

Mina & Conroy, Open for Business

Written by Pat Conroy

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The unusual story of an unusually delightful partnership.

By Pat Conroy

I've just opened a place of business in downtown Port Royal, South Carolina. It is an odd thing to be doing at my age. There is nothing on my resume that indicates I'll be successful in this unusual endeavor. But I'm doing it because there are four or five books I'd like to write before I meet with Jesus of Nazareth – as my mother promised me – on the day of my untimely death, or reconcile myself to a long stretch of nothingness as my non-believing friends insist.

Three years ago I nearly died from my own bad habits. At my lowest point I made an awkward vow to myself that if I could survive the crisis, I would try to improve my complete lack

of dedication to my own health. I stopped drinking at that moment, told my splendid doctor Lucius Lafitte that I was going to do what he told me. I hired my next door neighbor, the fetching Liz Sherbert, to be my nutritionist, and for two years I've tried to satisfy my great interior hunger with a diet that would satisfy a full grown squirrel, but did little to conquer the hippopotamus that lives within me. Still, I lost a quick twenty pounds and have learned to put up with Liz's surprise commando raids on my household to check on forbidden foods she finds in my refrigerator. When she spies me grazing on my front lawn, she shouts encouragement from her deck, "Greenery. Salads. That's the way to weight loss, Pat." Liz has encouraged me to shun all the foods I love and eat plentiful amounts of the things I despise. My lesson from this is never to hire a nutritionist who lives next door.

Dr. Lafitte also ordered me to exercise. In my youth I walked around disguised as an athlete, especially to myself. When I quit playing basketball at the age of 40, my weight increased every year until I turned into a southern fat boy, to my utter horror. Over the years, I'd hired personal trainers to abuse and shape up the fatted calf I'd become. From Europe to San Francisco, I hired a series of good men who were skilled practitioners of their art. But after a year or so, I grew bored, then had a back operation that affected my mobility for a long time. In 1996, I was diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes, which I call "The Fat Boy's Disease." The doctors are too kind and diplomatic to call it that, but I believe it's an accurate description in my case.

I joined the Beaufort YMCA a few years ago. It's a terrific place founded by the actor Tom Berenger and ex-his wife, a well-known Beaufort beauty. Three times a week I would meet my friend, the novelist John Warley, at the Y and we would exercise together. While exercising, I noticed a young Okinawan woman working with her clients and had never seen a physical therapist work with such dedication and compassion. With all her clients, including some who were elderly and some in wheelchairs, she gave her full attention and never looked around when someone was in her care. I hired Mina Truong as my personal trainer and went to see her twice a week. She was both a wonder and a stern taskmaster, so I started to feel muscles in places I forgot I had them. Then, on a book tour, I hurt my back getting out of a car and did not see Mina for an entire year. It was at the end of that year that I nearly died in a Charleston hospital.

When I recovered from my illness, I signed up with Mina at the Y again. At first, I went once a week, then three times, and then five times. I had marvelous fun with her, even though I could barely walk to the car after she had finished with me. But I started feeling better – much better than I had in years. Her skills in English are limited, and she'd apologize almost every time I saw her.

“So sorry, Mr. Pat. English very bad,” she’d say.

“No problem, Mina. My Japanese is much worse.”

“No, no, Mr. Pat. My English should be better,” she’d say.

“Could you stop calling me Mr. Pat? It’s driving me nuts. I feel like Marlon Brando in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*.”

“No, I must call you Mr. Pat. Out of respect. When you come to me, I did not know you. I not know you are very great man. A writer.”

“Give me a break, Mina. I write pornography.”

“What is this word? My English not good, Mr. Pat.”

“I write dirty books. Naked men and women doing unspeakable things to each other.”

“What is this unspeakable?” she said.

“You’re not supposed to say it out loud.”

“Dirty books? Bad books?”

“Yes, that’s what I write. Now hurt me some more. Our time is not up.”

“Mr. Pat, I never hurt you.”

“You hurt me every time I see you,” I said.

“No, I help you. I make you strong.”

So, without my quite knowing it, I became Mina’s unpaid English teacher over the past year, making certain that I brought in a few new words for her to learn each day. Because I lived in Italy for three years and never came close to grasping the language, I know that a sense of humor from a native speaker was a difficult, if not impossible thing to master. If a single Italian ever told me a joke, I can assure you I didn’t get it. At some point, I realized that poor Mina often had no idea I was kidding her. I know better than anyone that a Conroy sense of humor is not everyone’s cup of green tea.

In the middle of doing leg lifts, Mina would ask me, “How do you feel, Mr. Pat?”

“I feel terrible,” I’d say, gasping.

“Terrible. That is bad to feel? Terrible?”

“It’s awful to feel terrible,” I said.

“How can I make you feel better, Mr. Pat?”

“Call 9-1-1.”

“Why 9-1-1, Mr. Pat?”

“I need an ambulance.”

“Why you need this ambulance?”

“Because I’m dying. You’re killing me, Mina.”

“No, Mr. Pat. I help you.”

“Tell the crew I need a wheelchair.”

“Crew?”

“The men and women in the ambulance. They need a wheelchair because I can’t walk.”

“Why can’t you walk, Mr. Pat?”

“Because you hurt me.”

“Ah! It’s a joke. I hear you are a funny man, Mr. Pat. How you feel?”

“Terrible.”

Each week I could feel my body changing, hardening, growing stronger. Finally I came to a wonderful conclusion that I was feeling much better than I had for years. My friends and family and long-suffering wife all told me I was looking better, but to be truthful, I still look like a linebacker who has gone painfully to seed. But I give all credit to Mina Truong, who has inspired me to work harder than I ever have before.

This past January, my beloved brother Mike went into surgery for a quadruple bypass that terrified the entire Conroy family because Mike is the only one of us who knows how to get things done. He's the anchor to our whole family, so I can't imagine how complicated our family life would be if he was not around. But Mike is also tough as a walnut and he came through the operation and never complained to a single person about the pain he endured. The operation was a complete success and Mike came home several days before his release date. I was as joyous as I was relieved when I went to the Y and sweet Mina was there with a worried look in her eyes.

“How is your brother, Mike, Mr. Pat?”

“Mike . . .” I said (and this next part of my personality is irritating and inexplicable even to me, but it is my personality and this is how I answered poor Mina of Okinawa), “The operation didn't go very well, Mina.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Pat?” she asked.

“Mike's dead. But we can't let that interfere with my workout.”

“Your brother? He is dead? You must be very sad, Mr. Pat. You must go to his wife. To comfort her.”

“Naw, I never liked her much.”

“When is brother Mike’s funeral?”

“It’s going on right now, Mina. I knew I couldn’t miss my workout. And there’s a sale on tulip bulbs at Lowe’s,” I said, and by the look on Mina’s face I knew I would have some trouble bringing this subject to a close.

Mina helped me by starting to cry. Large, heartfelt tears fell from her eyes as she wept at the death of my un-mourned brother. I tried to figure out a graceful means of exit from a joke that offered few avenues of escape.

Finally, I said, “Mina, I forgot. I got a call on my cell phone before I got to the Y. Mike didn’t die. They made a mistake.”

“Mistake?” she asked in tears.

“Yeah, they got him confused with the guy in the next room. He looked a lot like Mike. But my brother’s fine.”

“You told me lie. About your brother’s death, Mr. Pat,” Mina said.

“It was a joke. But it must not translate well into Japanese,” I said.

“Joke? You make joke about your poor brother. He die. That is a terrible, terrible joke, Mr. Pat.”

“Yeah, it is awful, Mina. I apologize,” I said.

“You are a very, very bad man, Mr. Pat.”

“Yes, I knew you would find that out one day. Now hurt me,” I said.

Mina then put me through the toughest regimen of exercise His Fatness had experienced in a long time. I knew that there was some kind of subliminal punishment involved, but I felt I deserved it. The next day when I walked into the Y Mina said, “How is your poor brother, Mike, Mr. Pat?”

“Very bad, Mina. Mike died last night. I’m very sad.”

Mina burst out laughing and a fellow employee at the Y walked by at the time and asked her what was so funny.

“I told her my brother died last night,” I said.

“It is a lie. Nothing he says is true. No word is true. Ever,” Mina said.

I said, “Mina, you’ve got a great sense of humor.”

“No, Mr. Pat. You turn me into a terrible person. Today, we do aerobics. Fun, yes?”

"I hate aerobics," I said.

"It help you not be sad, Mr. Pat," Mina said. "Over poor Mike dying."

But there was trouble in paradise. The YMCA was one of the happiest places I've ever been in Beaufort. I fell in love with the women at the front desk and took great pleasure in getting to know various people who worked out at the same time I did. But for reasons I won't go into here, things weren't working out there for Mina. Some irreconcilable differences had developed, and eventually she resigned.

"What are you going to do now, Mina?" I asked her over lunch at Moondoggies that day. "I need you to keep me alive. So I'm real interested."

The following day, we rented a small office at 832 Paris Avenue in Port Royal, a



town that includes Parris Island in its district. Ten days later we opened shop at Mina & Conroy Fitness Studio. I warned Mina that if my photograph ever appeared on any advertising, she would not have a single client.

"I'm not a good walking advertisement for a fitness studio," I explained. Mina & Conroy is small, intimate, and a perfect place for me to spend part of the day for the rest of my natural life.

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We are having an open house on April 3, from 4 – 7 in the evening, and I’m inviting anyone who’d like to come to be Mina’s and my guest. Cassandra King and I will be signing books and I might invite some of my other writer pals to come as well. There will be wine and cheese and we’ll try to have a ball. Mina calls it her “castle,” and I like the sound of her voice when she says it. I’m trying to get my brother Mike to come down. Mina’s dying to meet him.

Pat Conroy is an internationally acclaimed bestselling author living in Beaufort. Visit him at www.patconroy.com