

## **Sweat, Glamour and Light Sins**

By Alex Canton-Dutari

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This is a work of fiction. Any names, characters and events that evoke real life are coincidental.

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I am pedaling on a static bike while writing on my moleskin notepad. The gym is huge and at 9 a.m. it is attended mostly by housewives taking a few hours off to do some yoga, spinning, rhythmic dancing and sharing gossip while comparing maid service.

From my vantage point in the balcony, I can spot a world of fellow sufferers; most have to shed more weight than seems realistic to do so in a lifetime.

The country is going through an epidemic of obesity, especially around the middle – not of the American region but of the abdomens of its residents.

However, there is a group of young girls who I could see nothing wrong with. Later, I found that they were beauty pageant hopefuls. Parallel to that setting, another was formed by young, perfectly-shaped men. They were either aspiring male models or fitness-freak gays.

While riding my static bike, I sense that every gymnast – a better name than gym junkies – has a story.

### **Rhonda**

I guess that most people do not know, subconsciously, that they will try to live up to the meaning of their name – that is my own unproven hypothesis.

Rhonda comes from the Spanish word <ronda> --throw in a little Latin – which means round, and she was a fair representative of the concept.

There is a stereotype of Botero's shape of ladies being very social and happy while remaining as well fed as can be. Rhonda was no exception.

She appropriated the bike next to mine and without asking my name told me her husband had jokingly threatened her for not losing weight. "I have no idea what he's going to do if I stay as I am," she commented.

My recent companion came to the gym every day, especially early in the morning, always carrying a bag with all her usual gear to make herself a touch-up before she went to work straight from the gym.

The gym outfit she wore consisted of sweatpants with a matching sweatshirt. Her sneakers may have been borrowed as they looked ill-fitting. Though what never was missing was some sort of lunch box or container for holding the snacks which she wholeheartedly ate after she had showered and slipped into her executive attire -- she called it a costume. She looked smart and round.

One morning Rhonda invited me to partake of her after-gym snack, which I accepted. A small cafeteria had been set to one side of all the exercising equipment and, as long as something was purchased within the premises, food brought along could be consumed on site.

Rhonda started to set all the food on the aluminum tables while I recalled the instructor's suggestions about food intake during a fitness program. "You can eat about anything," he insisted, "but in small portions; only what fits on your hand."

Rhonda may have noticed my inquiring eyes because she spluttered. "Well, no one said anything about the height of the food on your palm." Upon which, she served about thrice the amount probably allotted to each person. Granola bars, a large bowl of grapes, a half-liter container of yogurt and a huge thermos of coffee. I ate one granola bar, a few grapes, a half-cup of yogurt and a big one of coffee. It perked me up so I could walk back home briskly.

This was the routine that was performed between my new friend and me. I did not want to lose weight, and this extra bit of food allowed me to replace whatever calories were consumed during the workout while just toning my muscles. We wanted to make things a bit more formal by deciding to weigh ourselves every Friday.

I spent most of my time around the safer equipment that would help me work on biceps, triceps, pectorals and other undiscovered muscles without being in danger of getting suffocated by a weighty bar. Rhonda signed up for Pilates, dancing and spinning. It came as a surprise that the first choice had nothing to do with Christianity, although it seemed quite a punishment on the body. Anything close to Pontious Pilate brings me bad vibes.

The truth is that I attended the gym for mental health support. My mass-fat-muscle ratio was perfect. On the other hand, my friend's was a conglomerate of McDonald's, Vittorio's pizza and Cadbury's, Lindt and Nucita all combined. In other words, an international death by calories.

Since the instructor – now called a trainer – was aware that I did not want to lose weight, he advised me to eat a bit more, as the body would not have to consume its own resources with the extra energy expenditure. Of course, the opposite was told to Rhonda.

A few days before our first weigh-in, I suggested Rhonda invite her husband for support. She was not too convinced but asked him. He accepted with enthusiasm.

On the set day we were doing our cardio routine on our bikes and I saw Rhonda smile and immediately drew attention to a rather tall fellow – around 6'2". If she had not said anything, I would have thought he was joining the young aspiring male models.

"It's Morgan," she said. "See what I mean?"

"I guess so...you may have fierce competition," was all I could think of.

"Well, he likes fatties. At least, that's what he always said while we were dating." She sounded somewhat doubtful, more so when she added, "Of course, I've added a few more pounds since."

Morgan stood around taking in the whole scene, even chatting with some guys doing their routines until we were ready for our weight check. The procedure was held in a special room that resembled a small emergency room.

"Please disrobe and come in when I call your name," was the attendant's instruction.

We each had been assigned a cubicle adjoining the make-shift clinic, and I did as told, I guess. I do not know what happened, but when a name was called I walked in and caused an immediate halt to whatever activities were going on. Rhonda appeared in her panties and bra. I entered stark naked.

"Well, lady, you said disrobe." I ran back to the cubicle and put on my Calvin Klein shorts – it was an upscale gym, after all.

After being weighed and measured, all stats came out fine according to my height and age. On the other hand, Rhonda could have set off all the warning lights, chimes and what not, if they were installed. Her husband, who impassively watched the whole routine-turned-mess heard the verdict, approached her, gave her a peck on her lips, smiled and left. It was Friday.

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It felt as if all clocks had slowed, as the week-end had never lasted so long. Perhaps it was my eagerness to return to the gym, which had tracked me into some sort of a social life after retirement.

Early Monday morning, my speed became faster -- showering, shaving, dressing and barely taking a swig of coffee -- making me arrive just when the manager was unlocking the entrance door. As I came already fitted out for my workout, I climbed on my bike and started pedaling. Rhonda accommodated herself on the bike to my right.

"He left."

"What? When was that?"

"Remember when we finished getting our stats? Well, he left but said that I would find a note at home."

"Did you read it?"

"In a few words, 'If you want me to be me, lose weight'."

"That sounds a bit deep, Rhonda," was all I could muster, perhaps influenced by my "shrink" slant on dialogues.

"What attracts you to him?" I asked.

"Besides his sweetness, caring... he looks like a male model," she smiled widely while her eyes lightened.

"And how did you look when you got together?" This was beginning to sound like a clinical interview.

"I was a bit chubby... but he said he liked me that way."

"And are you chubby now?" I could not help but go in for the kill.

"I'm fat. No, I'm round."

"Are you the same girl he married?"

"Emotionally, yes. Physically, I guess not."

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My new friend was a fashion designer owning what she called an "exclusive" boutique for "slightly overweight ladies." I did not know beans about the subject, though I can say that she dressed in a classic, elegant way -- colors that did not make her glow like a birthday party balloon.

The saying goes that chubby girls have pretty faces. I wonder who came up with that. Rhonda may have been the exception, even if she had a pretty smile.

As far as I could gather, my gym mate did not have much of a social life. Most of it consisted of lunches with possible clients and fashion agency executives.

In fact, I was taken aback when after around six months she invited me to attend a fashion show. She was to present her fall collection. I had no idea how girls dressed according to the season, other than adding a pullover or sweater if needed -- or the contrary. In my country, there were two seasons -- rainy or dry.

"What should I wear?" was my worried inquiry.

"I picture you in jeans and marching loafers, a white t-shirt and a blazer over it."

"Too formal for me, Rhonda... the blazer thing," I added.

"OK, then a knockout open-chest, long-sleeved shirt, but with the sleeves rolled up. You have enough pecs now to show off." She said this with such spontaneity that I just had to go by her words, even though I remained unconvinced about the pectoral description.

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The event was held in her boutique, which had a salon big enough to hold a catwalk and provide a decent enough stage.

I tried to please my friend by donning a pair of clean looking jeans and a white, open-chest linen shirt with rolled up sleeves. I did wear tanned loafers.

"Morgan's coming," Rhonda excitedly told me. "We haven't seen each other for almost six months, but we've been in touch by cell and chat."

"How do you feel about it?" I asked.

"I know he loves me as ever. I can feel it. He's also said it."

"Did he ask you about your weight?"

"I told him I haven't shed an ounce," to which she added, "I did get a cosmetic makeover."

She, in fact, had a new look that accented her hazel eyes and her pretty smile. Her attire was strictly executive -- deep blue blouse and coat top with a white shirt, barely hinting some cleavage and black high heels that accentuated her chubby but shapely legs.

"I'm holding a brief cocktail gathering when the show ends. You're invited." Then she added, "By the way, I can't afford professional models. So, some gym friends will do the catwalk. After all, it's mostly plus size fashion, with a couple of exceptions."

I must say that I was impressed by the organization and swiftness of the show. The gym models knew how to make the outfits stand out. None tried to steal the show.

The event ended with the wedding dress display. It was modeled by a tall, pretty and elegant girl whose name was not announced as had been with all the previous models. This set off an alarm in my shrink's mind.

After a while, all guests moved to an adjoining room where champagne and finger-sized sandwiches were passed around.

Rhonda was ecstatic. The show had been a success. Though I noticed that while she mingled, her eyes kept looking in the direction of the entrance. I followed her gaze. At some point, the door opened and a fellow holding a single red rose entered and walked straight to Rhonda.

She began to smile but quit in mid act. "Is this Morgan?" I asked myself.

"Sweetheart," he said while handing her the rose. Though the scene was playing at a subtle pace, some people were paying attention.

"Rhonda, do you remember our wedding vows?" She could not answer.

"We shall remain the same as possible as today -- in love and looks."

Rhonda just looked silently while her husband continued. "I told you that if you wanted me to be me... please lose weight."

She nodded.

"I need to get you to understand what it is to live with a different person than the one you married." Then he added, "That's why I've gained close to eighty pounds in these past six months."

The woman should have felt ridiculed, I thought, but she just smiled at him.

"I want my Morgan back." She spoke quietly.

"And I want my Rhonda back." This was not said in a whisper.

I just had to say quite loud, "Well, my friends, let's all be here for Rhonda's next show."

### **Issi**

When she finished her catwalk in the bridal gown, her heart had already returned to its regular rhythm. All the gym workouts had turned her body into a perfectly adaptable machine. Hence, knowing she was the highlight of the fashion show hit its peak while she was speechlessly suggesting the audience that this was the outfit the next bride should wear.

The small reception was in full swing when Issi decided to make her entrance. Not because she was snobby or felt above the other models. On the contrary, she was constantly embarrassed, and nothing bothered her more than being socially and formally introduced. She always made sure she was presented as Ms. López. During shows, she would not even allow that. It was almost as if she was performing incognito.

I do not remember how old she was, though she could not be over nineteen. While attending her training sessions at the gym, she looked even younger as she wore no make-up. In my opinion, she did not need any.

Most of the girls in her group had been at least runners-up in one of the many beauty pageants held recently. A couple had represented the country in the Miss Universe Pageant and one had been in Miss World. I also think that even a Miss Asia-Pacific winner was in the group. Those who had not been winners had until age twenty-five to be hopefuls.

After Rhonda's fashion show, I became very curious about the nameless model. She must have been close to six feet tall, her head crowned by beautiful, bright auburn hair that cascaded to the tip of her shoulders in smooth waves. Her skin had a perfect, natural golden tan, and her face ... no way I can describe it.... just beautiful!

I guess not even beauty can be perfect. Issi was always kidded for having "a few pounds too many." Her attendance at the gym was to shed them as fast as possible. She was also invited to share Rhonda's fare, though she ate even less than I. Half a granola bar and maybe an ounce of yogurt. However, she would never shy away from a large cup of coffee with cream and sugar.

"Issi," I asked one morning, "would I be too rude if I ask where you're from?"

"I'm from Paraguay," she responded.

"I attended a convention in Asuncion many years ago. I remember that it was so hot that I decided not to wear a coat and tie. When I got there, everyone was dressed so formally that I was so embarrassed I had to go back to the hotel to dress appropriately."

"I came to the U.S. very young," she said.

"How young?"

"I was around eight, and that wasn't soon enough," she added, somewhat annoyed.

"Did you learn to speak Guarani? I remember that it's the official language of Paraguay, Spanish coming in second."

"We speak it at home sometimes. My favorite expression is "Rojhayhû," she said.

It means I love you. She must have pronounced it right because she beamed while saying it.

"That sounds sweet," I mumbled. "Who came with you?" I kept on.

"Don't you think you're asking too much?" she almost shoved me off. Well, I had it coming.

She said "see you" and went to work on a fly machine.

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Paraguay is a South American country that became a haven for Nazi Germans fleeing trials after World War II. It had also become a pathway for smuggling between Asia and the American Continent. While most of its inhabitants were very poor, there were - as was common at the time -- a few well-to-do families that owned close to 80% of the country's wealth. There was a big gap between the Native American Paraguayan population and those descending from Europeans. I have the impression that things remain pretty much the same, without the usual dictatorship that ruled for years.

Though the German immigrants kept a close-knit society, there was a bit of intermarriage with Caucasian Paraguayans. Issi must have got her looks from some intercultural sexual exploit -- or should we call it research? Her height gave away a possible background story.

She attended a Catholic private school. Her mother did not want her to socialize with the equivalent of gentry. Though the family was well-to-do with her father being a successful lawyer and her mother having been educated in Italy, the only child had to be secured a perfect future.

Amidst weekends in their little villa by Ipacará Lake, which was known for a very beautiful song, especially among the inhabitants of the Southern Cone of that portion of America and having all her needs attended by nannies, plus an active child social life, happiness prevailed.

Dictatorships will always dangle a Damocles sword over all its citizens. It was no different in this country. Dr. López was a lawyer who had developed much expertise in import-export trading law, and he was known for being clean. There was no chance of him participating in any smuggling enterprises.

His falling out with the Government occurred when he was asked to allow a huge amount of medication to be imported. The contents of the liquid cough medicine had not been pharmaceutically determined. Nevertheless, his signature was forged and the

small containers of cough syrup were labeled and distributed to hospitals and pharmacies around the country.

About a month after the remedy distribution started, people began arriving at various emergency rooms with fever and kidney failure. Many died and others were condemned to a life of suffering. The medication was laced with Diethylen Glycol, which is a poisonous industrial solvent.

Nothing could save the lawyer from being blamed for the import of the tainted medication. His wife and daughter were shunned from their usual social activities, and the girl had it especially rough as her schoolmates scorned and badmouthed her as children do while imitating their parents.

Unexpectedly, the family fled the country. Dr. López had enough money in the HSBC bank and had no trouble obtaining refugee status for himself and his family.

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I was able to gather the aforementioned information through Rhonda. She had a very close relationship with her "models," and this probably reinforced the stereotype that chubby ladies are motherly, regardless of their age.

There must be something wrong with this girl not wanting to use her name, I kept thinking more frequently than I wanted to.

So, during one of our snack rendezvous I suggested to my friend that from a professional stand it was not to a model's advantage not having a name. The times for mystery were left behind with Greta Garbo.

"Let's see, Rhonda, your next collection will be shown in a few months, and I take it you want to use Issi. Am I right?"

"Most definitely, the only problem is that we -- I mean she -- is losing weight," she said.

"So?" I came up with.

"Well, I still design for fat ladies. Plus size is almost my trademark."

"Whatever," I commented on passing, but became serious when I told her, "Rhonda, I think that you should include in all models' contracts that they will do their catwalk once their gown and official name have been announced."

"OK, I'll see how I get around this messy situation. We may be in for a surprise."

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"Issy," was the conversation's beginning, "what are your plans with your modeling career?"

"I wish I could say that I see myself as the main feature on the country's catwalks, maybe even getting a contract abroad," Issy responded with a reserved smile.

"What seems to be the problem? You own the moment once you start to show your attire." Rhonda squeezed the girl's hands in a motherly, concerned fashion.

"I've heard about the name in the contract clause. It scares me so much."

"What's the big deal, dear?" she continued. "Issi is a beautiful name."

"Can I tell you my story, Rhonda?"

"Please do."



"You know that I came from Paraguay. We have had immigrants from so many countries that unless the name is native Paraguayan, you may end up with the name of the saint assigned to your birth date. I would have been named Agapita, which is a hideous name, even for us."

Issi kept adding more examples of names, nicknames, even girls' names assigned to men and vice-versa. She decided to explain her plight. I am sure I would have rolled over laughing had I been present. Issi was lucky I was not.

"My mother liked to sing, and there was nothing more endearing to her than the sound of vowels and consonants intermingling."

"That's cute," Rhonda said.

"So it seems, but mother wanted to create a combination of sounds that would almost tinkle in her ears."

"And what did she come up with?"

Issi bent her head and kept it so for a few long seconds. Then she sat up straight, looked at Rhonda in the eye and said, "*Eazilei*"

"What?"

"Yes... can you imagine yourself announcing, 'And now our Eazilei will enchant you with the show's bridal dress?'"

"Oh, Issi... this is so unusual... I don't know what to do right now."

"Now you know, Rhonda... I'm sure you'll find a way around this."

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## **Jack**

Pets were not allowed inside the gym, but I became curious when I noticed a doggie traveling case with a small passenger in it. Most customers ignored it as the creature gnarled whenever someone approached.

I had read that the best way to gain a bit of trust with any dog was for the human to stoop down to the canine's height and maintain eye-to-eye contact while saying something nice.

The words probably do not have any importance as the soothing, mellow sound does the trick. It works similarly in humans.

One morning Rhonda told me that she would like to include a male model in her next show.

"I understand that you only design feminine fashion," I commented.

"That's true, though I'd like Issi to be escorted by a knock-out guy who won't overshadow her."

"I like the idea, Rhonda, and there are a few members here that you could choose from."

"Yes, but the only drawback is that most of them are so set on showing their bodies... I want someone not so egotistical."

"Let's do something, Rhonda. We already have our vantage point in the balcony while we do our spinning," I said. "How about checking all the guys weightlifting down below?"

So began the search for Issi's escort.

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I had made a habit of going up to the small dog awaiting his master in the reception hall. It seemed that the eye contact technique was having its desired effect, as the pooch would greet me standing on his hind legs and scratching the grill door of his enclave with his front feet.

Dogs are not my preferred pets, coming in a close second to cats, but there was something peculiar about this one. It was mostly white with very short legs on a disproportioned long body -- still a small dog -- long snout and with small ears in a perfect V shape. Also, he definitely seemed feisty.

On one occasion, I took Issi and Rhonda to see him. I had advised them about the eye contact technique, but only Rhonda attempted it. She almost gurgled like a baby, and I swear that the little beast curled his upper lips and showed all his teeth, canines included, while appearing to smile.

Issi could not help but laugh, never having met a supposedly smiling dog.

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The word was out that Rhonda was searching for a male model. This brought about more guests at her after workout repas. I would participate mostly out of curiosity; my friend insisted that I could spot any negative traits or motivation in the candidates.

We decided to do some research and discovered that in the 90s, male models tended to be chosen by looks -- masculine face lines -- and muscle development. The Italian Fabio type.

Nowadays, the trend is towards a much leaner build, with more delicate facial features - - almost androgynous.

So far, none of the gym male enthusiasts made the cut.

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As the days and weeks went by, I noticed that Rhonda was taking her mid-morning social munching with such gusto that it gave the impression that dieting had reached some special level.

Nevertheless, the fare had taken on a slight twist. Yes, there still was the big container of yogurt and seemingly endless granola bar packs, and grapes had turned into an assortment of fruits, mainly those in season. In addition, rather than the grab-what-you-want-from-the-table she had introduced small plates and would serve very small portions to whoever decided to drop by. Only the coffee remained uncontrolled, which was just right for me.

We had our Friday weight schedules but, by some unspoken pact, decided not to share the results. Maybe, subconsciously, we wanted to reveal a trophy end, or were afraid of facing possible failure.

I had, almost jokingly, commented to one of the administrators that the mirrors seemed to be playing a trick on me.

"Whenever I walk by a walled mirror, I always seem to have put on weight."

The fellow smiled and said, "You think so?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure," I answered. "Though, I don't care because my fear is to lose weight."

"Then it's not bad, uh?"

"Guess not, but I wonder if it works the same for the female clients. Most of them are here to slim down." It was a serious remark on my part.

"I don't know how the owners operate, but it may be that if the ladies always see themselves a bit over their real silhouette they'll keep coming to the gym. What the scale says doesn't matter." I took this as a risky comment, but appreciated the sincerity.

My final remark was just a sly comment: "I guess that psychology is always behind successful marketing."

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One morning, while doing our spinning, Rhonda and I simultaneously glanced towards the entrance, where the little dog waited. A lad, apparently in his early twenties, disengaged himself from the group of young men working out on the dumb-bells, went to a locker, took out a small bag and walked over to what we just discovered was his pet.

"That's him," Leaving me aghast, Rhonda almost flew down the stairs to the reception hall.

"Hi, I've been wondering who the owner of this cute thing is."

"Yes?" was the answer she received.

"Excuse me, my name is Rhonda. I've been here for ages, it seems. Your dog is my friend. What's his name?" It was as if she could not stop because she had to grab the young man's attention.

The fellow smiled in earnest while he told her that pet and owner shared the same name.

"No kidding! Which name is it?"

"Jack... Jack Russell," He paused and continued, "It's almost a joke; I know, but that's the way it is."

"Well, Jack... both of you... my name's Rhonda."

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Rhonda made it a routine to visit little Jack coinciding with the ending of his owner's gym routine. Sometimes she would leave me in mid-spinning to be at the post a bit ahead of Jack Russell.

I inquired about her eagerness, and her normal answer was, "He's Issis escort for my next show."

"And what's so special about him?"

"Jack's about an inch shorter than her. She'll stand out without overshadowing him," she explained.

"You're right on that one."

"Also, look at his thick, black, soft, wavy hair -- not long, not short."

"Grant you that one, Rhonda."

"And his build... no weightlifter stuff but well-defined lean muscles. He would look perfect in a close-fitting European-style suit, and I think is more elegant." She obviously had defined the profile she had created for her friend's escort.

"Do you think he'll accept?" I asked.

"That's where you and Issi come in."

I was speechless.

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### **Gym's Inner Core**

Yes, such a place does exist in every gym no matter where in the world it is. In the main areas, the clients tend to have a very serious attitude about their training. The conversations that take place usually center on the workouts being shared. Though, everyone must unwind and wipe their sweat after a general and individual group effort. Unwinding takes place in the dressing rooms.

The process consisted of changing to casual clothes after showering and perhaps shaving if going to work was the next step. Of course, I am referring to the men.

Being the oldest among the trainees had an advantage -- taken seriously upon making a dumb comment.

"My locker's missing a bed to be a bedroom," would be something I would say, getting at least a smile in return.

"Yes sir, I know what you mean. I practically live here, too," was a frequently heard answer.

There was a professional scale strategically placed in an aisle leading to the showers, and all kinds of sounds could be heard after the fellows stepped on it.

Most of the young men wanted to add weight and muscle, or at least keep it under control. The older group had losing weight as the main goal. Of course, this was the most common topic of conversation.

As for myself, I am too old to care about bodily aesthetics, but I did not want to lose weight. Of course, avoiding flab is always welcome.

When I was younger -- between forty-five and fifty-five -- I attended another gym after work hours. There were many people in my same age range. After all the daily routines, we would gather in the steam room and have a go at politics, trying to put the country's state of affairs together. I recall it was the best part of my early gym days.

Now, the political discussions were gone and were replaced by some more intimate themes. It seemed to me that most of the young people were less private about their personal information. Perhaps exposure to social media on the internet has provided the setting for this.

The gym had many programs, one of them being training to perform with long sheets hanging, toning on machines and, of course, learning to use the sheets for climbing, gyrating and synchronized movements. I never tired of watching the small group during their training sessions. Always captivated by the routines, I had failed to pay attention to the individual participants.

"Jack, you almost slipped down the sheet this morning," someone said out loud, which reminded me of Rhonda's, "It's up to you ...."

I looked around, and a bit further down the row of lockers ahead of me, Rhonda's new found friend answered, "It was a close call."

While sitting on a bench changing my socks I got myself into the conversation, "I hadn't noticed there was a guy in the group. You people are fantastic!"

"Thanks, I'm Jack." The young man came up to me and shook my hand.

"I'm called Abuelo -- Grandpa. And I practically live here, as you can gather from all the stuff in my locker." After a pause I continued, "How did you get involved in sheet dancing?"

"I was in Toronto a couple of years ago and saw Circle du Soleil. Got hooked."

"A bit daring, if you ask me, young man."

"It's safe enough under good supervision. And great exercise."

The truth is that I do not think I would ever have become acquainted with Jack if not for the frequent conversations in the men's locker room. On the other hand, I knew I had a task to perform and it felt uncomfortable.

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From that day on I made it a habit to drop by the sheet acrobatics training, and Rhonda was dragged along.

"I already opened the door for you, my friend," I told her. "You find out what's inside now."

It took me no time to identify the leader of the group, and she appreciated the compliments on her efforts, which were transmitted to the group. Jack introduced me to Mabelle and I did the same with Rhonda. In other words, the stage was set.

At some point we found out that Mabelle was very protective of Jack Russell, more on the motherly side than in the he's-my-find category.

He would follow all her instructions and remained very concentrated, always. Upon ending his sessions and his dressing room routine he would take little Jack and leave.

One morning, I noticed that the youth was having trouble wrapping around the sheet dangling from the roof. He slipped and landed on the protective cushions. Mabelle took him aside and analyzed his previous moves, after which she told him,

"Jack, it's the second time it happens," she told him.

"Sorry, Mabelle."

"Slow down on the dumb-bells. You need more flexibility. So, you're taking salsa lessons, Jack."

The fellow just nodded and added another daily routine. Rhonda noticed that he had a half-hour break which fitted perfectly into her own. She invited Jack to join her already traditional snack breaks. He accepted, and our plan seemed to be headed for a happy ending.

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### **Seriously dancing**

I was surprised by the number of participants the salsa classes had. It was called *salsa*, but it included several fast Caribbean rhythms, among them my favorite -- *merengue*.

Most of my fellow Latin Americans from the Caribbean area seem to be born with a very special ability to follow any cadence, beat or rhythm. I found it so natural that I did not understand why this class was included in Jack Russell's training.

The dance room was huge, and it had panoramic windows that allowed clear vision to the goings-on. It was pretty well sound-proofed. I enjoyed the music, but not at the volume it was being played. Besides, my spinning was done opposite the main door.

Most of those present were women, except Jack Russell and the instructor -- a young Cuban fellow. There was no need to sign up, and I decided to join the fun -- I thought it was fun. In less than ten minutes, I was almost out cold.

Marcos, the salsa instructor, explained that the steps had to be executed with strength for them to have any positive cardio and flexibility results. At my age I could not keep up. Jack just slipped in as a pro.

Later on, I approached the dance teacher and asked him why dancing would help Jack Russell with his sheet acrobatics. "Next time, watch me lead the class and you'll see," he told me.

I knew the steps to all Caribbean dancing and noticed that the dancer would accompany each movement with a short swing of his hips -- right, left, or in a figure of eight pattern. In addition, he would bend his knees slightly, while gyrating his arms and hands high above his head. All this was performed in perfect synchrony with the music.

Most of the pupils just followed the main sequence. Therefore, it was fun but without much effort on the body. Most would sweat profusely and recuperate the lost liquid after drinking a bottle of water when the session ended. In conclusion, Marcos kept lean and strong. The girls kept fat and happy. They also enjoyed Jack Russell's presence.

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## **Gym's Inner Core II**

While in the locker room, I would always reminisce about my previous experience with the gym sub-culture. It came as a surprise when one of the fellows commented to no one in particular, "Time to wax again."

I had no idea what he was referring to. My memory brought back, a scene from years back when I was participating in a cantata staged as an opera -- Carmina Burana by Carl Orff. A small cast of weightlifters was included to carry the throne of the Queen.

On the night of the performance, while we were donning our costumes a stench permeated the area -- a hundred rotten eggs? As it happened, the weightlifters had drenched themselves with some chemical that left their bodies as hairless as a baby's bottom. After that, they smeared oil on each other and remained wearing something that was nothing more than a sling.

As usual, I got into the theme and asked what needed waxing in the gym. The floors seemed clean enough to me, and I was convinced that waxing them would make them unsafely slippery.

"I've grown too much bodily hair. It doesn't look good when I lift my arms," was the explanation I received.

It was then that I noticed that almost all the young men attending this particular gym were pretty much hairless, having even shaved or waxed most of their pubes.

A large number of fellows also sported tattoos, some covering one or both shoulders and others just a small one on the lower back or on one side of their butt. Someone had tattooed his whole torso, front and back.

I've always been curious about tattoos. One day I asked, "As one grows old, do the flowers stay the same or do they wilt as the skin wrinkles?"

"No, Abuelo, the colors do lose some luster, but that's about it." The fellow with the full-torso tattoo explained.

"Guess you're right. I remember the men from Polynesia and Japan that have their bodies completely tattooed. The designs look fine on the old ones."

Jack Russell sported a little sword tattooed on his right butt cheek. The blade was painted bright silver and the handle red.

Oh, yes, he had less body hair than Michaelangelo's David -- the statue was marble.

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The trainers gathered in a special area that held all their lockers. Therefore, they were a closed group, though their subject of conversation was not their own work per se, but the aesthetic aspects of their trainees, especially the beauty pageant hopefuls.

Of course, most wanted to coach some of these girls, but not all were so lucky. Even the fortunate ones had to face a drawback: Socializing out of the gym's boundaries was forbidden.

When Issi started her training, she was not among the young instructors' favorites. They found her a bit overweight and felt threatened by her height. After Rhonda's fashion show, the wheels turned and they all vied for the opportunity to coach her.

She attended Marcos' dance classes -- they also called it dance aerobics. As far as his workmates were concerned, it was a waste of time. They were convinced that he was gay. "Has to be gay to move like that," was a frequent comment among the trainers.

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### **Sheet Dance**

I still did not understand the relationship between aerobic dancing and sheet dancing -- or acrobatics. One morning I approached Mabelle and asked her.

"Most weight and muscle building equipment," she started explaining, "will develop muscles and, when pushed beyond what is advisable, will produce muscle deformity. It may look nice for some people; however, fiber elasticity diminishes."

"What does dancing do, then?" I was becoming increasingly curious, and my scientific background was gearing the conversation almost towards a formal interview.

"If the students follow all the movements -- which most don't do -- they will burn fat and their muscles will slowly be able to stretch with ease. At the same time, following the rhythm requires controlled strength, which adds endurance to the whole body. All is needed for sheet acrobatics." Mabelle had answered as the professional she was.

I just kept on. "There has to be more than that because I've seen that every move in the acrobatics show is done with background music."

"Of course," she continued. "Most of our moves follow a count of two, four, or eight. And the acrobats have to count while moving to the music's rhythm."

At this point my brain had had enough information; actually, it could not take any more.

"Will Jack be able to handle all that?"

"I'm sure he will. I just need him to be more expressive, facially."

I had also noticed that Jack Russell rarely smiled. In fact, his dog was not that playful, and I remember that Reverend Jack Russell -- the creator of his name-sake species of canines -- probably never knew that these attractive creatures would, eventually, be trained to kill rats.

If the owner has a few traits of his pet, I smelled a rat around Jack Russell.

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Rhonda continued holding her morning snack breaks, and she already had a fair number of steady hungry participants. The models of her previous show always stopped by and, though he was not a member of the cast yet, Jack Russell included himself. In fact, he was not aware of what was expected of him.

One morning, a few months prior to the next season's fashion show Rhonda decided to approach her candidate about the modeling possibility.

"I don't know, Rhonda," he said, but followed as if interested. "I've always felt clumsy in public. And you've seen me in my acrobatics practice."

"C'mon, Jack. You're very self-assured now. Mabelle seems happy with your progress. On top of it all, you're aware of how your dance classmates ogle you and your moves." The designer put in a last recourse, "I need you, Jack. I need you for Issi."

Issi happened to be pulling a chair and was able to overhear her friend's request and added, "Yes, Jack, I'm counting on you."

The youth seemed to waver for a few long seconds before saying: "I'll do my best. But please be patient with me. I'm more scared than you can imagine."

Neither Issi nor Rhonda had an inkling of what Jack Russell meant. Warning lights flashed in my mind.

### **Fashion Re-Designing**

I had concluded that my friend was set on designing for what she called slightly heavy sizes because she perceived herself as such. It was also a good sales niche, though I was convinced that her creativity had become encased in providing a trimmer look rather than turning out a work of art.

Fashion designing was a great mystery to me. I thought that all it took was having a bit of imagination, a sheet of paper and perhaps a good black pencil. The next step would be sending the drawing to a seamstress to put the dress together.

Rhonda took me to her workshop and I was surprised by what I took for clutter: pieces of fabric of all textures, colors, hues and even scents. On one side of a room she had set a mannequin that she told me was for fitting the dress in progress. I had no idea what she meant.

There was also a rectangular table that perhaps would fit eight guests if it had chairs to match. It was used for drawing and cutting. By a huge window three automatic sewing machines were set side by side. I recognized a legendary black Singer which was called *la negrita* in my country. The other two were very modern.

I asked about the dressing room, and Rhonda just said, "I don't need one."

"Just give me a few seconds," she smiled at me. "I have to finish some stitching." She sat at the little Singer and did whatever stitching meant.



While watching my friend work at her sewing machine, I had a bit of a flashback of my grandmother doing the same thing. The only difference was that her Singer was not electric and she had to turn a lever with her right hand while controlling the fabric and the needle with her left one. I have the impression that the end product was of the same quality. Of course, I may be upgrading grandma's work.

"Rhonda, where did you learn to become a seamstress?" I asked in earnest.

"Hold it, my friend," she gave me a stern look. "I'm not a seamstress."

"Sorry, I thought that was the right word," I said, almost apologizing.

"I am a fashion designer, and I do my own sewing because knowing how to do so is a must." She went back to her task while continuing, "A seamstress will follow the pattern already designed. In fact, most shun designing. It's too risky."

I was not too convinced by the explanation, but she summed it up in an original way by saying that an architect designs and the builders are responsible for following the plans. With this analogical explanation, the profession of dress-making was set in its proper standing.

"Do you work alone?"

"When the season gets closer I have helpers that are in charge of measuring, fitting and sewing, but I do all the designs." Her enthusiasm started growing when she told me that she felt it was going to be easier this time.

"How come?" I asked.

"I've got all the girls' measurements. That's going to save me much time." She sounded convinced.

"I'm not too sure, Rhonda," I went on. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but I have the impression that your models are losing weight."

"That would be a mess, because there's nothing worse than re-making or re-designing when a dress has been finished. I'd always rather start from scratch." She was worried.

"Well, I have the impression that they were also touched by your husband's appearance during your last show. Maybe they also want their spouses to remain as themselves. And, by the way, how's your husband doing?"

Not much had been said about Rhonda's husband, which put me somewhat at ease for not remembering his name. "He's back home," and then she continued. "As sweet as ever. But I know he's up to something... a nice surprise, I'm sure."

The truth was that Morgan was arriving late from work. Anyone else would have thought that he was having an affair. Rhonda knew it was not so and decided to put up with his late arrivals. He always returned tired but in great humor.

Though she was not one to talk about her intimacy, she did tell me that their sex life was better in frequency and quality.

### **Designer Worries**

My designer friend was planning on having fourteen dresses in her summer fashion show. Well, actually fifteen, including Issi's show closing wedding dress. Thus, she scheduled a measurement session for her eight models.

The ladies met at the studio and each one went through the process, including having their current weight checked.

A wave of surprise spread as Rhonda noticed that each model's measurements had diminished, considerably. On the other hand, their weight did not seem to have reduced accordingly.

The explanation was that tissue re-distribution was taking place. Noticeable weight loss would occur later.

This was met with much joy by all the ladies. Rhonda felt ambivalent. This could possibly mean that she might have to re-design the dresses she had already sketched. The outlook was that the models would not be exactly overweight, and the designs she had in mind tended to be rather loose fitting to hide the lack of eye-catching silhouettes.

Even Issi allowed herself to say something about feeling more like a model now than during the previous show.

The following week I was assuaged by a very worried fashion designer who had realized that she had to start to work away from her comfort zone.

When she confided her worry I just voiced what I wanted to tell her since a few weeks back: "My friend, you may not be aware of it, but you are also getting trimmer." As a former shrink I knew that this could be a two-blade sword.

### **Real vs. Ideal Body Image**

Most people seem to handle well enough the fact of losing weight. Ladies welcome getting into smaller garment sizes. But from experience I know that the comfort gets a tumbling blow when compliments are received. The reason being that the body image the person has tends to be the original, even after change. "I am slim, but I am fat" - would be the oxymoronic rationale. In other words, self body image is not easily altered.

Therefore, the group was up against each person's possible rejection of a new body image. There was the risk of the appearance of anxiety which could induce a relapse to previous eating habits. And I decided to help them.

Since I did not want to make too much of a big deal of the negative possibilities of their weight loss I suggested that they take ten minutes each day and face themselves in a full-sized mirror. The exercise was simple: Look at your body for a minute; close your eyes and try to visualize it; open eyes and check the reality. The group felt enthusiastic about the simple instructions and there was the promise to follow them every day. Of course, I was sure that they would not waver as they all wanted to be part of a unique fashion experience.

After two weeks I noticed that everyone was comfortable and there was no report of eating binges, anxiety attacks or interpersonal problems. Rhonda was also participating and she knew that she was the group's role model, which made her proud.

### **A little bit of nightlife**

It can be expensive to belong to a gym, especially one as plush as this one. Most members come from middle class families that survived the recent economy downfall felt in most of the world.

I was not sure about Jack Russell. He was attending college; that much I knew, and to me it was obvious that he was supporting himself, unlike Issi, who lived off family funds.

One day while in the locker room I heard a conversation centering on a night in the town. Apparently, some fellows' wives had suggested going to a male strip club. I gathered that it was not the first time, as someone said: "Well, these joints are really coded and they're fun."

Another voice added: "And it's even more fun if you discover familiar faces."

"Abuelo, care to join us?"

"I'll pass. I'm too old for that kind of stuff."

"C'mon, people your age also show up." One of the guys insisted.

I did not want to be a party pooper, and curiosity got the best of me.

"Fine, I'm in." I paused a while and continued. "I don't drive at night."

"No problem, Abuelo. Johnny here will be in charge of you."

And so it was that a new stage was set.

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The truth is that I had never been very interested in night clubbing, though I had been to the classics such as Les Folies Bergères in Paris, Copacabana in Havana, and an interesting one in Bangkok. All of them were nothing more than high class tourist traps with classy shows.

Johnny and his girlfriend were on time, and we drove somewhere in downtown LA. As in most big towns this one had a nightclub strip, and the one we were attending just had a neon sign with its name. I was expecting a bouncer or two deciding who would be allowed in, but there was none.

Once my sight became used to the lights I followed the couple, who seemed to know exactly where to go. In fact, the group of ten persons -- plus one -- sat around a table that was in front of a stage. Well, I thought it was a stage, because its floor was on top of a platform about six inches high. Since it would be uncomfortable for a couple to step up to dance I concluded that it was a performers' stage.

The background music -- though I felt it right in my ears -- was techno, for which I was thankful. I probably would have walked out if rap was playing -- I cannot understand the words and do not consider it music.

I do not like alcoholic drinks that much. I ordered a Coke with barely a few drops of bourbon, which I planned on making last for a long time. And set myself to enjoy the conversation and the oncoming show.

It seemed that the entire group had been at this particular nightclub previously as the waiters were called by their names with much familiarity. The girls commented on their favorite performers.

One of the conversation themes made me laugh very much. It centered on the differences between the performers and the spouses. It seemed that coming to this particular joint reminded the guys that they better stay fit. I wondered if they ever went to see striptease, where the men would have their say.

After close to one hour of laughing, drinking and just kidding around the music changed, the stage floor was flooded with bright spotlights and the show began. From my limited previous experience I expected to see a group of young men strutting to the sound of the music, barely clad and doing whatever is considered seductive in a show as such.

I noticed something distinct in the artists' attires. They all wore masks. Not the kind that just covered the eyes. These masks reminded me of the ones used in Venice during carnival festivities. Characteristically, they conceal the main features of the face, which makes identification practically impossible. It occurred to me that most of the strippers were working their way through school.

As far as I am concerned, especially at this age, a job is a job. I was raised to believe that, as long as it was an honest venture, there was nothing to be ashamed of. Well, that is the theory of working. The reality may not be so liberal.

The show began with one dancer wearing a black mask that covered his entire face, but the eye slits were wide enough to notice very blue eyes underneath. He wore a matching slip that I took for a Speedo swimming trunk -- very low waist. By the way, I call it a slip because he kept slipping it down his butt every time he approached the front edge of the stage. My girl companions were going wild, asking their dates for money to put in the outfit. I wondered why they did not pay out of their own funds.

This particular performer danced and teased on stage for perhaps fifteen minutes and was followed by several others doing a similar routine. The girls kept begging for the *full monty*, which I was pretty sure was not going to happen.

The guys were having as much fun as the girls, even catcalling, which I found rather unusual. Definitely a new age.

When the last number was over, the stage went black for a few seconds. The music stopped. I thought there was a blackout, but just one spotlight turned on, creating a cone of light that formed a bright circle on the floor. The music was on again and I had a sudden flashback of the gym and the dance lessons.

The rhythm was definitely salsa. The dancer wore a bright silver mask with a matching silver Speedo. Every muscle in his body seemed to be linked to produce the most sensuous dance movements. In one instance, he stood still and made a number eight with his hips, belly and legs that made my table's occupants scream in unison. He was fantastic.

The music reduced its rhythm and the performer slowly approached our group. His movements became extremely seductive, practically inviting every girl to join him on the stage while allowing the money to be inserted in his garment.

Johnny's girl tried to play a trick. When the fellow dipped for her to be within reach she pulled his slip. It did not go down much. Just enough for me to see a tattoo of a little sword with a bright silver blade and a red handle painted on his right buttock.

### **Mabelle**

Mabelle told me that she had a degree in physical education, taught gymnastics at a local junior college, and was in love with her sheet acrobatics group. Every morning, except Sunday, was spent training her group.

I learned that Gram Dance was pretty well-known in the performing arts community as it had been staged both nationally and abroad. The group was tightly knit, and I felt

warm-hearted every Saturday, when Mabelle's husband and three girls between the ages of ten and two came to watch. Carl was an English teacher at the same institution his wife worked at.

By this time, Mabelle was aware of Rhonda having invited Jack Russell to become Issi's escort at the forthcoming fashion show. She was not very enthusiastic about the idea. Her opinions were kept to herself. Nobody ever heard her take on the subject.

For some unknown reason, people will always give me a hint of rough spots in their lives. Well, my monitors during my clinical training always said that I was a good listener, never voicing a judgment.

On one of Mabelle's family visits, Carl approached me at the table where I was drinking a cup of coffee.

"I wish my wife wouldn't be so set on Jack being a perfect copy of Sasha." He told me.

"Who's Sasha?" I asked.

"A girl who performed with the group for five years. She was as perfect as a sheet acrobat could be," he responded, sadly.

"Why was she replaced?" I asked.

"She and her son got hit by a drunk driver. The kid survived. She was killed instantly."

"When did it happen?" I kept on.

"About two years ago. They haven't had a public performance ever since," Carl added.

"Are they planning on going on stage again?"

"Yes, but my wife said that she couldn't stand a girl taking Sasha's place. She decided on a man." Carl explained.

"So there's where Jack Russell came in," I concluded.

"She knew him from a class in college."

At that moment, I began to understand a bit of the dynamics of my small group of gym friends.

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"Jack," I heard Mabelle speak sternly. "You are not abfloating as smoothly as you should."

*Abfloating.* That was a new word to me, and I immediately asked what it meant. It was explained to me that there was a move where the person would practically float in the air while wrapped by the sheet around the abdomen. It was supposed to be one of the most beautiful scenes of the performance.

"I guess I'm just tired, Mabelle," was Jack's response.

"Working late?" It was barely a question.

"Have to... tuition's coming up," was his answer.

"Please, Jack, remember that it was Sasha's showpiece," Mabelle almost pleaded. At the same time, she realized that she had said the wrong thing.

"I can't be Sasha; you know that."

"Sorry... I just want the group to be at its best."

If you expect a man to perform as a woman you may be in for a big disappointment, was the thought that came to my mind.

### **Burdens of Life**

It did not take long for Jack Russell to know that I had identified him as the star stripper at the club.

I was usually the first customer to arrive at the gym; he was among the next early arrivals. To me it was obvious that he had not slept more than four hours, did all his training routines -- three hours -- showered, shaved, dressed casually and left for college. I imagine that on the way he had to go back home to leave little Jack.

"Did you like my show, Abuelo?" He asked me when he saw me spinning by myself.

"I must say that I was amazed, kid. You sure know how to dance. You must have some Latin blood in you."

"Well, I do, on my mother's side. They're from Dominicana."

"The Dominican Republic; no wonder, Jack."

"How long have you been dancing?"

"Since I was a kid... you know that *Merengue* is the national dance." By this time, he was smiling and any trace of embarrassment was gone.

"Well, I guess I meant to ask how long have you been dancing in the club."

"I had to do it, Abuelo. College is expensive, plus room and board, clothing and everything else," he explained.

"I would say that it's a surprising but honest job, and that's what counts." I was trying to lift his confidence.

"Jack, does someone else know about your line of work?" I was a bit concerned about the job and its possible social consequences.

"I don't think so."

"Not even Mabelle?"

"I'm sure."

"How did you get into nightclub dancing?" I felt uneasy calling it by its name: stripping.

"Nightclubs send scouts to all gyms, and in a very discreet fashion, they approach some of the guys and offer spots. Some gym mates will accept for a night or two a week and others make it a full-time job. That's what I'm doing. As you may have gathered, the money is good."

"That's an understatement, my boy." I burst out laughing. "You don't seem exactly bold, Jack. Didn't you worry about the possible social consequences of such a job?" Here is where I wanted the conversation to go. I wondered why he chose this particular line of work.

"It was my first concern, Abuelo, but when I realized that the scout was so eager for me to accept, I told him that I would do it on one condition. I was to wear a mask."

Jack Russell was coming through as an intelligent, scheming lad. I was convinced when he explained that the manager of the club decided that it was best to have all the strippers masked. This would open a door for young college students in need of a job.

"Well, if it's a secret, it remains so with me, Jack." Though, I did add, "Just keep in mind what Mabelle said. You outshine all the other dancers in the nightclub. At least shine enough in Gram Dance."

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In the meantime, Issi had not remained idle. She was sure that there was nothing Rhonda could do about her plight.

Even though she had lived in this country for many years, she kept her Paraguayan citizenship. Through internet research, double-checking with her consulate and asking around, she became aware that she could travel to Paraguay and return.

Normally, she would not have considered returning to her homeland, but the ruling dictatorship was gone and no charges had been placed on her. Of course, there was the excuse of visiting almost forgotten relatives.

"You can't leave now, Issi," Rhonda was terrified.

"I have a personal issue to take care of, Rhonda. You know that." She had made her final decision.

"Can you at least tell me what it is?"

"Life will be easier for me when I'm back, no later than two weeks."

"When are you leaving, Issi?"

"Tonight"

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What really happened was that, as was already common with my gym mates, Issi had told me her name problem. I commented that in my country a name change was very easy, legally. Sometimes all that was required was a written explanation of the original name's burden. Around the US bases -- while they were allowed -- many children had been named Usnavy, Usmail -- US Navy, US Mail -- after expectant mothers read the signs on the military transports, and the Spanish pronunciation was music to their ears. It became a pain for many children later on.

The girl discovered that a decree had been passed in her country and her name could be changed without much hassle.

"So, I'm going, Abuelo." She was quite worked up.

"I hope you don't surprise me with a name like Sigourney or something like that." I laughed.

"My mother's not very happy about the whole thing."

"The truth is that Eaziley sounds pretty in Spanish. And it's quite ear fetching in English." I said.

"See you in two weeks, Abuelo." She placed a granddaughter's kiss on my forehead and left.

**Fashion Show Jitters**

"I need a bigger place for the show," was Rhonda's overture over her snacks. "My designs are much better than the last time and I want them to really stand out as works of art."

Suddenly, Mabelle, who was nibbling on a grape stood and, almost in a rush, said, "Let's do it here." Everyone else just added words of approval. Among other advantages, the strongest argument was that it would also work as a promotional event for the gym.

"Where would we set up the stage and the catwalk?" Rhonda asked, already convinced.

"Have you noticed the size of the area where Gram Dance practices? It is so big that it also holds a basketball court."

"How do I go about getting permission?"

"Rhonda, have you forgotten that I'm the largest stockholder of this place?" was Mabelle's strong input.

"I forgot all about it! So, I guess it's done!"

Jenny, one of the models, came up with an idea that left everyone with high hopes and expectations difficult to evaluate. "How about having Gram Dance being part of the fashion show?"

"Jenny, did you talk about this with Rhonda? I thought about it but didn't want to steal the show." Mabelle was sounding ecstatic.

"Steal the show? It's more like sharing a limelight through a new concept," Jack Russell intervened. "But I don't know how I will be able to be in both, sheet dancing and escorting Issi."

I was dumbfounded, never having seen a group agreeing and almost getting into action on the spot. "Who's going to organize or choreograph what and how both shows will merge?" I just had to get my bit in.

Mabelle and Rhonda looked at each other. Almost as one voice they said, "Marcos"

Of course, the Cuban dance instructor was known as a good choreographer. Besides, he got along very well with everyone. They were sure he would agree.

Two months remained for Issi to return from her trip, for Rhonda to have her dresses ready and for Gram Dance to create an unforgettable spectacle.

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"A family reunion in a couple of weeks?" was the response to my sister's unexpected phone call, a few days after the group's meeting at the gym.

"Of course I'll be there," I immediately responded.

Even though the fashion event was not my project I felt as if it was, having become very attached to the members and developing the feeling, perhaps overblown, that my presence was important.

As soon as I could -- during snack time -- I nonchalantly announced my next two weeks' absence. I had not visited my extended family for many years. The gathering was for my uncle's Celebration of Life, and, as he jokingly said: "My celebration of life party while I can still enjoy it." Ninety years of existence had earned him the liberty to be as extravagantly creative as he chose.



On the positive side, I was very confident that the blueprint prepared for the show was being well followed. Rhonda's designs were turning out as beautiful as any I had seen in a fashion magazine. She was presenting a spring collection, which allowed her to play with textures, prints, lengths and whatever is allowed in her profession.

Gram Dance, with the aid of Marcos, was practicing a routine that would not distract from the catwalk spectacle.

I flew to my country with the burden of two concerns in my mind -- Issi's name glitch and a shadow over-casting Jack Russell.

### **Gym's Inner Core III**

As the weeks went, by Rhonda was already used to her husband's schedule, which he seemed to follow, strictly. He always returned by ten in the evening.

"Rhonda's girls are starting to look pretty hot," was a comment voiced by someone in the locker room to no one in particular.

"Yeah... have you guys checked Issi out?" another added.

"Even Rhonda... she looks happy. Must be getting some," was another comment.

"Well, when chicks band together something big usually takes place."

The group of gym attendants was describing the thread without knowing the plot.

Marcos, the dance instructor, was getting into his working clothes while listening to the chat, but just smiled without adding his opinion. He bit his inner lower lip to stop from speaking when a fellow said, "I've spotted Morgan at the swimming pool quite often. He must be doing no less than two thousand laps daily."

"I wonder if those two are competing at who'll lose more weight by Showtime. He's shedding weight like crazy."

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Our fashion designer and her models were having the experience of a lifetime. All were fitting into what they called "cool sizes." At each fitting, they felt awarded as the attires actually did justice to their new shapes.

Rhonda had sent Jack Russell to get fitted for an Italian-style suit. It would fit snugly while not being too formal. Though I was given this information, I did not know what was meant by the "hint of less formality" in a tuxedo.

Gram Dance had decided to have the sheets hanging parallel from the beams of their training space and practiced having in mind that there would be a catwalk setup below. Each acrobat/dancer had one sheet on each side of the body. Their daily practice attracted some of the gym clients, which added to the excitement and expectations of everyone concerned.

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### **Fame or Shame**

There seems to be some sort of code of silence among a gym's inner core participants. However, the apparently strong links do not have the same strength. The chain, therefore, eventually breaks.

"Did you watch Jack's video?" was heard.

"No, I haven't," answered one of the mates.

"I've got it on my blackberry. I can send you the link."

I became very curious as the conversation strengthened my suspicion that there was more to stripping as a job in Jack Russell's account. On the other hand, no fuel was going to be added to the fire by my asking questions.

I had been convinced that since the advent of Google, most educated inhabitants of this planet had lost all privacy. I already knew how to find almost any information I wanted about any subject. It was all about having the right leads such as name, activity, work, location, to mention a few.

As the conversation had mentioned a video and I knew the job description and spectator genre, in no time I came to a site dedicated to male porn. In fact, there were two videos, perhaps shot within a few hours difference.

Both videos showed the same theme: Jack masturbating on-camera, silently. At the end of one performance, a voice was heard saying: "You're a far shooter!"

I cannot say that I was surprised by what I saw on my PC. It is a fact that there is a very thin line between stripping and porn.

Was this Jack Russell's fifteen minutes of fame? Or would it be a lifetime of shame?

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Skeleton in the closet. This is a very common expression nowadays. So much, that in some cultures, the skeletons are judged on interesting traits. For example, in the US, a politician's dream may evaporate if infidelity is involved. In some Latin American countries, a mistress is not a skeleton but an asset. Morality has many faces.

There is also a saying among my countrymen: "*La necesidad tiene cara de perro*" -- need has a dog's face. Out of necessity, close your eyes and kiss the dog. And hope you do not get bitten.

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Issi was greeted at Asuncion's International Airport by her grandparents as well as her younger cousins. Her adrenalin was running so high that jet lag did not set in until a few hours later, luckily coinciding with nighttime.

She had prepared a blueprint to follow, postponing all social family engagements. Her name change was her priority. Comments such as "Eaziley, you are beautiful" strengthened her resolve.

One of her girlfriends decided to be her guide and did the rounds of obtaining photocopies of birth certificate, all necessary forms for intent of name change and the tax stamps that have to be pasted on most documents -- a very common practice in Latin American official administrative procedures.

Not many people speak English in Paraguay. Issi was unlucky enough to present her petition in an office attended by multi-lingual personnel. Her petition brought about a few smiles and one honest laugh-out-loud of someone. Rather than showing anger, she smiled and joined the laughter that followed.

"It could have been worse," she said. "But I'd better not give an example."

"I would have asked for a name change, too," a female secretary said.

"Will it take too long?" Issi asked.

"Honey, in your case you'll have your new ID card tomorrow and your new passport the day after," was the answer she heard.

During the following days, the girl was taken on a tour of some new tourist attractions in Asunción. The way matters were unfolding her cousins set a schedule of social gatherings that were going to keep her very busy. She kept in mind that a very important task remained upon returning to Torrance and asked to be taken to a nice gym to keep with her body-shaping routine.

She caused somewhat of a stir when her presence was noticed at the gym. Her height was the main attention catcher. To her six feet was added her natural beauty and, by this time, a figure that promised to be perfect according to the modern standards of Latin American girls.

The same day, Issi was approached by a very polite and attractive lady who asked if she was Paraguayan. When she heard the affirmative answer, she asked the girl if she would be interested in participating in the next Miss Paraguay for Miss Universe Contest.

"I live in the United States, and I will be returning home in a few days," Issi responded.

"Do you think you could come back and spend three months in Asuncion? During that time all contestants will be trained. I'm pretty sure you could win."

"Can I sleep on it?" Issi asked.

"Of course... I hope you'll say yes by tomorrow."

"Could it be in the evening? I have something important to finish before I can make a decision."

Everything was moving too fast, Issi thought, but she was used to making quick decisions. "If I really get my name change tomorrow, I'll take it as a good omen and I'll accept the beauty pageant invitation," she thought.

That night, Issi partied for as long as her cousins wanted, mainly to take her mind away from the legal windmill already in motion.

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"Isabella López..." the name came on the loud speaker. Nobody answered.

"Isabella López or Eaziley López, please come to Window One."

Issi suddenly reacted and went to the assigned window. The lady clerk greeted her and told her to look at the camera, took her picture and had her sign a plastic card. In less than five minutes she was in possession of the national ID.

"Please return tomorrow to receive your passport."

All Issi could do was look at the clerk and give her the most beautiful and grateful smile.

"I can still be called Issi," she told herself while leaving.

The following evening she met with the beauty pageant representative and filled out the participation form. She signed her name: Isabella López.

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My communication with Jack Russell was not as verbal as I was used to with other people. So, I was surprised when I checked my e-mail and found one by the kid. I will transcribe the highlights because there seemed to be a lesson involved.

*My family is very poor, and I was the first member to finish high school. I never knew my father. He got my mother pregnant and disappeared. All I know is that he was a European Caucasian. And I already told you that my mom is from Dominicana.*

*I was lucky to have a combination of good looks and being pretty smart -- at least that's the feedback I always got. My mother always told me "your looks will get you ahead."*

*Learning came easy to me, plus I enjoyed reading. I started with kiddy comics and moved on to newspapers and, later on, to any book I could get my hands on. Maintaining a straight A average was normal since I started school, which got me a full-tuition college scholarship and a bit more for expenses.*

*I was used to limitations and expected them, but I was lucky to find a couple who gave me room and board in exchange for garden up-keep. That allowed me to pay for the gym.*

*The nightclub job just came in handy, being also lucrative enough.*

*I know that my video gig has been talked about. When I accepted to do it I thought it was a way out with no major consequences. Now I know it is not so.*

*I have to learn to live with my mistakes.*

*Abuelo, will you help me when you return?*

The last thing I wanted was to get involved in a patient-therapist situation with anyone. I was retired. Nonetheless, the Abuelo word hooked me.

On the other hand, the fictitious grandfather-grandson relationship could be turned into a conversation where someone was more mature, could voice his opinions, which the receptor was free to act upon, or not.

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Chance or circumstances help to shape a story.

One morning I was able to observe how scouting was developed in the gym. Within the first hour, I noticed the group of beauty pageant hopefuls and a number of good-looking young men gathered around someone. A rather large camera crew appeared and asked a few of the people to accommodate themselves on the different artifacts, whereupon professional shots were taken of each. Afterwards, a video was made of a work-out routine for men and for women.

At some point, the apparent crew director chose a few girls and men, and I watched him speak privately to each. At the end, he handed them cards.

I do not know about the girls, because they were more interested in something more glamorous than strip stage performance. Most of them were of Latin American ancestry, perhaps first generation, and Southern California -- Los Angeles -- was the place to be discovered for modeling.

I guess this was how Jack Russell became a stripper. Though, I wondered how he went on to the next level -- porn. And for how long...

**Back to Home Base**

Home base is Torrance, California, where I decided to spend a few years before definite retirement in my country. It is usually the other way around, but some life-changing events made me wish to return to my first college area.

I was originally in Gardena, right by Torrance, which was a bit upper-class and was within walking distance to the junior college I was attending. At present it bears almost no resemblance to the area I had experienced during my first two years in California. The college was no longer the main attraction. At least, that is my perception now. Nevertheless, there still are the big boulevards and neat single housing areas.

The retirement community I live in is well protected and it is easy to walk to Vons and a Korean food market. Accompanying an elderly aunt has its advantages, especially if one is interested in gathering family history and, once in a while, almost live in the past.

I find it very easy to go anywhere in the larger Los Angeles area. Public transportation is reliable, with its inter-city buses, metro, metro-link and access to Amtrak. There is no excuse to remain home and become a couch potato.

When I initiated college at barely age sixteen my social life centered around belonging to one of the many clubs. I joined the IRC -- Intercultural Relations Club. I became quite active, as many Californians wanted to get to know foreigners. The pattern seems to have disappeared in the last few years.

The Beach Boys were our neighbors in nearby Redondo Beach, and we young ones felt proud about it. Attending gyms was not "in" yet. It would not be for many years.

Unlike people who have shared strong life-threatening situations and emotional links -- military-- I still keep in touch with many college friends, having participated in many events of the 60s.

The main event during the fall semester in college was Homecoming, which was paired with the Trojans football game. To this, add choosing the Homecoming Queen, which was, perhaps, the highlight of the activities, when all sororities and clubs would submit a candidate.

The IRC was participating for the first time. I had made it a point to have some of our girls do some social mingling --I was the president of the club that year. We also constructed a float, which would participate in the Homecoming Queen Parade.

In the end, I did create a bit of a stir. The club signed up three candidates representing three areas: Holland, Hong Kong and the U.S. It just happened that the girl from the U.S. was black -- Afro-American was not used at the time. It was the first time that a colored girl participated. Our Rennie, from Hong Kong, became one of the two Homecoming Princesses. The IRC float won a ribbon for originality.

Reminiscing about this part of my past, I wonder how a rather shy and not social kid became socially active; always taking social stands and, as I now tell my grandchildren, became a long-haired almost hippie.

All of these experiences helped me turn out to be a pretty good psychotherapist. "I'm the best" I would tell myself when things got hairy. Others may have thought otherwise.

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I am convinced that when we reach old age -- now it is called being a senior -- we maintain our urge to live depending on the tasks ahead -- no tasks may lead to boredom

and eventual depression. Therefore, California was calling me. It was hard to resist in spite of all the entertainment in Panama.

Issi was already there when I rejoined the snack group. She was beaming, having already announced that she was a contestant for the Miss Paraguay Beauty Pageant. Jack Russell had opened up to the group by being more talkative and making suggestions about his moves and inclusion in the coming fashion show. Marcos had constructed an architectural model of the stage, catwalk and Gram Dance's position above.

I even dared to ask which would be the average size to be worn by the models. "No one is a plus size any longer," I was informed.

"Rhonda, I guess that chubby is out," was my congratulatory remark.

There was an addition to the group, though not on a permanent basis: Morgan. He was almost back to the original lean shape I had met months before the previous show. It was easy to conclude that I was in the presence of a happy couple.

### **Rhonda and Morgan**

As I mentioned before, Rhonda did not like to talk about her personal life. This I find a rare trait in some people.

When Morgan showed up with eighty-five pounds of excess weight months ago, the first thing that came to my mind was their sex life. When being overweight becomes a part of the duo, I think that a trio is formed. The newcomer will interfere rather than complement.

"You can't believe how difficult it is to connect," Rhonda confided privately one morning.

"How come?" I was curious.

"The missionary position doesn't work with two protruding bellies crushing each other like balloons." I tried not to laugh, but Rhonda had a way of describing sad situations that finally seemed to come out as jokes. "And I'm sick of doggie style. I need to see his face."

A few days after my return, I asked Rhonda how she and her husband were doing.

"We can see our faces now." The subject ended with me receiving a tight bear hug.

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My friend had contracted a small publicity firm to promote the fashion show. It was not a grand-scale event. However, it was an unusually attractive activity in the Torrance area.

Posters could be seen in the gym as well as in most malls and commercial areas downtown. Also, the local newspaper had a few words to say about the fashion show featuring Gram Dance.

The gym was surrounded by an aura of excitement ever since the stage and catwalk were being constructed. The area already had bleachers for the basketball games. They could be used for the show while rows of comfortable folding chairs would be arranged on both sides of the catwalk. Appropriate lighting was being placed and music was selected. Finally, a date was set for a full rehearsal.

I had the impression that the attendance at the gym had increased, at least during Gram Dance's rehearsal schedule.

#### **Gym's Inner Core IV**

"I wonder how Jack landed the stint in Rhonda's show," was a comment that caught my attention. The commentator was not aware that Jack was within hearing distance. When he finished dressing he spotted me and approached.

"Abuelo," he said, "Can you have lunch with me? It's on me."

"Of course, Jack," I answered. "When?"

"It's lunch-time, Abuelo."

I was starting to turn to shrink mode, but decided to halt. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"What do you have in mind, Abuelo?"

"El Camino College is not far from here, and I haven't been back for almost fifty years. Can we have lunch there?" was my suggestion.

My former junior college was not far, though not within walking distance, at least not at my present age. So on we went in Jack's comfortable KIA something.

As we approached the college I tried to remember the wide green areas in between buildings, especially around the cafeteria. Perhaps thirty percent of my time was spent there or in the adjacent lounge.

The site was completely different now. The lawns were smaller, and buildings seemed to have sprouted like weeds.

There were a few tables and chairs set outside the cafeteria. I suggested we get our lunch and sit outside. It was a sunny but cool day, which made the lunch spot perfect.

"I'm listening, Jack," was my opening.

"Abuelo, I want to tell you about the video."

"I haven't heard any more comments about it." I was trying to discourage the topic.

"I'm not concerned about the gossip, Abuelo." He paused. "It's about me and how I feel about myself."

"I'll just listen," and arranged myself comfortably on the chair to listen to Jack Russell's story.

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From what Issi's show escort told me, I gathered that he felt comfortable in his job as a dancer. The tips added considerably to his set wage.

Jack was financially independent and did not have considerable expenses, always able to meet his tuition and college related financial responsibilities. He also made steady but small contributions to his mother, who worked part-time and had no medical insurance.

All workers - private and government - have social medical coverage in my country. Those who want private care pay for independent insurance. I was not aware of the disadvantages of not having medical insurance in the U.S.

It was midnight when Jack was awakened by his cell phone's ringing. His initial reaction was that no good news is received after midnight.

Jack got into a T-shirt, sneakers and ran to his car in the sweatpants he was sleeping in. In a short time, he arrived at the emergency room of a nearby hospital and found out that his mother was awaiting an appendectomy and was in intermittent pain. As it was an emergency procedure, surgery would be performed as soon as possible. The worse news was that the hospital needed a guarantee of partial payment.

Of course, without even thinking about its implications Jack signed a \$5,000 affidavit, which was not much, considering the full cost of the medical expenses. Nevertheless, it was not the amount of money a young student on a scholarship has saved for a rainy day.

Jack's mother had almost ingrained in her son's mind that debts should be avoided, always. Since he was a child she would lend him out to do menial tasks in the neighborhood, making sure that he always got paid, at least symbolically. He would take out garbage, run errands not far from home, moving to heavier tasks such as land-mowing as he grew older.

Surgery went as well as expected. The first words he heard from his mother once she was awake voiced her concern about the expenses incurred. "Don't worry," said her son. "I'll get the money." She rested without worrying.

The following evening, after his always successful performance, Jack approached the manager of the strip club with a request.

"Do you think I could do a few more hours? I have a family financial emergency." He tried to control his anxiety while speaking.

"How much do you need, Jack?"

"Five thousand dollars," he answered, upon which the manager made an immediate proposal.

"I can't assign you more performance time. But you'll earn that much doing a video."

"I've never done porn, if that's what you're suggesting," was Jack's following comment. The manager understood that it was not a refusal.

"No sweat, Jack. You won't do a gay couple scene." He added while smiling, "Not bad money for a performance of a few minutes, if you ask me."

"Could I wear my mask?" - Jack asked, some anxiety slipping his control.

"Sorry, Jack... facial expression is important in this type of video."

"I'll do it, Gus." Jack committed himself while thinking, "A job is a job."

"Come tomorrow at one, right after lunch."

"I'll be here." Just before turning around to leave he asked, "Should I wear anything special?"

"Clothing is the least of our worries in this line of work, Jack."

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The following day, Jack arrived at his workplace right on time. Once he accepted the "job" there was no questioning it. The money was needed for an unquestionable cause.

Gus directed him towards a door that Jack thought was just for show as it was never opened -- at least not during evenings. The door led to a medium-sized room that held a comfortable couch -- upholstered with some black washable material -- a green



linoleum floor and beige walls. Two cameras -- one still, one portable -- were ready for use. The light settings were definitely for professional movie shooting.

A complete set of DVD and screen was positioned in front of the couch. "The videos will help you, Jack," was Gus' response to the lad's inquisitive look. A small rack was provided for clothing.

Once Jack took in the whole setting, he asked what the procedure was. He was told to get naked, sit as comfortably as possible on the couch and, "Just imagine that you're getting off in your living room. We should be able to do this in one take."

Another fellow came in while Jack was disrobing and grabbed the portable camera, which he was going to use for close-ups. This meant that he would be moving around for precise takes. Gus was in charge of the still camera.

A straight -- heterosexual -- porn video was started as soon as Jack Russell positioned himself on the couch. He was instructed not to pay attention to the cameramen, but after fifteen minutes Gus decided to call a break as nothing happened. Jack could not produce an erection.

"Five K, Jack. Think about it during a few minutes," Gus said while leaving the room.

When the second session started, Jack decided to perform in earnest. In a few minutes he got himself hard and began caressing his chest and nipples while stroking his penis in such a way that he spurted two loads which made Gus say "You're a far shooter," the voice that I had heard when I saw the video.

Afterwards, Jack Russell was handed an envelope containing five thousand dollars. The video was on-line in a couple of hours. The money started coming in -- to the producers. It was a hit; even though the performer seemed totally devoid of feelings.

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I always wondered how, and perhaps why, anyone at the gym saw the video. It was shown in a gay porn site under "masturbation -- straight." No one seemed to care, or perhaps the group was familiar with financial dire straights and some fast solutions.

In the end, Jack wanted to know if I considered he was gay for having done the video. I answered the question with a question, as is usually done in psychotherapy when the therapist does not want to answer. He said he thought he was not, to which I questioned if he needed to watch the straight porn video to become aroused. His comment was that it helped, but Gus' reminder of the five thousand dollars was the boost.

My personal opinion was that he was not gay, and I told him so.

"Abuelo," he said to me. "I won't be the last guy to do something like what I did. Youth allows mistakes. I paid my dues through strong but short-lived guilt."

In my clinical days, I am sure I would have pursued deep-rooted, subconscious reasons for Jack's choice of emergency funds. This time my approach was not clinical and, as long as there were no major psychological issues, I guess I decided that many times it is best to let demons sleep -- and hope they will never awaken.

### **Gym's Inner Core V**

As the days approached for the big event, I withdrew from attending the rehearsals. Besides a bit of indirect performance anxiety, I wanted to be surprised by the spectacle.

Nevertheless, enough information could be gathered in the locker room. It seemed that both Marcos and Jack had commented on the tasks they were involved in. The former was receiving much positive feedback from his peers, who no longer saw him as a dance instructor but a professional stage designer and choreographer. The latter was perceived as hot for being chosen as Issi's escort and doing something as difficult as sheet acrobatics.

Never again did I hear any reference to Marcos being gay for dancing nor to Jack Russell's porn video.

### **Rhonda**

I often wondered how a fashion designer formed ideas that could be transferred to clothing. I recalled that in Panama we had a couple of famous artists who drew scenes on paper; one had weavers convert them into tapestries. The other one had a set of Kuna Indian women who made "molas" which would be used to cover cushions or be stitched together to be turned into upholstery.

My friend told me that her customers were attracted by the reasonable prices she offered. This surprised me, as I knew that anything "Made in USA" was bound to be expensive.

Rhonda also offered originality. "You won't see two identical dresses. Women hate to see someone else wearing the same outfit." This I had learned years ago while living with three younger sisters.

She was able to reduce material costs by shopping in LA's garment district. Most retailers sold by bulk, which was not what she needed. In one shop, when she was toying with the idea of turning professional, she explained her approach to her plans, and the salesperson found the reasoning so original that she called the manager.

"Our fabrics are imported from Thailand, Madame," she was told.

"Rhonda, please."

"Niran, nice to meet you." He continued, "If you buy from us there is a little secret I can let you into."

"I'm listening," Rhonda answered.

"Many of our wholesale suppliers send us merchandise that is a bit larger than ordered. We call this excess 'odds and ends'. These we can sell for very low prices." The manager was all business.

"Can I see some of these 'odds and ends'?" Rhonda was taken to a side of the store where Niran began to show her a great variety of material. Most was silk, but she handed cotton, peau de soi, linen and others. She was lulled by the almost infinite designs on some fabrics.

"Know something, Niran?" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "None of these pieces is large enough to make more than one dress."

"I thought so Madame Rhonda. That's why I let you into my little secret."

The young designer left the retailer with enough material to make at least ten dresses.

Beginning a trade was relatively simple -- she had enough friends. Her gimmick was to ask what the dress was for; in what company would it be worn; whether during

morning, afternoon or evening. In the end she created an original outfit that was guaranteed to be exclusive.

One day Morgan surprised her with a chop -- a Chinese stone stamp -- which he had had made in Chinatown, LA. It read: "Rhonda's Fashions." She was officially in business; she had her designer's official seal to attach to her creations.

I learned from her that silk is more than just a nice fabric. The quality varies from 100% to less when combined with cotton. I was shocked by the hues of some of the colors when she took me to her workshop.

"Do you always use silk?" I asked.

"There's so much you can do with it. A well-made silk dress will never go out of fashion," was her response.

I became convinced that Rhonda would hit the fashion magazines some day.

### **Isabella López**

Issi returned to Torrance with a different outlook of what her future could be. Being a well-known fashion model was still her main goal, though the road towards it seemed to have changed.

Beauty pageants may not be life-changing events or main activity events in the United States of America. Well, there have been exceptions, as when Halley Berry was first runner-up in the Miss World Pageant. Yes, Vanessa Williams who even after her dethronement, became a famous actress. I still think that these were exceptions.

In Latin America, beauty pageant contestants are assigned a level of notoriety that may last a lifetime. Cecilia Boloco, a Chilean Miss Universe in 1987, went on to become a CNN Español anchor. A Venezuelan Miss Universe, 1981 - Irene Sáez - was elected mayor of the district of Chacao in Caracas. Not all winners or runners-up remain in the fashion industry, though their participation in the contests makes a major difference to their future.

I thought of the whole thing as the US male equivalent of making it through sports. However, be it a worldwide sport or even something as frivolous as a beauty pageant, these are serious business enterprises with strict rules to be followed.

There is also the stigma attached to the participants -- jocks and beauty queens are regarded as all body and no brains. When they make money, the stereotyped image may be replaced by admiration. Making money brings in a whole new meaning.

For beauty queens, especially in the Donald Trump era -- he is the owner of the Miss Universe franchise -- crowns do not come without sacrifices. 1995 winner from Venezuela -- Alicia Machado -- was close to being stripped of her title for gaining weight.

Julia Morley, chairperson of the Miss World Pageant, has kept the organization's slogan -- beauty with a purpose, and the benefited charities, worldwide, show it. Trump's Miss Universe is a strong supporter of the fight against AIDS, and the winners become the face of Aid for AIDS.

Perhaps the best success story is that of Aishwara Rai, 1994 Miss World from India, who is Bollywood's greatest female star and is a successful businesswoman. On the social side, Wilnelia Merced, 1975 Miss World, from Puerto Rico, married UK TV personality, Sir Bruce Forsythe.

Full-time dedication is expected, once elected winner in any pageant. In 2002, Russia's Oxana Fedorova was dethroned as that year's Miss Universe shortly after for not complying with the scheduled activities. She was replaced by first runner-up Justine Pasek from Panama.

In some countries, one company or person may hold the franchise for the three main events: Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss International. They are considered in the same descending order of importance. My belief is that the Miss World event seems to emphasize more qualities than just beauty.

There is an anecdote of a contestant in the preliminaries of a Latin American country who was asked who Confucius was. Her answer, which became an immediate internet joke, was, "He was a Chinese/Japanese man who invented the confusion." She was later labeled Miss Confusion and will be remembered for many years to come.

As Issi learned so much apparently useless trivia about national and international beauty pageants, she became aware of the responsibility that she had already started to carry on her shoulders. To make matters worse, participants from Paraguay had never made it past semi-finals.

### **Mabelle and Sasha**

Sasha had been Mabelle's favorite pupil from the beginning. In fact, the young single mother was her find in one of the modern dance classes she taught at El Camino College. The girl had such flexibility that she developed the idea of Gram Dance from watching her.

Initially, Sasha was not too convinced about migrating from modern dancing to something as foreign as sheet acrobatics. Her mentor showed her a video of Cirque du Soleil's Corteo. The challenge was accepted immediately.

Sheet dancing was not an approved course at the college, which made Mabelle decide to take advantage of her stockholder status at the gym and set it up as a private enterprise.

The gym was big enough, and its high ceiling was held by exposed, wide, iron beams. She chose the basketball court and installed two long sheets attached to pulleys facing each other. One was for Sasha; the other was for herself.

On the first training session, Sasha became familiar with her sheet. It was blue, with a deep hue. The material was soft and somewhat elastic. After a few seconds, she thought she was touching suede, though it probably was a combination of materials, perhaps synthetic, to provide holding power, smoothness and glide to the human body.

The first thing Sasha was taught, was to climb the sheet, first a few feet over the floor and slowly up to the top. Rather than following the technique for rope climbing by use of hand force, she learned to wrap the sheet around her hands or wrists to give the impression of gliding upwards. People commented that she was as agile as a cat climbing a curtain.

Gram Dance staged its first show with just two performers -- Mabelle and Sasha. It became a success at the college's theater. The choreographic theme was "just flying."

Four girls approached Mabelle a few days after the performance and asked to be trained by her. Since they were regular students in one of her classes, Mabelle added them to the ensemble.

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Sasha's sudden death almost obliterated her mentor's interest in Gram Dance. It had held several sold-out events and the girl was definitely the main attraction. Mabelle felt that she had lost a daughter, and she grieved accordingly.

Carl had a hard time making her continue with the group's projects. He knew his wife well enough and, eventually, was able to convince her to attend grief therapy. This helped her to reinstate the group's training.

She was not able, nevertheless, to replace Sasha's number with another girl. She flashed back to the image of the late dancer so often that it was painful. In her grief therapy group someone suggested she find a man to fill the spot.

"It doesn't sound like a bad idea," she almost never smiled, but she did this time.

Carl was very supportive with this alternative. The question was, "where do we find this person?"

"Something will work out, honey," Carl said, always convincingly. "It always does."

Both Carl and Mabelle were a very spiritual couple. Though they did not belong to any church in particular, they believed in the concept of some superior power that somehow took care of everyone. "Let's leave it up to Him," was their most frequent comment when facing tough times.

When I learned about their convictions, I thought that maybe one had participated in Alcoholics Anonymous, which embraces a similar belief. Later I found out that this was not the case.

I know that stating that "mens sana in corpore sano" - a healthy mind in a healthy body - may sound corny, but Carl and Mabelle were the best example.

Jack Russell had recently returned from Toronto, where he was allured by Cirque du Soleil. When he realized that a local group was going to do sheet acrobatics he made sure to audition. The following day he showed up at the gym and was granted his wish.

Mabelle was surprised by the speed with which he learned the basics. He lacked some flexibility, but she knew how this could be overcome.

"When I see him on the sheet, I no longer have flashbacks to Sasha," she admitted to her group therapy mates.

The group leader did warn her to watch out for a tendency to push the lad towards an imitation of the departed.

"It's going to be tough," Mabelle thought.

As time went by and Jack Russell was becoming more known within the gym, some comments about his video venture sneaked through Gram Dance's director. She decided not to let it turn into anything of actual importance.

Carl took the news on a lighter note when he told his wife, "It may be a bonus feature...after all he's a nice-looking chap."

### **Marcos**

"Since I was in the Cuban equivalent of kindergarten," Marcos told me one day, "I have enjoyed dancing; so much that I was chosen to go into special training at an early age."

"That must have been fun," I commented.

"Not when you're taken to a special boarding school away from your family."

In just a short time, I learned that Marcos had been trained to become a ballet dancer. If he did as well as expected, he would have a privileged life for a Cuban youth. His personal goal was to dance under Alicia Alonso's direction. She was considered on par with Dame Margot Fonteyn, who died in Panama in 1991, where she is buried alongside her Panamanian husband.

On one occasion, he was chosen to be in a cultural exchange tour in Venezuela, where the group would perform for a few days. It did not take him long to be overawed by all the stores, freedom to purchase, freedom to travel within the country - his group was always under strict surveillance. He started dreaming of leaving his homeland.

His parents had departed Cuba during the 1980 Mariel mass migration to the U.S. He was at boarding school and was left behind. Nevertheless, they kept petitioning to have their son join them in Florida. Upon his return from Caracas, he started his own petition process. It took close to three years, and he was granted the special refugee visa and the Cuban government let him go.

His point of entry was Miami, where he was greeted by parents he hardly knew. They had set up a small restaurant where mostly Cuban fare was sold, and they were successful enough. Marcos worked at the restaurant for a while, but he missed dancing.

The youth was aware that starting a career in ballet was out of the question. But, after watching a morning exercise TV show, he decided to practice Latin dancing with the goal of becoming a gym dancing instructor. His ballet training gave him an edge.

He told me that since the 90s research had proven that dancing decreased stress and increased endorphin levels -- "happy feelings." He wanted to add burning calories. Salsa and merengue were great for that.

On his first day as a dance instructor, the manager found it strange that Marcos started with a routine of stretching rather than going straight to dancing. Ballet always began with this muscle warming sequence. The students -- mostly women -- found this to their liking and felt that it was easier for them to follow Marcos' steps. He became a success as a gym dancing instructor.

It did not take him long to decide to move to California, which captivated him with its aura of diversity. Once in Torrance he was hired by Mabelle's gym. He was convinced that he had to practice what he preached: whole fitness.

Marcos always arrived early, did his ballet warm-up, a bit of muscle toning with some machines, and drank a liter of water. By the time he finished warming up, his pupils had arrived and were ready to go. Everyone liked Marcos and did not mind that nothing was known about his private life.

### **Catwalk and Flight**

Marcos had designed a stage from which the models would move on to the catwalk. Almost simultaneously, Gram Dance would perform slow motions above. These would include ascending and descending on the hanging sheets or abgilding. The way I saw it in my mind, modeling was happening on the ground and in the enclosed sky.

The stage designer/choreographer had made sure that no group would eclipse the other. Therefore, when the Mistress of Ceremony announced the event, Gram Dance would follow the music while flying. As this ended, the name of the model was to be announced, followed by the description of her worn work of art, and the audience would be feasted through their eyes.

After each model's catwalk, Gram Dance would perform a different routine, and the same process was to be repeated until all the models --except Issi-- had delighted everyone with Rhonda's whole collection.

As is customary, the wedding dress is the last act. Marcos had a surprise up his sleeve.

The days for the fashion show approached, and the gatherings around Rhonda's snacks had taken a serious stance. It was almost a communion rather than just social snacking. It was pleasing to see both Carl and Mark dropping by quite often, supporting their spouses in a very proactive fashion. They both had lost any excess weight.

As far as Jack Russell was concerned, Mabelle had given him a special practice schedule, being an accomplice to Marcos' plans. Not even Issi was let in on the secret, and she wondered how he could be her escort when no hint had been given about his intervention. She trusted the organizers' judgment and decided not to worry about anything.

### **Gloss and Silk**

I was familiar with beauty contests as I had been a judge on several occasions in Panama, and Rhonda knew about it. Of course, my friend was open to any information that would help her with her fashion adventure.

One of Rhonda's main concerns was to keep the modeling rule: Nothing must distract attention from the dress. She had this in mind while looking for a make-up artist, something that I had forgotten all about.

An announcement was posted in a local newspaper, and a day was set for interviewing and reviewing candidates' portfolios. I was surprised when the fashion designer invited me to sit in the selection process.

The procedure was to ask the applicant what guidelines were followed to decide on a specific look for a model. Afterwards the portfolio was to be studied. This seemed to be fairly simple; nevertheless, it proved to be complicated.

I remembered that most interviews, catwalks and everything related to the beauty contestants was either televised live or captured on video for later release. The common denominator was brightness. The main goal was to bring out the best features in each woman. If the candidate had green eyes, the make-up artist would apply colors that would enhance them. It was a fact that green or blue eyes plus black hair was a proven asset.

Apparently, the candidates for the particular job in the fashion show had the same vision of how a fashion model should be made-up. This was confirmed when Rhonda, Mabelle, Marcos and I started looking at the portfolio photos that each person had brought along. We had pretty much the same opinion -- good for a beauty contest but too much for a fashion show. In a way it made sense; this kind of event was a first in Torrance; these professionals had no previous experience in fashion modeling.

All interviewees followed the same guidelines I had observed in the Miss Panama Beauty Contests. No one mentioned that in modeling the most important feature had to be the dress, and the make-up had to be the equivalent of the frame on a beautiful picture. According to their concept of fashion modeling make-up, it was the other way around.

"I have the impression that these make-up artists want their work to be remembered," was the first comment Rhonda made when we decided that none of the persons interviewed lived up to our standards.

"I agree," I said.

"Rhonda," Mabelle commented, "The models are housewives, not professional models. Why don't we hire someone to teach them to apply the right kind of make-up, and have a hairdresser to prim their natural hairdos?"

Marcos almost jumped in saying, "I love the idea of reinforcing the fact that these are regular housewives doing an almost professional fashion show." And he added, "I have a friend who can do the job. She doesn't call herself a make-up artist, but I'll explain what we want, and I know she will be just right. She also does hairstyling."

"Well, after this let's write a 'how to do your own fashion show kit.'" Everyone laughed when they heard me.

### **Showtime**

Marcos' hairstylist friend lived up to our full expectations. She was able to convey to all the models that their make-up should be appropriate for an evening event while barely increasing the shade of their usual style. She also gave some advice about hairdos, and was on-hand just before each catwalk for any last-minute intervention.

I decided to rent a tuxedo. The occasion merited an upgrade of my attire. To my surprise, the models' spouses had the same idea.

The gym had a special entrance to the basketball court, which was transformed into a fashion show theatre. The spouses and I were assigned seats in the front row, left side. The show started when the Mistress of Ceremony welcomed the audience to "Silk and Flight," highlighting the participation of Gram Dance.

The program unfolded like clockwork. Prior to each model we watched an acrobat gliding, ascending and descending on the sheets, wearing an outfit whose color was a prelude of the following model. The M.C. announced the name of each model after the acrobat's routine. The music was appropriately paced and the volume was pleasant. The lights enhanced both the acrobats and the models.

By this time I had developed a friendly relationship with the other halves, and I must say that we made quite an impression with our new look -- well-fit and dressed to the nines. The group kept silent throughout the entire show -- in awe. The ladies were displaying Rhonda's silk creations over definitely non-plus size bodies.

I was very curious about Jack Russell's participation. In fact, only I knew that he would escort Issi. However, I had not seen him performing with Gram Dance and was wondering how he would make his appearance.

After Jenny did her catwalk showing a tight-fitting beige, bright, pure silk long dress the announcer said, "Our Isabella López will close tonight's fashion show wearing the wedding gown." A special beam of light shone on Issi and followed her as she walked. Halfway through her path another beam was directed above, where a sheet began to unfold while a male figure dressed in black started sliding. Jack Russell had been sitting, unnoticed, on the beam holding his sheet. Jack was wearing a very original imitation of a tuxedo designed by Rhonda. He was obviously timing his descent with Issi's approach to the end of the catwalk. When she arrived he slid to her side; the sheet



was immediately raised. They stood formally for a few seconds. Both smiled when everyone present burst in a standing ovation.

Issi's mauve bridal gown covered her perfect body. It paid homage to silk, her looks and the designer.

As is customary, the models reappeared with the designer glowing among them. In an unusual gesture, they were escorted by their spouses.

### **Sweat, Glamour and Light Sins**

Torrance News reported on the fashion show, and an L.A. newspaper congratulated Rhonda, and her team for having not only sparkled with her designs but for having turned the whole process into a therapeutic goal-oriented event that initiated with sweat and ended with glamour.

Apparently, Jenny and her husband had been interviewed by the newspaper and they commented on Rhonda's transformation from plus size to normal. They emphasized that normal meant not overweight. The proud husband mentioned how he was motivated by Morgan's unique therapeutic technique to assure that couples' should try to remain as close to the original throughout their marriage.

The local newspaper also mentioned that Isabella López was on her way to Paraguay, where she would participate in the Miss Paraguay Beauty Pageant. At the same time, I was on my way back to Panama, playing with the idea of going to Asunción for the event. By sharing so many experiences, to me Issi was almost a granddaughter. Very few previous events have given me more pleasure than the moment I saw her being crowned Miss Paraguay.

The Gym's Inner Core and Jack Russell introduced me to the concept of "light sins."

### **Panama City, Panama**

**September 15, 2011**

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