“Could you do it? Promise me?”

Kathy nodded. And they sat in silence for a few moments. It looked like Sam was dozing.

But then, with his eyes closed, Sam started speaking.

“Kathy, living with someone who has multiple personalities was bizarre. I think most people believe that the personalities are just aspects of the same person that have separated.

“That may have been true for the little girl who seemed to be a younger version of Heather – the one who existed before whatever the major trauma was. But the others? Jane was a monster. I can’t imagine such evil in a person. Certainly not Heather. And Adrienne, the British woman? I’ve never really talked about her but she did appear frequently during our marriage. She knew about things and had been places that Heather could never had known about. And her accent was as British as I’ve ever heard.

“I know you think it’s all crazy. But I still feel that I’m actually living in these dreams. And while my body stays here, I’m beginning to believe that I exist in parallel elsewhere and that my dreams take me there.

“And now that I think about Heather, I find myself wondering if whatever trauma she went through caused a break that let these parallel worlds cross over into her. Crazy?”

Kathy thought about this. Until now, she’d easily dismissed Sam’s dreams as just dreams. And maybe they were. But if she stepped back and let go of her biases, was this any crazier than reincarnation, heaven, hell, or any of the other ideas that religions brought our way. Could we exist on multiple planes? Multiple realities? In parallel? Could dreams be a bridge and could trauma break down the walls between them? It was too much to think about now.

“Sam, it’s not crazy. Yes. It doesn’t fit into most people’s reality, but who’s to say you’re not right?”

Kathy looked over at Sam for a response, but he had drifted off into a much more peaceful sleep.

It had been a week. Kathy tried to focus on her reviews but was struggling. Maybe she hadn't fully gone through those stages of grief. She missed Sam. They'd been so active together. Dancing with a connection she'd never found with anyone else, hiking, skiing, surfing, white water kayaking, movies, books, disc golf. Disc golf?

Kathy smiled at the thought. Vincent, her son who had moved to Chicago with his wife and her grandkids a few years before, had taken up the game. Played like golf, you throw Frisbees at baskets a few hundred feet away.

Unlike so-called ball golf, the disc golf courses did not have manicured fairways. Most courses offered challenging hikes through forests, across creeks, or up and down mountains. Many ski resorts attracted players for their summer activities with extremely challenging disc golf courses.

Vincent had convinced Kathy to give it a try and while she wasn't terribly good at first, she had a lot of fun. She'd tried to convince Sam to join them but he couldn't see giving up time from his extreme sports to do something mundane like playing disc golf.

But as Kathy spent more time with Vincent and got excited about the sport, Sam reluctantly agreed to give it a try. And that was the big surprise. He was terrible.

"While my friends played Frisbee on the beach in college, I was out surfing. I never learned to throw a Frisbee," Sam whined after his first outing.

Kathy found this hilarious. Sam was physically gifted at every sport he tried. For the first year playing disc golf together, Kathy consistently beat Sam. That was a first. Humbling for Sam and uplifting for Kathy.

But of course that changed. Vincent gave Sam lessons with a pro (yes, there are disc golf professionals) for his birthday and a few weeks later, Sam was beating Vincent from time to time. Then he returned the favor and Vincent quickly caught up. Their friendly rivalry warmed Kathy's heart. Yeah. Disc Golf.

The day nurse interrupted Kathy's thoughts.

"He's awake!"

Kathy raced to the bedroom where she discovered a subdued

but smiling Sam.

“I think my dreams are converging.”

“Good or bad?” Kathy asked cautiously.

“Yes. Did I ever tell you about Karen Gillis?”

“I think you mentioned her briefly. She was one of your first longer-term girlfriends, right?”

“Yes. And I broke her heart. What a shithead I was.”

I was at the University putting myself through school, taking more classes than normal, and surfing pretty much full time. I was living in a toolshed that a friend had made available. I cleaned it up, put in some carpeting and a large mattress, some shelves and made it a barely livable space. It had a tin roof and no running water.

Since the campus wasn't far away and I had friends who lived in the dorms, I used their facilities and showered there. No one seemed to mind. My best friend from high school, Marnie Macron had a roommate, Karen Gillis. She looked a lot like you. Super curly dark hair, laughing green eyes, and a striking body – at least it was striking to me, a twenty-year-old horny college student.

I'd had girlfriends throughout high school with lots of fooling around and 'everything but' sex. And then senior year, one full on sexual relationship that ended when we went to schools on the opposite sides of the country. At college, I'd only had short flings, nothing serious. It was that time. Everyone was pretty 'liberated', women and men.

One night, Marnie's dorm had a dance and she invited me. I immediately paired up with Karen who was wearing a thin halter top with no bra. Her large breasts swayed to the music and pressed against me during the slow dances. We never looked back.

Our sex life knew no bounds. We tried everything and had a great time doing it all. My memory tells me we had sex multiple times a day, most days, for the years we were together.

One rainy night, she even invited a friend to sleep with us in my toolshed, the rain hammering on the roof and, well, you get the idea.

And don't get me wrong, she was a biology major, headed to med school. Intellectually, we had great debates, we ran on the beach together.

She came to visit me in France while I was there.

It was perfect!

But my dream started almost three years into this idyllic relationship. I was splitting my work time between the local pizza parlor, where we made everything from scratch, and the adjacent

donut shop where I got to take home the leftovers for free calorie intake – remember, I was surfing five to eight hours a day. I also worked at a local miniature golf course with pinball machines and batting cages called Putt N’ Stuff.

Anyway, an attractive young woman started coming by the donut shop nightly to flirt with me. She was a grad student in English Literature who had graduated from Mount Holyoke, one of the Seven Sister’s Ivy League schools. Her name was Nina DeLorean (no relation to THE DeLorean) and she often stayed to talk with me while I closed up the shop.

One night, I was working at the miniature golf course. The phone rang. I answered, “Putt N’ Stuff”.

“I’d like to putt your stuff,” a lascivious female voice responded.

It was Nina. She came by and I went home with her. And. Yeah. I cheated on Karen. I don’t know why, but at that moment, or maybe leading up to it, I knew that my relationship with Karen was over.

I obviously didn’t sleep at Karen’s place and she was devastated when I told her what had happened. It was even worse when I told her that I was going to start seeing Nina.

Karen tried everything to get me back and offered even more exotic sexual favors, but my mind was made up.

My dream ended with Karen sobbing and me walking out the door.

“Wow!” Kathy exclaimed, shocked to learn about this part of Sam’s past.

“Yeah, I know. Marnie, my best friend, didn’t speak to me for almost twenty years. And when I did see her, Marnie’s first words to me were, ‘You were such an arrogant bastard back then. You broke Karen’s heart for no reason!’”

“And she was right. I never really knew why I went with Nina. She wasn’t as interesting as Karen. Sexually, aside from the first few times, she was horribly repressed. We had to have sex on a diaper so as not to sully the bed and so that she could avoid drips. No oral sex. No anything interesting.

“We stayed together as I finished school and started work for IBM in the Bay Area. She transferred to Mills College and when she’d finished her degree, she took a job as a professor on the East Coast. We never saw each other again. It was all very civil. No real emotion. I met Sharon not long after that.”

“So Sam, in this dream, did you consider not sleeping with Nina, telling her no and going home to Karen? Aren’t these dreams offering you choices? Why didn’t you take that one?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. And aside from seeing what a shit I was, I don’t know why I had this dream.”

Kathy shook her head. She knew people changed and she was grateful that she hadn’t known Sam in his early twenties. But what was this dream trying to tell him?

“You know Sam, as I think back on these dreams, two things strike me. First, of course, the abuse. That certainly colored your life. Maybe if you hadn’t been abused, you would have appreciated what you had with Karen and wouldn’t have been so easily led astray.

“On the other hand, you did say that you were almost three years into the relationship. As you explained to me before, you bailed on relationship every two to three years because of an uncontrollable need for dramatic change. This dream seems to be the epitome of this problem. You had a perfect relationship and you threw it away because you needed a change again. You said that at some point in your life you realized this and resisted change. That resulted in almost ten years of marriage to Heather and another ten years of marriage to Vanessa. From what I can

see, those were relationships you never should have gotten into. Or, if you did, there were definite reasons for you to leave them. But you were trying to fix that Military Brat Syndrome problem. You stayed too long there. You should have addressed this issue sooner – as soon as you recognized what you had done to poor Karen.

“What do you think?”

Kathy dried the tears from her sleeping husband’s face.

CHAPTER 2- THE END

“The end is just the beginning”
- T.S. Eliot

Sam slept more and more. When he was awake, it was for shorter and shorter periods. He really wasn't eating anymore. The hospice nurses tried to be reassuring that he wasn't suffering. Kathy had become surprisingly comfortable talking with them about the end. It would come peacefully, in his sleep. Kathy hoped that she'd be so lucky when her time came.

Like Sam, she thought she had accelerated the grieving process. Denial? Long past. Anger? There was no shortage of that at the beginning. She blamed Sam. But then, she ultimately accepted that while he could have been diagnosed earlier and maybe lived a year or two longer, his death was predetermined. Medical science had not come far enough to save people like Sam.

Depression? It was still there and probably would be for a quite a while, but clearly, she had moved on to the final stage; Acceptance. She accepted that Sam would soon be gone. Perhaps that had been easier because he was gone more and more? Maybe it was because he had moved on into his other realities, leaving her behind. She would miss him. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her and she couldn't imagine a better partner. But over the last weeks, she began to look towards the future.

As she did countless times a day, she went to check on Sam. When she touched him, she could feel how frail he was. His body wasn't even a fraction of the robust athlete she knew her husband to be.

He stirred.

He seemed delirious.

"Am I here?"

"I'm here, Sam."

"I was there for a long time?"

"Where?"

"With Heather just after we first met. I received the divorce papers from Sharon and she asked me to come over to her apartment to sign them."

Sam drifted off.

Kathy remembered what Sam had told her about that night. Heather had asked that he give her a ride to her parent's house

which was on the way and that he pick her up after signing.

Arriving at Sharon's apartment, he was greeted by a different Sharon. She had been in therapy for a while, and during surgery for an ovarian cyst, she had her tubes tied. She told her mother that the cyst had caused irreparable damage and that she could never have children. Apparently, her mother felt very sorry for her and changed her behavior, rarely contacting her, focusing more on Sharon's brother who would bear her grandchildren. Sharon felt like a new person. In the months since their separation, Sharon had changed careers. She'd moved into high tech and loved the challenge of new technologies.

After a glass of wine, the papers signed, Sam hugged Sharon. Suddenly they were kissing. He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom but then his phone rang. Heather needed to get home. She had an exam the next day. Sam was confused. The connection between Sam and Sharon seemed to be even stronger. But he'd made a promise to Heather so he reluctantly left. He'd told Kathy that he considered this to be the real inflection point in his life. Because after that point, the straight line to success that he was travelling went off track as life got pretty crazy with Heather and then Vanessa after that. Off track until he met Kathy.

"I think I'm going back," Sam mumbled, eyes closed, definitely delirious.

"Thank you for being my helicopter. Thank you for loving me."

And then he was asleep, very sound asleep. If it weren't for his irregular breathing, Kathy would have thought he was gone.

Sam drove up to Heather's apartment in Berkeley. Surprisingly, she was ready to go.

Getting in the car, Heather turned to Sam.

"Thanks for taking me to my parents'. They're having some problems with the mortgage on the house and they want to talk to me, my brother, and my sister. They might lose the house."

Sam thought about the amazing dome-like structure poised on a hillside with dramatic views of the East Bay hills and Mount Diablo that Heather's family had built. He remembered when Heather had shown him her bedroom, complete with its own huge bathroom and featuring an all-glass shower that was cantilevered beyond the edge of the house. She'd encouraged him to step in, and in spite of being a hang glider pilot, he was overwhelmed with vertigo, suspended in space.

"Pretty cool, huh?" she stated proudly, not noticing his distress.

Yes. It was a remarkable house and it would be a real shame if the family lost it.

Arriving at her home, Heather leaned over and kissed him hard. She reached for his crotch and purred, "When we get back to my place, you're going to have the best sex of your life!"

She sashayed theatrically as she made her way into the house.

Sharon's apartment was about ten minutes away. He found it easily. It was an upscale complex at the base of the hills to the west of Walnut Creek.

Sam hadn't seen Sharon in almost a year. They'd talked rarely and he really knew nothing about her life since they'd split up.

She answered the door smiling. As when they'd first met, her stunning green eyes and rich red locks struck him to the core.

This was the love of his life. He'd been rational when she proposed the divorce. Some part of him had just buried his feelings with rationality. But now. No. They were meant to be together.

"Sam, you're looking good. Come on in and have a seat at the table."

Sam looked around the understated but somewhat elegant apartment. It was Sharon. He sat down at the small maple dining room table decorated with a beautiful hand-made table

runner and hand-made napkins. Sharon had always been a remarkable seamstress.

A plate of olives, cheeses, and crackers sat between two wine glasses and a bottle of Ridge Zinfandel - much more upscale than wines he usually drank. The divorce papers lay at one place setting so Sam sat down to review them one last time. He noticed that there was no pen.

Sharon returned, poured the wine, took a seat opposite Sam and looking deep into his eyes, and said, "I've missed you, Sam! To our futures!"

Sam wasn't sure where this was going. His head was spinning and he hadn't even had any wine yet.

"Did you get a chance to go through the papers? I know you were sent a copy."

"Yes. I read them. The settlement is more than fair. Fifty-fifty. Thanks for that!"

"I couldn't have done anything else. We were a team. We made all our decisions together and chose our investments. We had a beautiful future planned and it was my fault we didn't get to go there.

"How have you been? I understand you've been seeing Heather Henshaw."

Sam blushed. He knew nothing about Sharon's new life, but she seemed to know about his.

Sensing his discomfort, Sharon assured him, "No. I haven't been stalking you. But you must know that the hang gliding community is small and that word gets around. Is it serious?"

"I don't know yet. Her family is amazing. That in itself is very attractive since I don't really have much of a family. And she's smart. Not as smart as you are but definitely smart. And there's this weird thing. I think there are multiple versions of Heather. I mean like different people living inside her. It's kind of fascinating. But yeah. She still sees her exes from time to time and she is a bit younger, so I don't really know. I'm just going day to day."

Sharon looked intrigued.

"And work?"

"I recently left IBM. I was recruited by a small startup - one of my customers - to come in as VP of Engineering. It's everything I could have wished for in a job. And you?"

“Teaching was getting hard. The kids in rural Half Moon Bay just weren’t interested in learning German. If you remember, my excuse for calling you after we first met was that I wanted to know more about how to break into high tech. So now, I have. I’m working for PacBell. It’s much more dynamic than teaching high school. I love the technology.”

“You’re looking really fit too and happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

“I guess I am. My mother went berserk when we separated. You wouldn’t believe the guilt-trips she laid on me.”

“Actually, I would.”

They both chuckled and dug into the appetizers.

“Then about six months ago I was having really bad cramps, much worse than anything I’d had before and they didn’t go away. I saw a doctor and was diagnosed with an ovarian cyst. They told me they had to remove an ovary and that my chances of conceiving in the future were much reduced.

“You know, some people decide not to have children because the world is such a terrible place. For me, I thought about bringing a baby into the world and what my mother would do to the child. I decided not to put a child through that. I asked the doctors to tie my other tube and then, when it was all done, I told my mother that because of my woman’s problems, I’d had surgery and would no longer be able to have children.

“She cried and cried, lamenting her loss, not in the least concerned about me. My subsequent and continuing therapy has left me in a very good place. When I do see my mother, she leaves me alone, finally.”

“So, you’re okay with this decision?”

“Absolutely!”

They sipped their wine and munched on crackers, cheese, and olives and after a few minutes, Sharon asked,

“So are you going to sign?”

“Should I? Are you having any second thoughts?”

“Just a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Sharon stepped into her bedroom and closed the door. When she returned, she was wearing nothing but a very thin silk robe.

Sam stood up and Sharon literally leapt into his arms wrapping her legs around him.

He carried her to the bed and fell down on top of her. As she

pulled off his shirt and her robe fell open, Sam's phone rang. He stripped off his pants and ignored the phone. A beep a minute later indicated that the caller had left a voicemail.

An hour later they made their way back into the dining room. Sharon handed Sam the divorce papers. He looked at them, then at her and she nodded. He tore them up.

"I have to call her. She's waiting for me."

"I'll give you some privacy."

"No. Please stay. We're a team."

Heather answered on the first ring.

"Sam, I need to get home!"

"I'm sorry Heather but Sharon and I have decided not to get divorced."

"You son-of-a - "

"You suspected this might happen, right? Right?" Sam chided, suddenly realizing why Heather wanted him to drop her at her parents' house. "I'm sorry but I love Sharon."

Heather hung up.

Sam looked at Sharon and knew that the life they'd planned, his life, was back on track.

The hospice nurse gently woke Kathy who'd been dozing in the living room.

"Kathy, I'm very sorry, but Sam is gone."

Kathy couldn't quite remember the dream she'd been having but like those that Sam had described, it had been a vivid one. This almost felt like a different reality.

She made her way to Sam who still looked like he was sleeping peacefully. She took his hand and kissed him.

"Good travels, my love. I hope you find a wonderful place."

"We'll take care of everything the nurse assured her. If you can, get some rest."

EPILOGUE

“Life is but a dream”
- Unknown

Kathy awoke from a very long, very vivid dream. She was crying uncontrollably. It had been so real. She couldn't remember ever having a dream like that or ever waking up crying. Not that she remembered many of her dreams.

But this one was so real. It was like living another life, one very different from her own.

In her dream she'd met a man dancing. They'd married and had a wonderful life together until he died of pancreatic cancer.

Now awake, Kathy felt a deep sense of loss. But why? It was just a dream. And the sense of loss wasn't just for the man who had died. What was his name? Sam?

No. It was about the loss of a life she wanted to live even if there was tragedy in it. That love she felt from him and towards him was worth it. If only.

Looking around, her best friend was there. Sensing her distress, he rushed over to comfort her.

"Sigmund Freud, what would I do without you?"

The Rottweiler-Australian Shepherd mix with the blue eyes snuggled closer.

No. She didn't need another life. It had been twenty years since her divorce and she'd made a comfortable life for herself without a permanent male companion. Truth be told, the last few years she'd stopped dating. Instead, she spent time hiking and kayaking with her women friends, and of course, Siggy never left her side.

And she felt like she was contributing. Somewhere along the line she'd started reading self-published authors and now, she made a decent living doing reviews and helping those authors improve their writing. And who knows? Maybe someday she too could write something other than reviews. Maybe that dream would be a good place to start.

QUESTION FROM STEVE

Should I turn this into a novel? One idea would be to take each dream, let Sam change what he did before, and see where that life would have taken him. They would all be unsatisfactory except the last one. Let me know what you think!

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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