

The Old Man and the Sea

Tony walked his old dog Sam through the fog in Gig Harbor, down by the boats and past the colorful kayaks standing like toy soldiers, waiting for tourists. Nothing had opened yet. The fog absorbed his mind and body. He could feel moisture on his face and hands. Pausing to take some hot chocolate from his thermos, he wished he had eaten before his walk. The fog didn't care. It comes and goes as it pleases. The sun had already risen, but there weren't any cracks in the fog to prove it. The sun waits for the fog to disappear, too slowly for children and too quickly for artists.

Sam wasn't in any hurry. He reached the age when walking was difficult, when younger dogs ran around him and encouraged him to play, but Sam would just lay down and watch them fetch balls or catch Frisbees with their young families. It wouldn't be long before Sam would be joining Tony's wife, resting in peace. Tony and Sam seemed to have that in common, time having caught up with them.

The harbor was changing. Older businesses like a shoe repair shop, a newsstand and a laundry mat had been replaced by upscale eateries, Starbucks and a hot yoga studio. At least there weren't any pot shops yet, not in Gig Harbor.

Tony walked past a new art gallery. Progressive paintings for the new upper middle class moving into town. No still life or fruit pictures here, but more modern looks at nature and the environment. Art had to have a message now.

Artists love the fog. It blankets the noise and commotion of life. It quiets the mind. It did the same for Tony. But Tony wasn't an artist. He loved to read, but never wrote. He loved paintings, but never painted. He loved music but never played an instrument. This had become one of his life regrets, having never experienced the joy of creativity. He wiped a tear from his eye. No one was there to see it.

Loneliness and regret are brothers who have lived long, but uneventful lives. Their quiet existence hides more powerful emotions, like anger and silent ones like melancholy. He guessed those were his choices now, to be angry or despondent. But that only made him feel more depressed. So while the fog provided inspiration for the authors, painters and musicians, it only served to accent his life of mediocrity.

Tony wasn't poor. He had saved a bit of money from a small printing business he had started. Now, when he had the time to enjoy it, he didn't know what to do. His wife of forty years had died a year ago. Their only child, a daughter, lived on the other coast, busy with a family of her own. She would visit once or twice a year, unless something came up. He could afford to visit her, but after a day or so, he felt like he was intruding.

Tony returned from the quiet, foggy harbor to his home, an old bungalow half a mile uphill. The drab grey exterior needed painting and the gutters were filled with leaves from the oak tree in the backyard. He was able to afford the house after leaving the service in 1971, thanks to the GI bill. Ten thousand dollars back then, but paid for now. Expensive housing was going up around the harbor, as tech professionals found Gig Harbor the place to go instead of overpriced Seattle.

With his wife and business gone, Tony was feeling depressed. Maybe it was also the fog and the endless rain that came down in this Washington port town? Should he just hop a flight to San Diego? Would that lift his spirits? He had nothing to lose.

Getting off the plane at John Wayne Airport, he rented a sports car, a red convertible, with black leather seats. With the top down and the sun shining warmly on his arms and face, he felt a little better. Finding a 60s radio station, he began to relax. Then he pulled into Hilo Hattie, a Hawaiian clothing store. He left with enough Socal clothing for a week and even bought a pair of Maui Jim sunglasses. Tony had transformed his look to match his new surroundings. He smiled as he got back into his car.

Next stop was the happiest place on Earth. He drove among the families parking in those character-based lots, watching children tug their parents toward the park. He was directed to a spot in '*Happy*', perhaps the mark of a good day. A woman saw him get out of the expensive sports car, walking to the tram pick up stop. She made sure she could sit next to him.

“Hi. My name is Shannon.”

Tony was startled by this forward woman, who wasn't unattractive. She must have been in her early 40s, with long reddish-brown hair, tied back with a red scrunchy. Her jeans looked new and she wore a light blue Danskin underneath a loose-fitting peasant shirt. She was clearly a former flower child, a product of the 60s. Tony extended his hand.

“I'm Tony. Nice to meet you.”

“What a great day for the park, don't you think?”

“Yes, I haven't seen sunshine for a month.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“I'm from Washington State and it's the rainy season. Where are you from?”

“San Diego.”

Shannon was fudging a bit. She was actually from Dulzura (population 700), a town made famous by Clark's Pickelized Figs, a company that went out of business due to a sugar shortage during World War I.

"Sounds lovely. I've always wanted to visit there. What do you do?"

Shannon continued to fudge. "I'm in the honey business."

Actually, she had just sold her hives to the company that was really in the honey business. Then she bought some new clothes, packed a bag and headed to Anaheim looking for excitement.

"That's very interesting. Do I know your brand?"

"Have you heard of Temecula Valley honey?"

Shannon held her breath after this lie.

"No, sorry. I guess they don't ship to the Northwest."

Shannon smiled and sighed. "No, mostly Southern California. Actually, I just sold my business. That's why I'm here, to relax."

Tony was warming up to this former hippie. Imagine meeting a California flower girl from the 60s.

"What do you do Tony?"

Tony also managed to massage the truth. "I just sold my graphic arts company, so I'm here to relax too."

Actually, it was a small print shop, but was located on 100 feet of Gig Harbor waterfront, so a hotel company offered him \$500,000 for the location, and then tore down his dilapidated shop.

Shannon was clearly impressed.

“Oh, graphic arts. Did you work with advertising agencies?”

Tony shifted his eyes slightly. “Of course.”

Most of Tony’s business actually consisted of those flyers kids put on your windshield for pizza and advertising the local dollar store.

“But we were getting a lot of competition from Seattle, so I decided to sell out and take it easy.”

Shannon wondered how old Tony was. He had a full head of hair, not gray.

Maybe he’s in his 50s.

“You’re kind of young to retire, aren’t you?”

Tony enjoyed the compliment. “Well, 57, not that young.”

Tony was 64.

The tram pulled into the main gate and they got off together.

“Would you like some company?” Shannon said.

“A young girl like you want to spend time with an old man. You must be in your mid-thirties.”

Shannon was 43. “How did you guess? I’m 36. I would love company. Disneyland is always more fun when you’re with someone.”

They bought their tickets and walked down Main Street. Shannon nudged Tony toward the runaway train ride.

“Still like the roller coasters Tony?”

“Of course.”

During the twists and turns, Shannon snuggled close to him and held his hand, with the excitement of a teenager. Tony could smell her perfume and was able to glance at her breasts during the ride. Good thing he bought the loose-fitting khakis. When the ride was over, he watched Shannon exit the train. She was about 5’8” with a few extra pounds, like him. When he exited, he could see a smile on her face.

“Splash Mountain?” she said animatedly, reaching out for Tony’s hand.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Tony and Shannon spent the morning getting to know each other, stopping for lunch at the French restaurant at California Adventure. As they sat outdoors under the umbrella, Tony started fantasizing about Shannon.

“Where are you staying?”

“Oh, I just came up from San Diego. I hadn’t made arrangements yet.”

Shannon had sold her beat up car, took the bus to Anaheim, with only a suitcase of essentials she had just purchased. Bathing suit, lingerie and casual clothing. Apparently, she was looking to start over, perhaps with this new man.

“Neither have I.”

Tony dropped this as a way of finding out if they might be together that night, but Shannon hadn't given him enough information. Now it was his turn.

“I was thinking about the Grand Californian, trying to impress her.”

Shannon let her leg slip against his under the table.

“That's a wonderful place. I've been there many times.”

She hadn't.

“Yes, I've always stayed there when I'm here.”

He hadn't.

They looked at each other, maintaining eye contact until one of them would speak next. Each decided it was too risky to make the next move, so they finished their lunch with quiet flirting.

“Cars land? Have you been on it?”

“Not yet. Sure, let's go.”

Shannon managed to get Tony on all the fast rides where a couple could be next to each other. The twists and turns gave her a chance to slip closer, by accident, of course. Tony was invigorated by this woman, and gladly played along. Still wondering about the sleeping arrangements, he waited for the right time to ask.

Then, late afternoon, after they had rocked and rolled through all the turbulent rides, including the Tower of Terror, they entered the Haunted Mansion, just to rest a bit. The slow ride through the dark emboldened Tony to risk the question, but before he could ask, Shannon slid her hand over him in the most suggestive way.

Smiling, she asked. “Grand Californian?” while slowly rubbing the inside of his thigh.

Remaining as calm as possible, Tony reached over and kissed her. “The Grand Californian.”

Reassured now, Shannon snuggled into Tony, put his arm around her and enjoyed the ride. “We should probably reserve our room.”

So they walked up to the Main Street guest services building and made a reservation.

“How many nights sir?” said the young man wearing a plaid red vest, crisp white shirt and black bow tie.

Tony and Shannon looked at each other. He waited for her to speak. She whispered in Tony’s ear.

“Four nights.” Tony said with mixed feelings. This was going to cost quite a bit, but, well, I’m on vacation.

Shannon gave Tony a gentle pat on his bottom, unseen by the young man making the reservation behind his counter. He glanced at her and returned the gesture.

“And would you like to make a dinner reservation?”

Shannon spoke up this time. “Yes, about 8pm please.”

Tony knew what that meant. Love making before and after dinner. Well, that would give him time to recover. But how much would she desire after that. He started to think of ways he could extend himself, to live up to his hopes and her expectations this night.

“Would you arrange for a bowl of fruit and some champagne on ice? We’ll be arriving around 5:30.”

“Very good sir. The room will be ready. Here is your confirmation.”

Shannon squeezed Tony’s hand, and he realized they were on the same page. No more guessing.

Tony and Shannon had built a wonderful fantasy, based on multiple lies, and neither of them was in any hurry to return to reality. So, they continued to redefine themselves in the ultimate getaway from the real world.

There were only a couple more logistics. “Where is your car?”

“I took a limo here from San Diego. My bag is in a locker at the main gate.”

“All right. Mine is in my car. Let’s go get yours first.”

Shannon realized her luggage wasn’t fitting in with her new identity. “Why don’t I meet you at the hotel? I’d like to get a few things first.”

Tony agreed. “Sure. Meet you there to check in?”

Shannon gave Tony a short, but convincing kiss. “See you then.”

Tony and Shannon split up for an hour. She went to upgrade her luggage and lingerie. Tony went to pick up some flowers and chocolate. After all, he was from a different generation.

Their room overlooked the Magic Kingdom. In addition to the fruit and champagne, Tony placed flowers and chocolate on the table. Shannon didn't take long to get comfortable.

"You must be tired after the day we had. Why don't we change into something more comfortable?" Shannon took her bag into one of the two bathrooms. Tony took a quick shower and came out in a hotel robe. He poured two glasses and opened the box of chocolate.

Shannon came out in a hotel robe too, but underneath she had a sexy red outfit. When she got closer, she opened the robe. "You like?"

Tony's heartbeat jumped a few decibels.

"I like very much." He handed her the glass and they drank. He fed her fruit and chocolate. Shannon noticed that Tony was beginning to get excited. She took his glass, put it down and led Tony to the bed. She held her robe open, requesting him to take it off. He did and took his off as well, leaving him just in his new underwear.

Shannon pulled down the covers, and lay down. "Come on lover. I'm ready."

Tony didn't have to be asked twice. Her body was even more alluring in the early evening as the sun had set with soft lighting from candles speckling the dark room. He tried not to be too aggressive but Shannon wanted to get going.

"Don't be shy. I've been thinking about this all day."

So, their first time in bed was intense. Tony liked that. He could smell her perfume, something he hadn't in years. She wore expensive make up too. Perhaps this woman is the start of something long term.

An hour later, they began getting dressed for dinner. Shannon walked into the bathroom and whispered in his ear.

“Now I know why they call this the happiest place on earth.”

Tony kissed her lips. “Mmm. What is that flavor?”

“Something tropical. I'll tell you after dinner.”

Tony and Shannon continued their fantasy for the next few days, exploring the parks, driving his sports car to the beach and even taking a day to visit museums in L.A. Both wondered where the end of their trip would lead. Each had their own ideas about that.

As they drove back to the hotel from the beach, Shannon posed the first question. “When are you going back to Washington?”

“I don't know. There's nothing I have to do there right now.”

Tony had left Sam with a neighbor, so he didn't worry about him.

“Do you like cruises?”

Tony had to pretend he did. “Well of course, if the weather is good.”

“There's one leaving to Hawaii tomorrow night. Fifteen days round trip! Are you interested?”

Tony clearly believed he was in a state of grace now. He smiled at her, squeezed her hand and replied. “That would be perfect.”

Excited, Shannon took out her iPad and made a reservation. “But I insist on paying my half. It was my suggestion.”

“How much is it?” he said, trying not to care.

“\$4200, but that includes lodging in Maui.” Shannon was buoyant.

“No, I’ll take care of it.” He pulled out a credit card so she could confirm the trip.

“But that’s \$8400 total. Are you sure?”

Ugh. She meant \$4200 per person, double occupancy. Those damn cruise ads. He swallowed a mouthful of Coke Zero from the can in his cup holder.

“No worries. Book it.”

Shannon finished the reservation and snuggled next to Tony. “Thanks lover. I’m going to make this a cruise you’ll never forget.”

Tony wasn’t likely to forget. Visa would make sure of that. What was he thinking? Oh yes, of course.

“I’ll need to buy a few things before we leave. What about you? Are you packed for two weeks in paradise?” She emphasized ‘paradise’ as she rubbed his thigh.

“Yes, I’ll need some more clothes too. What time do we sail?”

“Seven at night. We can shop in the morning, return your rental car and take a cab to the dock.”

So they spent their last night at the Grand Californian, a repetition of the first three, lovemaking in the late afternoon, dinner, more lovemaking, then sleep, only to be woken at 2:00am for another tumble. Not that Tony was complaining. He hadn't had this much in many years.

They arrived at the dock at 5:30pm with new luggage, clothing and outlook. They were now officially a couple, on a romantic cruise, with all the expectations that implies. It would either be paradise or a disaster, depending on how they got along. After all, they had just met and sometimes you discover incompatibilities in confined passage.

Remember, Tony thought Shannon was a wealthy woman in her thirties who had just sold her company. Shannon thought Tony was a wealthy man in his fifties. But Tony was living off the \$500,000 he got from selling his shack on the harbor. God Bless America. Essentially, Tony and Shannon had reinvented themselves and neither wanted the truth to come out anytime soon.

Tony knew what he had to do. Eat right, take extra vitamins and exercise daily, in order to survive, uh satisfy, his new lover. Shannon had similar plans, but it included setting up romantic opportunities on the boat and particularly in the cabin.

Before walking up the entrance to the boat, Shannon turned to Tony, threw her arms around him and gave him a long, passionate kiss.

“I hope you're ready.”

Tony hoped so too. He smiled. “I am.”

Hand in hand, they walked up the plank to the boat, found their cabin and settled in. Or so Tony thought. Their bags had already been placed in the room, and the table was decorated with flowers, fruit, champagne and chocolate. Shannon walked sensually over to Tony and began to undress him.

“Don’t we have a reception tonight?”

Shannon continued to undress him, then started to undress herself.

“We can be a little late. I can’t wait that long for you.”

An hour later, they were getting ready for the Captain’s reception and dinner at 7:30. The horns sounded as the boat left the dock. The moon was out and people were waving good-bye from the shore.

After a lavish reception with gourmet food and tropical drinks, the couple returned to their cabin for, well, you can guess. Tony wished he really was 57 now.

“Shannon, you’re going to wear me out,” he said with a smile.

“How did you guess?” she said seductively. They were both sound asleep by midnight.

Shannon woke Tony up before sunrise. He was half asleep and not ready for her yet.

“Can we sleep a little more first dear?”

“Not that silly. I want to watch the sun rise. Get up, it’s almost time.”

Tony and Shannon, wearing robes over their sleepwear, put on flip-flops and walked out to view the sunrise. It was cool. Fog covered the boat. It reminded him of his walks at home, but Gig Harbor was nothing like this.

“Oh, there it is. Isn’t it beautiful Tony?”

“Lovely. Can we go back to bed now?”

“Of course, lover, what was I thinking?”

Shannon led him back to the room, began undressing him for the morning romp. Apparently, the sunrise excited her, not that he was complaining. He just thought they might sleep in today, but didn’t protest.

“You first lover” she said as she prepared him for mounting.

Nope. Not this morning. Maybe another day.

The couple spent the next nine days loving and living together as a couple. There were side trips to islands, special nights with those tropical shows where they throw flame torches around and roast a pig in the ground, all accompanied by native Hawaiian music. They bought souvenirs and clothing at local shops. It was almost as if this was a honeymoon, although it was largely indistinguishable to anyone seeing them.

But on the last day in Maui, the weather changed completely. An earthquake and typhoon in the South Pacific was causing massive waves heading to the Hawaiian Islands. Storm surges swamped the waterfront hotels and prevented cruise ships from leaving. Power lines and trees were falling and electricity was going out. The cruise passengers were told they could stay on the ship or on land. About half of the passengers chose to stay on the ship, including Tony and Shannon.

A ship at sea can take an alternate course, away from storms. But a ship in port cannot, it is confined with the local weather conditions.

The cruise director made the most of the inclement weather, providing fun activities for the guests, even a murder mystery dinner that night. Shannon wanted to participate in the show, as some of the guests could join the detective in solving the crime. She pulled Tony in as well, who reluctantly agreed. With help from some Hollywood movie passengers, the mystery was both exciting and realistic.

“Ladies and gentlemen. My name is Inspector Robinson. I gathered you here to determine who might have killed Jonathan Williams, a carpenter from nearby Leeds. We need to search for clues that will lead us to the killer. Officer Hempstead has found some already.”

Shannon nudged Tony, who wore a Sherlock Holmes style hat. All the guests participating wore hats to distinguish them from the other passengers. Shannon wore an Irish Flat Cap and a tartan tie.

“Isn’t this great Tony? Maybe we’ll find the clue that solves the mystery.”

“Let’s hope so dear. Otherwise, it might be a long night.”

“Officer Hempstead, tell the other detectives what you have found.”

“Of course, inspector. Here is a bullet casing, from a handgun. It held a 45-caliber size bullet. And in this bag is a substance that was found next to the casing, some sort of material we believe came off the shoe of the killer. Finally, we have some blood drops that led from the casing to that door.”

Officer Hempstead pointed to a door in the ballroom.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have a body. It must have been moved. And, we don’t have the equipment required to test the blood or test for prints or DNA from the bullet casing. That will have to wait until we make port. But we believe that with more clues we can identify the killer and secure him, so he can’t murder anyone else. Will you help me look for more clues?”

The guests cheered the bobby on and were ready to search.

“Very well then. Spread out around the ship and look for anything that might be suspicious. Use the gloves we gave you and place any evidence in the plastic bags you have. You don’t want your DNA or prints to get on evidence, do you?”

“Not bloody likely”, said one of the guest detectives. The room laughed.

“Very well then. And remember one more point. There is still a murderer loose on the ship, so be careful where you go.”

The guest detectives moved out of the ballroom and to various points on the ship. Tony and Shannon decided to start with the recreation room at the stern of the ship. It was raining heavily so the clues must have been placed inside the ship, not on outer decks.

“What do you think we’re looking for Tony?”

“I don’t know. Guess we’ll know if we find anything.”

Shannon looked in a large plastic box, which held the volleyballs, nets and other sports equipment. Pushing aside the yellow spheres, she saw something. “Tony, I think I see the gun.”

Tony reached down and saw a gun. Using his gloves, he lifted it up to his nose.

“It doesn’t smell like it’s been fired.”

Tony put the weapon into one of the evidence bags. Shannon couldn’t wait to show the others.

“This must be a major clue. Oh, I’m so excited. Maybe we’ll win the free cruise for solving the murder.”

Tony loved the youthful exuberance Shannon showered on him. It was nice to have someone not preoccupied with their health or finances, the topics that dominate older people.

“That’s great Shannon. Let’s bring it back right away.”

Tony and Shannon headed back to the ballroom. Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder. It was deafening, so it must have been right on top of the ship. The lights went out; small emergency lights from the floor came on.

“Do you think this is part of the game?”

“Maybe. Let’s use your cell phone so we can read the signs that lead back to the ballroom.”

Before they had gone ten steps, another loud noise. This was clearly a gunshot and it sounded close. Shannon hugged Tony.

“Tony, I’m scared.”

“I’m a little scared myself. Just hold onto me and we’ll get back to the others.”

They walked hand in hand, Shannon holding her cell phone looking for directional signs. They couldn't remember how they got to the recreation room because there were too many turns, and three flights of stairs below the ballroom.

As they were walking up the first flight of stairs, Shannon held her phone's light in front of her face, so she could find the next turn. Then she screamed.

"Tony. Look."

It was a body and it didn't look like it was part of the game. Blood continued to ooze from the man's forehead, but he was clearly dead. Shannon averted her eyes and held Tony tight.

"What do we do? Tony, someone was really murdered here tonight."

Tony was trying to hold himself together, for her sake. But he was shivering and panicked as well.

"Take a picture with your phone. Then let's keep going."

Shannon took a picture then scurried around the body, pulling Tony with her. She continued crying and muttering about the body.

"This isn't fun Tony. I wish we had stayed on land."

"We'll get through this dear. We just have to get back to the others. That looks like the second flight of stairs we have to take."

Just then one of the stateroom doors opened and a man with a gun hustled them inside.

"Be quiet and you won't get hurt."

Tony and Shannon wanted to scream, but dared not. Once they were inside the stateroom, the man zip tied them together. Shannon was at the point of fainting and Tony couldn't help her.

“Well, I guess you found the killer. Congratulations. Did you find the body too?”

Tony and Shannon looked at each other. This man was smiling and not in a killer sort of way.

“We found a body downstairs. Is that where you killed him?”

The man took out an ID card, with the word KILLER on it.

“No friends. I'm the killer from the murder mystery. You solved the crime. Now let me untie you.”

“Wait, we heard a gunshot and saw a man shot in the forehead. That wasn't the body.”

The man looked panicked now.

“No, the fake body was in the recreation room, in a closet next to the equipment.”

The man took out a walkie-talkie.

“This is Johnson. Two of the guests found me so the game is over. But they saw another body not far from here, a real one. Send the police!”

A panicked response came back.

“The only police are on the island. We'll have to wait for them. Lock yourselves in the stateroom and wait until we can come get you.”

“Folks, it looks like we’ll have to stay here and be quiet. There’s a real murderer out there.”

Tony and Shannon huddled on the bed, leaving the man to guard the door.

“Is your gun real?”

“No, but maybe it will fool someone coming through the door.”

Shannon curled herself in Tony’s arms and began crying. “Tony, I’m scared. What if the killer finds us?”

“I’ll protect you dear. We’ll get through this.”

Thirty minutes later the man got another message on his walkie-talkie.

“All right Johnson. The cops are here and have apprehended the suspect. You can bring your heroes back to the ballroom.”

Tony and Shannon heaved a sigh of relief. Lights in the stateroom came back on.

“Good, the power has returned. I’ll bring you back to the ballroom.”

Up another stairway and a few more turns, they entered the last door to the ballroom. As it opened, they were greeted by cheering and laughter. Flying confetti and balloons were everywhere. All the guests had smiles on their faces. The inspector welcomed them in.

“Congratulations Tony and Shannon. You solved the crime and found the suspect.”

Tony was still confused. Shannon hadn't stopped shaking.

"But what about the real murder?"

The inspector continued.

"No real murder. That body you found came from our friends in Hollywood, several of them were on the ship scouting a location for a movie. Looked real, didn't it?"

Tony and Shannon finally relaxed.

"Now, here is your voucher for an all expenses cruise you can use in the next year. Congratulations!"

The big band started to play dance music and everyone joined in, as if it was New Year's Eve and the year had just changed. Waiters brought food and drinks for everyone.

Tony and Shannon had seats of honor near the band. They had a late dinner, and danced a few times. Tony looked at Shannon's face, her makeup now mussed from the crying.

"Had enough excitement for one night dear?"

"Yes, but the night isn't over yet." She took him by the hand back to their stateroom.

As they arrived, they heard an announcement on the intercom.

"You'll be glad to know that the storm will be moving through the area tonight and we should be able to leave for the mainland tomorrow."

Shannon was more assertive than usual that night, probably to extricate the fear she endured. Feeling very close and safe with Tony, she was particularly verbal during sex.

“Take me Tony. Oh, take me. That’s it. Yes!”

Shannon moaned and described every feeling she had. As she was reaching orgasm, she dug her red polished fingernails into Tony’s back, thrust her body up and down and let out a cry men know only as good news. But then, an unexpected utterance.

“I love you Tony. I love you.”

Under the circumstances, there is only one thing the man has to do.

“I love you too Shannon.”

They collapsed holding each other and then fell asleep. After a bit, Tony got up to go to the bathroom. He returned to find Shannon sound asleep. They didn’t wake until 9:00am. Tony finally got to sleep in. Shannon was the first to get up.

Tony had recovered from the drama and intense lovemaking they had last night. Shannon kept full eye contact with him as they made love now. She was clearly a woman in love. It made it even more exciting for him too. But this time was fast. She reached orgasm quickly just as she had brought him to climax. When they were done, she shook her long hair around, planted a kiss on him and hopped off.

“Let’s go lover. I’m starving.”

They showered, dressed and were at the breakfast buffet within 30 minutes. While they were eating, the boat horn began to blow, signifying that they would depart within the hour. Guests that stayed on the island were scurrying back to the ship.

Both Tony and Shannon had secrets they were keeping from the other, but they didn't know that the other person had a secret as well. They were only three days out from the L.A. port now, so there wasn't much time to come clean.

It was eerie how well they got along, even though the relationship was built on fiction. It was almost three weeks now of idyllic love, food and wine. Like the commercials you don't believe. Was she telling him the truth? Why would she settle for someone his age when she could obviously find someone in his thirties? What would happen when they got back to L.A.? Tony needed a plan.

Then Tony remembered dropping the 'L' word. It was only in response to her sexually charged use of it at the height of mutual orgasm. He didn't mean it, but what could he do now? You can't take it back, not to a woman who says it first.

Shannon was also worried. Should she tell Tony the truth, how she wasn't wealthy, how she spent most of her money already and had only a small apartment in the desert to return to. Why would Tony want to stay with her if he knew? He could easily find someone of substance, someone really in her thirties, and with money. Shannon needed a plan.

She decided she would tell Tony the truth. It might lead to the end of their relationship, but she couldn't keep lying. Lies always come out, sooner or later.

For a moment, Tony thought of Sam, so he called his neighbor Joe who was watching him.

"Tony, I was hoping you would call."

"I've been busy Joe. How is Sam?"

"I'm sorry Tony. Sam passed away a few days ago. Never woke up. I'm sure he went peacefully."

Tony sighed and let out a little tear. “Joe, can you...”

“I already took care of him. The vet laid him to rest in a small pet burial plot. You’ll be able to visit him when you get back.”

“Thanks Joe. I’ll call you when I get back.”

“One more thing Tony. You got two calls, one from a lawyer and one from a realtor. You really ought to get a cell phone. Here’s are the numbers.”

Tony called the lawyer first. Apparently, his wife had an insurance policy she bought that Tony didn’t know about. \$100,000. The lawyer said he would wire it to Tony’s bank.

Then he called the realtor. A development company wanted to put up condos overlooking the harbor. The ten acres they needed included his little quarter-acre lot and 1000sf house. They offered him \$400,000.

Shannon came into the stateroom and saw Tony crying.

“What’s wrong dear?”

“Oh, an old friend died.”

“What was his name?”

“Sam. We’ve been friends for 18 years.”

Shannon comforted Tony. “I’m sorry to hear that. Did Sam work for your company?”

“No, just someone I spent time with.”

Sam's death and the two financial windfalls gave Tony an upset stomach. His mixed emotions, along with his worry about the truth coming out to Shannon became too much. He hadn't told Shannon that Sam was his dog, or anything about the new money. The lies were starting to pile up.

"Shannon. Do they sell phones on the boat?"

"Yes, they have cell phones in the ship store, why?"

"Well, I left mine at home and I'm due for a new one."

Tony never had a cell phone.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't used mine much since we met. No one else I wanted to get in touch with. But it sure was handy during the murder mystery."

Shannon didn't think this was the best time to tell Tony about her situation, seeing that a good friend had just passed away. She would wait until later.

Tony started up his new iPhone.

"May I have your number dear?" They laughed. Their relationship started with sex and was about to end with exchanging phone numbers.

"Yes, I hope you'll call me sometime."

"Tony, I have a confession."

"Yes dear. What is it?"

"I'm not wealthy. My business was just some honeybee hive. I sold them to a company for a few thousand dollars. I don't live in San Diego; I live in an apartment in Dulzura? And I sold my car to raise some money to come here. I was hoping to meet someone and I met you."

“That’s all right. I’m lucky to have met you too.”

“And I’m not 36, I’m 43.”

“Is that all?”

Shannon sighed some relief but was clearly upset.

“Yes, so now you know. Guess this is the end of our time together.”

Tony took her face in his hands and kissed her.

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Tony didn’t take this opportunity to tell his side of the story. Maybe he could get to it later.

Their lovemaking that night was just as intense, but even more authentic than before. Shannon was feeling very secure now. She had unburdened herself and Tony still wanted to be with her.

Tony was also feeling secure. With close to a million dollars in the bank, thanks to the unexpected life insurance policy, and sale of his home and business, Tony didn’t think he needed to ruin a good thing with the truth. And now he had a cell phone.

There were still a couple pitfalls he had to worry about. Shannon expected that he lived in some fancy house in Gig Harbor and what about his car, a 1994 Volvo with 250,000 miles on it. Not exactly the Corvette she had been used to.

They were eating breakfast on the deck. The sun was shining. They needed a plan.

“Shannon dear?”

“Yes love.”

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

“No plans really. My boy is in the service and won’t be home this year.”

“How would you like to go to Boston?”

“Oh, I would love that. I’ve never been there.”

“My daughter and her family live there, on the ocean. And the autumn colors are wonderful.”

“That’s great, but I’ll need some clothing suitable for the weather. I only have Social digs.”

“Me too. How does this sound? We’ll fly to Boston for Thanksgiving with my daughter, then get a car and drive to Florida, where we can take that cruise we won.”

“That’s so great Tony. I’m so glad we’re going to do that.” Shannon was excited.

Tony called Joe.

“Joe, this is Tony. Please go to my house and give all my stuff to charity. Take anything you like, including the car. I’ll pay for any expenses you have. The developers will be knocking down the house next month.”

“Thanks Tony. Even your record collection?”

“Sure thing. I’m going to buy them again on CDs.”

“And to think, I knew you before you were rich and famous.”

“Not rich or famous. You’re still my good friend.”

“OK Tony, I’ll take care of it.”

The next day the ship docked in L.A.

Just as they planned, Tony and Shannon went shopping for some cold weather clothing, and then took a plane to Boston, to have Thanksgiving with his daughter.

Tony splurged for first class tickets.

“I’ve never been in first class Tony. This is so nice.”

“Well, after a while, you can’t go back to coach.”

Tony was still spinning the lie.

The flight attendants pampered them, especially Shannon. Champagne, fresh fruit, gourmet meal, choice of 3 wines, fresh warm cookies, hot washcloth, the works. It was a non-stop flight to Boston and Shannon fell asleep after the meal.

Tony figured out how to check his bank balance on the iPhone. Hmm. With the new money from the life insurance and the house sale, his balance was \$980,982. And that’s after paying for the cruise. He didn’t have a car or a place to live, but he was doing all right.

The flight attendant put a blanket on Shannon and turned off the lights. Tony pushed his seat back as well and snuggled next to his new girl. His new girl, just like a teenager.

He had a little talk with his daughter, in order to keep up appearances with Shannon. They agreed not to talk about money or his previous circumstances. Even the granddaughter played along with the game – Papa Tony made some money.

Two hours out of Boston now. A BMW would be waiting for them at Logan Airport, which he had already purchased on line. Aren't smart phones wonderful? It was new, but just the low-end model, seating for four and a large trunk. It was the perfect vehicle for a couple on a romantic road trip.

Shannon woke up, asking for tea and those cookies.

“Well, you had a nice nap.”

“This seat is more comfortable than my bed. Tony, you've been so good to me.”

Tony smiled. “We've been good for each other.” All the pampering really had an effect on Shannon. She did look 36, after all. Money, comfort and love will do that for a woman. Now he wished he had told his daughter how old Shannon was. It didn't come up. Good thing they were staying at a hotel instead of their house.

Maybe this would be a good time to tell Shannon the truth? Then we wouldn't have to pretend at Thanksgiving. No, this isn't the right time. Maybe later.

They collected their bags and met the BMW sales rep, just as promised. He put the bags in the trunk, opened the car door for Shannon, and then gave Tony the keys and registration.

“Wow. This car is beautiful.” She leaned over to kiss him. “And I can reach you from here.” Tony wondered what she meant.

“We have to stop in Boston for dessert. I want to surprise them with some good Italian pastry from the North End. You won’t believe how good it is.”

“Can we get some flowers for your daughter and maybe something for your granddaughter?”

“Of course. Why don’t you think of something for a 7 year old girl.”

They picked up flowers at Quincy Market and pastries from Mike’s; then they headed up 1A toward Manchester, a very exclusive town. Tony’s daughter married well, a doctor and so she was a stay at home mom.

He was a gentleman, never talking down to Tony, treating him with respect. Tony raised his daughter right and it showed in the type of man she chose to marry.

Meanwhile, Shannon was on her iPad looking for gifts. She found a Calafant Princess Castle that you build and color and showed it to Tony.

“Oh, she’ll love that. There’s a toy store on the way.”

It was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and they were arriving for dinner. They pulled into the driveway, a relatively modest house, but right on the ocean.

“Pop, I’m so glad you’re here. How have you been?” said his daughter Maria. They hugged.

“I’m good Maria. I’m glad to be here. This is my friend Shannon.” Shannon hugged Maria and gave her the flowers.

“Nice to meet you Shannon.” She gave Tony a look (you didn’t say you were dating a younger woman).

“Thank you, they’re beautiful. Come inside.” Maria’s daughter Olivia ran to her grandfather.

“Papa Tony. I love you.”

“I love you too sweetheart. My friend Shannon brought you a present.”

Olivia looked at the box and gave a little scream. “A princess castle with crayons. This is great.” She gave Shannon a hug, and then she ran off to open it.

“Tony, good to see you. Hi, I’m Mike, Maria’s husband. I’m glad you could come for the holiday.”

They all went inside for drinks and chatter.

“Dinner will be ready in an hour Pop. Shannon, would you mind helping Olivia with the castle?”

“I’d be glad to. C’mon Olivia, where can we start this?”

Olivia took Shannon to her playroom and they started making the castle. Maria snuck back into the living room.

“Pop, isn’t she kind of young for you?”

“Maria, she makes me happy.”

“I can see why. And flexible too, I’ll bet.”

“Now, don’t embarrass me. I was faithful to your mother all my life, but I was very lonely this last year.”

“Nothing wrong with starting over Tony. Maria, don’t give your dad a hard time.”

“I’m just kidding with him. How old is she Pop?”

“Stop it. You’ll just have to wonder.” Mike changed the subject.

“Are you taking care of yourself, still walking, seeing your doctor?”

“Yes Mike, thanks. I feel fine and I’m walking four miles a day around town.”

“Good, we want you around for Olivia’s wedding.”

“If I possibly can, I’ll be there.”

“If he stays with Shannon, he might outlive us all.”

Dinner was casual and went just as Tony had planned. No awkward conversation. After dinner, Olivia went back to work on her castle and the adults had tea and dessert in the family room.

“The Celtics are on at eight. Tony, you want to watch with me?”

“Oh Mike, he probably wants to get to the hotel with Shannon; don’t make him stay up here all night.”

“No Maria, that’s all right. I’d like to take Shannon for a walk on singing beach, but then I’ll watch the first half with you.”

“It’s a deal. Wear your jacket, it’s windy out there.”

“I remember.”

“Why is it called singing beach?” said Shannon.

“Well, if you’re in your bare feet, the sand squeaks as you walk.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you’ll see.”

“It’s true Shannon. No beach like it anywhere.”

Tony and Shannon went for their walk. Mike helped Maria clean up.

“It good for your dad to have a companion. That will keep him healthy.”

“I know dear. How healthy?”

“Stop it. She’s probably in her forties.”

“Maybe, and Pop is 64. There’s more than years difference, there’s energy and, you know.”

“That’s probably why he’s seeing her. You’re 35 now, right?”

Maria threw a towel at Mike. “I’ll show you how old I am, dear.”

Meanwhile on the beach, Shannon was awestruck by the ocean’s horizon and stars coming out.

“Tony, this must be the best place to live on Earth.”

“It’s not bad, but way out of my budget.”

“I’d be happy with you anywhere, except Dulzura that is.”

They both laughed. “OK, we won’t live there, but that leaves a lot of country.”

“We better get back. You promised Mike you would watch the game with him.”

“OK. But just the first half. I want to get to the hotel.”

Tony and Mike watched the Celtics for an hour while Maria and Shannon got to know each other better.

“How they look this year Mike?”

“Well, it’s not 1986, but they’ll make the playoffs.”

“Good, as long as they do, it’s a good year. And the Bruins?”

“Sorry to tell you it’s another rebuilding year after making the playoffs for 24 years straight.”

“Seems unholy somehow.”

“Yes, I understand the arch bishop is on the phone to the Pope.”

They laughed. The women could hear them.

“Tony loves Mike. He was so happy when we married.”

“I can see why. He’s really perfect.”

“Not perfect, but close.”

Olivia called from her room.

“Mommy, I’m going to bed now.”

“Good girl. I’ll be up in a minute to tuck you in.”

“She puts herself to bed? What are you feeding that child?”

“What can I say? I have the perfect husband and daughter.”

Tony and Shannon said goodnight and headed downtown to the hotel. Mike questioned Maria.

“You were polite with Shannon, weren’t you?”

“She’s great. Just what my father needed.”

“And you’re just what I need. Now get your pretty butt upstairs and I’ll show you how young you are.”

Manchester had a quaint bed and breakfast above an Irish bar and restaurant. Tony and Shannon checked in, and then went downstairs for a nightcap.

“What do you think?”

“It’s great Tony. What a lovely room and bar. How long are we staying?”

“Just a couple days. First, we’ll see a little of Boston, and then we head to NYC for two nights, see a Broadway show and some tourist sites.”

“Sounds like a dream come true.”

Tony and Shannon listened to some live Irish music, had their drinks and went up to bed. It had been a very family day, bringing Tony and Shannon closer together.

In the morning, the fog covered most of downtown Manchester and out to the beach.

“Tony, isn’t the fog romantic?”

“Yes, I love the fog.”

Fog used to depress Tony, but he could see now it was all a matter of one's circumstances. Fog could be depressing, but it could also be romantic.

Tony and Shannon made love in the morning, and then headed over to Maria's house for Thanksgiving. It was a perfect day. Maria, Mike and Olivia welcomed Shannon as if she was part of the family. Tony and Mike watched football while Shannon helped Maria with dinner. Olivia worked on her castle, coloring each part with care.

At the dinner table, Mike prayed for everyone's good health and thanks for bringing Tony and Shannon to their home. He concluded with a travel request.

"Please look after Tony and Shannon as the drive to Florida. Grant them good weather and safe travel."

"Thank you, Mike," said Shannon.

After dinner Tony and Shannon walked the beach again, the sand squeaking beneath their toes.

Tony and Shannon had a dream road trip down the coast. First, they explored Boston and its historical sites, and then they stopped in NYC for Broadway shows and fine dining. Next, they went to Philadelphia, had cheese steaks and went to a Flyer's game. They topped off the whirlwind with time in Washington, D.C., and sightseeing of the national monuments. By this time, both were fully committed to each other. Shannon's "I love you" utterance that Tony reluctantly replied, was now a fact of their lives. Tony had even thought of asking Shannon to marry him. That would come to light later in the trip, in a most extraordinary way.

Walt Disney World is the stop for couples in love; many choose it for weddings and honeymoons. Tony and Shannon's time there was more like a couple celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary, even though it had only been months since they first met.

The weeklong stay was followed by a cruise, which they had won solving the murder mystery. This cruise would take them around the Caribbean with stops on exotic islands, the perfect place for Tony's proposal. He had slipped away from her just long enough to purchase a \$10,000 engagement ring that he tucked away for the right moment.

Their lovemaking hadn't subsided a bit, since that night they exchanged I love you's. In fact, it had become so intense that Tony was considering a visit to the doctor for a checkup. The fog of Gig Harbor was so distant in his mind; he wondered what God was bestowing on him, this one hundred and eighty degree turn in life. He must have done something right in his 64 years.

Walking hand in hand on Cayman Island, they found a jungle path with exotic birds, colorful plants and luscious fruits hanging from trees. The sounds of monkeys, parrots and insects accented the surroundings.

"Shannon, what do you think of all these colors?"

"I've seen pictures and nature shows on television, but it is much more fantastic in person. Even the cruise ads aren't this beautiful."

"You know what else might make this a special experience?"

"What dear?"

Shannon was eager to hear the next words. She had fallen in love with Tony.

Tony pulled the ring box out of his pocket and then knelt down in front of Shannon.

“Shannon, you’ve been so good to me. Your love has filled me with more than I ever deserved. I can’t think of anyone else I would rather spend the rest of my life with. Shannon Erin O’Toole, would you make me the happiest....”

Suddenly, two men dressed in white with black ski masks came out of the woods, grabbed Tony and disappeared just as quickly. Shannon screamed and chased them but one of the men sent her back with a wave of a gun. She was frantic and ran back to the town to get help.

Two hours later, Shannon’s cell phone rang. It was Tony, or at least Tony’s phone.

“We have your husband. We want \$5,000,000 in small bills; put it in a duffel bag by tomorrow. Wait for further instructions.”

“We don’t have \$5,000,000. Or at least I don’t have access to it.”

“This is the Cayman Islands, my dear. You can just go into town and get it.”

“But I don’t know anything about his accounts. You would have to ask him.”

“We have, but he denies having an account. For his sake, I hope you can convince him to tell you.”

“Can I speak with him?”

“Here he is.”

“Tony, are you OK?”

“Shannon, I’m OK for now, but they think I’m some millionaire with hidden cash in the Cayman Islands.”

“But that’s what I thought too.”

“Shannon, I hate to say this, especially under these circumstances. I haven’t told you the truth about my life or possessions.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve never been wealthy. I’ve never been to college. I just happened to have a small shanty on the harbor that a hotel wanted to buy for the land. And a developer wanted to build condos on land that I had a tiny house on. Both the hotel and developer gave me a lot of money to sell. My house has been knocked down. I gave my old car to a friend who was watching my dog while we were in Socal. Worst of all, my daughter has been playing along, just so I wouldn’t have to tell you the truth.”

“Is that all?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Did you really have a friend named Sam that died?”

“Actually, Sam was my dog. He died while my friend Joe was watching him.”

“I see. Why didn’t you tell me the truth? Didn’t you think I could understand?”

“I meant to tell you. I really did. I’m so sorry. If I ever see you again, I’ll never lie to you again.”

Shannon started to cry, realizing that Tony’s lie may cost him his life.

“Please let me talk to them. I’ll convince them that you don’t have the money.”

Tony put the kidnappers back on the phone with Shannon.

“Listen. Tony’s been telling you the truth. He doesn’t have \$5,000,000 in some Cayman Islands bank. He doesn’t have that kind of money at all.”

“We saw the ring he was giving you. We know he has money. We’ll drop the demand to \$3,000,000, but it better be here by tomorrow at noon. We will call with instructions then.”

Shannon heard the kidnappers hang up and started to cry. She went back to town and told the police. They told her this sort of kidnapping is common in the islands, particularly with wealthy people. When she explained that Tony wasn’t wealthy and didn’t have the money, they shrugged and sighed.

“We’ll do our best.”

Shannon cried even harder, realizing the police would have to be very lucky to help her. As she walked out of the police station, a man came up to her.

“What is the trouble?”

“My boyfriend has been kidnapped and they are asking for more money than we can come up with.”

“Maybe I can help. Tell me all the details. And I’ll need a picture of your boyfriend.”

Shannon recounted the details and gave the man a picture of Tony she had on her phone. The man took her phone number and said he would get back to her in the morning.

Shannon didn't hear from the kidnappers and couldn't call them. She hardly slept at all, in her cabin on the ship. The next morning her phone rang. It was the man who offered to help.

"Miss O'Toole?"

"Yes."

"Meet me at this address around 11:30 this morning."

"All right. Do you have a way we can get Tony back?"

"We hope so. Meet me there promptly."

Shannon met the mysterious stranger as requested. He took her phone and hooked it to some computer looking device with an antenna.

"When the kidnappers call back, you'll talk to them. Say you have the money, but you can't drop it off until 1:00pm. They will agree and give you an address."

Shannon did exactly as directed. The kidnappers called, accepted the offer for 1:00pm and gave her a location to drop off the money. Meanwhile, the device with her phone captured the location of the kidnappers.

"What do I do now?"

"Nothing. Go back to the ship and wait. I'll call you when I have news."

One o'clock came and went. There were no more calls to Shannon's phone from the kidnappers. She was frantic and feeling helpless. Then her phone rang.

"Miss O'Toole, can you please come outside to the deck facing the dock?"

Shannon came out and looked to the dock. There was Tony running up the ship's plank to join her. The mysterious stranger was nowhere in sight. Shannon jumped into Tony's arms.

"Darling, I thought you would be killed."

"I thought I would never see you again."

"Are you hurt Tony?"

"No. Two men in military clothing killed the kidnappers and brought me here. I never even saw their faces."

"Who do you think they were?"

"CIA, mercenaries, I don't know and I don't care. I just wish I had given you that ring earlier. The kidnappers took it."

They returned to their cabin to get over the trauma. Tony was physically fine, just rattled from the danger. Later, they had an early dinner and planned to go to bed early. Someone knocked on the cabin door. Shannon opened it.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"A delivery ma'am."

Shannon took the package and read the label.

*To: Mr. and Mrs. Tony Granelli
The cruise line wishes you a fantastic honeymoon!
From: Captain Johnson*

Tony and Shannon looked at each other, wondering what this was about. They opened the large envelope. Inside was an envelope with a voucher for a two-week cruise, all expenses paid, by the cruise line, to make up for their traumatic experience.

“Honeymoon?” Tony reached into the envelope. There was another small felt bag. Inside was the engagement ring he had bought for Shannon.