

## **Martha – Not moving On**

As we were being told that our plane was delayed again, I noticed this very stylish, attractive woman standing next to me. I don't know what came over me, but I looked toward her and blurted out, "I hope that they have the decency to give us extra snacks". She started talking to me about all the delays she had experienced, that she was also booked on another flight that was leaving in a few minutes, and that she should probably take that one. We talked some more and realized that our final destination was the same. I was going back to Santa Fe; she was coming for a visit.

She then decided that she wasn't going to take the other flight. We somehow got on the topics of economics, sociology, our philosophies in life, and personalities who espoused those beliefs, and we seemed to agree on everything. Then we started talking about politics. It turned out that we had the same heroes and philosophies there, too. She was definitely my kind of woman. The thought actually crossed my mind that this was "too good to be true." I began hoping that they would cancel the flight just so the conversation wouldn't end-- it was that good. Then they announced boarding and we continued talking as we walked onto the plane. I couldn't believe all that we had in common. Then I realized that we wouldn't be sitting together and I thought how stupid I was to not ask her, while we were at the gate, if we should get seats next to each other.

She was seated at the front of the plane, and I was at the rear. After everyone was seated she looked back, noticed that the seat next to me was vacant, and came back and sat next to me. We continued to talk nonstop. Just before we landed I asked her whom she was visiting in Santa Fe, and she said that it was her boyfriend, who was also visiting on business. What a downer that was. I had already imagined us having dinner together, sightseeing, sitting on the plaza talking, and introducing her to my fellow senators. What an imagination!

Needless to say, I was dumbfounded. I finally meet someone who I can really relate to, and she too has a boyfriend. I knew I then had the choice of telling her that I would like to see her again, or of never seeing her again. This time I put myself in her boyfriend's shoes, and just wished her well on her visit. As we were leaving the plane she did ask me if I ever got to Orange County, and I told her all the time. That would have been the perfect opening for me to ask her for her phone number, had it not been for her boyfriend. As we departed the plane she introduced me to her boyfriend, whom I thought didn't match her personality, but maybe I was just grasping for some hope. She asked me if I needed a ride home, but I declined. So close and yet so far.

Being Suddenly Single is always a struggle between hope and despair, confidence and its lack thereof, and wishful thinking and reality. I am getting closer though, and with time and a little luck, maybe the next crossed path I encounter won't have a boyfriend.

## **Some Need to Forget, Some Need to Remember**

**B**efore I first met Mary, I was told by a mutual friend that she and I had a lot in common. What my friend really meant was that we were both divorced.

We first met in a coffee shop and talked for hours. I guess in some ways it was because we both longed to talk to someone who had an understanding of what we had been through. I was at a point in my life where I didn't want to relive my past experiences, although Mary was almost pleading with me to tell her every detail. While I was not much help, it seemed all her questions to me were related to something that happened in her relationship. And, then she would go on and on about her husband.

She would ask me questions like, "Did you travel together a lot?" and I would give a brief answer. She would then proceed to tell me all the places she and her husband had been to, and the positive and negatives of each trip. I could certainly understand someone who had just been divorced needing to talk to someone about their recent past experiences, but Mary had been divorced for over two years.

Mary seemed really nice, despite her obsession with reliving her failed relationship. Besides, I thought that once she got it out of her system, we would probably begin to talk about other things. As a matter of fact, the next time we went out, we went to dinner and only half the time was spent with her asking me questions to get to an explanation of something that happened in her marriage. The other half of the time I could tell that she was interesting and interested in me. She then invited me over to her house for dinner, and what a great dinner it was. I am sure her ex-husband is losing a lot of weight.

While I was over her house she asked me if I could change a light bulb in the ceiling that hadn't worked for over a year. She said that she didn't have a ladder, and if she fell off the chair while stretching to change it, that no one would be there to help her if she was seriously hurt. I got her assurance that she would help, should that happen to me. During my six hours at her house, I tightened a loose hose coupling that had been leaking water for over a year. I put a spare tire in the trunk of her car that was sitting in her garage since her husband left, and I connected a wire to a speaker of her stereo system that she had been listening to in mono since she could remember. I certainly didn't mind doing any of those things. Quite frankly, it felt kind of good.

During our conversation, I learned that when her husband left that she got the house and all the furniture, all the silverware and knick-knacks. She had all the mementos of all their traveling together sitting in various places around her house. When I mentioned that I had also been to a couple of the exotic places she had been, she proceeded to show me the pictures of her and her husband at these marvelous locations. She did say that she only kept the pictures of the "good times". The chair I was sitting in was a chair that they brought back from a foreign country because they both fell in love with it and had such pleasant memories attached to it. It began to get a little eerie. I was beginning to think that everything in her house was just like it was while her husband was still there. When I tactfully questioned her about it, she admitted that sometimes it's sad, but that they are just memories and it can't hurt to remember every once in awhile. It was more like a museum, and she was remembering every minute of every day. She was stuck in the past and was surrounded by things that caused her to dwell on her current circumstance.

I invited her over to my home for dinner, advising her that when she came that I really didn't want to talk about the past anymore, just the present and future. I told her that my home had just me in it. It was newly painted, both inside and out. All the old furniture, games, bikes, knick knacks, dishes, silverware and beds were given away to people less fortunate than myself. The only pictures anywhere in the house were those of my "immediate" family and me. Everything

was new and reflected me. As a matter of fact, I would rather have an empty space waiting until I could buy something, than to have a bad memory be sparked by an item from the past.

We had a really nice, kind of romantic, candlelit dinner. We talked about things we'd like to do and places we'd like to go. She really loved my house and how I fixed it up. She said it was amazing, but that it really did reflect me. Very rarely did the subject of the effects of our past relationships come up, but when it did, it was okay. It was always a brief glancing back, rather than a focus of much concern. When Mary left that night she asked if it was hard for me to completely change my surroundings. I told her that of course it was, but that it was absolutely necessary for me to move on to a happy future unburdened by the past.

I saw Mary a few more times since then, but we gradually lost touch with each other. She sold her house and moved to the other side of the country. I heard from our mutual friend that she met a really nice guy and that they were traveling all over the world together creating future memories.

## Do Things For Other People

There is a story my niece, a nurse, told me about two seriously ill men, occupying the same hospital room, but separated by some distance. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back, without a view to the window. They talked for hours on end about their families, homes, jobs, and their involvement in the military service, and their travels. And every afternoon when the man by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window.

The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods where his world would be broadened by all the activity and color of the world outside the sterile hospital setting; albeit being described by his friend on the other side of the room. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water, while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm-in-arm amidst flowers of every color in the rainbow. Grand old trees graced the landscape, and a magnificent view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance.

As the man by the window described all of this in exquisite detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine the picturesque scene. One warm afternoon, the man by the window described a parade passing by. Although the other man couldn't hear the band, he could see it in his mind's eye as the gentleman by the window described it.

Weeks passed. One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths, only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep. Saddened she called the hospital attendants to take the body away. Although the other man missed his friend, he soon asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, rolled his bed over, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone. Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the world outside. Finally, he would have the joy of seeing it for himself. He strained to look out the window beside the bed, only to discover that it faced the blank wall of a big empty building across from the hospital. The man called the nurse and asked her what could have compelled his deceased roommate to describe such wonderful things outside this window. The nurse responded that his roommate was blind and could not even see the wall. She said, "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you."

We have to be encouraged, if not by others then by ourselves. We have to realize that this change in our lives has created an emptiness within us. While its sense manifestations might be the sights and sounds we miss, it is the void inside us that creates that hollow feeling. Something has left our being barren and seemingly vacant of desire and anticipation of the future. It's a hunger, not satisfied by food; a thirst, not quenched by drink. It's a longing to be fulfilled again, knowing that it may not happen in the same way again. It's a starving for affection, for caring and sharing. It seems so hopeless. Encouragement must come from somewhere.

## Loneliness

As I began to notice myself wallowing in self-pity, I realized I had escaped from many of the things that had previously brought joy and a sense of accomplishment to my life. These were the things that didn't involve companionship or the intimacies of a relationship, but were rather involvements that required just my own singular interest. As I looked back at the times that I achieved a personal fulfillment even when coupled in a relationship, I realized that the only change brought on by my current circumstance of being alone was that I had more time for accomplishment.

Reflecting, I discovered that as a public official I was always able to serve my community and help people in need. I received a sense of joy by giving my time and efforts to people who desperately needed someone's help. I always felt a deep sense of pride when I was able to achieve success, fighting on behalf of those whose rights were being denied or whose condition warranted assistance. Then, there was always a wonderful feeling of relief and satisfaction when someone's life was put back in order or somehow made more bearable because of my actions.

I began to understand, that while I may at times felt my life was not worthwhile because of my lonely circumstance, it was certainly worthwhile to all the people I was helping. I realized that I became so mired in the concern for my own well being that I was beginning to neglect all those circumstances of other people's lives, who were a lot worse off than me. It was my own selfish ego that had brought about my isolation and the silence of my environment.

I then, once again, became less concerned with what was going on in my personal life and more concerned with helping others in theirs. I was able to exchange the whimpering of my personal despair, for the strong voice I had experienced in the past, defending others. My time was no longer spent dwelling on the mistakes and choices of the past, but rather on the solutions to the problems of those I was helping. The clutter I was now surrounded with was not reflective of meaningless memories but instead, of purposeful actions required to achieve positive results. My focus shifted from making my personal and family life better, to assisting other people and families achieve a better life. The silence of sounds and vision were replaced by the deafening roar of a very busy life.

I was able to immerse myself in finding solutions to problems in education, assisting the disabled, figuring out how to cure health care, providing for more economic development, analyzing ways to reduce crime, and improving the quality of life of those people who entrusted me with these responsibilities. I soon found myself spending every waking moment, and even some when I should have been sleeping, thinking about solutions to problems, answers to questions, and planning for the future. I had lost what little time I had allocated for self-pity. I was now again experiencing the joy of fulfillment, and couldn't believe that I had ever thought of my life as not worthwhile.

While my position might afford me more access than others have to the interactions involved in helping others, we all have the capability to reach out and help even one person or one family. Every person has so much to offer to the lives of others; that's what really makes our lives so worthwhile. And, no matter how bad we think we have it, with just a little searching we can always find someone worse off. When you find yourself alone, there is always someone who is more lonely; waiting for comfort to arrive. When you find yourself in a depressing condition, it's really pretty easy to find someone else that has a lot more to be depressed about. And, when you find yourself crying out for help, if you can quiet that urge for a while, you can hear so many people with so many better reasons to cry for help than you. As the saying goes, "It is in giving that we too receive." My life has benefited so much, by just being able to leave the self-contained silence of self-pity, to reach out to those whose needs are so much greater than mine.

## Exercise

When she asked me how to set up the controls on the Stairmaster machine, since this was her first time in the gym, I mentioned to her that it would probably be a good idea to start exercising on less strenuous equipment. I told her that it took me awhile, on other machines, to build up my capability to get the most effective results using the Stairmaster. She told me that her problem was that she spent too much time "building up" to things, and not enough time actually doing them.

She appeared to be about 5'6" tall and easily weighed 200 pounds. She told me that she gave birth to another child six months before, and her weight had gotten out of control. After having her first child two years before, she had gained so much weight that she was embarrassed going to the gym. Her choices now were to stay home and feel bad about herself, or suffer the initial embarrassment and begin to get back into shape. Her point was that she wanted to get in shape as quickly as possible, so her embarrassment wouldn't last so long.

Well, I showed her how to use the machine and gave her some words of encouragement. She lasted less than two minutes, huffing and puffing, saying, "Well, that's a start--a little more each day and I'll get there." Over the next few weeks I'd see her on different pieces of equipment, working as hard as anybody in the gym. She was doing aerobics and swimming laps in the pool. After a few weeks, I happened to be next to her on the Stairmaster again, and she told me how much "fun" she was having working out, and how she had already lost twenty pounds. She kept talking about her "diet" and "energy" as she was exercising; something I could not physically do. To me, I get out of breath walking up all those steps, and I really can't talk while I do it.

When I decided that I had enough of that grueling exercise and began to climb down, she asked where I was going, and suggested that I "push" myself a little more. I left to do some other exercises and watched as she continued stepping away while talking to the next bewildered soul who took my place on the machine. She seemed like a different person, no longer talking about being embarrassed, but talking about how good she felt. At that point, if you saw her for the first time, you would still think she was overweight, but definitely in condition.

A couple of months later, I joined her in an aerobics class. She was no longer struggling to keep up as she had done before, although I continued to miss a few steps. The contours of her body had reappeared and I would guess that she had lost another twenty pounds. She was certainly different than a lot of people at the gym; she seemed consumed with getting in shape. I've noticed that most people who begin in that much of a similar condition usually spend their time riding the stationary bicycles while watching TV. Granted, their risk of heart attack, pulled muscle, or damaged joints may not be as great as a 200+ pound, 5'6" overindulged Stairmaster working body might have. But she accomplished all that she did, and now certainly has less of a chance of some debilitating condition affecting her in the future.

In all my "people" experiences at the gym, she was definitely an exception to the rule, and what an inspiration. Obviously, the first thing she had to do to accomplish her extraordinary feat was to face up to it. Then she had to have the ambition to drive her to do a little more each day, and the commitment to see each day through. It seemed to be a tremendous amount of hard work, but I guess with all those endorphins kicking in, it actually did become "fun" to her.

Although I didn't have the opportunity to talk to her about it, I am sure her whole life changed. She seemed so proud of her accomplishments, and couldn't wait to tell people how far she had come, along with always giving others encouragement and a "push" to continue. Getting in shape became her focus, and as she told me when she first began, this was her "job" whose payoff was going to be feeling better about herself.