

## James at the Portal of Perdition

“Oh Jimmy, you’ll just *love* it! Exercise is so *refreshing!*”

I was doubtful. I was very doubtful.

Felice, my mother, is about to bid farewell to her forties and is in deep denial. She has never, in spirit, given up on being thirty-something, and the prospect of having to fudge her age by a full decade fills her with dread. The fact that Sylvia, her best friend and perennial rival, has dark good looks that wear well, while Mom has light skin, the sort that ages rapidly, doesn’t help a bit. Mom’s the more athletic of the two, though.

In her quest for youth, or at least its outward semblance, Mom’s wandered into some strange byways, but she doesn’t care to venture unprepared. Since she has no access to a supply of lab rats, she tries to get me to do it first, whatever it is. I did absolutely refuse to cover my face with green goo, or breakfast on brewer’s yeast and cod-liver oil, but this time it was exercise. I groped for an excuse, but was overwhelmed by a flood of ersatz enthusiasm.

“Oh, just come to the gym with me. You’ll feel so good after!”

“How about during? I’m not worried about after, and I feel fine right now. Besides, what kind of word is gym? It’s like my nickname written by a dyslexic. Nothing good can go on in a place named ‘gym’.”

“But this one’s not some dark, smelly training stable for boxers, Love. It’s a bright, fashionable place for people to improve the quality of their lives.”

I have never delighted in physical effort. It may be hard to believe, but I don’t find sweat alluring, especially not my own. The guy who said, “All motion is motion toward the

grave,” was right on as far as I’m concerned, and I don’t feel a need to hurry. My life’s quality is just fine.

Mother found this view without merit. I saw that unless I was ready to endure prolonged argument abundantly laced with guilt-inducing pathos it would be best to give her what she wanted. Maybe once would be enough.

At seven o’clock, an hour better devoted to sleep, or to coffee, toast, marmalade, and the newspaper, I found myself following Mom into what looked like a supermarket for implements of torture. Everywhere around the big room old men and young women writhed and twisted, pulling, pushing, sweating, gasping, faces tormented. I slouched. Mom pranced.

“Oh, come on, James. You act as if you’re sneaking into a smutty movie.”

“Worse! That’s just a film, but unnatural acts actually take place in here.”

“Nonsense. Just physical activity.”

“Exactly. Now what am I supposed to do?”

“Just sign up, talk to an exercise instructor, and get started.”

“While you do what?”

“Watch. And listen. I’m sure they have different workouts for men and women. I’ll start after you. And please call me ‘Felice’. Mother seems so ... Formal.”

“You just don’t want it known you have a kid old enough to show the start of male pattern baldness.”

“Oh! That’s... That’s just... It’s...” She was rescued by the approach of a man who looked a bit like a used car salesman in spandex tights, but less trustworthy. He had far, far more muscles than any human needs.

“Welcome folks,” he chortled. “Let us here at Fit and Foxy help you find the dynamic,

energetic, magnetic person you really are.”

“We came for a demonstration visit,” said Mom. She was obviously impressed, and I didn’t think she’d even seen his face yet.

“Of course. What better way to show the excellent value we offer here than to let you sample it?” His smile and tone were suggestive. “If you’ll fill out our guest form, we’ll get you started. Beth,” he called to a passing amazon, “Could you help Miss... ?”

“Bye, Jim,” twittered Mom. “See you soon.”

She walked off with the amazon, leaving me with our host. His smile had become a leer.

“Just fill out this form...”

Soon I had revealed things I would have thought of interest only to my doctor, changed into a sweat suit, and, sans secrets, awaited his judgment. He looked me over, dwelling unpleasantly on my midsection, and said, “I think we’ll put you with Don.”

Don also had a disturbing number of muscles, but looked pleasant enough. He was soft-spoken and polite. Then we came to a thing that looked like a cross between a bench and a giant metal bug. “This,” he said, “is a seated rowing machine. It’s set for ten year olds.” He gave me an assessing glance and removed some weight. “There. Sit down and take the handles, that’s right. Comfy? Pull.” I pulled. It felt like trying to move the Earth. I moaned. He said “Pull.”

“Yes! I think maybe two sets of fifteen each, what do you think?” He really didn’t want to know.

“Now, here’s what you really need. It’s great for the abs.” I was afraid to ask what those were. “Just take the handles,” he said, with the smile of a devil toasting a sinner, “And

bend at the waist...” After that one came so many more, each guaranteed to yield its own anguish.

It went on and on. The clock said two hours, but it was forever. The man’s badge said Don, but I knew his secret name was Deathwish De Sade. He’d planned a satisfying career as a Paris Island D.I., but was cashiered for insensitivity. He’d found a venue more suited to his talents...

A female demon joined us. “First visit, Sweetie?” she asked. “That’s always so exciting. You’re doin’ great! You’re gonna to love it!” So many falsehoods in so few words. Surely it was some kind of record. But if she could stand downwind and call me ‘Sweetie’ her mendacity must be endless.

I couldn’t recall dying, but I knew what must have happened. I could clearly smell the sulfur. I hoped it was sulfur, and not me.

“Oh Jim, wasn’t that fun? I must bring Sylvia...” Through fatigue-bleared eyes I beheld my mother, filled with joyful vigor. I made the sign against the evil eye and stumbled off to shower.

As we escaped she said, ”I signed up for body sculpting, aerobics, and water exercise! What are you signing up for?”

“Exorcism,” I replied.