

Sweet Lorraine

By Michael Groetsch

Tommy is one of the more colorful and elegant men I've known in life. He is a floor manager at the Grand Casino in Biloxi, Mississippi and wears designer ties to highlight his perfectly tailored suits. When off duty, he wears bright hats, shirts, overalls, and trousers that proclaim his dapper nature. Thick snow-white hair hangs to the shoulders of his lean and fit physique. Tommy has the charm of Robert Redford and the deep beautiful voice of Pavarotti. He has a lovely wife that he calls Sweet Lorraine and a cat named Peanut who he adores. Tommy has terminal cancer and less than six months to live.

It is an unusually warm day in late October on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. With the top down on my blue Toyota, I drive along the white sandy beach as the wind caresses my weary soul. A glaring sun reflects the water like shimmering glints of ice crystals. Seagulls soar high, seemingly aware of their freedom and the serene beauty that lies beneath their wings. With emotions that are felt when going to visit someone who is dying, I drive towards Tommy's home on Popp's Ferry Road. The song 'What Do You Say At A Time Like This' by Reba McEntire, blares from my car radio. My eyes tear as I enter the neighborhood in which Tommy lives.

Only a month ago, while I was playing poker at the Grand Casino, Tommy confided in me that he was dying. He shared his fear of death and the unknown. He spoke about his wife with words that expressed their deep bond. As I sat at the poker table next to him, he told me that he would like to write a letter to Sweet Lorraine before he passed

away. Although he spoke beautifully, he said that writing was one of his weak points. Knowing that I am a writer, I was humbled when he asked if I would assist him with a love letter to Sweet Lorraine before he died.

Although I have never been to Tommy's home, the entrance appears as an extension of his colorful personality. A large American flag surrounded by a cluster of pine trees hovers high into the sky. A red cardinal and gray squirrel sit perched on the rail of a cozy wooden porch that is covered by lush greenery and flowering plants. His home stands out among several others and projects, like Tommy, a feeling of warmth. As I park my car, a large gray and fluffy cat with big bright eyes purrs and brushes against my leg. While cuddling my new friend close against my chest, I approach the front door of Tommy's residence. A warm deep voice emerges from inside the screened door.

"Hello, Mike, please come in. I see that you have Peanut. I'm so happy to see you. I've been looking forward to our visit."

Tommy lies in a beige corduroy recliner near an open window that inhales a warm fall breeze. He appears much thinner and coughs loudly as I enter his home. Even within his physical distress, he remains very personable. Wearing a blue silk robe, a maroon scarf and matching headband, he gives me a friendly smile and an affectionate wink. The morning sun shines through the window upon his still very handsome face. Although his frail appearance suggests that Tommy is slipping further away from this life, he appears upbeat and warm. Devoid of inhibitions that often leave words left unsaid, we sit within the quiet of the day and speak openly about his impending death. As I listen intently, Tommy speaks about life as it was, as it is, and as it might have been.

“As a young boy, Mike, I was raised on what others would call the wrong side of the tracks. Don’t get me wrong. We were good people, just didn’t have much money. Although we were considered poor, Mom and Dad always kept food on the table. I felt bad for both of them. Dad would bust his ass at the factory all day while Mom cleaned other people’s houses. Both of them would come home each evening looking ragged. Dad was only 56 when he died of a massive stroke. Mom died of cancer when she was 84. I only wish that I could have made it easier on Mom and Dad when I was young. I certainly miss both of them. You know, sometimes when I lie in bed at night, I can almost hear them calling my name.”

“I quit school when I was only 15- years- old to join a traveling carnival. At the time, I felt that it was a way of moving to the other side of the tracks. In retrospect, I now know that it was my way of moving down the tracks. It was my ticket to freedom. It was a means by which I avoided working in a factory or cleaning other people’s homes. While it may be difficult to explain the thrill of working in a carnival, it can best be described as a rush. Although the games in a traveling carnival are designed so that the public will lose, I often rigged them so that parents and children would actually win. On one particular night, I gave away all the prizes. It may sound strange, but seeing a young boy or girl grin and win a prize made me feel good inside. I never let my boss know that I sometimes cheated in reverse.”

“I guess I’ve always been a free spirit at heart, Mike. In 1952, at the age of 17, I joined the Navy. Like the carnival, it allowed me to travel to parts of the world that otherwise I would have never seen. The greatest thrill I had while serving in the Navy was the time that I saw Winston Churchill. I was standing on the edge of a long pier as he

got off a ship, and with a hat in one hand and big cigar in the other, he walked right past me. My mind took a video and plays the scene back to me whenever I need a rush, the same kind of rush that I had when I saw a young child smile after winning a prize at the carnival.”

“I didn’t join the casino industry until I was 35. It didn’t take long for me to understand the allure. Working in a casino is like working in a carnival. You’re always giving a big party. You’re always putting on a big show. Unlike the carnival, however, it paid better and you could stay in one place for longer periods of time. Sweet Lorraine literally stumbled into my life when I was a dealer and she was a cocktail waitress at a large casino in Sparks, Nevada. There was a raised area of the casino floor near the keno bar that resembled a speed bump. On more than one occasion, Sweet Lorraine tripped over the speed bump as she made her way to the tables while carrying a tray of drinks. I like to think that she did it to get my attention. The first time I saw her walk into the area where I was working, I thought that I had seen an angel. Her radiant and glowing smile immediately caught my eye. I had never before seen such charm, such beauty, and such a pleasant smile. I guess you could say that I was always a lady’s man. I certainly broke my share of hearts. After I met Sweet Lorraine however, I knew that I had found my soul mate. I knew that I was ready to settle down.”

“I have to admit that Sweet Lorraine caught my eye before I actually caught hers. On several occasions I offered to give her the key to my apartment if she agreed to fix me supper. Although I mustered up all the charm I had, she initially declined. She probably knew of my reputation with the ladies. She had recently gone through a breakup. I guess she didn’t want to risk getting hurt again. On one particular night, however, after I was

convinced that I had struck out, she approached me at work and asked for the key. When I arrived at my apartment that night, I was so very impressed. Sweet Lorraine had fixed me a fabulous dinner. Oh, the splendor of that night Mike, is something that I cannot put into words. I always felt that the food you prepare and eat with others reflects your affection and love for them. Caesar Salad. Oysters Bienville. Mums Champagne. Candlelight. What more can someone ask for? Dinner should be more than just a meal. It should also be an experience. It was good, Mike. It was so very good and I got to share it with Sweet Lorraine.”

“Although she stayed with me that first night, we actually dated two to three years before getting married in a small Las Vegas ceremony in June of 1983. Sweet Lorraine was 33 and I was 15 years her senior. There were only three people at the wedding and we put cigar bands around each other’s fingers as wedding rings. I swear to this day that I heard a 40- piece orchestra playing classical music in the background as we kissed. She was the most beautiful woman that I had ever dated and now she was my wife. I had married my soul mate and I knew that it would last forever.”

As Tommy begins to shift his focus from how things were to how things are, his brown eyes begin to tear. Apologizing, he quickly retreats into the back bathroom. I hold my breath as he violently coughs and then I hear several loud whimpers. Peanut jumps into my arms and straddles my lap as if he senses his master’s distress. I stroke his fluffy fur while allowing my mind to slip away into unknown space. After regaining his composure, Tommy returns to his corduroy recliner and wipes his sweating brow with a soft white tissue. Peanut leaps from my lap directly into Tommy’s arms as he continues to discuss his life with Sweet Lorraine.

“Mike, I’m sure Sweet Lorraine is wondering when it’s all going to end. My illness has certainly been very hard on her. Although we often cry together, we also cry in private. On some nights she doesn’t come to bed right away. She sits quietly in the shadows of the den and cries alone. I can hear her sobbing and whimpering from the bedroom. She cries for the pain to stop. She cries for the pain to end. I only wish that I could protect her from her anguish. There is little doubt that her suffering is greater than my own. Sweet Lorraine has been my guardian angel throughout this horrific ordeal. In my hour of need she has become so very strong. She goes to the doctor with me for moral support and always seems to ask the right questions. Although she is somewhat naive when it comes to the politics of life, when things get rough, she can be very assertive.”

“As you know, Sweet Lorraine is a floral designer at the Beau Rivage Casino. She finds her job very rewarding. I love to see her smile when she completes a large flower arrangement in the casino’s main lobby. Such a colorful picture in one’s mind lasts forever. Seeing her coming home so very tired, however, makes me feel so bad. I know that she suffers with pain in both of her legs and the beautiful flowers that she nurtures sometimes prick her soft pretty hands. I only wish that I could contribute more than I can. Everything she does for me each day is a labor of love. Perhaps I can tie up the loose ends so that she doesn’t have to worry as much when I am gone.”

“As I said earlier, Sweet Lorraine is one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met and it is a privilege to have her as my wife. I love how she throws her hips and looks over her shoulder and smiles. I love her cockiness and the silly grin that she gives when she is up to something. I love when she gives me a certain grin that lets me know things are okay. Whenever we make love, it’s always like the first time. If I had to thank her for

what she has given me, I couldn't find the words. I've been a very lucky man to have her in my life. I have been so very fortunate. I love her more and more each day. I only wish that the dance could last longer. If it ends tomorrow, however, our lives together will have rivaled the love affair of Romeo and Juliet."

As I listen intently to Tommy's poetic expressions, I become mesmerized by his use of words when describing his life with Sweet Lorraine. Although he professed an inability to write, he articulates the feeling of warmth that is found in artwork by Thomas Kinkade. I suddenly realize that our discussion about his life with Sweet Lorraine is more than a love letter, it is a love story.

"Although she doesn't want me to leave, Mike, I know that it is over. I only wonder how I could have made it better. I'm not suggesting that I did such a bad job, but maybe I could have tried harder. At times like this you always wonder if you did your best. My illness has made us so much closer. I stand at the door each day waiting for her to come home. I wait like a little puppy. I wait for her hugs and kisses. I wait for her to tuck me into bed as she tells me how much she loves me."

"Mike, like so many other people in my situation, my illness has not only brought me closer to my wife, it has also brought me closer to nature. I see and hear things that I once took for granted. Although I have never been very religious, I do believe in His existence. If you shut your eyes and listen to the voices of nature, you cannot deny His presence. He speaks to us through nature. The sounds of waves washing upon a sandy shore. The whisper of a gentle wind. Rain crackling through tall Southern pines. Nature also has its moods, and like it or not, good or bad, He shares them with us. When I walk into a pouring rain falling from a darkened sky, We weep together. When I see a perfect

sunset that illuminates the distant sky, We both smile. Regardless of its mood, nature has a way of bringing us inner peace. It is His way of bringing balance to our hearts.

Everything begins in the heart. Everything continues in nature.

On December 23, as a heavy rain fell from the Mississippi sky, Tommy passed away warm in his bed on Poppo's Ferry Road. In his arms was his beautiful wife Sweet Lorraine. He passed away knowing how much he was loved by her.

It is December 26. A cold front roars across the Gulf Coast states like a speeding freight train. Heavy gusts of wind strip leaves from almost naked trees. A gray- black sky quenches the thirst of a willing earth with blistering rain. As I put my ear to nature's wall, Tommy's whisper can be heard among its eclectic sounds. I can hear him call out to Sweet Lorraine from within the oneness he shares with the universe. A bright sun suddenly breaks through the dark sky as a flock of seagulls fly above echoing His presence.

"Watching the peaceful death of a human being reminds us of a fallen star; one of a million lights in a vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night forever."- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross