

QI HEALS

NEWS FROM THE SIKE HEALTH QI COMMUNITY
OCTOBER 2010, VOL. 6, NO. 38

TREATING LOWER BACK PAIN (II)

Americans are very pro-anti. We like anti-aging unguents, anti-wrinkle creams, antiperspirants, antibiotics, antipastos, etc. About the only anti we generally dislike is the Anti-Christ, though some are eagerly awaiting his advent to bring on the Rapture to Narnia. One of the few anti's we lack, and which we have wished for since the days of Buck Rogers, is an anti-gravity device. Most people would like the device to release them from slavery to the pavement. Wouldn't it be cool to float around at will? My feeling is that, had we an anti-gravity device, we would be free from lower back pain.

I believe that most lower back pain is a gradual accretion of stress due to poor posture. Yes, Grandma was right. Without lower structural strength and integrity to support the superstructure, stress has no where to go but to the lower back. When the back finally gives in to stress, pain begins. When I talk about lower structural strength and integrity, and I mean the feet, that part of the body that actually meets the pavement and puts you literally in touch with gravity.

Ideally, body weight should be distributed across the ball of the foot and the heel in the shape of a triangle. However, just watching a person walk, or looking at his/her shoes, you will see that people walk on the outside of the feet, on the balls alone (also called 'toewalking'), or on the heels. This weight distribution is an affront to gravity, and

gravity will have its way with you. Walking on the outside of the feet means that your weight will be supported by the muscles running on the outside of the leg, the so-called long muscles. Again ideally, the weight should be taken by the inner muscles, the short muscles, which support the superstructure with ease.

When a person does not walk heel-to-toe, which maintains the flexibility of the ankles and distributes weight throughout the ideal triangle, the muscles running from the ankle to the knee along the shin become tight and painful. When they become chronically painful, they are called shin splints, and can be crippling. Most people are unaware that they have pain along their shins until they press on the muscle with their fingers. Walking flat-footed, or with weight bias on the front or back of the foot, is like driving a car without shock absorbers. The lower spine gets jolted out of alignment.

Lower back pain begins from the ground up, starting with tight, inflexible ankles, moving up the leg through the shin muscles, and tightening up at the bottom of the inner knee. Now, here is where things get interesting. Instead of continuing moving up the inner leg, the stress jumps across the knee, and lands on the upper outside of the knee, then makes its way up the outer leg to the hip joint. The pelvis is pulled out of alignment, the sacrum tilts, and voila, you have lower back pain. You call SIKE Health, and we use qi to stimulate the muscles to realign the bones.

Once the pelvis has been aligned, and the sacrum is back where it should be, the pain goes away within 72 hours. However, muscle memory guarantees that the pain will return without a second or even

third treatment, followed by a simple regimen of physical re-education at home.

The physical re-education consists of several things. 1) One should soaks one's feet in hot water (about 102 degrees) to above the ankles for 3 minutes once a day. Twice a day is better at the beginning, but once will do. 2) Lying on the back, rotate the ankles in both directions for a minute a day. Putting strength into the big toe makes it easier to rotate the ankle. 3) Be mindful when you walk that you are walking heel-to-toe, even if it feels awkward or unnatural at first. Three other things that will keep you flowing with gravity are 1) keep your feet flat on the floor when you sit. Crossing your legs or having your heels up and your weight on your toes is a recipe for recurring backache. 2) Do the yoga position Child Pose daily. This is like a cat stretching its spine. 3) Do not bend over to lift objects. Keeping the back straight, squat down, get hold of the object, and then stand up from the ground up rather than from the lower back up.

USEFUL HEALTH HINT

Most people stand with their legs straight and their knees locked. Take a moment to recognize if this is how you stand. When your knees are locked, feel the muscles in your upper backside along the line of the pelvic girdle. They will be tight. Now bend your knees. I don't mean a dramatic bend, just a slight bend will do. Now feel the muscles. They are loose and relaxed. Standing with straight legs and knees locked causes your lower back muscles to squeeze the pelvic girdle and sacrum. This will eventually cause you pain. Be mindful of standing with knees slightly bent.

UNCLE ARNIE (X)

Arthur Pillars did not receive me graciously. I had invaded his room in the bottom of the ninth of an engrossing Pirates game, and then had badgered him relentlessly.

"Goddamit, Arthur, what the hell do you mean Arnie didn't have a wife? The woman told me she was his wife. He's dead, for Christ's sake! You don't have to protect him anymore." I strode about the room like the Grand Inquisitor, gesticulating as ferociously as I could. The effect was nil.

He retracted his neck until nothing remained, and stared at me balefully. I strode about some more. The television announcer droned on, lamenting the huge sums paid to poor Pirate hitters.

"Can't we turn off the damn TV and talk about the wife of your best friend?" I thrust my jaw into his nose.

He looked away at the cabinetry of his tiny kitchenette. He seemed to be studying the grain of the wood. I grew disgusted, and made a small, explosive noise in the back of my mouth. That jarred him.

"Arnie wasn't married. That broad ain't his wife," he said finally.

"Then who is she?"

"Why?" he sneered, "for what you gotta know? I told ya t'go away. For what you gotta know things about Arnie? I told ya I'd bury him, an' I did. Now he's gone an' I got all the memories. You know all ya need t'know."

I stopped being forceful. My voice was composed. "Arthur, please. Arnie had a secret life. It's important to me to find out what it was."

Arthur snorted. "Shit." This might have been said to me, or to the news that a Pirate batter had just hit into the first triple play in sixteen years. Arthur composed himself. "Shit," he said again, "Arnie's dead and suddenly his life's important. 'sides, it wasn't no secret. I knew. I was his best friend." Predictably, he patted his chest. "You don't know what a good friend I was." He was becoming sullen.

"At least tell me so I can go and comfort the woman. She sounded terribly upset."

He looked at me with ineffable disdain. He spat out, "Yeah? Lemme tellya somethin'. That broad don't need no comfort. She's a whore." He stood up and turned his back on me as if that ended the matter.

But it didn't. With those words, Arnie Balsom's life was revealed. I understood everything: his refusal to take more vacations, his pornography collection, his insistence on having a telephone, his

weekend absences, the two bus tickets. There were no heavenly choirs, trumpeting cherubim, angelic hosannas or flashes of lightning to announce my illumination. Arthur Pillars alone among the people of the world knew that at that moment my mind had penetrated through a thick, dark veil to a shining vista. I had looked long and hard at Uncle Arnie, and where I once said, like Toots, "Naw, not him", I now thought, "Yes, him indeed". Uncle Arnie had come alive to me.

"You went with him to Steubenville, didn't you?" I exclaimed, and hugged Arthur. "He was afraid of buses and so you took him to and from Steubenville to see a woman. But sometimes you couldn't go, so you'd wait for him in his room to make sure he'd gotten back all right. You were a good friend, a wonderful friend."

I was no longer hugging Arthur, but holding him up. He had collapsed in my arms, sobbing. He did not share my joy. He had never liked the arrangement he made with Arnie. Yet his love for Arnie was such that he must have gone with him countless times to Steubenville.

"They'se my tickets. I swear they'se my tickets. He was my friend. He was just holdin' em for me."

Arthur shook and sobbed and swore. His abiding friendship with Arnie had justified his life, and the exposure of what he considered to

be complicity in an act of shame had, to him, debased that friendship. Suddenly he was no more than a bad man's crony. Above all he must have feared that that was how he and Arnie would be remembered by the Balsom family. We had, in my instant of insight, gained the moral edge.

I lifted and laid him on the sofa. He was light and fragile, like the handle of a bone china pitcher. Tears streamed down the sides of his face, his teeth chattered. I stroked his hand with a passionate longing to infuse my respect and sympathy through his skin. I felt mawkish.

"Arthur, I'll never tell anybody. Nobody. Not any of Arnie's brothers. Not my own father. I promise. No one will ever know. I'll come back from Pittsburgh and tell the family that Arthur Pillars was the best friend Arnie had. No, the best friend anybody's ever had."

The reflex action -Arthur raised his hand weakly to pat his chest, then let it fall, signifying he was no longer worthy of the title 'Arnie's best friend'. Vitality had fled from him as from a looming assassin. When his sobbing stopped, he might have been dead.

The television sportscaster announced the final score.

Arthur opened his eyes. "Them Pirates is stupid," he said with feeling. The words took me back twenty years when a little boy --like the man laying before me-- had mistakenly tried to protect his uncle.

I lifted Arthur's hand and patted his chest with it.

"You were the best friend Arnie ever had," I said, and stroked his cheek.

"You don't know what a good friend I was," Arthur murmured, and closed his eyes.

That evening, I cashed in one of the unused bus tickets for a one-way ticket to Steubenville on the first bus leaving Sunday morning.

The sun rose without zest, and shone without enthusiasm as if waiting for the hour when it could knock off work. It produced more heat than light, not that the heat was at all impressive. Having done well by Uncle Arnie on the day of his funeral, the sun seemed to have lost interest in the remnants of his life. It was behaving with the minimum grace, and in the most perfunctory manner. No doubt, it had other funerals to attend elsewhere.

Lantern Street was unornamented, unadorned, and undistinguished, perhaps the least memorable street in America. Small, whitewashed wooden houses with crabgrass-infested lawns aspired to wan respectability. Grimy cars of dubious manufacture and venerable age were parked right up against the curbs. The few elm trees on the street leafed half-heartedly, as if awaiting certain blight. Two small mongrel dogs rolled listlessly in the empty road. No birds sang. No insects hummed. All the sounds on Lantern Street were imported from other parts of the city. There seemed to be nobody to hear them. No one was going to or returning from church. No boys with bats and balls were hurrying to a park. No one read the Sunday funnies; there was not a single paper lying on a lawn. It was a street to go to lose your identity. The identical, forgettable homes with their heavy curtains drawn across small living room windows could house fugitives or conclaves of spies.

Number 126 was the only house on the street without a car parked out front. The wooden slats had been recently painted light gray. The trim had not been done for a while, and was a faded white. The lawn had been asymmetrically mown within the past fortnight. A gaudy red birdhouse, never used but lovingly maintained, perched on the front

porch rail. It proclaimed an optimism that made living on Lantern Street supportable. The welcome mat had a scuffed plastic daisy in the center. Somebody had no qualms about treading on the only bloom in the neighborhood.

The woman had passed the night in tumult. She answered the door bleary-eyed, her lashes like the rims of twin wells of sadness. Her tatty robe was askew and her hair stuck out as if she had been pulling it. She was thin and frail. Her face was like crumpled typing paper, neither kindly nor approachable. She looked to be about seventy, but I assumed she was Uncle Arnie's age, maybe a little older. Her hands were thrust deep into the pockets of her robe, probing nervously for something.

She eyed me disinterestedly. I might have been a piece of furniture sent on spec for her inspection and approval. "You're the nephew I spoke to yesterday, aren't you?" she said at last. "You look like your father. You've got the Balsom nose."

I was startled. "You've met my father?"

She spoke tonelessly. "I suppose Arthur told you where I lived. He never liked me." It was a fact to which she had long been resigned. She showed no resentment.

"He didn't mean to. He tried to keep me from coming."

"Yeah?" That amused her. "He didn't succeed, though, did he? Here you are on Sunday morning." She took her hands out of her pockets and folded them with authority on her chest. "I suppose he told you I was Arnie's whore?"

"No, he said almost nothing about you." I was a better liar than Arthur Pillars, but only just.

"Well, I was. And his wife." She stared grimly at me, expecting something ugly by word or deed.

"May I come in?"

In spite of having me on her doorstep, the question did not seem to have occurred to her. She stepped back as if pushed, and gave a moment's thought.

"Sure, why not?" she said, holding the screen door for me. "Come and see where your uncle spent his weekends for thirty years. And wipe your feet. I keep a clean house."

The hall was dim and stuffy. The woman talked with her back to me.

"No, I never did meet your father or any of the brothers or relations. Arnie kept me secret. But I saw their photos plenty of times. Arnie

was real big on photos," she said, opening the living room curtains to admit the pale Lantern Street light.

It was obvious at a glance that Uncle Arnie and the woman had been a constant couple of long standing. There was neither unity nor logic in the decor of the living room. He had what he wanted, she had what she wanted, and the incongruous items had evolved a resigned co-existence. Uncle Arnie, probably from all of his television watching and limited experience, preferred dark bulky objects exuding a bogus richness that he found opulent. Scattered about and between Uncle Arnie's big-ticket choices were ornaments and knick-knacks that were nervewrackingly cute and feminine. The overall impression was of small, strangely colored wildflowers blooming in a bog.

Half a dozen formally posed photographs of Uncle Arnie and the woman were displayed about the room. Uncle Arnie's face changed so little with time that it was hard to date the photos using him as a standard. The woman's face had quickly succumbed to the corrosive passage of time. The photos seemed to have been taken at five-year intervals over a thirty year period. The woman had never been pretty. Even in the photos taken of her in her early thirties, her face had been long, irregular, and held tightly as if ready to respond to an insult.

Uncle Arnie was well-dressed and beaming broadly in all six photos. The look on the woman's face as she stood stiffly beside him suggested that the photo-taking had been Uncle Arnie's idea. She had consented, but did not join in the spirit of the enterprise.

I was studying the photos as I would a museum piece, without reservation. The woman cleared her throat with unexpected delicacy. I turned to face her.

"What was it? Stroke?" she asked.

"Heart attack," I told her.

"Figures."

She sat down and lit an unfiltered cigarette, puffing with dramatic languor. Though unmarked, she gave the impression of having been beaten. She would be grateful just for a small, quiet smoke. She closed her eyes and became as exiguous as the smoke that rose from the tip of her cigarette. I moved away from her to the bookcase. There were two large photo albums prominent among half a dozen paperbacks. I removed them and carried them to the window.

There was Uncle Arnie on all of his vacations at the homes of his brothers. His parrot painting was fixed opposite a photo of the real thing. My father, my mother and I stood proudly in front of our first

home, long since sold. My mother posed gloomily, holding a thick bag of take out hamburgers for Uncle Arnie's lunch. Ernest and Arnie pointed towards a sublimely vast distance from a mountaintop. Arnie flipped hamburgers at an embowered campsite. Arnie held hands with Mickey Mouse and Goofy as a group of school kids giggled. Louis sat stuffing a hamburger into his mouth at the beach.

The photos were reassuringly nostalgic. The only jarring surprise was a publicity photo of young Benny Balsom in his boxing trunks, holding up his guard and looking hell-bent on destruction. The photo was signed in a reedy, twisting hand, 'To My Best Cousin, Arnie, Yours, Benny'. It was dated only five years before. I couldn't understand it.

"Arnie almost got found out once," the woman said, and I hastily put down the albums to look at her. She had snuffed out her cigarette, and was fanning the smoke with her hand. She had her feet on an ottoman and was reclining comfortably. "Yeah, just once." She shook her head and smiled wistfully at the memory.

"Arnie and I were just going out together. I mean, we were an item, but we weren't a real couple. I knew he was seeing other girls, and I worried about him, so I put a couple of condoms in his wallet just in case. His sister-in-law, the bitchy one, Ruth, she found the condoms

in his wallet. She used to go through his wallet, like he was a kid. She was checking to see if he'd used up his crummy allowance, and she finds condoms. Well, she raised hell. Why were they there? What was he doing with them? How dare he? That sort of thing. What did she think they were there for? Dumb bitch. She scared the pants off him, telling him about disease and death and Hell and all that. He never told me exactly what she said or what he did about it. He could never remember anything very long. I know that she wanted to put the screws on him even more, and make him report all his movements to her. He'd never have done that, though. He never stopped coming to see me, but he went off sex for a while. It wasn't easy to get him to trust me again after what she said. I don't know if he hated her more than he was scared of her, or if it was the other way. She was always giving him hell."

The woman grimaced at the memory, and recalled my presence.

"So what do you want? You found me. You see me. What's your gripe?" She spoke without anger. She did not equate me with Ruth. To her, Ruth was in a class by herself. Nor was she curious. She just wanted to be spoken to.

I explained the circumstances under which I had been asked to arrange Uncle Arnie's funeral, and told her in detail about the memorial service. She seemed not to care. She was listless. I told her about discovering the pornography, and Arthur Pillars's momentary lapse from propriety that had enabled me to piece together Uncle Arnie's secret. I talked skillfully for about ten minutes, hoping to engage her interest. At the end she only nodded.

"So now you're here. Why?"

"Curiosity, I suppose."

She smiled archly. "You're not sure?"

"Uncle Arnie was almost totally neglected by his family. Only his mother looked after him. When she died he was pretty much left to fend for himself. I know that Paul and Ruth were ostensibly in charge of his welfare, but you know better than I what that meant." I was hoping to tap into her affections through a common detestation of Uncle Arnie's enemies. She smiled wryly, but said nothing. I could not gauge my progress, if any, so I continued.

"The family were, to understate the case, unconcerned about Uncle Arnie and his welfare. When they found out how he was living it was really too late to help him."

She sat bolt upright to cut me off. "Living? How was he living?" she demanded. Her voice resonated with the urge to protect. "I never knew. We never talked about it. He just said he had a room."

No, of course she wouldn't know. She would never for a moment have tolerated it. She looked stern and birdlike, a fierce sparrow about to attack a marauding crow. I wanted to abase myself before her. I wanted to lie, to say something like the room had been fine, but it was unairconditioned in summer; poor Uncle Arnie, how he must have suffered in August. But I told her about the basement, its darkness, heat, noise, stench and machinery; about the winding obstacle course that led to the hideous revelation of his cage. I did not omit the size, dimensions, and furnishings of the room. I even got in --oh, nice touch-- the little padlock guarding his precious possessions, as if a thief could have found the room unaided. I told her about the family's frantic atonement culminating in the purchase of a third floor apartment. I may have been under unspoken indictment, but I acted the part of zealous prosecutor.

She gaped soundlessly, looking more beaten than ever. An old woman's tears, small and thin, hung and then dropped from her lashes.

She ran her fingers through her hair, staring through the ceiling as if calling on God to witness an act of infamy.

"I thought the brothers had just got him a phone for his birthday. I mean, he was sixty years old. Why make him run to the office every time they phoned him?" she said, choking on the words. "He never told me. Never said a word. I'd have taken him away from there and supported him here. I had money. He didn't have to live like that. Who will believe me? Will you? I never knew."

Her fingers never stopped their running. They were the physical expression of her bewilderment and grief.

"Why, why?" she moaned, giving me a look I could not meet. I walked to the photo of Uncle Arnie on the mantelpiece, and addressed it rather than her.

"You can understand that from the time I saw how he was living, I thought his life was pure misery. My heart ached for him. Then I found out about you and his second life. Or really, his first and better life. I wanted to meet you, see what kind of person you were, and thank you for taking care of my uncle."

Her voice rang with hysteria. "Thank me for taking care of your uncle?! I'm not a goddam Girl Scout. I was a whore. I picked Arnie up

one afternoon and we fell in love. We loved each other. I didn't take care of him. This wasn't a hospital or clinic where he came for treatment. We made a life here together. Look!" her hand sliced the yellowish air, "that's his chair, where he sat and looked at TV and read his comics. There's a bedroom in back where we slept together holding hands."

She was enraged at my insulting implication that Arnie was incapable of taking care of himself. He had never needed care, he could take care of himself and others. The family treated him as a freak, couldn't see him as anything else, and so whatever he did when he was with them was freakish. To her there was only the sweet smile and the gentle nature that was generous in giving, and grateful in receiving, affection.

World War II had recently ended and the men were coming home in droves. But they were returning to wives and to younger, better looking women. She was in her early thirties, past the age sought by the men who came to Steubenville for sex. In the past she had traded on her youth rather than her face. Now she looked and felt old and brittle. The younger women had more trade than they could handle, but not even the overflow came to her. She had been reduced to

stalking men in the bus station. She would greet them as they came off the buses with their duffel bags or ditty bags. For hundreds of sex-hungry Pittsburgh men, she was the first woman to welcome them to sexual El Dorado. Though she had first crack at them, most passed her by. They held in their hands scraps of paper bearing highly recommended names. Her face and form were not enough to waylay them.

She had first been drawn to Arnie's obvious inexperience. He was no prize: he had come off the bus trembling and oozing from his bad eye. Clearly, he was no freshly demobbed soldier. It was hard to make out what he was. But she had at once taken his hand and talked to him soothingly, then erotically. He responded amenably. He had gone with her to a hotel she used. His smile had softened her and his eagerness had excited her. She knew it was his first taste of sex. He was gentle and pliant, but began crying when it was over and she made to dress and leave. He had expected to spend the weekend with her. Or more to the point, with any woman who sold him sex. He absolutely refused to get back on the hateful bus so soon after getting off. He preferred the dingy hotel room. His wallet was stuffed with money he could not

count. He handed her a wad of \$10 bills and begged her to stay with him.

She had taken him home, though it violated all of her ethics and went against elementary caution. She felt that she could trust him and he would do her no harm. No one, she thought, could smile that infectiously and speak that ingenuously and still have an ulterior motive. Unlike the men who tried to con her with false affection to get free sex, he really liked her and hated the bus. And he would pay and pay.

He was wonderfully good-natured, and had at once volunteered to fix up the ramshackle Lantern Street house. The house was an inheritance, and only slightly less dismal than the hotel room she used for business. He mowed the lawn, patched some leaks, scrubbed coffee stains out of the carpet, moved furniture about to make the place more comfortable, washed up the accumulated dishes of a week, and generally ingratiated himself by the gratitude he showed her for having consented to take him home. And the sex was fabulous. With an endearing combination of curiosity and potency, he satisfied her every whim and craving.

She awoke Sunday morning trembling with eagerness and vigor. A persistent pall had been lifted from her heart, and she could see the day without anxiety or despair. She realized then that her dismal dwelling was the expression of her being; that she had surrendered her vitality and resilience even more easily than she had her youth. This smiling man made her tingle like a girl. She looked forward to spending the day with him.

That afternoon she took him back to the bus station and held his hand as he boarded the bus, rigid and resigned. He promised to return the following Friday evening and stay until Sunday afternoon. She promised to be at the station to meet him. During the week, as she walked through the bus station, lay on her back in the hotel room, or washed dishes in her small sink, she often caught herself hoping that he would keep his promise. She started looking after herself again. She did housecleaning as if it mattered, and it did, for the act signified the rebirth of her feelings and the optimism that he would return. He was the finest man she had ever met.

He returned on Friday with a friend, Arthur Pillars. She quite naturally assumed that he, too, had come in search of a woman, and offered to introduce him to a friend or friends. But Arthur was afraid of

sex. His fear had turned into mistrust of women who, he was convinced, were the initiators of the sexual act. It was the duty of a virtuous man to repel their advances. With undisguised distaste for her and her profession, he explained that he had come only as Arnie's escort, to help him over his fear of buses.

Later she realized that Arthur actually enjoyed riding buses; that the hour spent each way between Pittsburgh and Steubenville meant as much to him as the weekends meant to Arnie. The two friends had a perfectly symbiotic relationship: the one who feared buses more than anything, but was forced to ride them for sex, was chaperoned by a devout bus lover who eschewed a woman's touch.

Arnie was at first indifferent to his friend's resolve to keep chaste. He had planned all along to spend the weekend at the woman's house. She was, on that second Friday evening, paramount in his mind. She, who had been hoping he would come, and then hoping against hope that he would keep his promise and stay with her at her house, was wildly happy. Arthur could do as he pleased; the two were bound up in each other. They were blithe and without a care. The trouble began when the Friday to Sunday visits became routine.

Arnie would glow from the moment he set foot on Steubenville soil until the moment his foot touched the bus step for the journey home. Arthur was the exact opposite. Standing under a whore's roof seared his soul. Mercifully for Arnie and the woman, he made himself scarce, usually taking in two or three movies over the weekend. He frequently ate out. Friday and Saturday nights he spent on the living room couch while Arnie and the woman enjoyed each other in the privacy of the bedroom at the back of the house.

The threesome weekends very soon became intolerable. Arthur had become truculent, admonishing and chastising the woman in her own home while simpering coquettishly at Arnie. He was trying to save his lion's share of Arnie's friendship. It was not enough to have sole possession of him on weekdays. He feared an erosion of affection if Arnie forgot about him on weekends. Towards Arthur the woman felt the righteous indignation of the unjustly censured. She wished him dead, but kept it to herself. She realized that Arnie's visits depended to a large extent on Arthur's zeal for bus travel.

As the sole attraction for two mutually repellent personalities, Arnie became an unwitting conciliator. In the end it was he who drew up the compromise that satisfied all parties. Arthur would ride with Arnie to

Steubenville where the woman would be waiting to meet the bus.

Arthur would return at once to Pittsburgh. Two days later the woman would place Arnie on the bus to Steubenville, he would go through the agony of a solitary one-hour bus ride, and Arthur would be waiting at the other end to comfort him. I could imagine Uncle Arnie putting this proposal to Arthur and adding, "You'll do it for me, won'tcha Arthur, 'cause you're a pal." And Arthur would have patted his chest, and said, "Yeah, Arn, I'm your best friend."

Once or twice a year a momentary truce would go into effect, and Arthur would come for the entire weekend. It chanced to be on one of those rare occasions that I discovered the bus tickets.

This period of adjustment was remarkably short, only two months. Their lives quickly settled into the durable pattern that would continue for thirty years. Arnie arrived every Friday evening and stayed until Sunday evening. He never missed his bus, he never came alone. Sometimes Arthur would take in a film before his return trip, but more often than not he would just change buses and return directly. Arnie would spend the entire Christmas/New Year's week with her. A college kid would be hired as his part-time replacement. Arthur was melancholy, but stood the strain of a week's separation by constant

doses of televised sports and parades. Christmas was her happiest time of year.

Arnie left her for a fortnight each summer to spend time with his brothers. She envied him his trips to Florida, California, and Colorado. He returned with glossy photos of his wealthy brothers and their handsome families who, she assumed, helped Arnie financially. She was certain that he could not maintain an apartment at Silver Birches and contribute to the upkeep of their now mutual home on Lantern Street on his income as an elevator operator. She knew nothing about his parents or his inheritance. She felt a vague gratitude to Louis, Ernest and Mort for indirectly supporting her. She reproached herself for hating Paul and Ruth, but she hated anyone or anything that disturbed her Arnie's tranquility.

She knew little about his life in Pittsburgh and he never volunteered information. This pleased her as she was anxious to keep the harsh facts of her own work as far from Arnie as possible. Not that he ever inquired. He seemed oblivious to the possibility that she existed from Sunday evening when they parted until Friday evening when they were reunited. Their reunions were always seamless. It was like picking up

a story left hanging in mid-sentence from exactly where it had been terminated.

She sometimes wondered if he comprehended what it meant to be a prostitute. He had come to Steubenville with the sole purpose of meeting a woman like her, but perhaps she had taken him so far so fast for so little that the ramifications of her trade had never sunk in. She eventually decided that he never really understood. She could imagine him thinking that prostitutes were creatures who fell in love at first sight with one man and lived with him forever. Still, she found it hard to believe that Arthur Pillars, in a fit of jealous pique, had not graphically described her work to him.

In any event, she quit prostitution within five years of their meeting. From her observations, she had long ago concluded that there was nothing more pathetic than an unwanted whore, and had, in her pre-Arnie days, occasionally considered suicide. Now restored to affirming her life, she had given herself until age forty to find a more legal and less demanding job. She became a typist for a large glass manufacturing company, and had risen over the years to a high secretarial position. When I met her she had less than a year to go to

qualify for a pension and quit the company with financial security and honor.

The changes wrought to her life and character had not been ephemeral, but most substantial. She was living the changes, and yet --was it weakness?-- that did not suffice. She wanted a testament to her life and a covenant for her happiness. Thus, on their fifth anniversary, she asked Arnie to marry her. Not necessarily a legal wedding with a license, she told him; an exchange of vows in a holy place would suffice. They had gone to a local church and knelt in front of the altar. Each held a bouquet of roses; his were red and hers were yellow. She had written down what to her were poetic and romantic vows containing lots of thees and thous. She held out the cards before them for each to read in turn. It was then she discovered Arnie was illiterate. She read her vows first, he repeated them to the best of his limited ability, they kissed, and she recited the only holy scripture she knew, the Twenty Third Psalm. They stood and, laying their bouquets upon the altar, placed gold wedding bands on each other's fingers. They were married and would remain so until Arnie's death twenty-five years later.

Arnie would not wear his wedding band back to Pittsburgh. He never explained his reason, but was so stolid and unyielding that she assumed he was afraid of being cross-examined by Ruth. She kept it for him in a velvet-lined box on her dresser. The first thing he did upon arriving at the house, even before exchanging his black brogues for house slippers, was to take the ring from its box and slip it on his finger.

Now married and legally employed, she found that time hung heavy on her hands at night. She took up baking as a diversion, turning out pies, cakes, cookies, buns, biscuits, rolls, muffins and pastries at a rate that would not have shamed an assembly line. Arnie had an inexhaustible fondness for her creations, and it was from this time that he put on the weight that ultimately disfigured and destroyed him. She fed him little more than dessert foods, even for breakfast. He received his nutrition from the stern cooks at the home.

She was sure he had never been with another woman. However, at the beginning of their romance, and then again when she quit prostitution, she was very possessive of Arnie. She worried herself into a distraction of jealousy that he might be seeing other women in Pittsburgh. She dismissed as outrageous his contention that Arthur

Pillars was his sole companion. She daydreamed of nymphomaniac nurses stopping the elevator between floors and forcing themselves on poor Arnie. The vision was plausible to her. One would have been hard-put to convince her that Arnie was physically repulsive. She found in him the appeal of Casanova and the strength of Rasputin, and was certain that other women divined as much in him after a short time in his company.

It was she who nurtured his budding interest in pornography until it became a self-sowing plant that thrived in poor soil. She thought it would keep him indoors while he was away from her. It also kept him occupied on his solitary bus rides. From his early fifties his sex drive had begun to diminish until at the time of his death they were having sex only occasionally. However, his avidity for collecting never flagged, and he would relate to her with delight new faces and postures that had tickled his fancy.

So there it was, a good life, full and rich. She had almost from the first realized that Arnie was the man for her. Though unorthodox, their lifestyle had been a blessing to her, allowing her to work and remain independent while enjoying the security of his attentive love. Her few friends had commented on the fragility of the arrangement --like

Psyche, she admitted knowing nothing about him except what she held in her arms on weekends--, but her friends had never seen Arnie smile nor felt the sincerity of his endearments. No man had ever made them feel that life was a hopeful experience or had filled them with a generous gratitude for having been born.

As a couple they had not only endured, but flourished, keeping the vigorous freshness of their early romance intact to the very end. She was not grieving because she would be lonely; thirty years of Arnie-less weekday nights had inured her against that. Nor was there the discomfiting absence of a familiar habit, pleasant or unpleasant. She had lost the love of her life. It was that only. Arnie had been a fountain of affection that had cleansed and refreshed her over the years, and now the spring had gone dry. She would grow dusty and desiccated, kept alert and functioning by the sweet sap of Arnie's memory.

She had talked for three hours, and her rage was spent. Her night would pass in voiceless anguish. She would go to work the following morning.

"Now I want you to tell me something." She was so tired she had to force the words out. "I want you to tell me something about Arnie I

don't know. Nothing sad. Nothing surprising. Just a story about Arnie that happened in a place I've never been to, when he was on his own."

I told her the story of taking Uncle Arnie to see wrestling. I omitted my having called him a retard, otherwise I told all, broadly gesticulating and embellishing as I went along. She listened attentively, smiling and sighing according to the changing fortunes of that evening.

"Yeah, that was Arnie," she said when I had finished. Then suddenly, apropos of nothing that had been said, she added, "He didn't have an ugly bone in his body." It was her summation of his life.

"He didn't have a vindictive bone, either," I chimed in. "He ended up looking after his cousin in the home. You know about him and Benny, don't you?" I said this because her worn face looked puzzled.

"Benny? The plug ugly in the photo in the album?"

"Yes, he was a boxer forty years ago. That photo's an antique. He's feeble and brain damaged today." Benny's decline from athlete to deadbeat left her unmoved.

"About five years ago Arnie brought that photo home. It's my cousin, he says, a great boxer and a great gangster. Now we're living

together at the home." She treated it as a lesser incident in an exciting life. "But why should Arnie have been vindictive?"

"I'm not sure," I lied, "but I heard somewhere, family gossip maybe, that he owed Arnie a lot of money."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Arthur Pillars complained to me once that Arnie was spending money on Benny and giving him attention. Why not? Arnie had a big heart. Big and fat," she laughed wryly. "But Benny could have owed him money and Arnie would have forgotten all about it. Life was always new for Arnie." It was a nice note on which to close the conversation.

We sat looking at each other until the silence became acute. I rose to go. She made no attempt to stop me.

"Now that you've got the story, what are you going to do with it?" she asked dully.

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"I'd appreciate that. I don't want a lot of curious Balsoms crawling around here. I don't ever want to have to tell this story again. At least wait until I'm dead before you tell anyone. And you'd better wait for Arthur to die, too. It would kill him if the story got around."

She saw me to the front door. We gazed at the street for a moment. The only difference three and a half-hours had made was the disappearance of the two dogs. I supposed they had given up on Lantern Street and gone elsewhere to be run over.

I asked, "Would you mind if I wrote occasionally? Christmas cards, that sort of thing. Just to stay in touch."

"Sure, why not? Just don't expect a reply, that's all." She toyed with her hair as if thinking of something more to say, then turned to walk into the hall.

I stammered, "Who shall I address the cards to? What's your name?"

She spun round.

"Mrs. Arnold Balsom," she said, as if to a fool, and slammed the door in my face.

SIKE HEALTH

QI ENERGY WORKSHOP

November 6, 2010

Therese & Mallory Fromm will be giving a beginner/intermediate workshop in the SIKE Technique at our home on **Saturday, November 6, from 10:00-4:30. The cost is **\$125**, and includes: learning to access and transmit your qi, fundamental techniques of healing and health maintenance, an individual treatment, a great lunch, and conversation with interesting people. Detailed information about the takeaway skills taught at the workshop can be found at www.sikehealth.com. Click on Workshops.**

We cannot over-emphasize the benefits of taking a workshop. The knowledge and skills learned at a workshop enable the individual to understand his/her own diagnosis and treatment; how to maintain health and accelerate the healing process at home; how to treat others for aches, pains, and minor ailments. We plan to emphasize techniques for health maintenance at home, with particular attention to kiryu as a simple, elegant, and effective means of wellness and mental clarity. And finally, each participant also receives a treatment, which is included in the cost of the workshop.

TF adds: We pride ourselves on offering each individual client the knowledge and means to pursue his/her own healing and health maintenance. If you want to know what is going on in your mind/body and how to direct yourself toward health, then our workshops should not be missed! And perhaps best of all, a facility with qi makes you nice.

**For reservations and information, phone 818-992-0713 or
email info@sikehealth.com.**