

NAMASTE

by Tom Lombardi

I was dating my yoga class. It was going all right. Which is to say, the sex was pretty fantastic but otherwise I was beginning to lose interest. I'm thinking of one Saturday afternoon in the summer. We ended up browsing for Father's Day gifts at Crate & Barrel in Soho, and I found myself standing amid a throng of blown-glass vases, staring at the class as if from a stranger's perspective and wondering if we could realistically marry someday . . . maybe find a loft in Brooklyn with a gigantic bed and so forth.

Then, as if my mind wouldn't allow a single pleasant thought, I asked myself, *Am I just projecting romance onto an otherwise lifeless relationship?*

A few days later, I lost my job. And I felt so drenched in worthlessness on the way home that I practically expected a policeman to grab me and say, "All right, buddy, you're coming with me." The more uncertainty loomed, the more I wanted to stay in the relationship. Was it mere desperation?

Ah, I decided, to hell with the questions! So as to prove my love, I would take my yoga class to the movies. Then dinner. And then back to my place for a drink. (Actually, I was secretly hoping we'd go back to Julia's apartment. She's an interior decorator.) I made phone calls. I ordered twelve tickets. There are thirteen in the class, but Sarah, the endocrinologist, had come down with the flu, and thus sent her regards.

I hadn't even made it to the theater when my newfound surge of confidence began to wane. On tenth street, for instance, I found myself peering into the windows of a Pilates studio, watching the women stretching before the class had commenced, tying their hair into buns, and raising their ankles carefully to their chins. I stepped back to see a human heart of condensation had formed on the glass. I watched it fade. And then someone punched me in the shoulder.

"*Perv!*"

"Stacey," I said, wincing from the pain. She was the strongest

member in the class, a science professor who ran an intramural field hockey league on weekends. She was covered in freckles. "Is this what you do?" she said, "when we're not around?"

"No," I said, "I swear!"

She punched me again.

Of course, everyone but Lauren had arrived. Lauren was always running late, and Karen, whom Daniel (the only guy in the class) always referred to as a "J.A.P.," started in right away: "Fucking Lauren just shows up all late so *all* the attention is on her."

"Karen," I said, kissing her on the forehead, "sweetie, don't be so angry."

"Oh, like you never get angry," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're right," Stacey chimed in, "he's a cold fish." And wouldn't you know, while I was hugging Karen, trying to prove my warmth, I spotted Lauren standing cross-armed in front of an Adam Sandler poster, her cheeks enflamed.

"Hey, everybody," I said idiotically, "Lauren's already here. We love you, Lauren!" Daniel went up to Lauren and kissed her longingly on the cheek, squeezing her thigh. The fucker.

Everyone was chatting schizophrenically now. "Whoa," I said, "everyone has their tickets, right?"

"You mean does everyone have *his* or *her* ticket?" Cheryl, the high-school English teacher said. Whenever she corrected my grammar, I wanted to fuck her.

"Whatever," I said. Perhaps to piss her off, I put an arm around Alexis, the Persian lawyer, and another around Alison, the registered nurse from Minnesota, and addressed them all, wanting so badly to tell them about my job. "Look, I just want tonight to go smoothly with us, all right? I thought about you all day today and I'm really happy we're together like this."

"You're condescending again," said Abby, the black political science grad student.

"Jesus Christ, every time I get remotely sentimental, Abby, you accuse me of being condescending. You try addressing the — okay, you know what, let's give a hug, come on. Just a quick one."

As always, the heat from their bodies, emanating a potpourri of perfume, swallowed me whole, and my shins were beginning to melt when I felt a hand on my dick. It was Janine, it had to be. "Stop," I whispered, growing harder. Out from the corner of my eye, I caught Lisa and Dawn going at it, Daniel embracing them with his lanky arms. "Girls!" I said, "we're in a public place for God's sake!" At that point, Janine slipped her hand inside my boxers, and like that, with the class huddled around me, babbling to each other maniacally, we ascended the escalator.

The movie was a complete waste of money, a romantic comedy starring Sharon Stone and Michael Imperioli and a talking giraffe. Because the house was packed, we had to sit in three separate rows. I kept trying not to turn around to check on Daniel; in fact, I was beginning to think that Lori, the graphics designer who studied tarot cards in her spare time, was right in suggesting that he couldn't be trusted and that I should get rid of him.

"Is it me?" Abby said, when we gathered outside the theater. "Or is Sharon Stone, like, growing rapidly younger?"

"She's had more work done to her than a sidewalk," Daniel said.

"Right?"

"Dawn, you just agree with everyone. I mean, why don't you tell us what you thought of the movie, without just repeating what we all say."

"You know what, I don't need your shit."

"Where we going?"

"Maybe a drink?"

"I went to this great new bar on Hudson the other day but can't remember the name."

"Whatever. The Village is so touristy now it's like —"

"Yeah, 'cause you can't afford it."

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember releasing my finances as public knowledge."

"I thought we were going to go back to Julia's place."

"Yeah! I mean . . . if that's cool with her."

"Sure, why not?"

"Should we hail some cabs?" I interjected, suddenly worried I'd have to cover the expense. "You know what, though, it's so nice out . . . we should walk."

"Not the worst idea."

"Nietzsche said that all great thoughts are conceived during walking."

"Yeah, as if you read Nietzsche."

"She probably read it in a quote book."

"Hey, don't knock quote books."

"Are they going to *ever* finish working on this building?"

"Imagine if you lived there!"

"I don't feel sorry for them. Rich people. Who needs 'em?"

"Guys!" I said, "come on. Let's just walk in peace, no?"

We were walking in an awkward silence. I was feeling foolish for having reprimanded them, when we ran into my ex-girlfriend. My heart sank. For a second, I considered ducking into the crowd of the class. She and her boyfriend — I'd seen him before — were walking some golden retriever puppy, who, upon reaching us, immediately went after Stacey's sneaker laces.

"Hi!" my ex said, smiling all prettily. My legs were vibrating from her presence.

"Oh," I said, pretending I'd just noticed her, "hey. Uh, guys, this is Terry, my ex-girlfriend. Terry, this is uh . . ."

"Hi, Terry!" Dawn said, putting out a hand.

"This is my yoga class," I said, "we just saw a movie."

"This is my boyfriend," Terry said, staring at him with her eyes all lit up. "We just had sushi."

"This is my yoga class," I told her. "We once had a mutual orgasm after eating one of those gigantic sashimi boats."

"This is my boyfriend," she said, flicking hair away from her face.

"He has a house in the Hamptons."

"This is Daniel. His parents have a yacht, and he's promised to sail us all to the Caribbean in the fall, isn't that right, Daniel?"

"This is my boyfriend. He actually listens to me."

"Yeah, but does he make you laugh?"

"At least once a day."

"Prove it!"

"You'll always be petty."

"You'd fall in with a parakeet if it had a big enough savings account."

"You'll always be afraid to love."

I felt someone pulling me backward. "Afraid to love?" I muttered out loud, falling into the web of arms. The last thing I saw was the Golden Retriever's tongue flapping manically out its mouth as it was yanked away on the leash.

Stuffed inside Julia's elevator, we rode in silence. Most of us, I'm sure, were just appreciative the damn thing could fit us all.

"That was weird," Abby said, mixing martinis for everybody inside Julia's kitchen.

"My heart's still beating," I said. Copper pots and pans hung elegantly over one of those long, black, sturdy countertops on which high school kids tend to burn things in chemistry class.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"I'm fine. Thanks, Dawn."

Someone put on what sounded like Thelonus Monk. Janine began to unbutton my jeans.

"I miss my ex," someone said.

I put my hand up Janine's skirt. Her underwear was soaked. Dawn, standing behind Janine now, began to unbutton Janine's blouse, and I felt a tongue on my neck.

Once again, I was overcome with the desire to marry them all. I turned around and there was Abby, smiling at me. I kissed her. Her tongue slipped heavily my mouth, like some foreign creature they

haven't yet discovered on the ocean floor.

My jeans were crumpled around my ankles now, and I found myself being hoisted atop the large countertop, where I lay and attempted to let go. When you have several sets of hands groping your body, and sometimes up to three tongues running along your dick and testicles, it's best to turn down the electricity in your head so that your thoughts will eventually slip down your throat and eventually settle into your stomach. Otherwise, I imagine, one could have an aneurism.

I think Janine had planted herself right onto my face, though I couldn't be sure. Whoever it was, she began to sway along my extended tongue, back and forth, back and forth. It tasted milky. I wondered where Daniel was, whether he was involved or not. Letting go again, I quickly forgot about him and everything went black. I began to levitate, practically urinating come into someone's mouth.

Of course, I hadn't been levitating. I'd woken up amid a weave of arms and legs, having to peel someone's thighs from mine in order to stand. Carefully, I broke free.

In the living room, it took all of my strength to raise the massive window a crack so I could smoke. I hoisted myself up onto the great big ledge and began to exhale, watching the smoke rise into the city, five floors up. A quick rain must have dampened the streets while we were sleeping: they glistened with puddles and oil.

I would leave them early that morning, I decided. I'd write a simple note.

I thought of my ex. I missed her — the way, for instance, she'd walk languidly with her hands in her pockets. What, I wondered, would I miss about the class? But who ever knows why a relationship really ends. When it's over, it takes on its own form and exists not only in one's mind, I'm convinced, but perhaps in some alternative universe; in some cases, so overwhelmingly that some fools want it back and even, in many cases, manage to do just that, only to break it again. Insanity.

Hugging my knees on the ledge, I felt as safe from the trouble of the street as a cat who lies window-side all day with nothing to do but stare at life unwinding under its quiet watch.

The street below was empty, until this woman in a long coat came running wildly into view, her arms flailing above her head. For a second, I wondered if she was getting chased down by a rapist. My heart jumped at the thought of it. Would I take the elevator down to save her? Would I call the cops? As if to confirm my suspicions, what looked like an unshaven guy came running after her. Yet I remained. He caught up, then play-tackled her to the sidewalk. They both laughed riotously. And my nerves began to settle as I watched them with a longing in my gut, hoping they wouldn't move anytime soon.

