

The Locker Room

In the locker room at the gym, the old retired duffers, Clyde Abbott, Richard Sefcik and Myron Cooper, sit around the big-screen television in the lounge area, drinking sodas and talking sports and politics.

“Today’s fifty is yesterday’s forty,” Clyde is saying, sitting naked on the naugahyde sofa with a can of Coke, looking at the TV screen. An infomercial for some exercise equipment bounces out of the monitor on upbeat synthesizer music.

“Hell, the AARP magazine says sixty’s the new thirty,” Richard Sefcik notes.

“What I wouldn’t give to be thirty again,” Myron replies, looking at the blond on the screen demonstrating the newest contraption.

“Just take some of that Viagra,” Clyde cackles.

“They’re kicking us aside all the time,” Richard laments. “I read where age discrimination lawsuits are up forty percent in the last five years. Sending us out to pasture.”

Castleman heads out the door wondering what the word is for that phenomenon where you hear about something that had seemed obscure at first, and suddenly you’re hearing it all over the place. How to stay young; how to recover youth; how to stop the aging process dead in its tracks. On his way to the gym he’d been listening to a public radio talkshow about the same subject.

“There’s a difference between long life and a slowed-down aging process, isn’t there?” the talkshow host lobbed a scripted softball to his guest. “I mean, we’re talking about being young, not just living a long time.”

“Most definitely. Nature has a role here as well. During periods of scarcity, for instance, the aging process seems to slow down. Near-starvation diets have extended the lives of mice up to thirty percent, as an example. The theory is that during

periods of famine, certain genes trigger a slowing-down of the aging process, in order to prolong the reproductive phase so the offspring might survive when food is more plentiful.”

“You’ve written that studies have shown that even older mice live longer if their calorie intake is restricted.”

“Yes. We haven’t any data on humans, but we speculate that even starting a low-calorie diet at sixty could slow the aging process significantly. And let me add that restricted-calorie diets have also slowed the advancement of cancer in mice.”

“And yet technological advances are adding years to the lives of the boomer generation, stem cell research, improved surgical procedures. Life expectancies are increasing.”

“Exactly. What we might as well call living on borrowed time. Pharmaceutically assisted longevity.”

“But even here it’s not going to be a matter of old age dragging out, is it? People will be younger longer. The eighty-year old will look and feel sixty.”

Maybe because he’s writing a novel about Ponce de Leon he notices these things, Castleman reflects.

Castleman plays basketball with a man named Eddie Stokes. He almost always loses. But he cannot use age as an excuse since Eddie is about five years older than he is, and he’s had a big piece of his colon removed to boot. The games aren’t even all that competitive; Eddie is so much better than Castleman, even though Castleman is taller. But they enjoy the exercise.

Only when they play team basketball, other than one-on-one – say two-on-two or three-on-three – does Eddie lose his patience with Castleman. “Set the pick!” he screams as if talking to a child. “Set the pick!” Castleman is not even sure what a

pick is. Afterward, Eddie assures him, “Don’t worry. You’ll get better. The more you play the better you become.”

But at the age of 54 Castleman is pretty sure his days of improving as a basketball player are over.

Eddie isn’t there that day and Castleman runs on the treadmill instead. It’s pretty monotonous – think Sisyphus – and club management has put television monitors up every few feet as a distraction, the way they do in cocktail lounges. Usually Jerry Springer or ESPN is on the air. Today it is a women’s talk show featuring a line of cosmetics.

“Lines and wrinkles starting to get you down?” a reassuring voiceover asks. “Try our new line of cosmetics. We’ll make you feel like a kid again.”

But this isn’t a *real* return to youth, is it? Castleman is annoyed. This is just covering up the rust and the dents. Ponce de Leon wouldn’t have given such stuff the time of day.

“Fucking Duke, man,” Kevin Steinacker marvels in the steamroom. It’s a week later and Castleman has just come in from getting drubbed again on the basketball court by Eddie Stokes. Eddie has these long arms and a vicious hook Castleman simply cannot defend against. But they enjoy the exercise; it keeps them young.

“Know what you mean,” Clyde Abbot cackles. “Get a close game like that, you know Duke’s gonna pull it out in the end somehow. But those guys on Xavier had heart.”

“Could be an all-ACC final if Duke and Tech both win,” Kevin laments, a Big Ten fan, a young man from Iowa, in his early thirties. He likes to jive with Myron and Clyde, as if they all have the same old-fashioned values and represent a dying paternalistic worldview.

“I don’t know about you, but I miss the days when you had real star power out there on the court,” Myron complains, invoking the good old days, and Kevin nearly swoons. “Now it’s just a game of the coaches! This is about Jim Calhoun and Mike Krzyzewski. Where’s the young guys?”

“They’re all playin’ in the NBA!”

“Remember the Bird-Magic match-up? Remember Michigan’s Fab Five?”

Then the steam starts hissing again, and it is too loud to make conversation. If people are staying younger longer, Castleman reflects, the younger are growing up sooner. Before long NBA stars will be as young as professional tennis players.

Castleman and his wife had gone to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* the night before, and afterward they’d talked about the play and about being young and in love. Jodie had said it was one of the things she did not miss about youth.

“I don’t know. We talk about it so scientifically these days, in terms of ‘increased libido’ and ‘renewal of sexuality,’” Castleman offered. “I wouldn’t mind being young again: young and dumb and full of come.”

“It was so distracting and frustrating, though,” Jodie pointed out. “And your heart was so easily broken. I also think it’s weird that Juliet isn’t even fourteen when the story takes place. Can you imagine our daughter in love that way?”

“You mean, can I imagine somebody experiencing a love for her of such purity and passion that he kills himself when he believes she’s dead?”

“There! That’s what’s frightening about teenage love!”

“John Hinckley was twenty-six when he tried to kill Reagan, to prove his love for Jodie Foster. Of course, he’d had a major crush on her for years before that. Still, you don’t outgrow obsession. But it’s not even fair to compare Romeo’s pure love with Hinckley.”

“Oh, have it your way. That’s literature, not life. When you’re young you’re confused.”

“And when you’re old you’re full of aches and pains. My foot is still killing me.”

“Did you buy the anti-inflammatory Doctor Faye recommended?”

“It seemed to help for a while but I’ve been hobbling again lately. I played ball with Eddie at the gym yesterday and today I can barely step on it.”

“Well just don’t play basketball and you won’t have a problem.”

“An aged man is but a paltry thing,/A tattered coat upon a stick...”

“What a drama queen! Just don’t play so hard or for so long!”

“Yeah, well...”

The following week, Castleman runs into Kevin Steinacker again in the steamroom, the young man who yearns to be old. He loves to shoot the shit with the retirees, Clyde Abbott, Richard Sefcik and Myron Cooper. They trade stories of exploits on the golf course and share their sentiments about the good old days.

“Man, I never paid much attention before,” Castleman says to Kevin, “but that basketball court is actually just cement, with a thin rubber coating with all the lines and circles drawn on it, not a parquet floor at all. No wonder my ankles hurt, jumping up and down on that cement floor.”

Sensing an old man topic – aches and pains – Kevin warms to the conversation. Clyde, Richard and Myron are seated in plastic chairs like the hear-no-evil-see-no-evil-speak-no-evil monkeys by the steam valves.

“Oh lord, I had that once,” Kevin says, pouncing on the topic. He’s heavysset, a racquetball player, so it’s not unlikely. “Got a cortisone shot from my doc and never felt a thing after that.”

“You think that’s painful, you should try having a hip replacement,” Richard Sefcik declares.

“Try bypass surgery if you want pain,” Myron scoffs.

“I’ve tried ‘em both, boys, I’ve tried ‘em both!” Clyde chortles, and he sounds rather proud of himself.

“I just went to my quarterly stress test,” Myron challenges. “They give me so much of that radioactive junk I swear I light up like a Christmas tree.”

“You mean the thalium stress test?” Clyde rejoins. “You lie under that gamma camera and they stare at you like the Tour de France is going on in your bloodstream.”

“My girlfriend’s dad had that,” Kevin offers, humbled but still in the game.

“Your girlfriend?” Richard cries. “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend! You been holding out on us, boy?”

Kevin blushes, torn between a desire to ingratiate himself with locker room braggadocio and to be discreet. The Romeo of the steamroom. He’s saved by the valve, which begins shooting out a jet of hot steam that drowns out conversation, and the three monkeys lapse back into silence.

Hoping nobody recognizes him, Castleman goes to the athletic club one morning with the intention of riding the exercise bicycle and giving his sore foot a break, soaking it in the hot water of the coed Jacuzzi after his workout. He dreads running into Eddie Stokes because he knows his triumphs over aches and pains are nothing compared to Eddie’s, and besides, he knows, if asked, he cannot resist a game of one-on-one.

Kim, the cute blond towel girl, beams at him like a toothpaste ad, scans his membership card and hands him a couple of towels. Clyde, Richard and Myron love to flirt with Kim and make suggestive comments, but though Castleman is about

twenty years younger than they, the very thought of telling Kim how lovely she is, with the same leer and wink as Clyde's, makes him feel like a dirty old man. Monklike, he lowers his eyes, mumbles his thanks, and heads to the men's locker room.

Furtive as a spy, Castleman slides along the wall to the exercise room, making sure he doesn't run into anybody he knows, mounts a recumbent exercise bike. *The Price Is Right* is showing on the overhead monitor, spliced by commercials for The Scooter Store – motorized wheelchairs for older people with mobility problems *that may qualify for Medicare assistance*, the announcer stresses – Bayer and Excedrin and a variety of erectile dysfunction drugs; the station is pretty sure who makes up its morning audience.

Castleman gets off the bike for a moment to scan the magazine rack for something to read. *Newsweek*, *Shape*, *Surf*, *Bicycling*, *Aerobics Now!*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Abs and Pecs*, *People*, and what's this? *The National Enquirer*? He almost reaches for *People* when the tabloid catches his eye.

The Enquirer is several months old, he notices, an edition from the end of May. The cover story is “an exclusive breakthrough” – JonBenet's Killer Commits Suicide. The blue-eyed blond little girl whose image has decorated the covers of tabloids for at least twice as many years as she actually lived stares vacantly out from under the headline. Never-before-seen crime scene photos and a promise that inside the killer's identity is finally revealed. Also, Britney caught in drug den, and in a “biblical breakthrough” a man claims to have found Noah's Ark in Turkey. “We believe God wants it discovered,” a spokesman says...and then, the story Castleman really wants: Cher turns back time again. This could be useful for his fountain of youth novel, even if it is only a story about a face-lift. In fact, diet and exercise are cited as the reasons for Cher's youthful appearance. Just that morning Castleman received an e-

mail spam for a wrinkle cream called “La Decepcion,” which he saved for later perusal. Another possible source for material.

Castleman spends half an hour on the bicycle and then heads to the locker room to don his swimming trunks before going to the coed Jacuzzi, where he finds Camilla, a tall, blond, super-fit woman for whom he has lusted for several years (only in his heart, like Jimmy Carter and Jesus), relaxing after a rigorous workout. Camilla’s somewhere between the ages of thirty and sixty – it doesn’t matter; she keeps herself in such great shape, running, stretching, lifting weights, swimming – age is simply irrelevant. Her hair is obviously touched up and as a civilian in professional attire she wears make-up, but she’s still a goddess.

“Camilla. Hi,” Castleman greets her, shy as a stammering schoolboy, stepping into the warm bubbling pool.

A cat-like smile on her face, Camilla opens her eyes. She’s sprawled languidly along one side of the pool, submerged to her neck, her long lovely arms resting on the tiles. She could be naked under the bubbling foam, Aphrodite emerging from the sea.

“Roger,” she replies, closing her eyes again.

Castleman feels a great surge of desire but does not attempt further conversation. Camilla evidently wants to be alone in her thoughts. It’s as if he’s at a temple, a worshipful devotee at the feet of the goddess. Or in the actual fountain of youth itself, the invigorating waters. He feels himself getting aroused and is grateful that the bubbling water conceals that fact. Pudenda, he reflects, from the Latin for “shame.”

Castleman parks in the gym lot, pops the trunk, removes his bag. He enters the club, scans his membership card. It’s December now, and Kim, the towel girl, wishes him a happy holiday season. He makes his way to the men’s locker room, where he finds Clyde, Myron and Richard lounging around in front of the television talking

about vitamin supplements as an infomercial on botanical remedies for ailments ranging from bronchitis and diabetes to Parkinson's and wrinkles blares from the tube.

"Buncha quacks if you ask me!" Myron snorts. "Just a bunch of hairy-legged women with a string of garlic around their necks to cover the smell of their B.O."

"And guitar-playing old hippies with dirty jeans, sandals and scraggly gray beards," Richard agrees.

"I don't know," Clyde says. "My brother takes celery seed for his gout. Used to take a prescription drug and it didn't do a damn thing. Ever since he started taking celery seed he hasn't had a single gout attack. I bet he lives forever."

Castleman feels a jolt of inspiration. He can use this for his Ponce novel! *Living forever!* He closes his locker, turns toward the gym entrance, and almost collides with Eddie Stokes.

"Eddie, want to play a game of basketball?"