

*It's Never
Too Late*



P. Arthur Stuart



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To those of you that are young at heart, still believe in the magic of
love, and search for adventure.

As with all my books:

To *Patricia Lynne* the love of a lifetime.

I'm sorry I'm not the man you deserved.

I did and do love you more than you knew or know.

You will "Always And All Ways" be in my heart

Prologue

January 2012

Each and every morning, since my love left this world and me, I take a few minutes to speak to her, of course, it's a one-way conversation. I just hope she can hear me. I talk about our life together, while I close my eyes, I speak of the mistakes I've made. I speak about the things I should have done, and how I failed her. I wish I could have an hour or even a few minutes to tell her, where she could respond, how I feel about her and to apologize for being such a moron. Given the time and opportunity, I would tell her I love her so much, much more than she, or I realized. Why I didn't see this, I can't explain. Perhaps, my selfishness and what's in it for me attitude, was the cause, not an excuse. I was wrong, of that I'm sure. I should have told her, "I love you," whenever she was near. Or stroked her hair, hugged her, taken her hand and squeezed it, . . . I just didn't realize I was that deep in love. These and other thoughts permeate my thinking and verbalizations.

Then in the afternoon, I take some additional time to follow my morning routine. As I move through the day, I continually see things that remind me of my love and all I've lost. I tell her, "Look at that sunset. Isn't it beautiful, like you."

Just before going to bed, I continue with my dialogue. I speak of such things, like how we enjoyed travel, dancing, building things, and sharing a nightcap or two. I recriminate myself for all the dumb things I did and all the things I should have done.

This is my way of coping; I do and have done this each and every day since—"My wish is that somehow she gets my message and forgives me. I believe she does love me, for while she was in pain and leaving, she told our children to take care of me. Writing this brings tears; tears I should have shed long-ago.

I would love to hold her in my arms and sing, or rather put the song on, Still the One, by Orleans, while I hug her tightly. The words speak for how I feel about her and are so appropriate and true.

I wonder if she'll meet someone knew where she is now. Surprisingly, I hope so. I want her to be happy. For me there will never be another love like her. She was one of a kind. No one could replace her, but perhaps, I can find someone that could partially fill the void. Enough so I can have a deeper purpose than just existing day to day.

Reflecting, I ask myself, “Aeolian Stuart Penogard, you’re 78, what the fuck are you going to do with the rest of your life?” Musing inwardly, It’s been three years since she passed away. Patricia Lynne is not coming back; she’s gone and no matter what you do, you can’t change that. Why don’t I just die. Give up. Why couldn’t it be me that went first. Would it have been as painful for her? Probably! Will the pain stop? I wouldn’t want her to have suffered this way, so, it’s probably better that she went first.

I toss and turn with these thoughts, while I’m trying to fall asleep. I don’t think I’ve had more than a few good nights of sleep. If it wasn’t for my exercising—jogging, weight training, walking, and cycling—and my webpage development, I would’ve just dried up and died, or I’d be just sitting, waiting for death to claim me. My three children call from time-to-time and invite me to come visit. I guess I should. It’s easier for me than for them, with the kids and all. I do have some friends that invite me out. Perhaps it’s time to consider re-entering the world. Will I even know how?

Like I usually do, I decide I’ll make a list of sorts. First, I’ll start with one or two word items, like: Visit family? Socialize? Write? Exercise? Travel? Write a book? Repair and fix up the house and property? Get back into tennis? Get laid, yeah right?

Chapter 1

Friday – January 11, 2012

I make up my mind and call my eldest son. When his wife answers she says, “Hi dad, how are you doing?” I can sense a bit of trepidation in her voice.

“I’m doing fine. Actually, I think I’d like to rejoin the world. Is the offer still open for me to visit?”

“Of course. You should know, you’re always welcome here. When would you like to come?”

“Well I’d like to contact Silvia and Nathan to check if their offers are still on the table. If so, my thoughts are that I’ll visit you first. Then Nathan and finally Silvia. Is there a particular time that would be better for you?”

“No. Anytime you want. I’m really happy you’re visiting and I know Thomas will be too. The kids will expect you to spoil them. You sound better than the last time we spoke.”

I want to say, not really, but settle for, “Maybe a change of venue is just what I need. I’ll call as soon as I figure out how I’ll get there and the dates. Is that alright with you?”

“Sure Dad. I’m sure Thomas will be elated.”

“I’ll keep you posted. Bye Kat. Take care and tell everyone I love them.”

“I will. Bye Dad.” She hangs up. I do the same.

I add to the list of things to do: Visit Thomas, Nathan, Silvia.

I turn on my computer, open my web browser, and click on Google maps. After entering Poway, CA, Corvallis, OR, Goshen, IN, and finally Orlando, FL, the information returned is that the total distance 4,375 miles and would take 66 hours, using the interstate system, with a few tolls. Examining the breakdown, I find the distance from Poway to Corvallis is 1,015 miles, 15 hours 50 min., from Corvallis to Goshen 2,235 miles, 34 hours, and Goshen to Orlando 1,125 miles, 16 hours 37 min. With these figures I should plan on taking two days to drive to Corvallis, four days to Goshen, and two days to Orlando. The return trip from Orlando to home is 2,424 miles, 34 hours, which I plan on taking at least four days. I’d likely take a few more days so I could visit some of the sites along the way: Carlsbad Cavern, NM; Saguaro National Park, AZ; White Sands Missile Range Museum, NM; Balmorhea State Park,

TX; The Alamo, TX; Champagnes Swamp Tour, LA. I'll get maps and guidebooks from AAA and then make some preliminary plans.

Since the trip will take nearly two months, on my list are reminders to notify appropriate people—sheriff, utilities, and neighbor to pick up mail. Since we purchased our home, in 1969 we were able to pay it off. Taxes, home, personal, utilities, food, and other essentials are my only expenses. My military retirement and small social security provides sufficient funds for living and allows me to spend some of it frivolously. I have saved sufficient funds, so I have enough to spare for the trip, although I'm sure my kids would help me with travel expenses, if I ask.

My car, a 2008 Honda CRV, is in good shape, with exceptionally low mileage. You don't put a lot of mileage on driving to shop, eat, get gas, and go to medical appointments. We bought it new, with the expectation that we would travel to visit the kids and see sights along the way. This causes me to ask the question, "If you can do something, why wait?" I suppose in our case, it was due to waiting for the children to grow up and for me to fully retire.

When the time came, the medical problem started. At first it was minor dermatological problems. A few large skin lesions that required special surgery. Almost to the very end, things kept getting better. Each time they found something; it was taken care of. Appendicitis, kidney growth, blood clots, and a multitude of others, all of which were treated successfully, that is, except of course the cancer.

Chapter 2

Several months ago, I started to go to a local fraternal military club, that is in walking distance. I stopped in one evening when I had finished a long walk, to get a cold drink. After I proved I was a member for close to 20 years, I ordered a non-alcoholic beer.

I had joined the organization, around the time I stopped drinking; at my doctor's suggestion and because I wanted to stay healthy, so we could enjoy our future, when the kids moved on. A few weeks after I started to stop in, I ask myself, now that my love is gone, *What difference does it make, whether I drink an alcoholic drink or not?* Prior to initiating my non-alcoholic drinking phase, my beverage of choice was beer, which I consumed watching sports or during outdoor activities. Occasionally, in the evening she and I would have a drink. She liked Kalua and Seven-up, I had straight vodka or a glass of wine. I decided to jump off the wagon, but on a limited basis, and began to have two glasses of wine to start my evening.

It became a routine for me. I'd stop in around five, sit away from the others, and write. Mostly I was writing a story about how I should have shown my wife I loved her. I was so stupid. It's my only regret, a regret that will pain me till I join her.

While I was drinking my drinks, I was in my own world. I have found that I can concentrate in unusual places, like the club, with the chatter going on. One day, one of the regulars ask me, "Are you writing a book."

I responded in a friendly manner, hoping I didn't sound sarcastic, "Yes, I am."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, it's a love story, a bit erotic, but a love story. I'm also writing about some of my misgivings."

Accepting that I'm not joking or being sarcastic, he introduced himself and the others. I found them to be friendly and sociable. After a while I was accepted as a regular and would engage in a causerie, from time-to-time. I was told that they thought I was an investigator of sorts, because of my writing things down. We do have some wild imaginations.

On a Friday, about six months after I started coming, they were going to have some sort of an event after the regular Friday night dinner. I arrive at my standard time and find a seat at the horseshoe bar, on the

side opposite to the main room. Although I usually leave before seven, I decided to stay and see what happens; what else did I have to do, nothing.

The *bill of fare* is spaghetti and meatballs, with assorted side dishes: garlic bread, make your own salad, and choice of sauces. The price is very reasonable and affordable for people on a low income budget. I note that many of the regular Friday night diners, with families, and many new faces were present. Every Friday the club has a buffet style dinner that a volunteer prepares and is sold at a very low price; a price that lets the preparer recoup their cost and provides the club with additional funds. All the meals are prepared by volunteer members of the organization. The advantage to me is I don't have to fix dinner later, then add to the stack of dirty dishes in the sink. And besides, the food is usually tasty.

I'm sitting at the bar, drinking my daily two glasses of wine and waiting for the Friday evening dinner to be served, that is, when it is ready for people to go get it.

My dinner finished, I sit nursing my wine, as I observe what's going on. Around 6:45, I see a woman setting up a piano keyboard. I ask the bartender, "Elain, what's going on?"

She informs me, "Stu, tonight is singalong night. Everyone is encouraged to sing. The words are put on the TV screens karaoke style." She laughs, "If you want you can take the mic to lead the group."

I laugh, "Yeah right. I've been told that the only place I should sing out loud is while I'm underwater." She giggles and moves off to serve others.

After the woman sets up her keyboard, she also stacks up song books, I find they cost two-fifty a copy—some people prefer to read words from a book, rather than on a TV screen. On the table with the piano keyboard, she places a tip jar. I suspect that's how she makes some money. I make a mental note to make sure I put something in.

Surveying the room, I see many regulars, several older couples, at least they're older than I am, and a few groups—families or friends. One group I note is made up of three women, they look to be in the late thirties or early forties, and one guy, about the same age. I think one guy, three girls, some men have all the luck. The women are attractive, and they look alike, probably sisters. There is one I feel more attracted to. While I'm looking at her and fantasizing, she looks up and our eyes meet. I smile, she smiles, and we stare into each other's eyes for several minutes when she returns her look to her group. I shift my gaze and begin to look around again. From time-to-time I shift my view, perhaps I

should say, ‘ogle’ to look at her. She has chestnut brown wavy hair, that hang several inches past her shoulders. Her face appears to be oval, with a straight nose that has the slightest bit of an upturn. Her lips are full, and her face is symmetrical. I feel I could look at it forever.

The singalong DJ, whom I will call *The Piano-Lady*, starts the evening festivities with *Margaritaville*. It’s a popular song that nearly everybody knows the words to, particularly with the help of the TVs, or the book if the song is included. After several songs, *The Piano-Lady* announces that anyone can use the mic to lead the group or sing to their significant other, and don’t forget that anyone can make a request.

Chapter 3

An hour or so, ten plus songs, and everyone is getting into the mood. I suppose the spirits are contributing somewhat. I look around and it appears to me that most of the crowd is singing, while some are mouthing the words, which allow those of us that have less than musical voices to join in. Our cacophony of voices are lost among those of the horde. I glance in the direction of the woman I'm attracted to and see, that she is dancing with the other girls in her group.

Emboldened, perhaps because of the wine, I get up, leave my running shoes, and approach the dancing girls. When I'm close enough, I ask, "Would you mind if I join you?" I've prepared myself for rejection. It's a self-preservation thing; expect the worst.

Looking at me, the woman, says, "Please do. A man in the group will make it better." I'm relieved. The dance is typical of the more none contact style. Arms flailing about wildly, while hips are gyrating without consideration to dance steps. It's move any way that makes you feel good. After several more fast songs, which I stay and participate in, the DJ puts on a slow tune.

I decide to step out of my comfort zone, but I prepare myself for failure, I ask the woman, "Would you like to dance?"

Smiling she says, "I would but I don't know how to dance."

Instead of just turning and walking away, I reply, "Well that has to be the nicest way of saying 'no' that I've heard."

Taking the offensive, she retorts, "Seriously, I would like to dance, but I really don't know how. You'd probably be surprised at how many women don't know how to dance."

I stand there wondering, *Could it be true?* I thought all women knew how to dance. I close my eyes in contemplation, open them, reach out my hand to her, which she takes. I gently pull her to me and hold her like we've done this all our lives. She puts her hand on my shoulder. I whisper softly, "Just relax and walk." I've found the best way to avoid stepping on a woman's foot is to continually move backwards, pulling her along. We make it through the dance and *The Piano-Lady* plays another slow one. Since I hold her during the minute or so intermission, we pick up where we left off. This dance I have her do a couple of pirouettes. She laughs in enjoyment.

While we dance, I sing, very low, barely audible, she sings a bit louder, but her voice is soothing and unlike me, she's able to carry a tune. We dance for several of the slow dances. I think *The Piano-Lady*, purposely played a couple of slow romantic tunes for us.

When a fast song comes on, I walk her back to the table and say, as she sits, "I want to thank you ladies for allowing me to share the pleasure of your company. It was great and made my evening. Thank you again for tolerating me."

As I start to turn to leave, the woman, asks, "Would you like to join us?"

Grinning, I muse aloud, "Is that a trick question? I would very much like to join you. I probably should have done this earlier. My name is Stu and it's a pleasure to meet you all."

The woman takes the lead, "My name is Sahara, like the desert."

Before she can say more, I state, "You're anything but a desert. May be a dessert. You're gorgeous."

She smiles and giggles a bit, the other girls grin. "Thank you." Then pointing to one of the girls, "This is Synthea, spelled with an S." Then pointing to the other girl, "Alice." Lastly, she introduces me to the guy, "This is Paul, Synthea's husband." As she does the intros, I reach out and shake their hands.

We sit out the next hand full of songs, maybe five or six and between singalongs, we manage to share some pleasant conversation, general in nature. For the next hour the girls and I get up and dance. When a slow one comes on, I offer, and Sahara comes into my arms and we move slowly. Sahara is about three inches shorter than I am, which would make her about 5' 7", based on my height of 5' 10." Sahara is wearing a stylish light brown dress, with a floral pattern, that extends to just below the knees. She's slim, but not skinny. She's everything I could wish for; except I think, *I'm too old for her. Oh well, so be it, enjoy yourself while the evening lasts.*

During a slow dance I ask, "You girls are related, aren't you?"

Grinning she informs me, "Yes."

I guess, "Sisters?"

This sends her into a fit of laughter. I'm puzzled, what could be so funny that I think they're sisters. Regaining her composure, she tells me, "The girls are my daughters."

I snicker, look at her, and respond, "You're so full of it. Were you married at age ten."

“No, I was married when I was twenty, closer to twenty-one, just before I finished college. How old do you think I am?”

“I’d say you’re in your mid to late forties. And I’d bet your siblings aren’t under thirty.”

“Again, they’re my daughters. Really, they’re my daughters. Now stop lying and tell me how old you really think I am?”

“First off I don’t lie. I really thought you were in your early to mid-forties. When I guessed, I did embellish the truth a little. I’d rather go lower when it comes to telling a woman what I think her age is. It’s a matter of survival. You should know that I don’t lie.” I start to laugh.

She asks, “What are you laughing at?”

“I don’t think I should tell you.”

“And why not?”

“Umm, I, I don’t want to offend you.”

“Go ahead, I’m so damned curious now. I promise I’ll forgive you.”

“Okay, you ask for it. I was going to say, if you’re a day over fifty, I’ll kiss your ass. Then I thought I would kiss your ass anyway.”

Thankfully, Sahara starts to laugh. “Well maybe someday I’ll let you pay that debt. I’m seventy-two.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes, “Boy you are just jerking my chain and teasing me. If you’re having fun, it’s okay by me. I enjoy being with you.”

“Same here. I’ll tell you what, when we sit down you can ask my kids, and I’ll show you my driver’s license if you don’t believe them. Thank you for your compliment.”

“If you believe nothing else, what I said about your age is the absolute truth. I might add or subtract a few years when ask to guess an age, depending on who’s asking. However, I would never add or subtract more than a couple of years. You look amazingly young. I’m awed.”

Grinning and giggling, she retorts, “Don’t you think you’re laying it on a bit much.”

Cocking my head to one side I look directly at her, “No. I was just telling you the truth.” Before I say more, I discover were moving about the floor slowly to a very fast song. I suggest, “Perhaps we should sit for a while?”

When we’re seated, Synthea asks, “What was all the laughing about?”

Sahara looks at me and laughs again, “Synthea please tell Stu how we’re related.”

Synthea looks at me like I should have known, then says, “She’s my mom.”

Sahara speaking to her other daughter, “Alice, please tell Stu how old I am.”

Looking surprised, Alice asks, “Mom, are you sure? Really?”

“Yes really.”

Still not sure Alice grimaces and looks confused, “Mom.”

“Yes Alice. I told Stu my age and he doesn’t believe me. He thinks we’re sisters.” Paul laughs and gets “that’s not funny stare” from Synthea. He stops quickly.

Looking at me, “Our mom is seventy-two. Stu, you were just trying to impress her.”

“No, I put you two in your mid-thirties, possibly near forty, and I thought your mom, was the older, wiser sister.”

Synthea says, “Stu get your eyes examined as soon as you can.”

I look at Paul, he has that don’t get me involved. Smiling I inform them, “Okay, I’m a poor judge of age, but you all are very attractive women and you cannot deny that you’re related. If it pleases everyone, let’s drop the subject.” Quickly I ask, “Do you all live in Poway?”

Paul says, “No. My mother-in-law has a home here. One of her friends told her about the Friday night dinner. I joined the organization several years ago at a local club. Since I’m a member, we decided we give it a try.”

“I for one am glad you did. Did you all enjoy yourselves?”

Alice looks at the others, then states, “Yes it was fun. How often do they do this?”

I tell them, “I don’t know how often they the singalong, typically these events are once a month. Every Friday, they have a buffet style dinner, prepared by a volunteer. Perhaps, you may want to form a team for *Trivia Night*.” I give them a summary of how it works. They indicate they might like to do it.

Now that we’ve escaped from the age conflict, we talk about the places they live, movies, sports, and in my estimation a myriad of subjects of general interest. I do a lot of the listening, talk as little as possible, and ask questions which stimulates others to speak.

We are so engrossed in our conversation, that it takes the bartender to inform us that we’re the only customers left and that the bar officially closed at nine; it’s now past eleven. She lets us know that they usually stay open until everybody is done or it gets really late, which it is now. I apologize and give Silvia a twenty dollar tip, in addition to what

I had left on the bar earlier, when I moved over here. Thankfully, I put a twenty in *The Piano-Lady's* jar earlier—it was worth it. The group leaves some more on the table as we get up to leave.

I ask Sahara, “Can I have a moment alone with you?”

Smiling, she takes my arm and moves us off to a quiet spot outside. Then says, “Sure.”

Meekly, I inquire, “Sahara would you like to meet me for a cup of coffee, breakfast, lunch, or a similar get together?”

Smiling, “Yes, I’d like that.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you my number. That will allow you to avoid saying ‘no’ or I’m busy for the next couple of years when I call.”

I can see her rolling her eyes, “Why would you think I’d say no, when I just said I would like to go out with you?”

Timidly, “Since this is the first time, I’ve asked a woman out in close to fifty years, I’m a bit apprehensive, unsure, and nervous. No, I’m a lot insecure and terrified. Right now, my heartbeat is in the thousands.” This causes her to giggle a bit. “I guess I’m thinking back to my teen years when I’ve asked a girl if she would like to go out, and they either gave me a bogus number, or a thousand reasons why they would be busy for the next hundred years.”

Almost laughing uncontrollably, she informs me, “Like you, no one has ask me out since I’ve been married.”

I suck in a deep breath, then look questioning at her, and stammer, “Are you married?” I always check for a ring but failed to this time.

Grinning, she retorts, “Would that make any difference?”

I think about her question for a few moments, “I don’t know. It’s a complicated situation. I just don’t know. Are you married?”

Laughing lightly, “Relax! I’m a widow. Jerome passed nearly ten years ago.”

I offer my sympathy, “I’m sorry. Please accept my condolences. Before you ask, I’m in the same boat. Patricia passed about three years ago.” I want to tell her more, but if we connect, we’ll likely have lots of talks about our past loves later.

Taking charge, Sahara tells me, “Look, let’s meet at one of the events you suggested. Say tomorrow or the next day.”

Smiling I say, “That’s acceptable. Personally, the sooner the better. I enjoy your company. How about tomorrow for lunch at Cully’s? Do you know the place?” She does, and then in case something happens, I give her my number and have her call me. “I explain this way we can

put it into our contact list and know it's correct." I make her pose for a picture. She demands I do the same.

"Sahara, I want you to know that I've had a great time tonight, it's one of the best days ever. I am so looking forward to seeing you again. Good night." I walk her to the car, open the door, and I don't know why but I bend and kiss her cheek. When she's seated inside, I close the door, wave, and start my walk home. I'm floating like a teenage boy that spent time with a girl he has a crush on.

As I begin to leave the parking lot, Paul stops along side me and asks, "Can we give you a lift home. I don't see any more cars, except for the one, which I suspect is the bartenders."

"Thanks! I appreciate the offer, but I like to walk, it's part of my physical fitness. I come here primarily because it's in walking distance." I point to my street, "I live maybe a quarter mile down there, or should I say, up the hill. I'm the second house on the right." I chuckle, "There are only three houses on the right. Once again thanks for the offer and thank you all for a great evening." They continue on their way and I walk home in a daze.

Chapter 4

Although our lunch rendezvous is scheduled for eleven, I arrive at Cully's at 10:15. I'm a wee bit early, right. The proprietor, Mark, and I go way back. Pat and I started coming here, maybe twenty or more years ago, it's become my place to go for breakfast or lunch. Except for weekends and unusual days, it's a seat yourself place. I go to one of my preferred tables and pull up a seat.

Mark ask, "Coffee?" I nod yes. He asks, "How's it going?"

"Good. I'm meeting someone," I chuckle, "They're schedule to be here around nine. I'm slightly early. So, if it's alright with you, I'll just sit here and nurse my coffee till then."

Since there are more than a few empty tables, Mark retorts, "Not a problem. Relax. It's not like you need a reservation." We both laugh.

I settle back in my seat, peruse my phone, check my emails, and Facebook page, while I nervously wait for Sahara. I've made some changeable, after lunch plans, in case she doesn't like what I've planned. In that case we can *play it by ear*. I begin to worry she won't even show up. Then I worry she won't like it here or anything I like. If I can imagine something going wrong, I do. I'm nearly a wreck by 10:45, so I get up and go out the back door to get a breath of fresh air and calm myself. After taking a dozen or more deep, deep breaths and letting them out slowly, I achieve a modicum of calm and then return. It's a little after 10:55 when I reenter, through the back, and I see Sahara standing at the entryway. She takes my breath away and my heart rate increases.

I see Mark approach her. He speaks to her and she replies. Mark leads her to my table, just as I get back. I stand behind a chair to assist her in getting seated.

Smiling, she says, "That's very Sir Galahad of you. Thanks."

Grinning and happy, I reply, "Perhaps." I then introduce her to Mark, and then Sahara to him. Then I tell her, "I'm really very glad you showed. I was worried. My imagination went into overdrive and ran wild. I thought of every conceivable reason why you wouldn't show up. Your showing up most assuredly lifts my spirits. I feel like an adolescent on his first date."

Rolling her eyes, shaking her head, and grinning, she informs me, "Stu, if I say I'm going to do something or schedule a date, I'm going to do it."

Grimacing and grinning, I attempt to defend myself, and I tell her, “I understand, now. I’ve only known you a moment or two, and I’m somewhat pessimistic. It’s a protection mechanism, when it comes to girls. Further, I haven’t been with a girl, or rather, a woman, other than my wife, for over forty-five years. I’m not in my twenties, or even thirties, and I’m scared to death that I’ll screw up and make a bad impression, that will send you away, screaming.”

She starts to laugh and informs me, “Welcome to the club. I’m nervous and scared too. It’s also been a long time for me and the only man in my life was my husband. You’re the first man I’ve met outside of organized gatherings. So, I can certainly empathize with you.”

I laugh, she laughs, I suggest, “Let’s take a deep breath or two and then order.”

We take a couple of breaths and order. While we eat, we talk about family, principally our kids, their families, travel, and places we lived. Like me, she had three children, two girls and a boy, whereas, I have two boys and a girl. I’ve met Synthea and Alice. She informs me her son is an associate marine biologist professor and is currently involved in a research project on the migration patterns of whales. I tell her about my naval service.

When we finish our meal, we sit and continue to talk, while we nurse our coffee. After my umpteenth coffee, I finally work up the courage to ask, “Sahara, would you like to go to the San Diego Safari Park. The day is warm, but not hot.”

Smiling warmly, she replies, “Yes, I would but first I need to go home and change into walking shoes. The shoes I’m wearing will get uncomfortable quickly, if I’m standing or walking for an extended period.”

Nodding, I respond, “I understand. If you like I could follow you home or wait here, whichever is most comfortable with?”

“You can follow me. I’ll give you my address just in case you lose me.” On a piece of paper, she retrieves from her purse, she writes her address and gives it to me. I manage to follow her and park in her driveway. Exiting her car, she comes to my window, I power it down, and she says, “Would you like to come in while I change?”

Attempting to be funny, I ask, “What are you going to change into?”

Looking at me in a confused manner, she retorts, “My shoes and I think I’ll be more comfortable in sweats.”

Grinning, I tell her, “I was trying to be funny. When I asked, ‘What are you going to change into,’ I meant you. Were you going to change into a werewolf, a lion, or something else. Guess it didn’t register.”

She laughs, then replies, “It is funny. It went right over my head. I’m not used to being with a man. You know, worried I’ll screw up.”

Nodding, I acknowledge, “Me too, maybe even more so, that is screwing up. I mean, not being with a woman. I’ll come in. You can take your time.”

Her home is a typical, single level, slab house, in a track housing development. The living room has a warm feel and is very feminine. There’s a light brown overstuffed couch, a recliner, a couple of end tables, a coffee table with magazines spread across the top, and a wall mounted television. I think, I would be comfortable sitting here with her, watching a movie or a show.

Sahara tells me, “Make yourself at home.”

I sink into the sofa, lean back, and close my eyes. I have a moment of realization; I really enjoy being with this woman. It’s been a long time since I’ve had this feeling, a very long time. I feel like a grade schoolboy that just got a kiss on the cheek from his crush. It’s a heady feeling.

I’ve been sitting, daydreaming when Sahara interrupts my reverie, “Stu, I’m ready.”

I open my eyes, look at her, and soak in her beauty. She’s dressed in slacks, shipboard deck shoes, a lightweight jacket, and a San Diego Ballcap, with her ponytail hanging out the back opening of the cap.

My heart rate increases, I stand, and say, “You look terrific. Okay, let’s go.” Although, I’d like to stay and do other things. Shaking my thoughts off, I head for the front door, open it, and allow her to exit. I ask, “Is the door self-locking?”

She nods, but also answers, “Yes.”

So, I close the door, try to open it, to make sure it’s locked and closed; It is. Satisfied, I go to my vehicle and open the passenger door for her to get in. Once she’s seated and I’m sure I won’t close some part of her body in the door, I close it. I move to the other side, get in, and start the car. I turn to Sahara, who’s smiling. I smile back, shift my attention to driving, put the car in gear, and begin to drive.

About forty minutes later, we enter the San Diego Safari Park grounds. It’s a pleasant day, the temperature is in the high sixties, which makes it comfortable for wondering around the park.

I say, “Sahara, it doesn’t matter how many times I come here, it always awes and amazes me. The advancement in animal care and how they’re exhibited is a win-win for them and us.” I don’t want to scare her away, so, I stop before I get on a rostrum to express my views of the importance of caring for nature and the environment.

Solemnly she replies, “Yes, zoos have become more than just a place to exhibit animals. They’re taking steps to protect wildlife and prevent extinction. Hopefully, what they do will help. It would be tragic if our descendants don’t have the opportunity to experience the things. Truly tragic.”

I look at her with veneration and say, “My sentiments exactly.” To move us off this serious discord, I ask, “Would you like to take the tram ride?” She just nods her head.

On the way to the tram, we stop at the nursery and small animal facility. There’s two baby tigers, both a couple of months old. One of the tiger cubs was confiscated from a guy, trying to smuggle it across the border. He told the border agent it was a house cat. The other cub was abandoned by its mother. When we are afforded a viewing opportunity, we get to watch them play and attack each other.

From the nursery we go directly to the tram. At the tram, we wait in line, perhaps 10 to 20 minutes. When you’re engrossed and with someone you like, time doesn’t seem to matter; it just seems to flyby.

Chapter 5

Day -- Month Day, Date

As I arrive to pick up Sahara, for our first date, I think back to when I asked her out, I said, “Would you like to join me for dinner and a movie? This was after we ate an early lunch and spent the day at the San Diego Safari Park.

Sweetly, with a smile, she replied, “Yes. I think I’d like that.”

When I arrive, I find she’s outside waiting. I pull my vehicle into her driveway, get out, and open the door for her. She slides in gracefully and I admire her shapeliness. God, this woman is awesome. I quickly run around to the driver’s side and get in. As I pull out, I try to impress her with my convivial manner, so I ask, “Where would you like to go to have dinner? I don’t know what you like and didn’t want to appear presumptuous.”

Smiling, she replies, “Anywhere. I’ll pretty much eat anything.” I laugh. She appears mystified. She asks, “Why’d you laugh?”

I think, *Uh-oh*, how should I answer this? I go for the truth, if this relationship goes anywhere, I want it to be based on the truth. I inform her, “I was going to say, really?”

She states, “Why is that funny?”

I look at her, with my head cock to one side, and reply, “Really?” I’m beginning to suspect she didn’t get my sexual innuendo.

“Yes, really. I don’t get it.”

I attempt to dodge the issue, by suggesting, “How about we go to one of the steak places?”

“Okay.” However, she revives the issue and pushes. “I’d still like to know what you meant.”

Being cautious, I inform her, “Honestly Sahara, I don’t want to offend you, at least not before I get to know you better. Well, actually, I don’t want to offend you ever.”

“Why do you need to know me better?”

“Uh, we’re just starting out. I’m not sure what I can say or not say. You’re beautiful and I’m drawn to you, like a moth to a flame; perhaps a better analogy would be the attraction of a north and south pole of magnets. I frequently put my foot in my mouth. I’m not ready to do it with you.

She thinks about this for a while. She sort of inoculates me with, “If this relationship stands any chance of surviving, we need to be up front with one another. Frankly, we’re too old to play the games young people play. While I may not be worldly wise and lack experience in some matters, I’m not a prude. And I want to learn and experience life in new ways. So, once again, why was,” using finger quotes, as she says, “*really*,’ funny to you.”

Nervously, I tell her, “It’s a sexual innuendo, referring to oral sex.”

Surprising me she starts to laugh. She shakes her head, then states. “While I’m no expert on the subject, I do have a rudimentary knowledge. Okay, a couple of things. I don’t want you to hold anything back, regardless if you think it might offend me. So it offends me. We’ll work it out. Also, although I led a rather prosaic existence. It was what it was. I loved my husband and he was what he was, a very kind, banal kind of guy. I won’t say I didn’t have a good life, because I did. He loved me, of that I’m sure. I have my children and that alone makes life worth living. Yet, if there is more, I’d like to get it. So, just be you and I’ll be me. If we’re not compatible, so be it, although I think we are.” She stops, looks at me, and waits for me to answer.

I search for what to say and all I can come up with is, “Okay.”

She bursts out laughing. Repeats, “Okay, okay. Is that all you can say to my out poring?”

“Ah, yes. I can’t think of what else to say. I’ll be me.” I chuckle, then add, “I was going to say, really, what would you like me to say.” I pause, “By okay, I meant I understand and can live with it. And most of all, I want us to work.”

“Okay.” She stops and looks at me and smiles

Stretching it out, I repeat, “Okay.”

We arrive at one of the local steak houses for dinner. Our meal turns out to be enjoyable and pleasant. The food was good and while we ate, we discussed family, travel, books, and bits-n-pieces of our past. We don’t reveal much. I tell her that, like her pretty much eating anything, I like all sorts of movies, except horror, they just don’t move me. In the end we choose a romantic comedy. Throughout the movie, I have my arm around her shoulder and she holds my hand; it’s like we’re teenagers. We share popcorn and a drink. Like me, she drinks regular soda and prefers it clear.

When I drop her off, I apprise her how I feel, “Sahara, I’ve had a wonderful time since I met you, tonight in particular. So, I’ll make it easy

on you.” She looks at me perplexed. I go on, “You have my number. If you’d like to go out again, call me. This way, if you don’t, you won’t be burdened with having to say no.”

She laughs, then comments, “Men? Stu, I like being with you. Call when you want to go out because I’m going to say yes unless I’m truly otherwise obligated. I want to go out with you again.”

“Okay.” I chuckle, “There’s the okay again. Good night. I’ll call sometime tomorrow and we can set something up.” I lean down and kiss her on the cheek and then proceed to my vehicle, get in, start the car, turn, and wave, and drive away, happy and excited.

Any feedback will be appreciate. Yes, even if it's negative.

Please email comment to: p_arthur_stuart@pastuart.com