

# *THERE WAS A SHIP*

(A Memoir)

by

*Richard Balthazar*



*From an Engraving by Gustave Doré*

*It is an ancient Mariner,  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,  
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?'*

RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge



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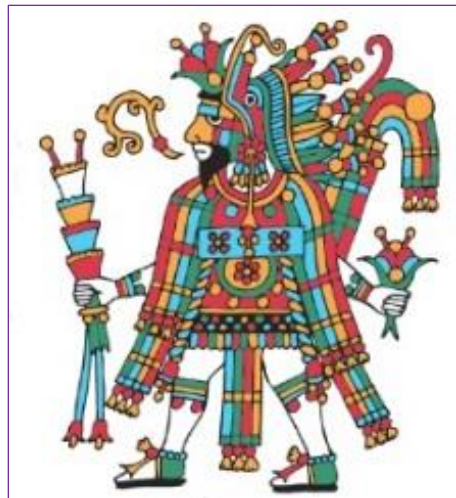
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*There's dance in the old dame yet!*



# *THERE WAS A SHIP*

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## CHAPTER 1. THE PIRATE PRINCE

.i.

In the splendid summer afternoon I sat on a park bench warming my gay old bones in the sun and feeling perfectly joyous. Several young folk came ambling down the path, two of the boys holding hands, as well as two of the girls. Their nonchalance made me even more joyful for surviving to see this brave new era of freedom, and I greeted them warmly:

*Hello, young lovers. Real nice day for a stroll.*

Good morning.—Hi. What's up, mister?—Beautiful day, alright.

*You kids on your way to that wedding over there in the church?*

Yeh, but we're kind of early.—But George and Mario are always late for everything.

Why don't you come along too?

*Why, thank you kindly. I'd love to celebrate with you.*

There's plenty room for everybody.

The reception's going to be scrumptious.—And are we gonna celebrate!

*Yes, indeed. We've sure got a lot to celebrate.*

You got that right!—Took more than thirty years, but we've got our rights at last.

The right to love and marry.—At least in this state.

*It's our unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.*

You know, that's what this is really all about. Happiness.

*Any of you maybe remember that old Sinatra song about love and marriage?*

Oh, I do! ♪...go together like a horse and carriage—

♪—can't have one without the other.

Wasn't that the theme song for a sitcom back when I was a little kid?

*Yes, it was, young lady. And just think, now you can marry the one you love.*

So can you, old fellow.—Do you have a boyfriend?

*No, not now. Long ago, yes, but we couldn't even dream of getting married back then.*

Oh, that's so sad, so tragic.—I just hate it that gay people were so oppressed.

Discriminated against... persecuted...

*In that way I was really lucky. I only got beat up once. Not too bad.*

I can't imagine having to live like that.

*No, you can't, my boy. Back when I was your age, it was much different being gay.*

How'd you manage?—Bet it was awful.

*No, I have to say I had it rather good. Surprisingly so. Just much, much different.*

How?—What do you mean?—What was it like?

*Are you asking for the tale of this Ancient Mariner?*

Ha! What kind of a sailor were you anyway, old man? A pirate?

*More or less, me hearty. Ever hear that old Judy Collins song "Suzanne"?*

Hey, man, that was like fifty years ago.—There you go, some ancient history.

*Like that line: "All men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them."*

Wow! That's like metaphorical, man. —How about us women?

I want to be a sailor too.—You can swab my deck any time you want, sweetie.

*Do you youngsters really want to hear about such ancient history?*

Yes, indeed. I'm in a course on gay history. I'd like to hear about your experience.

Yeh, and you're like an elder gay dude.

Come on, you all, let him tell us about being a pirate.—I bet you were a real hottie.

Like Jack Sparrow! Sailing the Caribbean...

*Well... I actually saw myself as a Yul Brynner-type swashbuckler—but with hair.*

Ha! You're a hoot, man.—I saw that bald guy once on the movie channel.

Hey, let Mr. Brynner talk, guys. Okay?—Say, what's your real name anyway, mister?

*I've had a number. Now I go by Rich. What are your names, young friends?*

Kevin—Johnny—Carol—Jason—Lynn—Deirdre

And I'm Mack. I been looking all over for a rich old man.

*If you want rich, Mack, you best keep on looking. I'm only Rich as in richly blest.*

That's really sweet, Rich.—And are you richly endowed?

Kevin, get your mind out of the gutter, girl.

*I think maybe that's something for me to know and you to find out, darlin'.*

Ooh, watch out, Kev.—Still got a fire in the furnace, eh?

*Yep. Care to stoke it for me?*

I... umm... well...—I do want to hear your pirate story.—So do I.

Let's sit for a while over here by the fountain, guys.

*Truthfully, I wasn't really a pirate. But I was once the ruler of the queens' navy.*

That's from Gilbert and Sullivan, isn't it?

*Almost, Carol. So... Back in the fifties I was a teenager called Dick, living miles from any neighbor in the southern backwoods. Dick's only real human relations were minimally with his father, mother, and younger sister—and a very close friendship with his school chum Dennis.*



**PENNEY HILL, ARKANSAS, Dick's home and his family's truck stop café in the later 1950's.**

So he had a boyfriend already? Thank goodness.

*No, it wasn't like that. Dick knew he loved Dennis but didn't understand why or how.*

What? I knew I was gay when I was ten years old.—I didn't figure out till fourteen.

*You're some lucky kids. Dick didn't even know there was such a thing to be.*

Yeh, I guess people never talked about sex much back then.

*It was still very Victorian. Nothing about straight sex at all, much less gay sex.*

Gee, we learned about gays as little kids.—Yeh, on the TV and all.

I mean, I've even got two daddies.—What a raw deal not to even know.

What on earth did Dick do with himself out there all alone in the woods?

*Well, he had no iPod to listen to or cell phone for talking to friends. No way to watch movies whenever he wanted to. No video games... So just a lot of walking in the woods.*

How horrible. Like the Middle Ages!

*All Dick watched on TV was American Bandstand and the Mickey Mouse Club. And so the lonely kid fell in mad, rock and roll love with Annette Funicello.*

OMG! Didn't she just die recently? —Something like multiple sclerosis?

I read that she was the first teen goddess. —Really cute!






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**Dick and his secret sweetheart, Annette Funicello**

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Annette was absolutely gorgeous in those old movies with Frankie Avalon.

I'd take Frankie any day.—Not if I get to him first, you won't.

*Anyway, this was back before those beach movies, boys—while Annette was still a Mouseketeer. She was Dick's romantic obsession. His emotions were totally shaped by those early rock and roll songs of teenage passion, going steady, and getting married.*

How boring! —Do you know how many of those early rock stars were actually gay? That's true, but Dick didn't have any idea. Meanwhile, there were no eligible females anywhere around, and so he adored Annette with a futile, hopeless, pure passion.

Poor little Dick must've masturbated a lot.

Nope. He was raised Catholic, so that was a mortal sin. So was even thinking about sex.

Holy shit! What did he do?

Nothing—except leave the Church. By eighteen he became a lifelong fanatical agnostic.

It doesn't sound like Dick had it all that bad though, Rich. Just awful lonesome. He didn't let the physical and psychological abuse from his father get to him. But the psychological and spiritual abuse by the Catholic Church was harder to ignore. Fortunately there was no sexual abuse... I once wrote a novel about it called "Bat in a Whirlwind."

A novel, really?—I want to read it.—Wild title, Rich!

Thanks... Anyway, poor Dick had no sexual experiences at all.

God help me! A real, live virgin.—You don't find them much anymore.

A real one. And then in 1960 Dick left the backwoods for New Orleans to go to college at Tulane. It was a whole new exciting world.

—Fantastic school, I hear.

At the time it was an all boys' school. The girls went to Newcomb next door.

And New Orleans is supposed to be such a wild place.

It certainly was back then when the riverfront was still all wharves, and the Vieux Carré was a den of iniquity—like in that movie "Walk on the Wild Side."

Isn't that the one where Barbara Stanwyck's a lesbian?

♪There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun...

So at any rate... When Dick left the woods, New Orleans was a truly wild place, and he was about as virginal as a guy can get. Innocent as an angel.

I bet he was a total hunk though.

He did have a hairy chest.

A hairy farm boy... Like a dream.

Hey, guys—Sofia just texted me that they're leaving the house right now.

That means we've got at least another twenty minutes to wait.

Great! Rich can tell us what happened to the virgin.

*So at Tulane, the angel forgot all about Annette, started calling himself Richard, and got lost in fascinating classes, a great job as a cashier in the Student Union, and the wonders of dormitory life, so utterly different from his solitude in the backwoods. All fall nothing happened to upset his virginity, but over the holidays...*

Somebody boinked him, right? —Kevin, you're so not socially acceptable.

*Not quite boinked. More like bombed.*

He got drunk?

*No. One evening a dorm friend named David, a handsome blond kid, asked Richard to come into his room to talk. He was distraught and wanted some advice.*

Sure... He just wanted to get into Richard's pants.

*No, my young friend. When David closed his door, right off he called Richard a little angel who'd surely be able to tell him what to do. He started crying and confessed to being gay. Richard didn't understand, and he said, you know, queer. He liked boys. Boom!*

That was a bomb.—So much for his innocence.

*To say the least. Then David said he was in love with a guy named Paul. He just didn't know what to do, if he should...*

He should!—Go for it, baby!—You sluts would say that.

*Well, virginal Richard was stunned—but figured if David loved Paul, how could there be anything wrong with that? Not that he knew what that was, of course. So David accepted the angel's verdict and threw himself into Paul's arms.*

But what about our little angel?—Didn't David even boink him?

*No, Johnny, but Richard heard from David later on about the mechanics of gay love in theory, and all the new ideas soon blew the lid right off his feelings. Right away he saw that what he'd felt for Dennis in high school had really been unconscious passionate love.*

And there's nothing wrong with that either.

*You're quite right, Lynn. But when Richard met this Paul, a tall older guy in his early 20's, he heard what was wrong with it. Paul told him it was illegal to be gay, and you could go to jail if they caught you. Or send you to the loony bin, like had happened to a friend of his. David said they even could throw him out of school if they found out.*

Give me a break, Rich.—You can't be serious.

Yes, he is, Johnny. I've read about how they used to entrap gays and arrest us.

What did sweet little Richard think about that news?

*Of course, he was utterly dismayed, first refusing to believe it, but then he figured if it was against the law to love somebody, he'd just have to be an outlaw.*

Smart kid.—I like the way he thinks.

There you go, Rich. See, you were a pirate after all.

So who got to pop his cherry?—All you men ever think about is popping cherries.

What else is there to do with them?—Now don't be rude, Jason.

This should be a love story, boys.

*You think so, Deirdre? Anyway, Richard spent the next term hoping desperately to catch a boyfriend around campus. Tulane being a boys' school, it should've been a happy hunting ground, but all he found were several crushes on cute fellows who ignored his existence.*

I've been there. Let me tell you, it sucks.—If you got lucky like I did when...

Kevin! Stop it. This isn't about you.

*To make matters worse, David soon dropped out of school and went home to Houston, leaving our innocent angel with no gay connection to anyone. Other than in theory, he didn't know how to be gay—or how to tell if a guy felt that way about him too.*

He had no role models.

*That's right. Absolutely nobody was openly gay, even Liberace.*

She was such a spectacular queen.—All that silver lame and lace.

*I mean, there were no gay characters in anything, no celebrities, no Ellens or Wills.*

How about that diver, Greg somebody?—Greg Louganis came out in the eighties.

Well, that's still way before I was born.

*Ah, youth! Anyway, in 1961 there were no gay sports figures or politicians. Richard almost felt like he might be the only gay person in the world. But he knew David was gay, and David had told him there were gay guys down in the French Quarter.*

I bet the French Quarter was really something else.

*Yes, it was, Jason. Very exotic, like the Left Bank in Paris, lots of beatniks and artists.*

Beatniks? Really?—That's who came before the hippies, baby.

*Also you should know that the drinking age was 18.*

So Richard was legal. What was he waiting for?

*True love, I guess. But one June night he suddenly decided to go down there to a bar David told him about called the Gaslight Inn on St. Peter Street. A nice young guy named Harry picked Richard up, took him home to the Claiborne Towers, and cured his acute virginitis. He told Harry his name was Tommy and didn't say anything about being a virgin.*

You mean... Just like that?—What did they do?—We want details.

*Well, since Tommy simply did what Harry was doing, they wound up in a rather symmetrical configuration.*

Not bad for a first time.—How'd he like it?

*It felt like a rite of communion, a secret initiation into a mystical brotherhood.*

That's what I thought the first time too, like I'd been enlightened.

That was probably the weed, dude.—But what about the romance, Rich?

*Don't worry, Carol. That's coming. Though Tommy never saw Harry again, now he at least knew what to do when he found a boyfriend. The romance came in October with the new school term when a boy walked up to Richard's cash register in the Snack Bar with a glass of orange juice, a black-haired, turquoise-eyed, smiling new freshman.*

And his heart was stolen away.

*No joke, Johnny. Richard and Peter soon got to be great buddies, talking and listening to music together, drinking pitchers of beer at the local college hangout. He was deliriously in love with Peter but too afraid to say or show it.*

I think everybody's afraid to love for the first time, don't you?

I wasn't. Was I, Deirdre?—Not that I could tell, baby.

Hey, Sofia says they're almost here. We better get our butts over to the church.

Hold on, guys. I want to hear how Richard got Peter.

*Oh, you do? Well, I think we'd better go over to the church. Fortunately I can talk and walk at the same time. And anyway there's not very much left to tell.*

Come on, Rich old man, I bet they had a ball.

First love, how wonderful.—Yeh, tell us about it.

We can hear the rest afterwards at the reception.

*Here goes. Richard invited Peter for Thanksgiving to his parents' place a ways up the river. They slept together, and Richard held Peter in his arms all night. But he was afraid to do what he now knew perfectly well how to do, and only dared to whisper, "I love you, Peter."*

He didn't do anything at all?—Not even cop one little feel?

*Afraid not. Not a blessed thing. And neither did Peter.*

I bet he was just as scared as Richard.

Makes me want to give them both a good slap upside the head.

*I wish someone would've. In the morning while they cuddled some more and snuggled his sister's blue cat, Richard told Peter again that he loved him. He didn't dare try and kiss him but was ecstatically certain that they would kiss and make real love—soon.*

How could they not do anything?—What a shame!

Well, I think it was a very sweet thing, them just sleeping together that way.

How awful to be too afraid to love each other. —But not even a little bitty kiss?

Maybe Peter was straight.

*I expect you're right, Kevin. After they got back to the dormitory, Peter totally avoided Richard and always hid amongst friends when he'd come to the Snack Bar, barely saying hi to him at his cash register. Anguished, Richard would play a special song on the juke box for Peter to hear: "Anyone who had a heart."*

♪—would take me in his arms and always love me. Why won't you?—Bacharach.

*That's the one, Carol. You sang it very well. How'd you know it?*

Oh, I'm a high school music teacher.—And Jason teaches history.

*What kind of jobs do rest of you do?*

College.—Computer nerd.—Me, too.—College.—Art gallery.

*A fine group of young professionals. That's good.*

So, Rich old man, are you saying Richard's first love fizzled out? Just like that?

*Not really. There was still the pain, that chagrin d'amour for many years after.*

Not toute de la vie?

*Pain eventually passes. Its memory is all that endures.*

That's comforting.—I've got some pains I'd rather just remember.

I bet I know where they are.—Don't be rude, boys.

Let's take that pew up by the front.—Yeh, and get a good view of George's gown.

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.ii.

Ushered into the church by my new young friends, I wound up sitting between Carol and Mack in the third pew on the left. The place was fairly full, a crowd of all ages and ethnic types, I assumed mostly gay, though who can tell nowadays? Eloquent testimony to this new age. Lots of folks were sitting close in couples, as were the lovebirds in our group. Unattached, Carol and Mack were my beautiful company, like vibrant children with their grandfather. Perhaps naively, I asked if George was really going to wear a wedding dress.

Mack laughed. "Oh, no, Rich. Jason was just kidding."

"Tuxedos," Carol also laughed. "But only because Mario refused to wear a dress."

"His Puerto Rican family would have killed him," Mack explained, nodding toward a cluster of Hispanic persuasion across the aisle.

Again Carol laughed. "They're fine with him marrying a man—only not in drag."

Mack nudged me with his elbow and asked, "Say, Rich, you ever do drag?"

"No, I never did," I admitted with a touch of embarrassment. With all the wildness of my youth, I'd never given a thought to that "fashion" side of being gay or even to the mannered gestures of "typical" faeries.

"Well, I did—in a tuxedo," Carol crowed. "I was a regular Victor/Victoria."

"I bet you were very handsome," I said in all seriousness. "But I should warn you, Carol. I find boyish lesbians quite attractive."

She blushed and looked away. Mack guffawed, the wedding march started, and we waited in silent attention for the celebrants.

First down the aisle came Mario in a gold tuxedo on the arm of a man in a black tuxedo who could only be his father, same nose and eyes. This groom was as beautiful a Puerto Rican as God ever created. Nearly took my breath away. When they were positioned by the minister and other wedding party, down the aisle came George, a striking blond fellow in a blue tuxedo, in arm with an older woman in a blue gown, again clearly his mother.

As I watched, a tear sprang to my old eye. I imagined this nuptial scene with me and Peter, young lovers coming together before God and Man as consecrated mates. No, I was wrong before: The pain hadn't passed. Indeed, this celebration was something Peter and I never could've even dreamed of a half-century ago. I surreptitiously wiped the tear.

Mack may have noticed. He nudged me again, gently, and whispered, "I think I'd settle for a richly blest old man."

In my best Mae West, I whispered, "Thanks, Mack. Let me know when you're serious."

We kept our eyes respectfully on the rituals occurring before us, and the energy that Mack's compliment generated in my sentimental state fueled other contemplations. I wondered what young Dick would have done if, like kids nowadays, he'd known what the options were. What if he and Dennis had known it was possible to love each other? They did once daydream about building a house and living in it together—with some wives and kids. At least that would have been one way for their friendship to last forever.

Still fascinated by Mario's beauty, I leaned to Carol and whispered, "Mario's exquisite."

Carol grinned at me and whispered back, "He's hot stuff alright."

"Just my type," I sighed quietly.

She cocked an eye at me and asked, "Ever meet your type?"

"A few times," I answered truthfully, evasively, and turned back to the minister's homily. He was saying something about cleaving unto one another, and I wondered why otherwise cleaving means cutting. A cleaver...

In their marriage ceremony, the grooms had their own pronouncements, heartfelt proclamations of love and devotion that left hardly a dry eye in the place. Both were simple statements, perhaps a tiny bit baroque in imagery, quite moving. I marveled that now at last two men can say these things with such pride and power to the world.

While George was listing all the loving things he'll do for Mario, my mind wandered to the subject of lessons. After all, there's supposedly a lesson in everything that happens to us. What lesson did my ancient Richard learn from his stillborn first love for Peter? That just because a guy's all friendly and warm doesn't mean he wants to fuck? Not a very helpful lesson, of course, for finding one who does.

At the end of George's manifesto, they exchanged rings and with no more ado swept each other up into a ravenous kiss. The congregation burst into applause and exulting shouts, from myself as well, "Yes!"

The minister then asked us all to stand and join hands to pray for the newlyweds. While he said the prayer, Carol and Mack held my hands lightly but firmly, and I was thrilled to feel their young energy flowing through me, and a sense of community with this new gay generation at long last liberated from tyranny of the straight.

Dutifully we all trooped outside and gathered on the lawn to cheer and throw lucky origami cranes for peace as the happy couple left the church. When they were safely in the limousine, Mack suddenly took my hand.

“Come on, Rich, you can ride with me and Kev to the reception.”

“It’s at a big Italian restaurant over on Tenth,” Kevin explained.

With some effort, I convinced myself that it was alright simply to leave my car where it was parked and go with the flow of my new young friends. Someone would bring me back. I hadn’t been a passenger in a very long time and rather enjoyed sitting on the other side of a car. Particularly nice was not having to pay attention to where we were going.

Being rather tall, Mack bent slightly over the steering wheel as he drove and chattered about how he wished he could go to Cancun, where George and Mario were going on their honeymoon. No, actually he’d rather go to Costa Rica. Then he said like a challenge, “So, Rich, in what way are you richly blest?”

I was momentarily taken aback, never having had to spell it out before. “Let’s see,” I demurred. “First, through no fault of my own, all my life I’ve been stunningly handsome.” Kevin hooted from the back seat, and Mack gave me an uncertain look before he too laughed, not unkindly. “You could also say I’ve been blest living my long life as a gay man by having no social problems to speak of.”

“How in the world did you manage to do that?” Kevin asked, justifiably.

“Well, Kev, I found ways. My career was in the arts, and in that world your sexual orientation is fairly irrelevant. It’s just a matter of being good at what you do. In some cases being gay is even an advantage.”

“Like for the casting couch?” Mack snickered.

“And for the creativity,” I said proudly.

“That’s right,” Kevin exclaimed. “Where would our culture be without gays?”

“They almost found out back in the AIDS crisis,” Mack remarked ominously from the wheel and giving me an affectionate smile, asked, “What other blessings you got, old man?”

“I suppose the big one’s that I somehow survived that crisis.” Not to linger on death, I quickly added, “Another blessing is that I got to love so many really special guys—and in so many special ways.” Both my companions chuckled, perhaps appreciating the pornographic implications, but I’d meant much more than that. “And I’m also hugely blest to be retired and reasonably secure in my dotage.”

“You can say that again,” Kevin said from the back. “Our generation doesn’t have much hope of ever retiring.”

“Or getting much of anything from our folks either,” Mack sighed. “I guess you really are richly blest, Rich. Good for you.”

Figuring that my next blessing would blow their minds, I planned for a moment how to say it in summary.

*And... Long ago I got the biggest blessing of all, though at the time it didn’t necessarily feel like one, and it took years to fully understand and realize it. For my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, my sister Judy gave me a tiny Pekingese puppy.*

The young men asked simultaneously, “A puppy?”

*Yes, and that little dog is the reason I'm now blest with several grandchildren.*

You what? —Grandchildren!? And children?

*Exactly. Two and four or five, more or less.*

Wow..? —What on earth happened to you? —How?

*How do you think? It wasn't the stork.*

And because of a dog?

*It's a long story—happened after the pirate tale I've been telling you guys now.*

Yeh, I can't wait to hear how Richard finally gets to love somebody.

A special guy in a special way...

Fortunately we arrived right then, and I didn't have to expand on the mysterious puppy.

Mack parked a couple blocks down from the restaurant where we'd seen a big white tent and gathering crowds on the wide lawn.

On our walk up Tenth, Kevin remarked, "I sure hope Liam will be here."

"I didn't see him in the crowd at the church," Mack observed. He nudged my elbow and explained, "Liam is George's straight friend."

"Yeh," Kevin sighed. "He's like your pretty Peter. My hopeless first love."

Mack laughed. "At least you got to kiss him, dude. Last New Year's Eve."

Just once. But not even any tongue...

It was my turn to laugh. "Hold that thought, boys. That comes next in my story, if you still up for hearing it."

Of course we are, Rich. I love ancient history.

Right after we hit the buffet. I'm starved.

#

.iii.

To Kevin's woe, Liam was not to be seen. We took our drinks and plates heaped with meats and miscellaneous culinary concoctions to the shady picnic table Jason and Johnny had staked out for us under a spreading oak. Our group of eight sat easily at the table with chairs for me and long-legged Mack at either end, and we all immediately fell into a feeding frenzy.

Only when the edge was off our appetites did we relax and consider the big event happening around us. At the far end of the tent was a dense group of folks around the grooms, and I was glad my friends were in no hurry to join it. Lynn explained they're such close friends of the couple that they'd just be in the way. Then the band switched from vaguely jazzy background music to more recognizable and rhythmical dance music, and various couples went out onto the floor to wiggle around.

As the subject is dear to my heart, I asked if any of my new friends like to dance. They all said they did, and Kevin quickly asked if I wanted to. Old man that I am, I figured not so soon after eating, and Carol said anyway, she wanted to hear some more pirate story.

*Okay, then... more amorous adventures of young Richard the Broken Heart.*

♪Anyone who had a heart—would take me in his arms and always love me...

*Exactly. But Richard's juke box lament only lasted a few weeks. He'd learned his lesson well. Then in mid-December he met someone else at his cash register, a grad student from India who was instantly so open and friendly that Richard was stunned. Not mention that this Hindu was more beautiful than the full moon.*

I know that! Arabian Nights!—What are you on about, doll?

*She got it, Lynn. Scheherazade. Anyway, the stunning Indian invited Richard to go out with him and some friends that night to a bar he'd just discovered in the Quarter. When he got off work,*

*Richard met up with five students outside the Student Union. The Hindu introduced himself as Desai, and not knowing Richard's name, he nonchalantly introduced him to the others as Norman. The six of them cabbed it down to Decatur Street.*

Okay, this is where it better start getting good.

*It is. The place was called La Casa de los Marineros, The House of the Sailors, a Latin sailor bar. The Hindu said it was so wild and rough that police wouldn't even go inside. Norman didn't hesitate a second to go through that dark door and stepped into a new world.*

You make it sound like Alice down the Rabbit Hole.

*It was something like that, Johnny, a Wonderland of sorts. Insane crowds and louder Latin music than seemed possible.*

Look at this, guys—Jason just googled it.

Here's a blog about New Year's Eve at La Casa de los Marineros.

And a picture of the place...

*Yes, I've seen that too. For the rest of his Tulane years, Richard was an outstanding student and contented cashier during the days, and then he spent his dissolute nights in that very same La Casa. He averaged three or four hours sleep a night.*

So La Casa was where he became a sailor, I guess.

*Right. That's where he set sail on the open sea of life.*

But what about the beautiful Hindu?

*Oh, yeh... By the way, Desai kept calling him Norman, like a title. They went out to La Casa almost every night of the holidays, sitting at the bar in the quieter First Room drinking beer and talking—about themselves, life, politics, religion, you name it. Norman got a crash course on eastern philosophy.*

Come on, Rich, cut to the chase!

*Wish I could. Norman refused to believe that Desai's warmth, his affectionate touches on the hand, arm, and once even the cheek, meant anything other than a deep, true friendship—like that he'd had with Dennis back in high school. He was determined to make do with Desai as simply his best friend.*

Once burnt, twice shy, I guess.—Damn it! Norman needs to fall in love again.

*And he did—on New Year's Eve in the packed Second Room of La Casa. At the stroke of midnight, Desai kissed him right on the mouth. Norman fell like a ton of bricks. Ten tons. But without any tongue. Sorry, Kev, but I couldn't resist...*

'S alright. I know all about bricks.

*And later on in the insane Third Room of La Casa, he declared his love. Desai said he couldn't love Norman like that, but they shared a soul and would be friends forever.*

Strike two!—I've heard that line before.—More than once.

*But it was true. Through those Quarter years, Desai stayed Norman's closest friend, carousing companion, soul-mate, and guru. Norman accepted the platonic friendship and started looking for a boyfriend again. Meanwhile, over the holidays he learned to dance the merengue and cumbia and pachanga.*

Hey! Mario loves the merengue.—I bet the band will play some later.

*That would be great. So when his other new friends got back from the holidays, Richard taught the girls the dances too. One of them, a beautiful blond Newcomb art student named Jane, and he became frequent dance partners and hung out together all spring.*

That was no help finding a boyfriend.—Were there any other gay guys in La Casa?



*Let me tell you, Jason, there were all kinds of carousing folks. Occasionally even drag queens. But it was really hard back then to “hook up” with anybody because you could rarely be explicit. You had to “cruise”—catch a guy’s eye and not let go.*

We do that now—all the time.

*But back then you had to be very careful. The guy might well be vice.*

Oh, yeh... I forgot about that.—I guess dating a girl was a pretty good smoke-screen. *Indeed, but there was never a date per se. Richard was clear with Jane from the start that he wanted a boyfriend. Of course, she may have had other intentions, but he was happy just having another platonic friend and a great dance partner. Several nights a week they danced in La Casa, often till dawn—*

—What? All night?

*Right. Bars were open all night. Still are. And they often went up the street to dance at a raunchy Greek sailor bar called the Gin Mill.*

Really? That’s an incredible name for a bar.

More sailors. —Sounds like a real dive. —Degenerate, like in a Genet novel.

*Precisely. Right then Richard was reading Genet and saw himself as another Our Lady of the Flowers. And he felt like he was living his favorite movie “La Dolce Vita.”*

Never saw that one, but Fellini was a spectacular director.

I’ve seen “Juliet of the Spirits” and “Satyricon.” Wow!

Look, here comes the groom!—Hey, George, congratulations, dude.

Hi, guys. Why you hiding out way over here? Come over and join the party.

We’re hearing a great pirate story.

Yeh, Rich here’s telling us about being gay over fifty years ago.

*Good to meet you, George. And congratulations on your wedding. Best wishes.*

Thanks, Rich. I still can hardly believe it. He’s mine! All mine!

You’re a selfish pig, Georgia.—Eat your heart out, Kevin.

Lynn and I are getting married next month.—And Johnny and I are engaged.

*I know young lovers when I see them—and how it feels to have wings on your heels.*

♪...and to fly down the street in a trance—King and I, right?

*Right again, Carol.*

So Rich was talking about wild sailor dives in the French Quarter in New Orleans.

La Casa de los Marineros and the Gin Mill.—What? No gay bars back then?

*Plenty, George—on Bourbon Street, Dixie’s Bar of Music and Lafitte’s in Exile, both really old, gay bars. Dixie’s is gone now, but Lafitte’s is still there.*

I even went there three years ago.—So that bar’s like really historic?

Let’s google it, Jason.—Why didn’t Richard just go there to find a boyfriend?

*Oh, he did sometimes. When Jane didn’t come out to La Casa, he’d go over to Dixie’s. It wasn’t any easier or safer cruising there, but he did meet a couple guys for a roll in the hay—no boyfriend material—and some other gays from school who became his “sisters.”*

Sorry, Rich old man, but I need another drink. —Yeh, me too.

Okay, everybody come on over and re-fill.—And we’re about to cut the cake...

Hey, George, Rich dances the merengue.—Fantastic! Mario will love it.



**La Casa de los Marineros**  
*Toulouse & Decatur*



**Dixie's Bar of Music**  
*Bourbon & St. Peter*



**Lafitte's in Exile**  
*Bourbon & Dumaine*

#

.iv.

At the bar, a hunky young tender or if you will, tender young hunk served us seriously stiff drinks. Indulging in another gin and tonic, I stood around with my crowd listening to the heartfelt toasts and drinking enthusiastically to all that. When the band struck up a valiant, simplified arrangement of “Blue Danube,” the blue and gold George and Mario waltzed around the dancefloor like Fred and Ginger. Johnny told me they’d taken lessons in ballroom.

Watching the grooms dance so blithely, I sighed inside. Even in La Casa, Richard wasn’t free to dance with a boy. Okay, he danced with the Greek sailors at the Mill, though that wasn’t the same. But in the mad crowds in the Third Room, he soon learned to dance alone, up on top of a barstool, a performer on a tiny stage—before there was such a thing as a go-go boy. Nothing like this graceful waltz of newlyweds. Again I was staggered by the time warp.

After that dance, George brought Mario over to our group. He shared hugs with them, and when I was introduced, he hugged me too. He stepped back and said, “George says you can do the merengue. We’ll dance.”

Slightly taken aback, I said, “Well, I used to—long ago—with girls.”

Mario’s laugh was utterly charming. “Don’t worry, Rich—I can follow.”

They had to leave us to do the cake-cutting ceremony with a very intimate flourish, and we all took our plates of chocolate confection back to our shady table. Before even sitting down, Deirdre said, “Okay, Rich. No more stalling. When does he find a boyfriend?”

*Well... (I hedged and ate a bite of cake.) At the end of the term, Jane and the other friends left for the summer. And worse, Desai went off to Chicago, leaving Norman all by his lonesome. He moped around La Casa missing everyone, and that Friday night—*

*—It happened—at last.*

*He was in the Third Room dancing on a barstool and saw this handsome blond guy in the crowd below that he knew from school, a grad student German instructor named Günter—who was watching him with hungry eyes. Richard gave Günter the flirty eye and an unambiguous smile and danced as sexily for him as he could.*

*Work it, girl! —♪Let me entertain you, let me make you smile!  
So then Günter came over and offered to take Richard home. Just like that.*

*You mean, he just said can I take you home?*

*Uh-huh. Günter’s apartment was sort of oriental with woven mats on the floor and something he called a ‘futon’ to sleep on—quite comfortable for making love on all night long. (While my young friends all gave great sighs of relief, I had my last bite of cake.) Richard had to cashier the next day at the Snack Bar and wore the whisker-burn on his chin like a red badge of passion.*

“How sweet,” Lynn said and snuggled close up to Deirdre, adding, “I’m sure glad you don’t have to shave, doll.” They kissed vigorously.

To make the short story even shorter, I quickly summarized:

*Richard was ecstatic all day long and didn’t even go out to La Casa that night. Instead he went back to Günter’s place for some more loving. Then on Sunday morning when they got up, Günter said he was leaving that afternoon to spend the summer in Japan.*

You’re kidding. —So much for a boyfriend. —Strike three.  
*More like a foul ball. But Richard didn’t have time to be all that upset because the next day he moved out of the dorm into a cheap apartment at 387 Audubon Street—with a beautiful Jewish boy named Louis—whom he seriously hoped to seduce.*

If at first you don’t succeed...  
*He didn’t succeed this time either. But that’s neither here nor there. Most important was that Louis named their new place the Rising Sun.*

That’s neat. Was Louis a poet?  
*Maybe, but really more of a satyr, a richly endowed satyr.*

There were little squeals of titillation all around, and then Deirdre commented, “I get the feeling this kid’s about due to meet Mr. Right.”

“It’s high time for that,” I agreed, “and for another drink.”

George and Mario joined us at the bar, where they all ordered fresh drinks, but I just asked the tender hunk for a glass of water.

The youngsters were surprised at my moderation, and I explained that two G & T’s were all I could handle. Never much of a drinker even during those years in La Casa, Richard just drank beer for something wet when he got thirsty dancing. And ouzo was great fun to drink with the Greek sailors.

“In fact,” I explained to my new friends, “drinking wasn’t the point of carousing in La Casa or the Gin Mill, but revelry, dancing, celebration, and jubilation. It’s like in Latin,” I said self-consciously, “Gaudeamus igitur—Iuvenes dum sumus. Let us rejoice while we are young.”

Carol remarked, “You seem pretty young yourself, Rich, for an old guy.”

Mack rubbed shoulders with me and asked confidentially, “What’s your secret?”

I told him seriously, “you just gotta keep on dancing, darlin’.” When he claimed to be an awful dancer, I figured he just hasn’t been woken up yet.

Mario slapped me on the shoulder with, “Let’s do it! I’ll get the band to play some merengue.” Then he trotted over to the bandleader. Not without trepidation, I took Mario’s hand, held his shoulder, and led us into the rhythm. The steps came back to me instantly, and he followed very well, smiling the while with his bright, dark eyes that reminded me of so many lost loves. One sensuous passage was so exhilarating that we both laughed out loud.

At the end of the song I thanked Mario for the dance and remarked that the tempo of the merengue seems faster than I remembered. He laughed heartily and said, “That’s what los viejitos always say.” Then he got embarrassed and quickly led me off toward the bar. I don’t mind being a viejito, as long as I don’t feel like one.

Back with my group, we found that Mario’s mother, an attractive woman, probably in her early forties but still rather voluptuous, had joined them. He introduced me as Señor Rico and her simply as his mother. She said, “Teresa,” and added that she very much wanted to dance the merengue with me too.

I happily obliged, and we danced like long-time partners, as gracefully and closely as Jane and I used to. It gave me a little pause to think that Teresa was rather younger than my own

daughters, and her son... At the song's end we clapped and laughed and shared a hug. I tried not to show how out of breath I was from the splendid exertion.

Jason handed me my glass of water with compliments on my dancing. Johnny remarked, "Wow, Rich. You must've been smoking fifty years ago."

"I like to think maybe I still am," I laughed. "There's dance in the old dame yet."

They all giggled appreciatively, and Carol broke in with, "Okay. Enough dancing and carrying on, guys. I'm waiting to hear Rich's story."

Mario asked innocently, "What's it about?"

Mack tried to summarize. "It's about a poor kid who can't find a boyfriend."

Carol added sternly, "Well, this time he'd better find one—or else..." Unsure what else might be, I assured her he would, and we trooped past the bar again and back to our shady table.

George and Mario wanted to listen as well and joined us, pulling up more chairs into a larger circle. I suddenly felt like an actual storyteller, or to be pretentious, maybe like Socrates with the youth of Athens. While I contemplated how to turn this stumbling love story into a tale of piracy, they all looked at me expectantly. Besides, I was going to have to whip through this stuff pretty quickly to wrap it up this afternoon.

After the dramatic pause, I jumped right in:

*What with moving in with Louis, Richard didn't have time to mourn for Günter, though he did feel terribly betrayed. That Monday night at the Rising Sun proved that luscious Louis wasn't available, and so on Tuesday night, he went out to Dixie's, just in case.*

There were appreciative chuckles.

*He ran into a guy he vaguely knew, who turned around and introduced him to his cousin from Opelousas, a cute Cajun kid—curly black hair—called—and I'm not making this up—Butch.*

There were several laughs.

*Both boys were totally smitten. They sat at a table talking, holding hands and rubbing knees.*

Finally! Here we go.

*Butch was staying at a female cousin's place out in Metairie, and since Richard couldn't take his new boyfriend home to the Rising Sun, all they did for a few weeks was ride around in Butch's VW convertible—and find dark places to make out like hormone-crazed adolescents. Not an easy thing in a VW.*

More chuckles.

*Rather frustrating, you'll agree, for two guys who just wanted to get it all the way on.*

Their attention was whetted.

*Then... On the Fourth of July, a Wednesday, Butch's cousin went away somewhere for the holiday, and the boys finally had a private place to consummate their passion.*

George chortled, "Consummation's a good thing." Mario took his husband's hand.

*They made marathon whoopee, with occasional naps, from noon till the next morning. By then Richard was completely blissed out. The total communion he'd experienced with beautiful Butch was a first in his short life. A wonderful life of love and happiness lay ahead for him and his wonderful boyfriend.*

Skeptical noises.

*Richard had wings on his heels all Thursday at work and dancing that night in La Casa. Butch was to come by the Rising Sun Friday evening to pick him up—they again had nowhere to go for privacy, remember. So Butch showed up alright, right on time.*

Why does that sound so ominous?

*Does it? Maybe because instead of driving them down to the Quarter for a night out, Butch wanted to sit there in the VW and talk. He told Richard that a neighbor had seen them go into the apartment—and not come out—and told his cousin. In a big scene with her, Butch had admitted he was gay, and she exploded. Right away that Thursday afternoon she hauled him to a psychiatrist, and the two of them insisted he had to stop seeing ‘the faggot.’ Butch had no choice because they threatened to tell his mother.*

*That’s horrible!——“Blackmail!*

*Butch drove off, leaving Richard sitting on the curb, aghast, crushed. Though he felt a certain Genet-like pride in being called a faggot, he was most poignantly struck by the obvious futility of romantic dreams about boyfriends. This was the fateful moment when our sailor turned into a pirate. He saw clearly now that love wasn’t some blissful state you achieve for the rest of your life, but fabulous treasures to be plundered at every opportunity. That seemed the only way a gay guy was going to find happiness.*

*That’s so tragic.*

*He didn’t see any other options.*

*But to give up on romance—on hope...*

*Back then gays didn’t have much hope for lasting romance. All Richard knew was ‘turning tricks,’ and again, he had no role models of happy couples. Just think how different it would’ve been if he could’ve seen you two, George, Mario. So he decided that from now on he’d simply have to sneak aboard guys’ ships, so to speak, and make off with their booty.*

*Shake your booty!*

*Oh, and about pirates, right across from where Richard was sitting on that curb was 390 Audubon Street where, I found out later, the parents of John Kennedy Toole lived on the second floor. The next year he wrote a Pulitzer Prize novel about another pirate.*

*Carol gave a start of recognition. “A Confederacy of Dunces?”*

*Yes. That crazy-wild one about Ignatius Reilly.*

*“I’ve read that!” Kevin exulted. “That one about the hot-dog vendor. What was it?”*

*“Twelve inches of Paradise,” Carol answered.*

*“Wow!” Jason exclaimed excitedly. “That’s so literary. I’ll put it on my bucket list.” He whipped out his iPhone whatchamacallit and started merrily poking at its little screen. This technological activity was far beyond my ken, and the way almost all of my listeners occasionally but regularly checked various devices I’d found slightly unnerving*

*Speaking of literary, (I remarked with perverse pride), Richard also used to see Tennessee Williams drinking alone in the back corner of the Second Room of La Casa. They never met, but sometimes he’d dance especially sexily for the famous old man.*

*The Sweet Bird of Youth.——A regular Dancing Queen.*

*“On that note,” Mario interjected, “I’d like to dance again, Señor Rico. Okay?”*

*“With pleasure,” I said and risked asking, “Can the band play the cumbia?”*

*“No hay problema,” Mario assured me and led me by the hand over to the bandleader with the request. They soon started a sparkling cumbia that drew practically everybody onto the dance floor. Lanky Mack sat it out. Mario’s mother and aunts closed in on us in an ecstatic crowd, and I found myself crying again from awakened memories of La Casa. The ladies got all worried by my tears, even though I was laughing with glee.*

#

## .v.

After the dance, Carol announced that it was time for me finish telling my pirate story, and shoed us all back to the picnic table. I promised to try and be brief, took a drink of my water, and picked up where I left off:

*After Butch dumped him, Richard the Broken Heart took the streetcar down to the Quarter and danced away his woe in La Casa. Then at work on Saturday in the Snack Bar, a friend told him that last night he'd gone to Cosimo's, a jazz joint up on Burgundy, and seen Desai there. After work Richard tore down to Cosimo's and indeed found his Indian friend—who said he knew that Norman would find him because they share a soul.*

*Desai came back to the Rising Sun with Norman and lived there with him and Louis for a couple months, sleeping on the floor in his apparently Hindu custom. The presence of his beloved friend blew away Richard's grief over Butch, and what's more his old dance partner, the beautiful Jane, showed up a few days later, bored with Dallas and raring to get to La Casa.*

*They danced themselves silly all summer, Latin and Greek, and then in September two distressing things happened. Desai met an Art History grad student named Frances at the Gin Mill and moved over to her apartment. And then one evening right after that in the Napoleon House, where Jane and Richard sometimes had a glass of wine before going dancing in La Casa, she announced that she wanted to stop the carouse—and asked him to stop with her. He simply said he couldn't do that, and Jane left alone.*

So she finally gave up?

*You know, looking back, I think they were completely in love. Jane knew it, I believe, but just didn't or couldn't make the move. And Richard was so exclusively focused on being gay that he couldn't see what was really going on. And remember—he'd never had any real relationship with a female before.*

“Do you think Jane could have turned him straight?” Carol asked.

I was saved a difficult answer by Jason, who said huffily, “Just like a woman, Carol. Straighten him out? There's no way this kid's ever going straight.”

Lynn compromised for them, “We know that, but how about bi?”

*After Jane, he had a series of female friends as regular dance partners, often wonderful dancers and compatible, but he also never gave any of them a sexual thought. And none of them was such a perfect partner and friend as beautiful Jane. So that's why he thought he missed her.*

All alone again...—What now?

*Richard got serious about piracy. Like when he'd first decided that to love boys, he'd just have to be an outlaw, now he realized that to love boys, he really needed to be a pirate. It seemed like the only way a gay boy could pursue his happiness. When he told Desai about deciding to turn pirate, the Hindu said it was good because their soul was a prowling tiger.*

*Secure with the safe haven of Desai's friendship, Richard sailed out onto the bounding main of the French Quarter seeking booty. He captured many rich prizes in the sailor bars on Decatur, the gay bars on Bourbon, and on the streets in between.*

A streetwalker. —A gay whore.

*Whores charge, silly boy. Richard saw himself as an apostle of free love, a true philanderer, a lover of his fellow man. Actually, he was something of a prophet since the hippies hadn't happened yet. Otherwise, I suppose you'd just have to call him a natural-born slut.*

What did he call himself? Queer? Fruit?

*None of those. From that very first talk with David, Richard knew the word gay, and he soon learned the various slurs, but as far as he was concerned, he was a fairy, a mythical fey being like maybe the son of Oberon and Titania.*

Like Puck? He was a fairy, wasn't he?

Nowadays it's 'faerie,' like the Radical Faeries.

Oberon was King of the Faeries so that would make Richard a prince?

*You might say... Anyway our faerie pirate soon got quite good at plunder and pillage. He'd cruise up alongside the prize, cast an intimate glance like a grappling hook, and then just reel the guy on in. Of course, it helped being a slender, lovely youth with Beatle-length hair and an inviting bubble-butt.*

I should think so! —So all he had were one-night stands?

*No, some of his piratical encounters turned into affairs—which were lucky to last as long as the lust. Sometimes there was great affection, even starry-eyed episodes, but never was there ever any illusion about or allusion to love or a future, because those simply weren't options. His brief alliances always ended with see you later, pal, no hard feelings. Oh, and I should say, Richard had very high standards for his plundering. Guys had to be beautiful and young—no nerds, dorks, fatties, or anybody much older than he was.*

"I'm cool with that," Kevin snickered.

"Oh, please," Mack whined. "Us dorks need love too."

There was something about him and a few of the others that said they were a sheet or two into the wind. I laughed, "And so do poor old men." Mack glanced at me, quickly looking away, and I regretted teasing him like that. So I lurched ahead in the tale:

*On Mardi Gras of 1963 Richard the Sailor found his ship. Desai and Norman dressed as pirates and rode on a ship-float in a parade down Canal and Royal, tossing beads and favors to the crowds, waving their plastic cutlasses, and making pirate noises. The float was like a frigate with slots for cannons and tall masts. It felt just right, and so Richard decided to keep it. He took it home to dock in his fantasy closet. (They looked confused by my transition into metaphor, but I forged onward.) And he christened it the Faerie Prince.*

Several laughed.—By the way, what about STDs?

*Way back then in what I guess you'd call the Bareback Era, Richard never worried about condoms—just about KY. (More merriment.) Truly, he was incredibly lucky not to get crabs or worse from some trick.*

Speaking of bareback, did Richard ever, you know, like watch porn?

*Darlin', there was no porn to watch or even see. Only once he saw a muscle magazine with buff guys in tight swimsuits. Back then you'd never see bare bodies anywhere, so he found it mildly titillating. The pornography you folks watch nowadays would've curled his hair.*

Carol shook her amber curls and quipped, "It can sure do that alright."

"Ain't it the truth?!" Kevin exclaimed, fluffing his own brown ones.

What do you think about porn, Rich?

*Not much. I guess if I needed a way to get excited, it might come in handy, but I've never had a problem that way.*

Ooh, that's right. Fire in the furnace. You're a live one.

So what did Richard do about the vice cops?—Yeh, he must've had to be real careful.

Especially on the street at night.

*Actually, he didn't. Veteran carousers in the Quarter pretty much knew who the vice were—not many of them ever—and otherwise they were healthily circumspect. Besides, vice*

*usually hung out in the bars trying to be inconspicuous but available. Also he could always tell by the way a cop cruised. Suspiciously. No real desire in the eye.*

*I can't imagine having to worry that a hot guy in the bar might be a cop.*

*Be glad you can't imagine, darlin'. You're blest. But you know, Johnny, the biggest difference from nowadays was that for all our pirate's 'underground' connections, he never ran into or even heard about anything called drugs. Once someone mentioned Benzedrine pills, but he didn't know from drugs. I'm sure folks of your generation can't imagine such naiveté.*

*Poor kid. Not even a tiny puff?*

*Nope. (I tried to pick up the thread of my tale.) Now 21, he sailed into his senior year as not so much a swashbuckling Jack Sparrow pirate as a sophisticated libertine, a gay Casanova, a suave seducer, who could charm the pants right off any guy he took a shine to.*

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**Claiborne Towers**

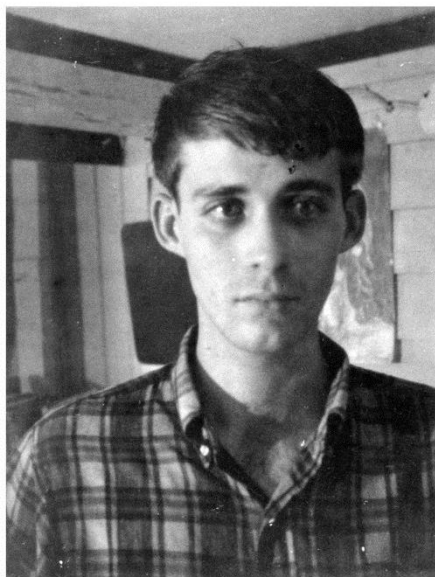
*Where Richard lost his virginity  
on June 16, 1961, in Apt 666  
(Building imploded in 2011.)*



**Princess of Monaco House**

*where Rick lived in the dissolute  
summer of 1963 and was beaten  
up in the carriageway*

---



**Rick at the Rising Sun,**  
*Spring 1963 (Note the famous  
Madras shirt and tiny ears!)*



**Rick with sister Judy,**  
*Summer 1963, and parents  
of Oná, the lucky pupdog*

---



*At times he even managed to finesse a number of concurrent affairs with great aplomb. What with all his amorous adventures, Richard felt as happy as a hog in hot mud.*

Ha-ha! —The backwoods boy...—I'd be too.

*Also for what you might call professional purposes, in his beatnik days of 1963, he started going by Rick, a much sexier moniker than stuffy Richard. Anyway, by the time 1964 rolled around, Rick had come to see himself as a latter day Don Juan with the noble goal of making love to men from all over the world. So far he'd already assembled a virtual United Nations of amorous conquests, heavy on Central and South America, many from northern Europe, France, the Mediterranean countries, Greece of course, Middle East, and China.*

George asked pointedly, "And how many in Spain? Mille e tre?"

"No, solo uno, ma il bellissimo." I was thrilled that someone appreciated my point.

Suddenly modest, George explained, "I'm an opera singer... Don Giovanni..."

Mario patted his spouse's hand and said proudly, "I'm his manager. He's going places."

"Go for it, boys. Where are you singing next?"

"At the Unitarian Church next Friday," Marco announced. "Seven o'clock."

"I'll try to make it," I promised seriously.

"So will we. Right, Jason?"

"You seem to know a lot about music, Rich," Carol commented. "You in opera too?"

"Once, in another former life," I said to avoid digressing. "You know, I think you youngsters—I'm sorry if that was patronizing—young folks are really great. You still get my archaic cultural references, stuff from long before you were born."

Deirdre volunteered, "That's because they're classic, Rich—historical."

"Our generation isn't all airheads," Jason said proudly.

Mack laughed, "Speak for yourself, dude." His jaw slacked into a stupid expression.

All laughed, and then Kevin remarked, "I notice there was still no Hindu in the list."

*Regrettably so. Also regrettably, and not for lack of desire, our amorous pirate Rick hadn't captured an African prize. Segregation, remember—before the Civil Rights Act.*

When did they pass that? —Like July of '64, I believe.

Johnny asked delicately, "Did he ever... get a black guy?"

"Another time, another place," I said, again evading while I searched for the thread.

"How about Norway?" Mack asked.

"Nope, but one stupendous Swede," I said and suddenly found the thread:

*So come 1964, fateful things happened. First, Rick had to decide where to go for grad school.*

"Grad school, really?" Kevin wondered. "Was he that good a student?"

*He was indeed. Outstanding. Even had some great fellowship offers.*

You never said what his major was, Rich.

International Relations? —Ha, ha!

*Almost. He was a Russian major—and studied some Spanish, of course, German (unter dem Günter), and classical and modern Greek.*

He could've been a spy.

*Right... Russian was a popular subject back then in the Cold War.*

Imagine a gay James Bond—with a license to— —Don't go there, Jason.

*But besides being a spy, a foreign language major usually went to grad school and then taught. Rick had simply done what was expected of him and applied around. So his choices turned out to be San Francisco State or the University of Washington in Seattle. Now, San Francisco would've been perfect for a fugitive faerie from the French Quarter, but the good student Rick*

*naively chose academic prestige. Seattle. In September. So he had just scheduled an end to his enchanted life in New Orleans.*

“Seattle!?” Lynn exclaimed. “I hear that’s a great gay city.”

“Now it is, dear,” I conceded, “but not fifty years ago. Not by a long shot.” Again, if I wanted to get through this, I had to get back on track:

*Then right around Rick’s 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday in April, he moved out of the Rising Sun and into an apartment in the Quarter—with a long-time carousing companion named Rolfe. It was great living just blocks from La Casa with a bedroom of his own—often used for intimate entertaining—and a big living room for parties and for friends to crash after carousing—frequently including his beloved Desai.*

Great setup. I once lived two blocks from our bar in Boston.

Before I could continue, Mario’s mother appeared and took the newlyweds away to say bye to Tia Elena and Tio Ramon. Before leaving us, George asked me not to tell any more of my story till they got back.

#

.vi.

I looked around at the rest of my listeners, unsure of what to say in the interim. Kevin saved the day when he asked, “Hey, Rich, who were some of your favorite affairs?”

“Well, let’s see,” I hedged. How to keep this from being part of the story? I’d just have to make it little side-stories, anecdotes:

*Rick had a few favorites. One was a Greek sailor named Pteros who came into port every few weeks and spent all his time ashore dancing and debauching with Rick in the Gin Mill. He felt he should write about the epic affair, but there was no plot beyond the passion. Then one week the Piraeus came into port without Pteros on it.*

He should have written...—It sounds so Genet. Querelle...

*Very. But by now Our Lady of the Flowers had turned into Nuestra Señora de la Marina, Our Lady of the Docks, if you will.*

How about Notre Dame de la Rue? —Queen of the Night?

We laughed at the epithets, all apropos. *Then there were some intensely sensual weeks with the Chinese painter Fong. Rick modelled for him—nude—for a painting that hung for a while in his show at Lafitte’s in Exile. Bacchus.*

That must have been good advertising. —Full monty?

*Full bubble-butt, darlin’. Looking seductively over his shoulder. The Fong affair lasted until his wife suddenly showed up. Then the model was out of a job.*

A bit of a problem. —Makes you wonder where that painting went.

*I’ve often wondered. And the Ganymede one—partial monty. Then there was the Dane from Colombia named Alphonse—*

—Two birds with one stone.

*He was a rare bird alright. A peacock of sorts, what Rick called a nookie bird—with another evolutionary advantage besides oversized tail-feathers.*

Are you implying..? Oh, I guess you are.

*Rick and Alphonse flew down the Quarter streets in a trance, two birds of a feather—*

So Rick’s a nookie bird too?

*Darlin’, I done told you that’s for me to know—*

—and me to find out. I know.

*They had a splendid couple months—until Alphonse’s father, who was a big financier in Bogotá, ordered him to come home to go into the Army. He was terrified and wanted to run away to France, but he had no money... And Rick was poor as church mouse. So he had to go.*

Who else?

*Oh, yes. Then there was the football player at school, a hunky Polish virgin named Tom.*

A virgin? Really?

*Not for long.*

Score one for Poland.

*Tom played a good game for a rookie. For several weeks he and Rick scrimmaged fiercely.*

My friends laughed heartily at the turn of phrase. —What position? Tight end?

*I didn’t dignify that with a response and continued. Then Tom got scared that Rick would turn him queer, and he called it all off.*

Good grief! Turn him queer?—Lots of guys think that way, even now, honey.

Classic denial.—I’d jump at a chance to turn Johnny Depp queer.

Lord, give me just one shot at Zac Efron, please!

*Funny thing—back then Rick actually looked a lot like that one. Longer hair, of course.*

Anybody else special?

Seeing George and Mario approaching our group, I stalled, “Well, there was the Swede—but he’s coming up later in the story.”

“Hi, guys,” Mario waved to us. “Look what we brought you.”

The husbands put a tray of more wedding cake on the picnic table, and George urged, “Go for it! Sugar counteracts the alcohol.” They sat down, and he added, “I think.”

“In that case,” Kevin jumped up, “I’m getting another drink.” Lynn joined him and said she’d bring me more water.

“We didn’t miss anything, did we?” Mario worried.

“Let’s see now,” Carol considered, “there was a Chinese artist, a Greek sailor, a Polish football player—tight end... And a nookie bird.”

“Oh? What’s that?” George asked around a bite of cake.

“You should know,” Jason snickered. “Mario’s a nookie bird.”

Confused, Mario innocently asked, “Me? What?”

George got the gist of it and comforted his spouse, “I’ll explain later.” He turned to me and asked, “You mean Rick nailed all those guys after moving into that apartment?”

I laughed off his worry that I’d continued my story without them. “No, they were just highlights of his piratical career. You didn’t miss anything really.”

“Except the nookie bird,” Mack guffawed and grabbed some more cake for himself.

Since the others weren’t back with their drinks yet, I indulged in another highlight. *One night he picked up a Mexican kid named Lalo, one of those native types from Sonora.*

Tarahumara?

*Something like that. Well, when Rick got Lalo into bed, he discovered he had an honest-to-john satyr on his hands. Like the great god Pan. From the waist down, like a pair of pants, I kid you not, the boy was covered with thick black fur—no goat feet though.*

How about a tail?

*Nope. And no little horns. But let me tell you, his fur was so utterly animal. A perfectly mythical experience. In the morning Lalo left on the Greyhound to go back to El Paso. (They all looked at me expecting more, but there was no more. So I joked.) As a matter of fact, Rick was delighted to discover that Lalo was more like a centaur than a satyr, if you get my drift.*

There were understanding chuckles, and fortunately just then Kevin and Lynn returned with the drinks. So I took a sip of my new water and started right in again: *Okay. For Rick's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, his sister Judy gave him a special present.*

"The fateful puppy!" Kevin exclaimed, and the others looked at him strangely.

"Rich told us about it in the car on the way over," Mack explained.

*Right. It was a tiny golden Pekingese, the kind Chinese emperors carried in their sleeves. He named his new pup Oná, Russian for "She," as in H. Rider Haggard's novel. There's a good one for your bucket list, Jason. Sort of sci-fi without the sci-.*

Thanks, I'll check it out.

*Rick hadn't had a pet since back when he was Dick, and he bonded with her instantly.*

What's this about fateful?

*Oh, as I mentioned to Mack and Kevin the car, that little puppy wound up determining the whole trajectory of Rick's life. (I could tell what Mack was about to say and shushed him with a finger to the lips. He kept my secret.) Caring for Oná gave Rick's life a structure and a focus. Also, on walks around the Quarter, Jackson Square, and all, with the little ball of fluff on her leash, he soon found that she was a perfect way to meet guys on the street.*

As though he needed help...



**French Quarter Street**

Old photo but much like when Rick roamed, though with more and later-model automobiles



**Jackson Square**

with Basilica of St. Louis, where Rick first met the painter Fong and the nookie bird Alphonse

*Be that as it may... Though he wasn't at all superstitious, Rick came to think of Oná as a lucky charm, his "lucky dog." She proved her worth one day in June. On Chartres they came upon a tall blond guy walking a golden afghan hound. Actually he looked quite like lovely Mack here. (Slouched in his chair like a slovenly teenager, Mack suddenly sat up straighter.)*

*Oná stopped in her tracks, growling ferociously, and the afghan cowered. The guy on its leash laughed, "Boris is just a big pussycat." His name was Eric, a Swede, and he proved to be something of a marauding Viking himself.*

Swedes aren't real Vikings.

*Okay, so then Eric was technically a Varangian. They sacked Constantinople, twice I think it was. Maybe three times.*

Fuck Constantinople! What happened with Eric?

We all laughed at Kevin's eloquent enthusiasm.

*I think you could say Rick and Eric sacked each other's cities repeatedly. From that day on for the rest of the summer they scheduled their dog-walks together and most other free parts of the days and nights, either in La Casa, or in Rick's or Eric's boudoir. Oná and Boris became*

*the best of doggie friends and played nicely, the tiny one zipping around and around between the legs of the tall one.*

I'd say Rick kind of hit the jackpot.

*You said it, darlin'. His last summer in New Orleans was a perfect idyll. In a rare state of bliss, Rick was blest to be a beautiful and famous Quarter queen, and blest best of all to have in Eric a lover just like himself. They even spoke of their mythical love. Living in the fairyland of the French Quarter, far from the crude and craven straight world, they promenaded around Jackson Square with Oná and Boris on their leashes—elegant faerie princes out to bless and amaze the world with their beauty and happiness.*

Sort of art nouveau—maybe an Aubrey Beardsley drawing, all flowing and flowery.

I see them as an art deco pair of demi-gods. Demi-gods with golden dogs.

No, I think they're more like a Tom of Finland pair of pneumatic hunks.

*I couldn't help but laugh out loud at Kevin's reference to those hypertrophied biceps and bulging buttocks. When I'd recovered, I tried to wrap it up: So here he was. Through dissolution, debauchery, and mostly dance, Rick had landed in the best of all possible gay worlds. Our simple sailor-turned-pirate was now the glorious ruler of the queens' navy. But guess what the fly in the ointment was.*

No fair, Rich. Just tell us.

I know—they ran out of KY. —Ha-ha!—I bet Eric had a wife.

*Nope. He was already divorced. (They were clearly stumped, so I told them.) When Rick and Eric spoke of their love, Eric made it clear that he wouldn't be going to Seattle with him. They didn't speak of it again, but it was a constant thorn in Rick's side. All the same, he never even once considered staying there in New Elysium with Eric. Meanwhile, the thought that he himself would indeed and in fact be going to Seattle was unthinkable. Even more unthinkable was the fact that he'd also be leaving his Hindu soul-mate behind.*

*Then it turned September, and all the goodbyes came crashing down around Rick like a Tchaikovsky finale. Roommate Rolfe threw a going-away party for him on Friday night with all his old friends like Jane and Desai, La Casa dance partners and cronies, many former lovers and tricks, Greek sailors, Gin Mill whores, total strangers, and Oná (who adored daiquiris). Unlike the rest of these drunks, she loved Rick enough to go along with him to Seattle.*

*On his last Saturday night in La Casa, Rick frantically danced away the fear and horror of what would happen tomorrow. But tomorrow while Eric was driving him to the airport, they came back. He handed over his golden Oná in her travel kennel and suitcase—where his faerie ship was safely stowed away like a genie in the bottle of Bacardi rum Desai gave him for bon voyage. And when the doomed lovers Rick and Eric said goodbye on the concourse, both wept, but of course they couldn't kiss each other in public, not two guys. Then our pirate prince got onto the jet plane and sailed away from Fairyland.*

#

.vii.

While my young listeners sat nonplussed by the abrupt end of the story, I heaved a sentimental sigh at getting through this telling, rather pleased with how I'd done. Maybe I could tighten it up some more next time? That pirate suggestion was an absolute gift.

George was the first to say anything. "It's like The Slut's Progress!"

"Thanks, George. I should tell you that in my foolish youth I also wrote a novel about Rick's New Orleans years. I called it "Divine Debauch."

Wow!—That's neat!—Another great title!

"Thanks, Carol," I said. "I'm a widely unread author. Unknown the world over."  
Ha, ha!—I'd read it. Like ancient gay history.—What a ball that must have been!  
And he just left it all behind?—I wish we had a sailor bar around here.

Really makes you wonder what happened to him in Seattle, doesn't it?

"That's another story, darlin'—and nothing like this one. Nowhere near as much fun."

Well, whatever... I think Rick was real courageous to be openly gay back then.

"Courageous?" I asked. "Remember, he lived in fairyland. It was natural for him to become the Dancing Queen and the Faerie Prince. Those titles were created especially for him. Rick certainly had an unusual college experience.

My college totally sucks in comparison.

I'd sure love to take courses like his. I'd ace 'em.

"They're not being offered anymore," I sadly remarked. "La Casa—the Gin Mill—all gone with the wind."

Maybe we should think about going too, guys.

We looked around and saw that the afternoon was seriously getting on, and the crowd was largely gone, only scattered relatives left huddled in conversation. Our own group looked rather the worse for wear, or well lubricated, if you will, and we agreed with Jason. For our best wishes for their Cancun honeymoon, George and Mario gave us all warm hugs goodbye and returned to their remaining guests. When we wandered out on the sidewalk to go to respective vehicles, there were more hugs around, and Mack, Kevin, and I headed down the street for his.

"Hey, Rich, old buddy," Mack said, "think you could drive for me? I'm sorta drunk." His little slur was more than convincing, and as a perennial designated driver, I easily agreed.

Mack slouched his long frame into the passenger seat, and a similarly tipsy Kevin lounged in the back. As soon as I pulled out of the parking place, Mack gestured loosely and said, "Make a left up here on Sheridan."

Driving by his direction, I felt I simply had to say, "Thank you, guys. I've really enjoyed being with you all at the wedding, and—"

"—You're welcome, Rich," Kevin pre-empted me. "And I'm honored to meet the ruler of the queens' navy."

His homage was sweet, but I went on, "I was going to ask if we could keep in touch."

Mack jovially clapped his big hand on my forearm, giving the steering wheel a small lurch, and asked, "How's this, Rich old man?"

I just laughed, and Kevin spoke up from the back seat. "Okay, give me your stuff." When I recited my address and phone, I knew he was punching it into some electronic widget. Mack was doing the same on his whatever. "Great," Kevin concluded. "We can talk about going to George's concert."

"Keep going straight—ahead," Mack directed with another broad gesture. "When we get to Third down there, do a right." He let me wonder a moment and added, "We're taking Kev home first. Over on Montgomery."

I knew where he was talking about. Kevin spoke up again, "Rich, I just can't imagine someone my age getting so many guys. A whole United Nations. Rick was prodigious."

"Prodigious?" I chuckled at his unusual vocabulary. A new slang term?

Mack said, "Yeh, dude—" He actually called me 'dude!' "—I'm even 23 and nowhere near that prodigious yet."

I truly regretted that they'd been so deprived and tried to sympathize. "Well, fellows, to be frank, I'm at least three times older than either of you, and for this last third of my life I've had no carnal relations with anyone. See, things tend to even out in the end."

"None?!" Mack literally choked. "Good Lord!"

Leaving them to do the math, I confirmed that and turned us onto Third. Their calculations took a moment, and Kevin exclaimed, "Since before I was born... OMG!"

Mack brightened up, "You mean we'll get a lot more nookie later on, I hope."

"God willing," I said, patting his arm, and expanded on my original point. "I mean—meeting you all in the park and going to the wedding... It was really special for me."

Us too. I know Johnny loved the lesson in gay history.

Me too. I like that pirate ship, the Faerie Prince. I'm a sailor too.

All those sexy guys... the nookie bird...

The car had been sitting at the stop sign at Montgomery as I waited for direction from either of them. Mack suddenly jumped to and pointed left. Then he commented, "You know, I'm kind of glad Rick had such bad luck finding a boyfriend early on."

Why's that?

Just think of what he would've missed. The United Nations. That Swede.

That's right. Things tend to even out in the end—or sometimes get better.

Kevin's apartment house was in the next block on the immediate right, and I pulled the car up by the front walk. He reached over the seat to Mack with, "See you later, dude," and they exchanged fist-bump and finger-clasp. He turned to me with, "Great to meet you, Rich." I awkwardly negotiated the bump-clasp. Getting out of the car, he said, "I'll call."

It was an easy, fairly direct matter to get from there back to the area of the church and park, so I headed in that direction and asked Mack, "You going to be okay to drive home from the park? I mean, I'm parked right near where you were before."

"Sure, sure," Mack dismissed my concern with another broad gesture. Then he hoisted himself up in the seat and turned to me. "So what were you doing in the park today anyway?"

Poisoning pigeons.

No, really—I bet you were playing pirate again, sailing on the bounding main.

No way. Really, I was just sitting there thinking about the historical significance of the wedding. I'd read about it in the paper but didn't know anyone connected. Figured I'd just watch from the park bench as the guests arrived. I was sitting there imagining a bunch of young lovers walking by on their way to the ceremony.

Are you saying you imagined us?

Maybe I did, existentially speaking.

Like you knew what was going to happen?

What do you think, Mack?

Did you really imagine all the stuff we did today and talked about?

Basically. The dancing was a pleasant surprise though.

But what if I was to do something you hadn't imagined?

Gee, I guess that would be another surprise. Maybe I'd better quick imagine some more stuff so it won't be, you think?

Can't I do something without you imagining it?

Maybe you better hope I keep on imagining you.

While Mack considered the philosophical convolutions of our discussion, I drove along appreciating what great fun it is to mess with the minds of inebriated youths by stirring up the utter enigma of reality.

You know, Mack, I don't remember what you do for a living.

I'm webmaster for a big catalog company. Good job.

Goodness... makes me think of wizards and magicians.

Magic would probably be a big help.

Give it a try. A few spells and incantations...

Couldn't hurt. Can you teach me some, Rich?

Do I look like a wizard?

Not like a Gandalf... but I bet you wield a Level 10 Staff of Awesome Power.

Flattered speechless, I turned the car onto the block along the park.

Well, looks like we're here. My car's just around the next corner.

Good, you can just park us right here.

Are you okay to drive home?

No problem. I live right over there across the street. Third floor.

When I'd parked, I got out and walked around to help Mack out. Woozily unfolding his long limbs, he lurched against me and hugged me to his chest. My head fit just under his chin—the way it once did with Eric. Appreciative, I wrapped my arms around his slender waist. When I made to let go, he didn't, and we just stood there embracing while the evening sun slanted golden through the park trees. Then his voice sounded above my ear.

I'm serious now.

You still drunk, Mack?

No... I'm Norwegian.

Oh...

A real Viking.

###

## CHAPTER 2. LUCKY DOG

.i.

That Friday evening Mack picked me up to go to the Unitarian Church for George's concert. He and Mario had just gotten back from Cancun on Wednesday, and according to Mack, they were both very, very suntanned. Ever since the wedding, he or I had called almost every day and had gone out a few times for dinners at his favorite places. Mack turned out to be an intellectual Viking as well, his conversations either enlightening me about this strange new world of the present or touching on history and science in ways I'd never imagined. Relating so closely to such a young guy pretty much shook my old mind and heart awake.

As arranged, we went by to pick up Kevin, who was now sporting a row of curls across his forehead in a bright, poison green, rather like a wreath. He explained that it was as much fun as getting a tattoo, but less permanent. I chuckled to my old self about what permanent used to mean. On the way to the church, Kevin filled us in on his futile love for the straight Liam. They'd run into each other at Starbuck's last weekend and had a good talk about how a straight guy could always make it with a man, you know, and that wouldn't necessarily make him gay. So Kevin had high hopes.

Mack advised, "Don't ask if he loves you, dude. That's like saying hit the road, Jack."

Hoping I didn't sound too cynical, I volunteered, "And don't ask for anything else either, Kevin. Just be there for when he wants to give you something."



"I could deal with that," Kevin sighed. "But being there... I see Liam so rarely."

Mack was pragmatic. "Call him for a date—dinner and a movie—no strings attached."

I agreed. "Even straight guys need male friends. Build a friendship, and then who knows?" It fascinated me that now a gay and a straight guy could talk so realistically about having sex with each other. Of course, my young Norman was there for Desai for all those years, but all that came of it was that one night. On New Year's Eve of 1964 in the legendary snowstorm, they slept together—to keep warm—a night as chaste as that Thanksgiving with Peter. Clearly, I wasn't much of an authority on how to love a straight guy.

At the Unitarian Church we found Jason, Johnny, and Carol, who'd saved us seats on the first bench. Sitting again between Mack and Carol, I was pleased to find that the program was to be a revue of various solos, duets, trios, etc., by five singers. George was listed to solo in Rossini's *Largo al Factotum* and for the duet from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. For some reason I hadn't thought he'd be a baritone.

When I'd finished reading the program, Carol remarked, "I've been thinking about your pirate story a lot, Rich. I keep wondering what ifs. I mean, what if Richard did find a boyfriend? Or what if he and Jane..?"

"Do you think he'd have wound up any happier some other way?"

Carol grinned sheepishly. "Happier than a hog in hot mud? Probably not."

Kevin leaned around Carol with his wreath of green curls and said, "Something you ought to know, Rich—Johnny recorded your story."

I was taken aback, but not displeased. Johnny also leaned out around Mack and smiled. "It was like an oral history project—for my class at the college, you know."

"That's great," I graciously conceded the *fait accompli*.

"I call it *The Pirate Prince*," Johnny announced, "or *Fuck Constantinople*."

"Hey, I said that!" Kevin crowed proudly while the rest of us laughed out loud.

My vanity tweaked, I asked, "And what do they think of it?"

"They thought it was so exotic—the French Quarter and sailor bars. Like a fairy tale."

Right then a bell dinged, and several musicians marched out into the central open area around a dais. Johnny went on quietly, "The prof says New Orleans was one of the few places back then where a gay person could live openly—also San Francisco and New York."

"Yes, that's right," I whispered back, "but it was living as an outlaw. A pirate."

"Still a hell of a lot better than living in the closet," Mack opined.

Johnny added, "She says it shows why gay people often become sex addicts."

That modern perspective took me by surprise, but maybe it was valid. "Same reason most people become sex addicts," I chuckled. "They like it."

"And she likes the rest of us commenting. It underlines the historical perspective."

Right then, to our welcoming applause, the five vocalists filed out to stand in a row on the dais. Third in line, George glowed with his blond hair, fantastically tanned cheeks, and that ring on his finger. The director, a tiny woman with red curls, took her place, raised her baton, and after a second's reverence, signaled the violins to begin. The program was beautiful, including George's *Figaro* solo in a powerful, resonant voice. It was easy to see him making it big someday soon. He also sang in a Mozart ensemble from *Così fan tutte*. Then came a five-minute intermission.

We all stood up to stretch, and Mack remarked, "I sure wish I could sing like that."

To be gentle, I said, "You're probably a tenor, darlin'."

Kevin suddenly exclaimed, "Yow! There he is!" He indicated across the way where a very tan Mario was talking with some others. Liam was on Mario's left. The black-haired beauty was indisputably swoon worthy. Mario saw us looking and waved, which led Liam to look also. Likely surprised by Kevin's green hair, he waved, and Kevin fairly swooned.

Mack chuckled and said, "Well, if you're not going to, dude, maybe I'll ask Liam out myself. He looks totally hot to trot."

"Don't you dare," Kevin snapped and pulled out his phone. I watched his flying thumbs tap on the screen. He pressed a send button, and across the way, Liam pulled out his own phone, looked at it, and after a flurry of his thumbs, Kevin checked his screen. "I asked him out after," he boasted, "and he said yes." I was amazed by the speed and ease of the transaction. Crowned with his verdant curls, Kevin beamed at me. "See, I'm gonna be a pirate too."

Carol clapped him on the back. "Good for you, Kevvie. Let's see you board that ship." "And grab some big booty," Jason encouraged with a snicker.

We all chuckled politely as Kevin gazed wistfully at the beauty across the room. Then Johnny announced, "Hey, guys, George wants us to go out to the Titsling afterwards to dance."

"You don't mean like Bette Midler's song about Otto Titsling?" I wondered.

"Yeh, and Pierre Brassiere," Carol laughed. "Used to be a lesbian joint, a 'sports bra' for the biker chicks, but now it's totally extra-sexual, and they've got a great DJ."

"Is that like extraterrestrial?"

"Or maybe extrasensory, but I doubt it's anything like your La Casa."

Kevin said brightly, "Good idea! With the bunch of us, maybe he won't feel threatened."

Mack chuckled, "Yeh, and maybe you can sneak up on him from behind."

"Standard pirate tactic," I joked, and at that moment, the bell rang again. The audience sat down, and the performers filed back in to their places. Mack leaned close whispering, "Sure hope Kev can make it with Liam. Then maybe he'll stop moaning how nobody loves him."

"That's what he thinks?" I hadn't imagined the elfish Kevin feeling unloved.

"Oh, he's had some boyfriends," Mack confided, "but they all dump him."

"Then it's high time he turned pirate," I said with conviction and sincere sympathy.

As the singers resumed their places on the dais, we settled down for the second half of the program, which turned out every bit as good as the first half. The soprano's Butterfly aria gave me thrill-chills, and the wild chorus from Orff's *Carmina Burana* has always been one of my favorites. George's sensitive performance as Zurga with the tenor Nadir in the Bizet duet brought me to senile tears.

At the end of the concert, our wild applause turned quickly into a standing ovation. Afterwards there was nothing to be done but slowly ooze with the rest of the audience out of the building. Trapped with us in the crowd, Kevin anxiously eyed the group with Mario and Liam making their way out the door on the other side. Eventually we made it outside, and waited under the tree by the street where Johnny had arranged to meet up with George. Carol left to pick up her friend Janet and would meet us at the bar.

#

.ii.

Shortly, George, Mario, and Liam came around from behind the church. We all greeted each other and congratulated George on his fabulous performance. Meanwhile Kevin smoothly worked his way around to stand beside lovely Liam, who admired his green curls. He gave me a wily smile. When Mario introduced me to Liam, he said, "Good to meet you, Rich. So you're the old sailor I heard about, hey?"

“More or less,” I chuckled. “And you’re probably the straight guy I heard about, right?” He laughed and gave Kevin a quick, questioning glance. “More or less, I guess.” “Whatever,” George cut off the chat. “Let’s dance!”

Liam joined us in Mack’s car, sitting in the back seat with Kevin. After a moment’s awkward silence, Mack spoke up, “So what’s with this ‘more or less’ stuff, dude?”

Kevin quickly took advantage of the opening. “Yeh, Liam, how much less?”

“I don’t know yet,” he said, and then it was all quiet in the back seat.

“Well, Liam,” the elder advised, “you really do need to explore all your options.”

“Never know when you might need to exercise one,” Mack quipped. Kevin groaned.

To change the subject, I asked, “So, Liam, got any kids yet—that you know of?”

They all laughed, and he said sincerely, “Good Lord, I hope not!” It was quiet back there for a bit, and then he said, “You know what?” Of course, we didn’t. “George and Mario decided they’re going to adopt.” The rest of the way to the Titsling we chatted about the gay couples we know who’re raising children.

The ‘sports bra’ was in an unassuming strip-mall, probably an old grocery store, with plenty of space for a lounge and a large and crowded dance floor. On a low stage a startlingly bald young woman operated a bank of electronics that would put the control room of the space shuttle to shame. The whole place throbbed with an aggressive beat, which I noted didn’t seem any louder than the music in La Casa used to be. Our group gathered in the lounge area where conversation was still possible and ordered drinks from a cute, bare-chested waiter sporting unnerving rings through his nipples.

Mack ordered me a draught beer called IPA, which turned out to be rather smooth and tasty. Johnny was amused at my unfamiliarity with beers and curious. “I know you said you don’t drink much, Rich, but how long you been in town not knowing about the Titsling?”

“Oh, since long before you were born,” I said. “I just haven’t gone out for a real long time—doing other things, you know, old man things.”

Johnny jumped up and grabbed my hand. “Well, come on and do some young man things, Rich. Let’s dance!” Shy at the thought of dancing with this vivacious black boy, I followed him onto the floor, and George and Mario joined us. The DJ’s rhythm was complex enough to be fun, though a bit too insistent for my taste, and I joyfully thrashed around, sharing Johnny’s exuberance and surprising even myself with my flexibility. The only problem was that I felt vaguely like an ancient John Travolta.

Back at our tables, we discovered that Carol had arrived with her friend Janet, a baby-faced girl with short, honey-colored dread-locks clustered on top of her head like a spiky crown. They were at one table with Mack and Jason, and meanwhile at another, Kevin and Liam were in quiet, private conversation. Mario, Johnny, and I sat with them but tried not to intrude.

Johnny remarked, “You’re in pretty good shape for an old guy. How do you do it, Rich?” “I’ve been working out for a long time.”

Mack, who was sitting behind me, leaned around and said, “You should see his pecs.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” I turned to Liam. “But I wouldn’t mind seeing this guy’s.”

He and Kevin looked up from their talk, suddenly surprised by the outside world.

Mario commented, “Liam’s stacked like a library, six-pack and everything.”

The library squirmed, and Kevin laughed, “Damn! I wanted to be surprised.”

Mack leaned around again. “Don’t worry. I bet he’s got something else up his sleeve.”

Liam didn’t know where to look. Kevin hopped up and pulled him up too. “Come on, big guy, let’s dance.” As they left, Kevin tossed back to us, “Maybe he’ll take his shirt off.”

Carol remarked, "So, Rich, I was telling Janet about your wild French Quarter days."

"Yeh," Janet said. "Quite a story. The House of the Sailors... the faerie prince..."

George giggled and said, "Ask him about the nookie bird." Mario rolled his eyes.

Janet ignored him and said, "It really makes me wonder what happened to that guy when he left fairyland. I mean, an out gay boy suddenly dumped into the straight world."

"That's right," Johnny said. "Everybody in my class wonders what happened to him."

"Well," I stalled, "like I said, that's a whole other story. Not one I can tell as easily. And nowhere near as colorful." I hoped to leave the subject at that.

But Mack chose that moment to let my cat out of the bag. "By the way, you guys should know that Rich here is a grandfather—with grandkids."

Amidst the general consternation, Janet pointedly asked, "How many?"

"About a half dozen. My youngest grandson lives here in town, almost a teenager."

Shaking her curls incredulously, Carol asked, "You mean the pirate went straight?"

"Not exactly," I hedged. "It's a simple story—I wound up becoming a father."

George clicked on that and proudly announced, "We're going to be fathers too."

"However it happens, it's a miracle," I said, happy for a chance to deflect attention from myself. "And it will change your life. Bang! Just like that."

Carol remarked with emphasis, "Motherhood does that too." At my questioning look, she added proudly, "I've got a two-year-old son."

Janet said, "Jet's the cutest little thing."

"Get her drunk," Jason advised, "and maybe she'll tell you how it happened."

Carol nudged me and asked, "Do we have to get you drunk to hear your tale, Rich?"

I argued, "It's not something I can just tell like that pirate story. Too complicated. I mean, I've got journals and stuff... But still it was half a century ago."

"There you go!" Janet exclaimed. "With all that already, you should write it down."

Just then, Kevin was coming back to the table with Liam and asked "Write what down?"

Johnny replied, "What happened to the pirate prince out in the straight world." He turned to me with an encouraging grin. "I think you really should, Rich. Like some more gay history."

"Like Some More Amorous Adventures of the Slut," George suggested theatrically.

In the same spirit Mack offered, "Like the Voyage of the Faerie Prince."

His suggestion was touching, and I recovered by suddenly asking George to dance.

As we stood up, Carol pronounced officiously, "I move that Rich will write about the voyage of the faerie prince to the strange island of Seattle."

"I second the motion," Jason stated firmly.

"All in favor?" Janet asked with pomp.

The unanimous 'ayes' couldn't be ignored, and I reluctantly said, "Okay. I'll try."

With that, they let me escape to the dance floor with golden George. Several of the others followed, and we had a free-for-all dance frenzy. That was an easy matter since dancing now is such an individual thing, rarely coordinated in any way with a nominal partner. It felt almost as ecstatic as dancing on a barstool. Your body just moves with the music however it feels like moving, all its pieces alive to their own rhythms. George, Jason, and I traded off displays of our aerobic moves.

After a brief break for a drink of my enormous beer, I hauled Kevin and Liam with me through the crowd of dancers to our friends. The temperature suddenly felt several degrees warmer, and Johnny and I soon worked up a serious sweat. Before I knew it, he and lots of the guys dancing around whipped off their shirts, baring amazing tattoos and unexpected body

jewelry. It was a heady vision of youth at its most arrogantly exquisite, the most magnificent being Liam's ripped torso and imposing chest, classic beefcake with neither ink nor ornament. Kevin danced with him with a perfectly dazed expression.

As much to catch my breath as to wet my whistle, I took frequent beer breaks between dances and tried to keep Mack from feeling neglected. After a few more numbers, including a sweaty gyration with shirtless Mario, I retired for the last half of my beer. It was more cardio than I'd had in one lump for a long time, and my heartbeat felt almost audible. Mack said he'd enjoyed watching me dance, but I was dubious.

As others of our group straggled back to their drinks, my pulse calmed, and I relaxed into a couple heartfelt yawns. (It was well past my usual bed-time.) Mack gave me a Viking smile and announced, "Looks like it's time to get gramps home to bed." He turned to Kevin. "You coming with us, Kev?"

Kevin begged for just a minute and took Liam aside from the table. In the shadows I saw them whisper fond farewells, and Liam even let our pirate kiss him briefly. Apparently still without tongue, I'm sad to say.

After the round of good nights to all, we walked back to Mack's car. "Liam says he wants to explore!" Kevin exclaimed. "He's coming over to my place Sunday night for take-out Chinese and a video."

"Way to go, pirate-boy," Mack said with a slap on his back. "What'll you watch?"

"He wants to see that last Lego movie," Kevin said a bit disdainfully.

"No matter, darlin'," I laughed. "I imagine you won't watch even five minutes of it."

#

*.iii.*

Right after our breakfast that Saturday morning, Mack said, "Okay now, Mr. Ancient Mariner, time to rhyme." He sat me down at the keyboard and commanded, "Give me two hours, Rich. I know you can do it." With that poetic encouragement, I'll start my Rime appropriately: There was a ship. Second and third thoughts provided no better beginning. Indeed. I typed:

There was a ship called the Faerie Prince that sailed out from the fairyland of the French Quarter bound for distant shores. Its captain was the handsome, long-haired, and ruthless gay pirate...

(A few lewd piratical names come to mind right away, making me pause and snicker, and from the other room Mack inquired about my mirth. We've now mutually agreed to call our pirate Tricky Rick, and Mack has left me to my labor. I started again:)

Once upon a lost time, in September of the long gone year 1964, the swashbuckling gay pirate Tricky Rick flew off on his fine ship, the Faerie Prince, to seek plunder in a foreign city called Seattle. Instead of some squawky parrot perched on his shoulder, his faithful companion was a fluffy golden puppy named Oná, his treasured lucky dog. On the long voyage, they sailed right past the snowy summit of a towering mountain called Rainier, like an island in the clouds. When Tricky Rick landed his ship at the hilly city on the sound named Puget, the buccaneer and his little dog stealthily stole ashore to scope out prospects for booty.

They took temporary lodging in a motor inn on 45<sup>th</sup> Street NE in a room with a hideous green carpet and bedspread, but Tricky Rick had slept many a night in stranger places, some without even a bed. As it was yet only early in the afternoon, he strolled up the quiet street with Oná frisking about on her red leash. There was no sign of booty anywhere about, but as the dog's luck had it, they soon came upon a merry park. A passing wench called it Ravenna. All

the trees were robed in the golden-leaved glory of fall. To celebrate their safe voyage, our pirate and his pup first frolicked on the grassy hillside and then went down by the creek in the ravine to loiter busily and get their feet and fluff all wet.

#

(Hold it. I've simply got to say that this idyllic scene is a perfect example of something I've learned over the years. Everything always exists in a context. You can move out of one context but will immediately get sucked into a new one. The first elements of the new context that you encounter will generally stick fast to you, like by static electricity, and before you know it, you've been thoroughly contextualized in a new matrix.)

Thus it was for Tricky Rick and Lucky Oná. They'd left the enchanted world of the French Quarter behind. So when they docked the Faerie Prince in this new harbor, they stepped right into the new context. With the park, that new matrix began to crystalize around them. In other words, be advised that Ravenna will play a prominent role in this story.

After a lazy while in beautiful Ravenna, it was going on suppertime. Since it felt like two hours later for Rick, he was hungry as a sailor. Leaving his sweet pooch in the green room at the motor inn, he went back to a café they'd seen on the walk. Called the Olympia, he figured it for a Greek place. Olympia was also the name of a local beer and of the mountains to the west, not to mention of the state capital. The famished sailor was disappointed that the Olympia didn't actually serve Greek food. It was a regular American short-order place just run by Greeks. So he ordered pork chops and iced tea, unsweetened.

Over his supper, Rick checked the want ads for apartments. From his map he knew the numbering system for streets and so looked in the northeast section. Everything had outrageous rents, nothing fitting the pocketbook of a poor grad student on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship of a mere \$2,500. (To make it, he'd definitely have to get a job.) During Rick's chocolate pie, a toothsome Greek lad walked out of the kitchen, the dishwasher apparently, a deliciously dark and curly-haired piece of pirate treasure. Noting this possible plunder, the diner decided that he'd have to come back to the Olympia again soon.

On that long voyage from the French Quarter to Seattle, Tricky Rick had had lots of time to contemplate many things in his past and future, and being a language and literature student, he'd decided to start a journal of his exploits. In a literary trick, he decided to write it as letters to his aged self, let's say at 50 or 60, just so the poor old guy could remember the juicy details. Goodness, I can still remember being only 60.

As I'd thought to do earlier, this even older guy has now fished that ancient journal out of my files and read its first pages. They're written in my small, fine hand on narrow-lined yellow pages, not all that easy for my old eyes to read, even with reading glasses. Using it for factual detail, I'll also give you colorful selections in Rick's own words. But tell you what, to keep things from getting out of control, I'm going to use a different font for such quoted stuff. That's so easy on a word-processor.

In the journal I find that first thing on getting up that next morning, Tricky Rick wrote in some juicy detail about his first night on the town in Seattle.

#

Dear Me,

Good morning, old fellow. I hope you slept well [*I did.*] and still feel healthy and happy [*I do.*].

All is well on this end as Oná and I arrived safely in Seattle yesterday. The first thing we did was walk up to Ravenna Park and fritter away the sunny afternoon in nature, which was very restorative after all those hours on the plane. The trees are all autumn bright, mostly gold, my first time seeing fall colors since way back in Arkansas when the sweet-gums would blaze scarlet. My poor Peking pup

had to ride in a horrid crate, and in the park she ran in ecstatic circles. Supper was at the Olympia café, all white tiles and bright windows, where there's a succulent busboy on the menu whom I must try sometime. Afterwards, with the time difference it was still way too early to start my debut carouse, and so I came back here to the motel.

Cuddling sweet Oná on my lap, I toasted our arrival with the Bacardi that my beloved Desai gave me for a going away present, inelegantly mixing it with Coke in a plastic glass, no ice. Missing my beautiful Indian soul-mate terribly, I indulged in some more furry snuggles with the pupdog. I suddenly felt totally alone, not connected to anything, to anywhere, except to my pupdog, my lucky pooch. Brushing out her long golden hair, I thought with a pang that Oná is all I've got left of New Orleans, my only link to yesterday, to the world that used to be. Now she and I are alone together in this new world.

We took a second walk in the gathering dark, and then I had another rum and Coke. It was still a wickedly early hour for going out, but I simply couldn't wait any longer. Settling Oná down with a chew toy, I ventured forth with a slight buzz on. Back home I'd asked all over about Seattle and learned to my dismay of only two reputedly gay bars in the whole city. Thank goodness, my map showed both located on convenient bus lines.

The first bar on the list, ominously called the Boots and Saddle, had apparently been closed for some time, judging by the ruinous state of the boarded-up façade. Back onto a bus for a long ride to seek out the Retreat in a grubby industrial area. I was appalled to find it a small, dark corner tavern with not a sign of night life. Well, signs of beer, naturally, the neon kind. Inside, a couple of old guys with mugs of suds were sitting off alone in a booth. But no music. Stopping in the doorway, I reckoned this was way worse than the Wrinkle Room back home on Chartres Street. At least there they had music.

With no other options, I marched resignedly over to the bar to find a lovely bartender, a smiling, well-built guy, not too much older, maybe thirty, in faded jeans and shirt open at the neck. He supplied me with a bottle of Olympia beer and catching a signal from the old guys, went to draw two more mugs of draft. What a jewel, I marveled, to find in this dim troll haven.

The beers delivered to the booth, the cute bartender chatted with me and learned that my name is Rick, about my recent arrival from New Orleans, and about the bars where I caroused there. This Nelson grew even more attractive as he warmed to my tale, so to speak. To my inquiry about places to go out in Seattle, he sighed that there simply weren't any places like I was used to. Some gay guys came in here at times, he said, but there aren't any real gay bars, and no sailor bars. I stared at my beer, stunned. Dear me! No sailor bars! Beyond horrible. Whatever is a gay young trollop to do?

Nelson tried to cheer me up, his attentions moving from bartender-ly to more intimate. "Want to hang around a bit, Rick, and come home with me when we close?"

Of course I wanted to. "Thanks, but I didn't plan on a late night," I argued.

Nelson laughed. "Just another twenty minutes – we close at ten."

If I could've made a sound, it would've been to shout, "Ten?!" What kind of sick nightmare have I stumbled into? Ten o'clock?

"My lover's out of town," Nelson said and urged, "I can drive you back to your motel."

Who could argue with that? So I didn't and hung around anticipating.

Making love with a guy always seems like being in a dream. Afterwards I can't ever remember details, just the sensations. And even those I can't hold onto for long, like shreds of a dream fading into dawn. Now here it is just the next morning after making it with Nelson. I've got a vague recollection of our dark trip to his house near downtown on some hill and a wispy memory of our first kiss in the car. I can still smell his pungent male fragrance like an intoxicating orchid and almost feel his weight on me in that broad bed. As for other details, maybe I recall which bodily orifices were penetrated, but forgive me, old man, if there's no describing the outrageous joy of shoving my cock up Nelson's splendid bottom into glory. Here's hoping you can still get it up, Old Me, and that you've got some notion of what I mean. [*Not to worry.*]

Somewhat after midnight sweet Nelson dropped me off back here at the motel, quite satisfied with him and myself. What a great omen. Within twelve hours of getting to Seattle, not unlike that tradition I heard of in Hawaii, I've been properly laid.

For Oná we made a quick potty trip out to the curb. Then, even though two-thirty my time is still early for me, I turned in with my pupdog curled up at my side. Anyhow, I had to get up early this morning to find us a place. And besides, I've got to start living on a normal person's clock soon. Bye-bye to dancing till dawn. Hello to the horror of bars closing at ten, or as Nelson says, midnight on weekends. How uncivilized.

#

*.iv.*

Transcribing all those tiny scribbles took quite a while, a little more than the two hours Mack asked for. I've never been a speedy writer in any case, and it's a slow process trying tell a story without getting lost in the fascinating details. Thank goodness for word processors.

While I was making myself a light lunch, Mack called to check up on my progress, and since I was on a roll, he ordered me to write some more after lunch. I was actually thinking about doing that anyway because at this point in the story, things start happening fast. Again I'll try not to get lost in detail:

Tricky Rick was obviously thrilled with his first prize and the rich booty, but he reeled from Nelson's terrible news that Seattle was a carouser's wasteland. After journaling, he took Oná for a brief walk, and then between breakfasting at the counter at the Olympia and admiring the Greek busboy again, he checked today's newspaper. Nothing new under apartments, he looked at rooms to rent, which again seemed awfully expensive. An older fellow sitting at the counter beside our pirate saw what he was checking out, and probably clued in by his long hair, suggested the Little Sweden boarding house, a cool beatnik place, he said, adding that their cook was a card-bearing Communist.

That sounded like Rick's kind of place and might actually be a ticket to some real nightlife in Seattle. The guy gave him directions to 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE, which runs north along the top of the hill from the University of Washington, which he called simply UDub. The broad street was lined with golden sycamores and old houses with porches and two or three storeys. Two blocks up from campus, Rick found 4710, a brown house with shingles up all three floors.

The manager, a dark-eyed Tony Curtis sort named Sean, (too old to get excited about), said they had a couple rooms left on the third floor of the house next door, but they still needed painting and fixing up. The room in the back was quite a mess with some broken furniture and stained walls, but it was large and bright with a double window south, and the best part, besides the walk-in closet with shelves and built-in chest of drawers, was the broad deck with balustrade out back on the roof of the second floor.

It looked out over the rooftops down the hillside of golden trees, across the mirror of Lake Washington, to another golden shore and a chain of snowy mountains—the Cascades, as Sean informed him. It was a dizzying panorama for a guy who'd rarely had a view in New Orleans of anything more than a few blocks away. Rick was struck by an odd cloud, rather triangular, hovering over the Cascades, which Sean said was Mt. Rainier. It was indeed that supreme peak, Tricky Rick's island in the clouds. All in snow and aglow on the morning side with the sun, it floated on an invisible base lost in the bluish haze over the mountains.

That cinched it. Rick was absolutely going to live in this fantastic room. With a few days before classes started, he'd have time to do the painting and fixing. Sean said if he did the work, it would be \$80 a month, including meals next door. Since you couldn't beat that with a stick, Rick shelled out the first month's rent from his fellowship stash. Sean apologized that the



only furniture was that mattress on the ugly metal frame, the broken chair, and a couple blankets. He volunteered to take Rick that afternoon in his pickup to a paint store and to St. Vincent de Paul's to find some better furniture.

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**Downtown Seattle, Space Needle,**  
and Mt. Rainier, on a whole different  
planet than New Orleans



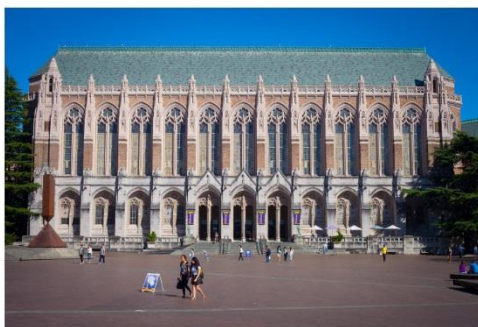
**Mt. Rainier looming over Seattle**  
much the way it looked from Rick's  
deck at Little Sweden

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#

So that's how the new matrix of Seattle started closing in around him. He was quickly being transformed into someone other than that pirate called Tricky Rick, a new Rick in this new place. It was a little frightening but very exhilarating. Feeling on Cloud 9 for finding this wonderful new home, he hoofed it through the glorious sunny morning back to the motel and took Oná out to explore the campus. Walking under the huge trees in riot of fall, he let her off the leash to romp and kept his old pirate's eye out for plunder. But few students were about.

They ambled over to Smith Hall, a big stone building squatting beside a quadrangle of green lawn where they leapt and bounded about to celebrate this new beginning. At the Slavic Department on the third floor, Rick checked on his schedule of classes in Structure of Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Slavic Philology, and Linguistics Survey. That's the sort of weird stuff one takes for a Master's degree in Slavic Linguistics.



**University of Washington Library**  
where Rick would spend many hours  
researching on his Master's thesis



**Smith Hall and Quadrangle**  
where Rick would have most classes  
and often leap about on the lawn

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This is as good a time as any to observe Rick's remarkable ability, well developed at Tulane, to live simultaneously in two different worlds, like bi-location. His personal, emotional life and intellectual life happened on separate but parallel tracks. The intellectual was what informed his life, like this move to Seattle for graduate school, and had little bearing on his

emotional being. That side of him lived to learn, and the other side lived to love men. Of course, for Rick love had become something of an unprovable hypothesis, but he rather enjoyed testing it whenever the opportunity arose.

Later in the morning Rick walked down 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue to a department store to shop. While he was debating over brown or gold sheets, two girls walked away from the adjacent counter. As they passed near on either side of a post in mid-aisle, he overheard an incomprehensible exchange. The cute redhead said, "Bread and butter," to which the pretty blond replied, "Bread and butter." Mystified, he decided on the gold sheets and brown towels. Later, while the clerk rang him up, he asked what "bread and butter" might mean, but she had no idea either. He also bought straw mats for the floor and a phonograph for his favorite records. More and more of the elements of Seattle were crusting him over like polyps on a coral reef.

#

When Rick got back to Little Sweden, he found that the Communist cook Stan, a burly bearded guy in black Army boots, had a tuna salad sandwich and apple ready for his lunch. Then he and Sean took off in the pickup for the paint and thrift stores, where they bought gold for the walls, dark brown for the trim, and ivory for the ceiling, and some used furniture. The prize was an oak rocker with tasteful carving, and there were a pleasant desk, a neat old lamp, a couple chairs with caned seats, and two low shelf units.

Sean helped carry the new stuff up to the room and together they hauled the other junk out into the hall. Though he still had the old mattress on the floor, Rick said he'd spend that night in the motel again. When Sean left him alone in his new digs, he raced out onto the deck and greeted his magic mountain with a joyous sailor's hornpipe jig.

Then with everything so splendidly right with the world, he went inside to sweep out his great room. Sean showed up soon with paint brushes, rollers, and pans and wished him luck with all the work. When Rick said he'd start the job tomorrow, Sean reminded him to come back for Stan's supper, which would be meatloaf with gravy and cherry pie. Indeed, life was good.

Their afternoon walk took Rick and Oná back to golden Ravenna for more romps on the hill and rambles in the ravine. Lying about on the lawn, he cuddled his pupdog and told her all about their new home. He felt absolutely giddy with the glorious weather, especially recalling how friends in New Orleans had warned that it rained so much in Seattle. He'd even brought an umbrella. But today was totally halcyon. The only problem was there were no boys about.

When he was getting ready to leave, that changed. Some young folks came ambling down the walk, three long-haired boys in beads and flowery shirts and two girls in long skirts and many scarves, beads, and feathers. Rick was puzzled since it was nowhere near Mardi Gras. Of the boys, the one with blond locks, was particularly plunder-able, but he was attached to a girl. The other girl, enchanted by Oná, sat on the grass and cuddled her.

Rick explained that he'd just arrived from New Orleans for school, and they all welcomed him to Seattle with surprising hugs. When he announced his new home at the Little Sweden boarding house, the homeliest boy remarked that it was a really cool, 'fringey' place. As the group wended on its way, the tasty blond guy said goodbye with, "Peace, man." Feeling extraordinarily peaceful, Rick walked Oná back to the motel thinking that these friendly 'fringey' folks were his kind of people, and he needed to meet more of them.

#

Stan's meatloaf and gravy was super. There were only a few boarders dining as most had not yet arrived for school. Rick sat with lovely Sean and another fellow named Jim, even more attractive with black hair and ivory complexion, who had the third-floor front room next door.

Our pirate perked his ears to learn of such booty as his almost next-door neighbor. Sean said that he and Jim were ‘black Irish,’ which confused Rick rather until Jim explained about the destruction of the Spanish Armada and its survivors in Ireland.

The hospitable Irishmen invited Rick to join them later for a beer at a nearby place called the Shamrock Tavern, which he’d actually seen on a walk. He wasn’t about to turn down a date with two such hunky guys. They remarked that Rick probably didn’t have his liquor card yet, but they knew the bartender. The mention of a liquor card caused Rick even more confusion: To buy alcohol one had to have an official ID card to be gotten at an office downtown. He suddenly realized the magnitude of the favor that Nelson had done for him at the Retreat, bless his beautiful bottom. Clearly, getting himself a liquor card was top priority business.

After taking Oná for her leisurely evening stroll, Rick set out for his second night on the town. Again, the next morning he chronicled the adventure.

#

Dear Me,

Good morning, old fellow. (Don’t I sound British?) Are you still kicking? [*I am.*] Well, here it is my second morning in Seattle. Yesterday I found a perfect place to live...

...Back at the motel, I cleaned up and dressed for my date with the two Irish lads. I put on my fancy leather vest, the going away gift from dear Rob, and felt appropriately ‘fringey.’ It was only a few blocks over to the Shamrock Tavern. Behind the beer signs in its windows, the place was dark and smoky. At scattered tables sat various couples, who from a perfunctory glance proved impossibly straight. My two eminently Irish friends introduced me to the fat bartender, a Joe Malone, who, Jim explained, had once been a local baseball player of some renown. Joe’s girth reminded me of giant Jackie at the Gin Mill, but this Shamrock Tavern was about as different from the Gin Mill as you can get. I couldn’t imagine ever doing a sailor dance in this place.

We three Little Swedes joined two other guys at a table in the smoky dimness. I lost one’s name as soon as uttered, but the really sexy one was George. They, and Sean and Jim as well, all were wearing plaid shirts, one with suspenders, and suddenly my fringed western vest over the blue denim shirt made me feel like some kind of dude, stylishly overdressed for the occasion.

Actually, what was I, a famous Decatur Street faerie, doing here in an Irish pub with a bunch of butch lumberjacks? In a lull, I remarked, “Looks like I better buy me a plaid shirt.”

George chuckled, eyeing the fringes on my vest, “Hey, Rich, I bet you’re a fringey, eh?”

Again that word. I replied archly, “Maybe so.” As soon as I could figure out how.

The conversation abruptly switched to ball games and scores, leaving me floating around in my head. Quickly I discovered that though these guys looked easily at each other, not one would meet my gaze directly. Come on, George, baby, lock eyes with me once, and you’re mine. He wouldn’t.

In the second round of beers, another thing I observed about my companions was that all four had amazing sets of gleaming, even, white teeth. Maybe it was the dim light that made them shine so brightly in their faces. Again self-conscious, I reflected that I’d always thought of my own uneven front teeth as crookedly pretty, but now they just seemed pretty crooked.

It was a relief when my lads were ready to leave after the second beer. I certainly needed no more. On my walk back to the motel, I kept wondering how folks can stand to go out and just sit around sucking on beers. Where’s the excitement of the carouse, the sociable party talk, the jubilation of the dance? Where are the beautiful guys ready and willing to debauch? And you know, plaid shirts aren’t really all that sexy.

I took advantage of the dark, empty street to dance a silent merengue down the sidewalk. Crossing a deserted street, I paused on a manhole cover for a Greek dance. After a late walk with Oná, I snuggled with her in the dark, imagining La Casa right then, two hours later there in New Orleans, with its dancers and swirling murals, the madness of merengue music—no, a cumbia, *Mar Adentro*.

#

.v.

This evening, when Mack had looked over my efforts of the day, he remarked generally that Rick had certainly landed in a very different world in Seattle, but the room sounded super. We went out for a spicy dinner in Mack's favorite Thai restaurant, where he suddenly asked, "Who's this Rob anyway?" I explained that Rob was a rich Tulane senior with his own Mercedes and private dorm room, where Rick frequently had dropped in for tea and a tumble.

After dinner we went out after to the Titsling and joined our friends in the feverish Saturday night crowd. After spending so much of the day at the keyboard, I may well have over-indulged in the dance, but it meant I slept well.

Now that the story's begun, I don't think I'll need Mack's prodding to keep writing. Besides, having this old journal, generally tedious though it may be, is a great help in writing about the experience, laying out the order of events and describing things I really don't remember. Like that dancing in the street or the records he played (see below). Now, on this lazy Sunday afternoon, I'll jump back in and see how far I can get.

#

The new day in Seattle, Thursday, was just as brilliantly autumnal when Rick awoke, monstrously early by his old standards, barely after dawn. But that meant he had all kinds of time to get things done. After perambulating a few blocks with Oná, he had breakfast at the Olympia and then made two quick trips to Little Sweden with his bags and new purchases. Sean brought up a ladder and a stack of newspapers to spread on the floor, and Rick first tackled the ceiling to the boisterous Brandenburg Concerti on his new record player. The ceiling took two hours with the music of Mozart and Scarlatti and gave him a pain in the neck.

The next item of business was to pick up Oná for a walk across campus to the Office of Student Services to find a job. All they had though was a sorority house looking for a dinner waiter, which was disappointing, but he took what there was, six evenings a week with meals and off Sundays. He was to check in Saturday morning at the sorority on the corner of 17<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup>, conveniently just a block down from Little Sweden. Speaking of Greek societies, as an undergrad Rick had belonged to only two: Gamma Mu Sigma (Gin Mill Sluts) and Phi Beta Kappa. Imagine the havoc our pirate would've wrought in a fraternity. Fox in a henhouse.

With the job all set, Rick wandered with his pooch down past several beautiful Gothic buildings toward the lake. The prospect had a staggering view of his shining Rainier. As they strolled along the lakeshore, he lamented again the dearth of boys. At least, come Monday, the campus would surely be crawling with student bodies, and the plunder would be magnificent.

Dropping the pupdog off back at the motel to keep her out of the paint, he returned to Little Sweden just in time to claim his bag lunch, a ham sandwich, and luxuriously eat it out on his deck—with Rainier hovering benevolently on the horizon. Ready to get back to work, he put on some Tchaikovsky ballet music and painted the window wall gold. Then for a change of pace, he made up the mattress on the floor with the gold sheets and the maroon blanket to lie down and appreciate his wonderful new room. Before long it was time to go check out of the motel and bring Oná over to her new home at Little Sweden.

#

Oná was a funny little dog. Unless you were prepared to scratch, pet, cuddle, or feed her, she was out of here. Get busy with something besides her, and she'd wander off somewhere alone. Now while Rick painted another wall, she stayed out on the deck watching the birds and enjoying the breeze. That wall finished, he turned to nailing down the loose molding over the window, and technical difficulties with the nail caused some profanity to be uttered.

When he got down off the ladder, there in the doorway was a cute girl wearing an amused expression and a dark blue dress. Her black hair was in a pageboy like Prince Valiant. Turned out she was Betsy and had just taken the room down the hall. He introduced himself as Rick, and she took his invitation to come in. At the sound of somebody who might pay her some attention, Oná scampered in from the deck and easily charmed Betsy into scratching her ears.

The new neighbors chatted about how they'd gotten to Little Sweden. Betsy had come in on the train from Pittsburgh some days before and was a grad student in Poli Sci and Chinese. As a Slavic scholar, Rick felt an immediate bond, but there something more aggressively womanly about her than he was used to. Then he clicked that Betsy probably found him attractive. To cut that off at the pass, he told her right out that he was gay. Stroking Oná's long golden fur, she didn't even blink.

Rick showed Betsy the oriental straw mats for his floor, and she was inspired to do her room the same way. Of course, he shared the idyllic view from his deck and introduced her to his mighty Mt. Rainier. Leaving, Betsy said it was great meeting him and called him Rich. Unobtrusively, he reminded her that he was Rick.

After some more painting, Oná's walk took them to the east on 47<sup>th</sup> Street. Strolling along under the golden sycamores, Rick felt blessedly content. The only thorn on his rose was the lack of romance, but surely a fine prize soon would appear on the horizon, and our pirate would hoist his Jolly Roger. Suddenly they had to stop walking because the street ended at a high cliff looking out at the valley. Down below were houses and streets running right up to its foot. For a flatland foreigner, it was perfectly shocking. Finding a way around and down into the valley, Rick was soon dancing a happy merengue on the end of his leash.

Back at home, Rick sat down at his new desk to write some letters, first to his mother about his safe arrival and new address. The second was to beloved Desai, going light on the horror of Seattle's night life and the pain of missing him. Then he wrote to Henri, a fellow he'd met him only last Friday night in La Casa. For a long time Henri had admired Rick's dancing, and devastated that he was leaving town, he'd asked him to write. So Rick ran on in a stream-of-consciousness all about the move, including the sexual angst, for a few dense yellow pages.

Dinner next door was recorded as delicious beef stroganoff. It was enjoyed by a few more boarders newly returned for the quarter, all male with longer hair or beards, maybe a sign of fringe-iness, but Rick found beards unattractive. Even without a beard, one guy named Harold had to be the flat-out ugliest man Rick had ever seen, indescribably. It hurt even to look at Harold, but he was pleasant and jovial chatting with Betsy about political science.

Back in his room with the affectionate pupdog, Rick wondered what on earth to do. It was unnatural not to go out dancing. Of course, he didn't have that damned liquor card yet, and even though Joe Malone now knew him, the Shamrock was totally un-cruisey. Disconsolately, he rocked a while in his new rocker with Oná on his lap. Then, putting some favorite Vivaldi on the record player, a concerto for guitar & strings, he retreated to the deck, where a big moon was flooding the landscape and gleaming off Rainier's snows. To the magical music he danced a Greek-ish sort of cumbia, and then jigged through the next concerto for horn & strings.

While he was changing the record to some Beethoven, Betsy appeared in the doorway with a big jug of Tavola Guild red table wine, not quite full. Here's what his journal says about the rest of the evening.

#

Dear Me,

Did you get yours today, old man? *[None of your beeswax, whippersnapper.]*...

...not quite full. Generously displaying the jug, Betsy said, "Have a drink, Rich? Finest vintage."

I mentioned again being Rick, but she didn't seem to hear. Not a regular wine-drinker, I hesitated over her kind offer. Briefly. Soon we were lounging on my maroon mattress sucking it up out of plastic cups and playing gin rummy with ever-increasing confusion. We chatted about families, older and younger sisters, her Jewish background, mine Catholic. Of course, I now professed to be a raging heathen sodomite.

Also of course, I reminisced, sometimes graphically, about amours in my sordid past. Betsy seemed to enjoy my tales of being ravished by the god Pan and of seducing tender Tommy, my first virgin. I paused and moaned dramatically, "O Lord, I need a man!"

"I can relate to that," Betsy laughed, "like that hunky Jim down the hall."

To titillate, I described encountering Jim this morning with his delectable athlete's clefts showing above sagging pajama pants. I poured us some more wine. "Here's," I toasted, "to a man in every bed." Before drinking, I judiciously amended that to: "and to another one in mine."

Always the gracious host, I asked about Betsy's own romantic history. At first she seemed embarrassed to talk about boyfriends, but then I realized that it was because she hasn't had very many. After going steady with a Sidney in senior high, chastely, she added, she'd only gone out with boys a few times in college back in Pittsburgh. "Guys always think I'm too bossy," Betsy concluded.

"So you're a virgin?" I asked, not a little indiscreetly.

"No," Betsy said, blushing furiously. "One, cute Rodney... I just kind of let it happen."

"Let what happen?" I demanded. "I want details, girl!"

"Not much. He was as scared as I was—and never asked me out again."

I was touched. "Seduced and abandoned," I moaned.

She chuckled ruefully. "That's a new Italian film at Cannes."

We drank and laughed some more. There was a tromping up the stairs, and the recently mentioned devil appeared in the doorway. Jim leaned in with a beautiful hi, mostly aimed at Betsy, and glanced at the wine bottle and cards scattered on the bed.

"Hi, Jim," Betsy said. "I hear you've got a great pair of athlete's clefts."

Giving me a questioning glance, Jim looked back to Betsy, took a provocative stance, and said, "Wanna come down to my room and see for yourself?"

I watched in fascination as Betsy kept her cool. "Thanks, but I'll take a rain check."

"Just knock on my door whenever." Turning down the hall, he added, "Good night."

"Rain check?" I hissed at Betsy. "Are you out of your mind, Maude?"

"Well, I can't just jump into bed with some guy simply because he's hot."

"Why not? What better reason is there?"

"But Rich, I can't just jump into bed with—"

"—Of course you can," I interrupted, without the energy to correct my name again. "Just bend your knees and leap. Here, let me show you how." I struggled up from the mattress, but by then we were both laughing so hard that I couldn't leap on anything.

Also by then neither of us had the mental acuity to play any more card games. Instead, I put the Vivaldi back on the record player, and we went out on the deck with more wine. Again the landscape was vivid, Rainier glowing like a silver ghost in the moonlight. Betsy said she didn't know classical music at all, but this was the most beautiful stuff she'd ever heard.

Vivaldi notwithstanding, we called it a night shortly after eleven o'clock. How scandalous! I curled up with Oná in our new bed, but hormones kept me wide awake till nearly one, just about the time La Casa would really be hopping at three. Of course, it's also that many thousand miles away.

#

Well, this is a good spot to break. Describing that first Thursday seemed to go smoothly, I think, though maybe a tad too chronologically. What are you gonna do? A heck of a lot went on in those first few days as Seattle sucked Rick into its new context. Get ready for all the elements of his world to come together now, and then we'll see who the ruthless pirate Tricky

Rick will wind up being.

Besides, it's getting on my own supper time. I'm going out with the family to a pub for burgers, and I might even order one of those IPAs again. Which reminds me, this evening is Kevin's date with Liam. I'll have to ask him how he liked the Lego movie—which, God willing, I'll never see. Even though my grandson has said he liked it.

#

.vi.

This Monday morning seems made to be spent at the keyboard again. It's not as though I have much else to do in my blessedly idle dotage. There are my daily trips to the gym to keep the old body from sagging, and frequent times are spent with my grandson, but most mornings, afternoons, and evenings are available for whatever I want to do. My new young friends' interest in my speckled past has convinced me now to dig into it. It's something I want to do. At least keyboards don't clack the way typewriters used to. To continue:

Again the next morning, that first Friday, Rick woke up around dawn, took Oná on a stroll up and down the quiet street, and then painted the last wall. Soon it was time to go next door for breakfast, where he found additional proof that Little Sweden was a superb boarding house. Stan served eggs benedict with Canadian bacon, most unusual for a southern boy.

Betsy was bright-eyed and chipper over her second cup of coffee. Rick suggested she come with him to get a liquor card, and after a quick check on Oná, they jumped on the downtown bus. The process of legitimization went so quickly and easily that they were back out on the street in under ten minutes, cards in hand, like a ticket to nowhere, as Rick quipped.

Being downtown at their leisure, they walked to Third Avenue and rode on the futuristic monorail built for the last summer's World's Fair over to the Space Needle tower. Going up on the open elevator, up, and up, and... Rick almost puked, but Betsy loved watching the city simply fall away, tall buildings shrinking to a cluster of stubs, and the horizon sweeping dizzyingly outward to bright mountains and water. They looked out the window at the outer edge of the tower's rotating pavilion, the vast view slowly moving around toward the University area and its golden-treed hills. As the scene moved across Lake Washington, Rainier didn't look all that high in the sky.

On the ride down the tower, the horizon rushed closer, and the big buildings shot up like mushrooms. Back on the monorail, Rick had the distinct feeling of being in an Asimov story. Everything was so utterly different than New Orleans, truly like another planet—or in some future century. Betsy felt much the same comparing it to Pittsburgh. Two innocent babes in Futureland, they hopped the bus back to their comfortable reality at Little Sweden.

Leaving Oná to play on the deck, Rick went back to work to the strains of Bach's Goldberg Variations, quickly painting all the trim on the window and two door frames a rich brown. Next he spread out the straw mats to cover the splotchy wood floor and stood back to admire the finished effect of the gold and brown with the maroon blanket. Very warm, though maybe a touch Spartan. It felt exactly right.

Now that Rick wasn't up to anything else, his pupdog came back inside and raced happily around on the soft mats. He took her excitement as approval of their new digs. Putting on some frenetic Cimarosa harpsichord sonatas, he took Oná up in his arms and danced around the room to express his own pleasure at how their new world had shaped up. They'd found the best of all possible rooms on this strange planet of the future, with a mystical mountain on the doorstep, and very soon, he had no doubt, some lovely young man would show up to warm his golden sheets.

#

I keep coming back to that comment by young Johnny's teacher about sex addicts. Even with all his amorous history as pirate, Casanova, and Don Juan, I frankly don't think Rick was a sex addict, rather more of a sex adept always ready, willing, and able to display his talents. During these first few days in Seattle, he probably didn't think of sex any more than any other healthy 22 year-old of either gender or persuasion would, maybe even less.

In appropriate situations like with the Greek busboy or Jim in his sagging pajamas, Rick admired male pulchritude, but didn't dwell on his sexual urges. Maybe you noticed how in idyllic moments he would indeed wish for male companionship, but again it was just as passing thoughts with a markedly optimistic attitude.

In general, rather than wallow in the lustful fantasies of sexual addiction, Rick stayed right on mission and made a home for himself and his lucky pup on the new planet. Not even his pain of missing New Orleans or dismay at the harsh reality of Seattle nightlife got in the way of that goal. Now that it was accomplished, he could start looking for that guy to warm his bed.

While I'm interrupting, let me add another comment on my former self. Remember how he didn't hesitate to tell Betsy that he was gay? In his out and open years in New Orleans, Rick had told people on a need to know basis, and of course, any woman who might get romantic ideas about him definitely needed to know. For that matter and another reason, so did any man with similar ideas. But if somebody asked, he was happy to satisfy their curiosity. Here in very straight Seattle, Rick still planned on being an out homosexual, at least a selectively out one.

#

Rick picked up his brown bag from Stan and lunched again on the deck with Oná and his mountain. It gleamed in the sun over the golden landscape and silver lake. The pupdog stayed out there when he went back inside to write in his journal and then unpack his big suitcase into the closet drawers. No sooner had he finished that job than there was a knock at the door.

It was Sean, come to see how the fix-up was going. He looked appreciatively around the room and called it elegant. Rick joked that maybe he needed a crystal chandelier. Hearing the voice of a possible patter or cuddler, Oná came wagging in off the deck and sniffed at Sean's boot. Looking down at her and then back up at Rick, he said sadly, "We don't allow pets."

This comment hit Rick like a punch in the solar plexus. He managed to argue that Oná wasn't much more than a hamster, and besides, Sean hadn't said...

Apologetically, Sean noted that Rick also hadn't asked and that a hamster was still a pet. To Rick's point about all his work on the room, the landlord apologized and told him all he could do was refund his rent. When Rick just stood there in stunned misery, Sean said to let him know soon what he was going to do. Then he went downstairs.

Still stunned, Rick sat on the floor and cuddling his precious pet, wept. What was he going to do? He couldn't get rid of his pupdog. How could he give her away? There was no way he'd take her to the pound! But how could he leave this perfect room? His mountain? School was starting on Monday, and now it was way too late to look for another place. For an untold while, Rick agonized between the rocks and hard places while Oná blissfully enjoyed his cuddles and caresses. There was another knock at the still open door.

It was Betsy, concerned to find him tear-stained and sobbing. Incoherently, Rick mumbled about the no pets news, and she had a ready answer. She'd met some girls on the train who love dogs and was sure they'd happily take good care of Oná for him. They had an apartment quite nearby. As thanks for crashing at their place those first nights here, Betsy was making dinner for them that night, and she invited Rick to come along with the pup. It would all work out fine. Then leaving Rick once more stunned, she went grocery shopping.



He eventually got up off the floor and in a daze leashed Oná for a walk, straight to Ravenna to romp off the stress of the past hour. He felt it all would indeed work out fine. It was just too bad it wasn't some boys Betsy knew. Anyway, his sweet pupdog could stay with those girls, and he'd take her on walks and play with her on visits. Lying at rest on the grassy hillside, Rick explained to Oná how nice it was going to be living at the girls' place, and she panted at him as though understanding.

#

Dear Me,

It's this Me again reporting the news from my new home. Hope you've got time to hear about a rather complicated yesterday. [*I certainly do, my boy.*]...

...Oná and I followed Betsy's directions to a new apartment building on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Apartment 107 is at the rear on the first floor with a gray door. Betsy answered, be-aproned, and let me into a hall with kitchen to the right and a small dining table ahead along the left wall. Past the bedroom also on the right, the hall leads into a living room with furniture of that modern thin wood style they call Scandinavian and with double glass doors onto a patio.

Across the room on a couch sat the two young women from the department store, the blond and redhead, the bread-and-butter girls. To my consternation, Betsy introduced me as Rich, but it would've been rude to correct her now. The sisters Martha and Barbara and I shook hands, laughing at the coincidence. They'd also noticed me in the store for some reason.

Immediately everything was all about my precious Pekingese, and there was much hugging, petting, snuggling, licking, and cooing all around. Martha was particularly smitten. Betsy brought us all gins and tonic since I'd mentioned liking the drink. Wistfully I noted that back home in New Orleans we'd called it Mother's Milk. The girls giggled, maybe impressed by my worldliness, and tasted their drinks gingerly.

Leaving Betsy to do her chef thing, we took Oná out onto their patio, a 15-foot square concrete job with planter borders and a wooden fence. A great play area for Oná, I figured, but as it abutted an alley, there was a vast web of power and telephone lines running directly overhead, not quite the view from my deck by any means. [*Forgive a historical note here. Within a decade of this time Seattle had managed to get all its utility lines buried, an early triumph in urban aesthetics.*] Rather than remark on that ugliness, I asked Barbara about the inscrutable 'bread and butter' exchange.

She laughed, shaking her auburn curls, brown eyes bright, and explained, "You say that when you walk on either side of something—so you'll never split up."

Playing with Oná, Martha explained, "It's a Midwest thing, Richie. We're from Michigan."

With a shudder, I mentioned that my name is Rick and then explained that Oná is a sleeve dog, kind of a dwarf. Barbara exclaimed excitedly, "Oh?! Whenever you see a dwarf, you've got to make a wish—like this." With a rapid motion, she licked her right thumb, squinched her eyes tight shut, and rubbed the thumb in the palm of her left hand, and then over her heart. Simultaneously, Martha made exactly the same moves. Not superstitious, I laughed nervously. Fortunately, Betsy leaned out the door and called us in to eat.

The small table in the hall was set with blue plates and glasses. On a platter was Betsy's famous roast. It was atrocious, dry and tough, only marginally edible, but naturally we praised the cook. Betsy and I relied heavily on gin, and I soon found myself carrying the conversation with a loosened tongue.

Figuring Betsy had told the sisters, early on I clarified that I'm gay. One can't be too careful around unattached females. Then I entertained them with tastefully explicit accounts of my wild life in the sailor bars and favorite Mardi Gras memories like riding on the pirate ship float. I sensed that my audience was impressed by the glamour, but talking about home made me miss it all the more.

The sisters took our plates over to the kitchen, where Martha got ice cream out of the freezer. Over dessert Barbara talked about their train trip from some town called Ann Arbor in Michigan. It turned out that Martha's a grad in French, and Barbara a senior transfer, also a French major.

In a politely short stay after dinner, we finished off the gin, and then Betsy and I bid our good nights to the sisters, thank-you's flying in all directions. They called me Richie again, and I gave up protesting. Then I said a cuddly bye to Oná, assuring her that I'd be back real quick with her stuff.

Rather tipsy, Betsy and I staggered up the street in the light of the big moon, singing in awful harmony "Shine on, shine on, harvest moon..." In the calm after our laughing, she remarked, "You know, Richie, the girls were really scandalized when you talked about being gay."

"They were?" Now she was calling me Richie too! "Didn't you tell them?"

"No... I'd never tell anyone about you being... that way."

"Why not? I could use the publicity."

Betsy laughed. "I'll be sure and tell Jim first thing tomorrow morning."

"Please do, darlin'. He needs to know." Anyway, we were back to Little Sweden by then, and Betsy called it a night.

With sadness, I gathered up Oná's canine paraphernalia and marched back down the street, totally deserted even this early in the evening. Why, at home in the Quarter there was always somebody on the streets. This Seattle street was eerily vacant. It felt post-apocalyptic in the bright moonlight, as though nobody's left in the world, and I felt a twinge of panic. Where are all the boys?

At the girls' apartment, I delivered the dog food and dish to the sisters, both in robes, and declined a nightcap. For a long sad while I scratched Oná's ears affectionate see-you-tomorrows and then took off.

Back at Little Sweden, I ran into beautiful Jim in the hallway and invited him to come out onto my deck to see the moon. He gave me an enigmatic smile and said, "No thanks, I've seen it." Made me wonder if maybe Betsy has already told him. Jim could've warmed my new gold sheets very nicely. For the first time in several months I sadly went to bed without my lucky dog. But I felt absolutely blest to have survived the day's ups and downs. It all happened so quickly I could hardly keep up. What an enormous relief to keep my wonderful room, but the price is awfully steep. Still I've got to say, bless Betsy for finding a way.

#

.vii.

That First Saturday morning's breakfast was pancakes and eggs. While getting his, Rick told Stan about his job at the sorority house and said he wouldn't be eating dinners here anymore, except Sundays. He also saw Sean right away and happily told him he wouldn't be keeping the dog at Little Sweden, but she might visit him occasionally.

Betsy nibbled at her breakfast in a less than chipper state, moaning about feeling awful. Rick ventured that it was the gin and recommended tomato juice, but there wasn't any in the house. When she went back to bed, he walked down to the sorority for his job meeting.

The elderly, portly house mother, Mrs. Larsen, met him in the huge formal dining room. Right away Rick recognized her matronly *comme il faut* type and put on his best manners. She described the formal dinner service she expected for the twenty sorority sisters, and noted that the waiters would wear white coats. She pointed out exactly how the vast table was to be set with their beautiful silverware and fancy china dishes. Rick found none of this intimidating. What perked his interest was the old woman's use of the plural form of waiter.

There was more orientation in the kitchen around the serving racks and procedures with the dishes, again nothing out of the ordinary. Rick was introduced to the two middle-aged women who cooked, Georgia and Florence, and then Mrs. Larsen gave him another instruction, which I'll quote from the journal:

"Now, Rick, you're a very attractive young man, and I have to ask you not to make advances on any of the sisters."

"Not to worry, ma'm. I'm gay."

"I beg your pardon."

"You know, homosexual." She was struck speechless, and I added, "I hope you'll also ask the sisters not to make any advances either. It could be uncomfortable."

Mrs. Larsen stammered slightly in her reply, "I shall. Well, thank you, Rick. We'll see you on Monday at five." Georgia and Florence were standing nearby with big surprised eyes.

Rick left the sorority house exuberant that he'd just defused that bomb. By Monday every female in the place would know the name of his game. And that plural of waiter...

#

That business now dispensed with, Rick headed right over to the sisters' apartment to see Oná. They were again in robes at their own breakfast and invited him to have coffee, but he planned to take his pupdog for a nice long walk. Martha told him he was welcome to come over any time to visit Oná and them and gave him a key for if they weren't home. Rick spoke a bit on the importance of dog-walks, and Barbara promised that they'd take her out often too.

They headed straight for Ravenna. The trees were just as golden as the other day, but the green grass was now turning gold from newly falling leaves. Oná scampered around in them, and Rick danced an exultant skip-step across the sunny slope.

Resting on the grass, he got to wondering how Seattle, a port city, could possibly have no sailor bars. After all, ships come in at ports. Ships are full of sailors. Sailors do sailor things, so there has to be somewhere... That gave him an idea of what to do this afternoon: find Seattle's harbor and docks. He might find some place of interest near there. Rick hadn't seen any area like that along the water on his city map, but he figured it must be close to the old downtown.

Excited by the plan, our pirate took his little dog back to her apartment, dropped by Little Sweden for his bag, and ate the chicken salad sandwich on the bus ride downtown. Heading downhill from the bus stop toward the water merely brought Rick to First Avenue and a wall of buildings. Walking many blocks in both directions, he couldn't find any way down close to the water, and nothing looked even vaguely like a dock or a bar. It didn't make sense. He was one very disappointed little explorer.

Strolling aimlessly along First, Rick noticed a big book store in an ornate old building and a good while later came out with two books. A paperback of Kazantzakis' vast poem "The Odyssey" and a Victorian folio of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with engravings by Gustave Doré. At a florist shop he bought a philodendron vine for some green in his new room. After all, plants aren't pets.

#

There was a full house at Little Sweden's groaning board that evening what with the rest of the boarders having straggled in for the new term. Two rather older men, an uninspiring youth with scraggly goatee and pimples, and two homely, long-haired girls in similar gypsy-like blouses completed the contingent. There wasn't much of an effort made by anyone to socialize over the delicious spaghetti and meatballs, salad and garlic bread.

Rick sat with Betsy and Harold, who really did seem like a nice guy. Talking with Harold, he was more comfortable looking at his fork and slippery pasta. They were going to go to a movie and invited Rick along, but he begged off with other plans for Saturday night. He didn't reveal that plan to them, but I'll tell you. It was to get laid.



After dinner, Rick went upstairs to his room, still as warm and wonderful as ever but sad without Oná snuffling about. Rocking in his neat rocker, he paged through his new old book, lingering long over Doré's masterful engravings. The details of ships and waves, of sea monsters and storms, boggled his mind, like that eerie ship sailing among icebergs. Then Tricky Rick set sail in search of plunder. The next day he wrote about this piratical expedition.

#

Dear Me,

...By half past eight, ungodly early for a Saturday night anywhere, I was on my way down the moonlit street to the bus stop feeling pretty sexy in my fringe vest. If anyone on the bus thought so, it wasn't evident. An old guy glowered angrily at me till he finally got off.

Riding along, I wondered if going back to the Retreat really offered any hope, but there was nowhere else to go. When I transferred to the other bus, it was nearly empty. Again I tried to picture what the Retreat might possibly be

like on a Saturday night. It wasn't easy to imagine that dark building on a dark street in a still darker neighborhood as a place of brightness, revelry, or gaiety (in the broad sense). Even feeling this desperate for some loving, I lost all desire to go there. Especially as Nelson's lover would be back by now. So I wound up not even getting off at the stop for that depressing tavern.

I recalled how on Desai's arrival in New Orleans, he'd ridden the buses and streetcars all over town. Pulling out my bus map and schedule, I plotted a route of transfers to get me all over town and finally back to the University district. Switching from one bus to the next according to plan, I got more depressed about how terribly different Seattle was turning out to be than anything I'd hoped for.

Staring numbly out the window, I had to work hard at keeping the window's reflections of the stark inside of the bus separate from the dark reality outside. Strangely there was no more moonlight out there. It really was dark. I felt like wailing. Good Lord, why did I ever come here to this strange place? What have I done to my life?

On the fourth leg of my route heading west toward somewhere, I sank into a sentimental slough, and as other passengers got on, they turned into phantasms of lost lovers. To my horror, variously, they all got off, leaving me to make this long voyage alone. The fifth leg on the bus took me across town and home. Getting off into moonless darkness, I finally felt a great calm of acceptance, of surrender to this unknown new world.

Still early on this Saturday night in Seattle, I decided on a whim to stop in the Olympia and treat myself to coffee and pie. My scrumptious busboy wasn't there, and an older woman with dyed black hair brought my order. Apple pie's especially delicious after eleven pm. Then I noticed the public phone in the hallway and gave in to another whim.

With a handful of quarters, I called La Casa de los Marineros, where it was now after one o'clock. As I hoped, my friendly barmaid Angie answered, shouting over the roar and the thousands of miles between us. I got her to let the phone hang there for Rick in Seattle to listen to the music. It was "Piano Merengue," a bit hard to make out behind the din of carousing voices, but the pounding rhythm made my body quiver with dance. Too soon Angie came back, shouted into the phone, "Bye now, darlin'," and hung up.

Afterwards, I lay on my lonely golden bed and cried tears of distress and longing. When I woke up this morning, it was raining outside too.

#

What do you think of that tale of settling into Seattle? I didn't bother interrupting your reading to mention that it was taking me a couple days to write this all up, and I don't know what I would've done without that old journal. Actually, I do know. It would've been: Boy and dog move to Seattle and find a great place; dog can't stay there; boy boards dog with nearby girls. I suppose you could add: boy regrets the move. Thank goodness that the young Me took the time to tell this old Me what really happened.

By this afternoon I'd slogged all the way through to that rainy First Sunday morning and then went grocery shopping for stuff to cook for my dinner guests. Mack came over with Jason and Johnny for my simplified *coq au vin*, asparagus, salad, and Sarah Lee for dessert. I asked if anything was known about Kevin's Sunday evening rendezvous with Liam, and Mack reported his call this morning with the news that Liam just isn't ready yet.

"Did he at least make it to first base?" Jason asked hopefully.

"Nope," Mack sighed. "But he said this time there was tongue. Lots of it." He added that they're going out to dinner Friday night.

"I imagine they'll work it all out then," I commented and served the salad.

After dinner, Johnny asked if he might read some of what I've written, and I showed him the traumatic First Friday, the real nut of it.

When he'd scrolled through those few pages, Johnny said, "Well, I don't think Rick was a sex addict either." Turning to Jason, he added affectionately, "Not like some guys I know."

Mack spoke up. "Are you talking about me?" More chuckles around.

"So this was about the fateful puppy you mentioned?" Johnny asked. "How do you pronounce that name? Oh-nah?"

"More like Uh-nah," I explained like the language teacher I once was.

He looked puzzled. "So how was the dog fateful if Rick just gave her away?"

Having read the pages earlier, Mack clarified for me, "Rick didn't give Oná away—just got somewhere else for her to stay."

"I'm calling this chapter Lucky Dog," I announced. "The next part will be hard to tell."

Mack snickered, "I sure hope so. How many more countries join Rick's private UN?"

"Let's just say, no new ones."

Then we sat around the living room with more *vin* and discussed the utter madness of the Middle East. Shortly, Jason and Johnny politely headed on home. When Mack took off later, I wrote this post-script, and now I'm off to bed to get some sleep.

###

### CHAPTER 3. CARNE VALE

.i.

This morning I sit here starting a new chapter about what happened to our philandering Pirate in strait and straight Seattle. It's going to cover the long, wet haul from fall 1964 to spring 1965. As I told my friends, it will be a hard one to tell. Let's talk first about Rick's academic life at UDub over the fall and winter. He found it terrifically exciting. *Chacun à son gout*.

There were lots of orgasmic experiences in Rick's classes, insights into whole new areas of intense interest but of no practical applicability whatsoever. (I often wonder what neural circuits fire so brightly when I even now discover an obscure fact of absolutely no importance to real life, or when I learn something nobody never ever needs to know.)

Suffice it to say that Rick was enthralled by his Fall Quarter curriculum: the history of the Slavic languages, the crazy development of the Russian language, and fabulous linguistic

things like phonemes and metathesis. (Google it!) He found the Serbo-Croatian class most fascinating, so similar to Russian yet so different, and loved the wild dialect differences between the several parts of Yugoslavia.

That language class was also fascinating for the hot Serbian boy in it named Mirko. Rick fondly hoped to add a Yugoslav to his collection, but after their first eye contact, the Serb beauty pointedly ignored him. However, being pointedly ignored didn't preclude admiring Mirko's classic profile—After all, even a pig can look at a king.

For the Winter Quarter Rick's class load was lighter without the Linguistics, and the philology course turned into Old Church Slavonic, a language dead for nearly a thousand years. This class was a high point in esoteric knowledge that flooded Rick's pleasure centers with dopamine, and he took to it like a duck to water, even writing poems in illuminated script like the old manuscripts. The beautiful Serb Mirko disappeared from that term's language class, stealing much of its luster, but he learned wild poems and tongue-twisters to chant on wet walks across campus under his umbrella, loving the syllabic liquids: *Cvrći, cvrći, cvrčak na čvore crne smrce*. (Chirps, chirps the cricket on the branch of the black thorn.)

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You may have noticed understated references in the above to weather. Not to belabor the stereotype of Seattle's weather, neither can I omit remarking on its remarkable consistency. As a matter of fact, Rick's journal entry for his first day of classes gives a good description:

Well, it's indisputably bumbershoot weather. Today the Fall Quarter at U-Dub has begun wetly, the rain since yesterday only a misty spray from lowering skies. Big drops only fall under trees from moisture collecting on the leaves and branches. In one day the beautiful autumn has gotten bedraggled, its golden clutter clumped and splattered on the sidewalks.

Walking on campus under my black umbrella—thank goodness I brought one—it wasn't easy to cruise the amazing flood of student bodies also huddling under umbrellas of various colors. All I could make out were the lower parts of male passersby, (females of course being exempt from inspection), but sometimes even that was enough to excite a saint.

The whole fall and winter, that's how it went. Seattle's weather had no *sturm* nor *drang*, no drama. It never rained hard, the wind never blew, and forget lightning or thunder. It was just plain wet, sometimes a little less so, not so much dispiriting as un-spirited. Rick's shoes were always moist. He worried that Lake Washington would rise and flood even his hilltop home.

By Thursday of that first week of classes, Rick had already lost his umbrella, and he got sopping wet walking to the department store for a new one. After that he observed that UDub students always kept their prophylactic precipitation paraphernalia either in hand, under arm, strapped onto something, or stuck somewhere at all times. So he held onto his for dear life.

Rick's real problem with the Seattle weather was that with the constant clouds, he didn't lay eyes on his pet mountain for some months. Even being out on his deck under brella wasn't any fun with only occasional views of dripping bare trees and the leaden lake. Feeling lonely for pets both large and small, Rick withdrew from the rainy world and curled up in his splendid golden room with his classical music, wondering when something of a romantical sort was going to happen to him. But more on those intimate matters later.

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The emotional mainstay for Rick through the long months was getting to see his little Oná so frequently. Almost every day he'd drop by the sisters' place for a fix of puppy love. Whenever it was on the drier side of downpour, he'd take Oná out for a wet walk, not much fun

for either of them. After the quality time with his lucky pupdog, he'd take off for his next class or to the sorority house with new vigor and hope.

Martha and Barbara didn't seem to mind him continually popping up at their apartment, and the three quickly became comfortable, casual friends. Unfortunately, the girls persisted in calling him Richie. Like with Betsy, Rick had little difficulty in making female friends, as long as there were no sexual expectations. It always helped, of course, if they were dancing partners, but in Seattle that was a moot point.

Soon Martha started going out with a guy named Gene, an English grad student, though she still had a boyfriend back home in Michigan. Also, in a few weeks Barbie (as her sister always called her) started seeing a dentistry student named Morris. With those things settled, they and Rick became situational fixtures in each other's lives.

Of a Sunday when Rick was off from the sorority, the girls sometimes had him over for dinner, usually with Betsy and Gene. Martha's local boyfriend was a round-faced fellow with brownish hair, laughing eyes, and nothing about him to fluster our faerie. Rick wondered what she saw in him, but then what did he know about women's tastes in men? Before long Barbie got rid of her Morris for some reason and switched to dating a pre-med guy named Herb.

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Another constant in Rick's life was that job at the sorority. Six evenings a week made it a very big constant. He found it amusing the way the girls got all dressed up and sat primly at their places like in some finishing school. As house mother, Mrs. Larsen sat at the head of the enormous table to keep things polite and civilized. Feeding the girls was simple, organized work that Rick could easily handle without paying much attention. Also, the sorority food really was delicious and a lot fancier than even Stan's great dinners at Little Sweden.

Mrs. Larsen's earlier plural mention of waiters turned out a huge disappointment. Rick wound up working with a sadly overweight sophomore named Arnold with severe acne and a red crewcut, whom Rick had to show what to do. Unfortunately, Arnold was consumed with futile lust for the sorority sisters, but they ignored his existence. The girls didn't ignore their gay waiter though. They were most polite to Rick with gracious smiles and thanks for his excellent service. It was a very civilized way to work a couple hours a day.

The crucial thing about the job was that Rick's every evening was saturated with female energy. Daily exposure to all that female flesh on the hoof, one might say, wasn't very thrilling for a faerie, to say the least. What with Betsy, Martha, Barbie, and the sorority, Rick figured Seattle just had too damned many women. Or better said, too fucking few men.

Please don't think that Rick was in any way a misogynist. Let's call him an a-gynist or a non-gynist. After his adolescence and youth without female relationships, (except for dance partners), he'd come to think of women as some different species, an odd kind of human creature designed to have babies. And so heterosexual sex seemed somehow akin to bestiality, even though that's how babies are made. As far as Rick was concerned, women were for procreation, if you were into that sort of thing, and men were for loving, a simple distinction.

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## *.ii.*

That distinction brings us to the point I've been dreading to discuss. I know when my young friend Mack reads this, he's going to ask me where all the steamy scenes of plunder and booty are. Aye, there's the rub, matey. Loving men was Rick's mission in life, something he was quite good at, but in Seattle it was a whole new ballgame. I'm not sure how to start, so I'll grab some lunch first. I like to make an egg salad with olives and nuts, with a piece of fruit...

... Sated, I can now get back to Rick's tale. Rest assured that he jumped into the Seattle ballgame with great enthusiasm and resolve. As quoted above, as soon as the students showed up on that First Monday, he cruised through the rain admiring the lower halves of student bodies, but that wasn't a very productive activity. So before, between, and after classes, he tried everywhere and anywhere out of the rain to meet guys. He'd lurk around the library or loiter in the student center with his books, where he wrote many tedious journal entries to Old Me.

Day after day Rick lounged around watching the passing crowd of UDub students and admiring the many good-looking boys. He was struck right away by how many of the people were blonds and clean-cut in stylish clothes. Everybody looked so different than folks in New Orleans, and he hadn't seen many black people anywhere about. With his long brown hair, Rick was definitely in the minority, and his polo shirt, corduroy jeans, and fringe vest made him rather conspicuous. He figured that was good because getting their attention is half the battle. And besides, he figured his look was a signal for anybody else with fringe inclinations.

To his amazement, for all his conspicuity, no one seemed to see him. No one. Rick had expected that being different would be interesting to others, at least to guys of a compatible disposition. Whenever he seized an opportunity to say hi to someone, anyone, there was generally no response. A few might respond without eye contact, but only minimally and then scurry away. It was impossible to strike up any kind of conversation, even with his classmates. They saw him so often and still would only minimally acknowledge his existence in their midst. The teachers were just as impersonal.

Rick would also watch the occasional other student, male or female, who might also be sitting around the library or center. Even they didn't look at him or at anybody, their gazes fixed somewhere in the middle distance. He absolutely hated being invisible. (In my current chronologically advanced state, I once more feel invisible, but now it's liberating.)

Everybody seemed so secretive, withdrawn into his own private world, interested in no one else. Why, in New Orleans almost anyone on the street would meet your eye and at least signal a greeting. But it obviously wasn't just about him. Rick observed that nobody seemed to acknowledge or interact with anyone else. Of course, there were occasional couples or groups of friends who would then jointly ignore the rest of the world.

Soon he diagnosed the general phobia of each other as pernicious Seattlitis. (Nowadays of course, we'd call it homophobia, the fear of *Homo sapiens*.) Rick keenly felt the pervasive atmosphere of fear, the atmos-fear. It was inconceivable that anyone should be afraid of him. All he had was love in his heart and the will to share it. Recalling FDR's quote about fearing fear itself, he was horrified by all the fear, the mute terror, of the folks in Seattle. No wonder there was nowhere in this strange city to carouse, nowhere to dance. How can you jubilate and revel when you're scared to death of other people?

After a few weeks of such treatment, Rick reached the end of his rope. One Saturday night when the sky was desperately weeping, he broke down and rode the bus back to his last and only resort, the Retreat. In the half-empty place an ancient guy was tending bar and told him that Nelson had quit and moved away to San Francisco. Disheartened, Rick only drank half his Olympia and left, never to return.

As he wrote before, Rick wasn't superstitious, but all the same he'd often stroke Oná's long golden fur like a magic lamp and beg his lucky pup to make something happen. Almost frantic, he started wondering what was wrong with what he was doing. It had always worked before in New Orleans. And now not one of these Seattle beauties would give him the time of day. For our hybrid Casanova and Don Juan, it was a devastating experience.



A conversation with Betsy one evening caused Rick to do some soul-searching. She'd said that she and Harold (the Hideous) were going to a movie, and he'd obliquely referred with a trace of revulsion to the fellow's far from handsome, he dared even say ugly, appearance. Immediately, Betsy accused him of being prejudiced, a beauty bigot—an "anti-uglite."

It was a hard pill for Rick to swallow, but he had to admit that he had a bias for beauty. Maybe not paying enough attention to the homely guys in the crowds of students, he'd missed perfectly reasonable opportunities for plunder. After this realization, his cruising in the library and center became more democratic. He'd contemplate the less than attractive fellows trying to find their attractive aspects and usually succeeded. He had no success, however, in engaging the eye of any of the uglites either. They too were infected with the Seattlitis virus.

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Maybe it was the influence of the lucky pup, or maybe just a fluke, but one November evening Betsy invited Rick along with her and a new friend, also named Richard, another grad student in English, to see the Beatles' movie "A Hard Day's Night." He got all wound up about finally getting to meet a man.

This Richard turned out to be fairly handsome, if a bit heavy, with wavy dark hair, and he immediately rang Rick's bell. He kept hoping for eye contact with Richard but couldn't snag his dark browns. It was really disconcerting how even in meeting, Richard kept looking far off to the side or up in the air. Clearly an acute case of Seattlitis. Cunningly avoiding the pirate's eye, Richard chatted with a wry humor about the arts and music, which was a positive sign at least.

Meanwhile Rick stood there like a human Van de Graaff generator, charged with megavolts and snapping static lightning all over the globe of his head. But with Richard not even looking at him, all that power just leaked off into the ground. Thus crumbled Rick's romantic cookies. He took comfort in the wackiness of the movie, particularly enjoying "Can't Buy Me Love" and the line "I'll give you all I got to give if you say you'll love me too." A nice sentiment with no place to put it.

This new Richard soon joined the loose social cluster of Betsy, the sisters, Gene, and Rick at dinners and movies, and they started calling him Richie too. Even sharing that nickname, Rick didn't feel any closer to him than a friendly acquaintance. He often wondered what Richard's story was—(his own being common knowledge)—but they never spoke about anything personal. He also wondered sometimes about making an overt pass at the fellow, but early on he'd lost enthusiasm for the project. Clearly Richard had no enthusiasm either.

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Writing all that about Rick's romantic destitution was rather painful for me as I vividly remember his distress and loneliness. Metaphorically, his good ship the Faerie Prince was becalmed in the Sargasso Sea, and Tricky Rick sought in vain for a sail on the rainy horizon. His journal comments on hope and despair are touching, but adolescently boring from my overly mature perspective. I just hope that the above account was short enough not to bore my young friends or whoever happens to read this. With that hope, I'll take a break for dinner with Carol and Janet at a Mexican place. That's a cuisine I love but enjoy too little of. ....

... I took those kernel pages of the First Friday along as proof to show the girls—beg pardon, young women—that I was indeed working on the project assigned to me at our previous meeting at the Titsling. When we'd ordered, Carol read it first while Janet and I chatted. Turns out she's a poet, a song writer, who says she can't sing. So she gets friends like George or Carol to sing her stuff. Janet warned me her work's strongly post hip-hop, whatever that means.

Then while Janet read the pages, Carol and I chatted about her friend's work as well. Of course she couldn't sing any examples there in the restaurant, but she recited a few verses. I was impressed by the sentiments and forceful use of imagery, but I'm sure the music will add a lot. Of course, I'm not all that clear on what such music might sound like.

Over dinner (my tacos rather better than I expected), I got their thoughts about the First Friday. Janet said she likes the way the action moves so quickly into conflict and out again to resolution. She said she's from Illinois and knows the 'bread and butter' thing, and her mother used to do that same wishing ritual.

Carol liked the futuristic Space Needle trip juxtaposed with the sisters' plain apartment. Then she asked, "Is 'pupdog' an Arkansas expression?"

"Not exactly. It's from the comic strip Pogo. The white puppy was called Pupdog."

"That's so cute," Carol laughed. "I think I've seen that strip. An alligator, a turtle..."

"Albert and Churchy La Femme," I proudly advised from my store of trivia.

They both agreed that Rick wasn't a sex addict and applauded his liberated attitude, and Janet remarked, "I bet those sisters really were scandalized to meet an openly gay guy."

"Rick had the right idea about advertising," Carol chuckled. "I hope it worked."

I didn't say anything to dash her hopes but asked how her son Jet was doing.

Carol made a few fond comments about the boy and then, without even being drunk, gave me the story of how Jet came about. She and Rebecca were partners and agreed to have a baby. Carol didn't want artificial insemination, so with Rebecca's consent, she methodically seduced a young lifeguard, a perfect male specimen, got pregnant, and promptly ditched the sperm donor. Then a few months later, unable to face being a parent, Rebecca left her.

In the telling she didn't seem bitter at all about Rebecca's leaving. Surprised to learn that they were still good friends, I congratulated her on having such a liberated attitude about motherhood. To myself I thought, too bad women didn't think that way back in Rick's time. His life could have been remarkably different. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

We had excellent flan for dessert. That was when Janet asked what I plan to do with what I'm writing. When I noted that detail hadn't been included in the motion, she said that I'd have to find a publisher and... I explained that I have no desire to be a cash cow for the publishing industry and don't believe folks should have to pay to enjoy what I've written, or not. I'll just have to find a way to make it available for whoever wants to read it.

They both promised to think about how I might do that. And both hoped Rick would start having some fun now. I didn't have the heart to tell them about Seattlitis.

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.iii.

The fact remains that the Faerie Prince was becalmed. Not only was his romantic life destitute, his social life in the evenings basically sucked.

After work at the sorority, which Rick called the feeding frenzy at the female farm, there wasn't much to do most rainy evenings besides study, struggle through more of Kazantzakis' interminable stanzas, or dance in splendid solitude. Sometimes he'd join other boarders in the living room next door and watch TV sitcoms like the old "Beverly Hillbillies" or the silly new one called "Gilligan's Island." With absolutely nowhere to go out—forget the Shamrock—the routine was dull enough to try the patience of a saint, if there'd been one on the premises. Rick's *joie de vivre* began to fade, and by the end of the quarter it was getting terminally pale.

Perhaps the only highlight was one exceptionally frantic Saturday night in early December when Betsy and Rick came close to finishing off a whole jug of Tavola Guild red table wine. The next day he wrote:

Dear Me,

I sure hope you appreciate how much effort it is to write about the same old nothing every day. [*I do.*] Of course, you probably find this just as boring to read. [*I do.*] But at least something happened yesterday evening that almost makes an anecdote.

When Betsy and I couldn't stand gin rummy any longer, we started playing Scrabble, which isn't very easy when you're soused. Then we got hungry. Little Sweden's kitchen being out of the question, and the Olympia being closed at this late hour, Betsy came up with the quite reasonable solution of raiding the fraternity house next door, the Jewish one.

We careened downstairs, across the lawn, barely moistened by the misting rain, through the unlocked front door of the fraternity house, and into its dark hall. Betsy wondered where the kitchen was, but since there were no lights on downstairs, in spite of my protestations, she led us staggering upstairs. Up there was another dark hallway with closed bedroom doors all along it. In spite of the delicious, heady male fragrance, I got really nervous and in whispers tried to get her to leave.

But then Betsy saw the sign on one of the frat brothers' door announcing: "Snacks, sandwiches, cold drinks." She knocked forcefully on the door, causing several doors along the hall to pop open immediately. At the commercial one, a cute boy appeared in maroon silk pajamas, blinking in amazement at the pretty drunken wench so nicely ordering a tuna salad sandwich.

The entrepreneur and his stern-faced brothers ushered us forthwith downstairs and out the front door. Betsy protested that this was no way to treat a nice Jewish girl. As we stood on the squishy fraternity lawn in the big drops from its trees, she was quite amused that I'd asked the tall, pretty frat guy if I could go back to bed with him.

Defeated and still starving, Betsy gave up and headed down the hall to her room. With a good night and nod, I again indicated Jim's door, remarking, "I bet he's got something good to eat in there." She shook her head vigorously, her dark page-boy mussing over her face, and stalked into her boudoir.

Back in my own room at the desk, I took a piece of paper and in dark pencil printed huge on separate lines: "NEED / NOOKIE / NOW! / Inquire Within." This fairly unambiguous sign I took down the hall and taped to Betsy's door. While brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I got worried maybe the sign might invite just any old rapist to sneak in and take advantage of my innocent friend. So, in the heroic spirit of Oscar Wilde, I took it down and stuck it to my own door. Any rapists in the neighborhood had sure as hell better drop by my place first.

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While most of Rick's excitement was of the scholarly kind, the correspondence with his new pen pal Henri supplied an almost literary, perhaps artistic, and definitely egotistical thrill. Leave it to an old packrat like me to still have those letters, (and I've discovered that Henri still has those from Rick as well). His are much more interesting than Rick's, I'm sure, and definitely more so than that journal. I'll try to recapitulate their epistolary relationship.

Henri answered Rick's first letter with several pages, writing first about trying three times to dance for him in La Casa. Next he went into an elaborate personification of their beloved sailor dive as a painted whore with a wildly beating heart (juke box). His dedication to Rick's holy Home of the Sailors was comforting to this Lafitte in exile.

Henri then explained the Holy Charlie Brown Church. Yep. Pontificating over a Sacred College of Bluejays, he was Pope Henri I. Rick was pleased to note a total lack of dogma for this new Church, the hierarchy and small congregation of which was made up of close papal associates. Then His Holiness revealed Rick's induction as a Prince of the Church. Okay.

Henri's next letter was short. He'd read Rick's reply (an anguished tirade if I rightly recall), seven or eight times in tears and then closed with a profession of love. Whoa! While Rick appreciated the abstract affection, he also appreciated the irony of such passion from afar and none from a-near. He replied with more pages of lonely, horny maunderings.

Henri's letters grew more frequent, and Rick tried to keep up the pace of letters flying back and forth every couple of days. Their correspondence became a somehow saner alternate reality for him, one of excitement and comfort.

In early November Henri gave a progress report on La Casa, announcing that he finally had learned to dance right with a girl Rick knew well and had loved to dance with, Fontaine with the amazingly frizzy red hair. The Holy Carouse rolled on!

The Papal communiqués evolved rapidly. By mid-November the Pontiff awoke from an emotional hibernation caused by an earlier betrayal in love. That was quickly followed by a hyperbolically romantic letter about finding love again (for Rick). The next one stepped back and in many pages gave the story of his life, ending with those three words again.

I doubt Rick ever wrote those words back, but I'm sure he gave many reasons to pity his plight. Also he wrote at one point about how Desai, not yet knowing Rick's name, had dubbed him Norman. Near the end of November, Pope Henri I canonized Rick as St. Norman de La Casa, proclaiming him the patron of sailors on shore leave. After reporting the arrival of a new juke box in the Third Room, Henri went on to envision Rick a-dance to the rhythm of the old whore's new beating heart. The fantasy took them to bed after. The irony was maddening.

In December the Pope's letters brought frequent imaginings of being with Rick in intimate and sometimes awkward positions, especially for a clerical celebrity. But Henri's tender fantasies didn't do a heck of a lot of good for Rick's aggravated celibacy. In mid-December, Henri recalled one of Rick's remarks about the soul being a phoenix and promptly surrendered to his fire, experiencing the supreme joy reserved for popes in love. Who wouldn't be moved by such enthusiasm? Henri sure knew how to make a guy feel special.

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Our pirate in exile also corresponded with his beloved Indian friend Desai, though much more rarely. I still have half of this correspondence too. In a December letter, Desai wrote about how everyone at La Casa (as well as he) missed Rick terribly. Then he and wrote, "Sometimes I regret that I am not a fruit—or that you were." Troubled only by the first regret, Rick replied with an update on the tribulations of St. Norman. To his surprise, Desai answered immediately with advice quite disgruntling for a famished faerie: "The best thing to do is find someone—even a girl—or try to write fiction." Find someone! Rick pounded his head on the wall.

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*.iv.*

When the fall quarter ended, everyone Rick knew went home for the holidays, Little Sweden and the sorority emptying out of boarders and sisters respectively. Since he'd decided to go home to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, he couldn't afford to now. Carefully considering Desai's advice, Rick decided on the second option. As a matter of fact, he'd been thinking about a story already for a good while, and he might as well try and write a novel. I won't comment on that ambitious goal other than to say that he felt something really big inside needing to get out.

For the holiday break, Rick moved over to Martha and Barbie's apartment and happily resumed full custody of his fluffy Oná. Being with his lucky pupdog full-time was a joy after his months of solitude, albeit comfortable months in his wonderful room. During this writer's retreat he decided not write in the journal but to concentrate on fiction. I think that was probably

wise, and I'm grateful now having less to read. Fortunately, he later gave a précis of his novel's plot in the journal. I truly hadn't remembered much of it.

Right after everybody left that morning, it miraculously stopped raining, and Rick and Oná got in a great walk to Ravenna. While they squished about on the sodden hillside, the sun even more miraculously appeared. But by that evening the temperature had plummeted, and they kept warm inside cuddling on the sofa and mindlessly watching the sisters' TV.

The next morning Rick awoke beside Oná in the strange bed and bedroom and was confused by a remarkable brightness. Brilliant sunlight shone in the patio doors with a couple feet of snow piled up against them and burying the patio. He found a broom to clear the snow away from the glass doors and off the middle of the patio so his pooch could go potty. It was well below freezing, and his hands and feet felt frost-bitten.

After foraging for breakfast in the refrigerator, Rick parked at the dining table with Oná in his lap and started scribbling on a yellow legal pad on his novel. That's where he spent most of every day for almost three weeks. Oná was more than happy to lie in his lap for hours on end while Rick's left hand automatically stroked her fur or scratched her ears. The contact with the loving creature was vastly comforting and seemed to help him focus his thoughts on the fiction.

The novel was about this 18 year-old gay guy named Luke from Bunkie, Louisiana, who moves to New Orleans to go to LSUNO and gets an apartment on Ursulines Street in the Quarter, actually the place of Rick's old lover Paul. The crux of the matter was that Luke is, to use an ugly word, ugly. Not as spectacularly as Harold, mind you, but he's definitely been whipped with the ugly stick. And to top it off, he's a little overweight.

Rick intended the novel to be an exorcism of his beauty bigotry. He wanted to get into Luke's mind, to see the world through Luke's eyes, to live with and in him, feel his experiences. Calling up all his compassionate resources, Rick hoped to bring his hero somehow through much adversity to a delightful and romantic denouement.

After the snowfall, it stayed insanely clear, even sunny, and cold for the next few days, and the snow went nowhere. That was another good reason for Rick and Oná to stay indoors. The place was more than a retreat. For the exiled pirate and his pup, it was a safe haven. He blithely wrote away and not unlike Oná, ate, defecated, and slept contentedly. Of course for those first few days, poor Oná had to poop on the patio. On an arduous foray out to the grocery store for people- and most importantly dog-food, Rick wore a blanket like an Indian chief.

As it warmed up and the snows melted, there were more sunny days, and they made it out for long walks again, which were great for plotting on the novel. The honest-to-John sunshine was the best Christmas gift Rick could imagine. They walked on campus and rejoiced in majestic visions of Rainier ruling over the Cascades. Thus his days flowed idyllically along, the yellow pages piling up on the kitchen counter.

Since Luke lives in the French Quarter, Rick got to describe the familiar New Orleans streets, sights, and bars. The exercise was very cathartic but probably excessive. He constructed what he hoped were realistic experiences for Luke at school, in stores, at bars, and so on that he found painful to narrate. When Rick delved into Luke's frustrated desire for handsome guys, he had the character realize that he suffers from the same beauty bias as they do. Luke resolves to take off his blinders and see everybody (within reason) as a possibility for love, hoping they will see him as one too. Technically, Rick was indulging in projection.

The intensity of his focus on Luke's world felt insane. I've experienced a few bouts of that feeling over the years since. It's an ecstasy. Begrudgingly he'd haul himself away from the Quarter and back to Seattle, if only to feed sweet Oná and his own face. He pushed the story on

to Luke meeting a painter named Simon at Jackson Square, who is also rather worse than better looking and very nice, of course. Simon wants to paint Luke's portrait because his face has such great "character."

That evening Rick pulled his head out of Luke's story and made himself go out of the apartment to see the movie "Zorba" with Anthony Quinn. Being a Kazantzakis fan and inveterate grecophile, he'd read "Zorba the Greek" and "Last Temptation of Christ." The movie affected him deeply. With the first notes of the Greek music he was transported back to the Gin Mill. That night he danced like Zorba around the apartment and suffered an absolute misery of homesickness. Oná's scampering round his dancing feet was his only comfort.

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The days following turned rainy again. Rick buckled down and took his story through more encounters as Luke and Simon's friendly relationship grows closer and more affectionate. It was challenging to do that without any of the usual grounds for sexual desire. He planned for the consummation to be a natural outcome of their closeness, a spiritual sort of thing.

New Year's Eve should have been a sentimental holiday for Rick, being the anniversary of the frozen night when he'd slept (chastely) with his beloved Desai, but he and Oná barely noticed and retired around ten. He snuggled (just as chastely) his lucky pup like a plush toy.

On the first day of 1965, a Friday, Rick realized that it was high time for the love scene. Suddenly the writing became tremendously difficult, even with Oná there for tactile inspiration. He wrote slowly, crossed things out, and scribbled out in the margins. For some days he struggled over half a dozen different versions of the absolutely necessary sex scene.

One would be too vague and polite, another too salacious, more were simply silly, rude, or embarrassing. He even tried an understated, off-hand account, but it was clearly a cop out. Rick's problem was that there are so many perspectives, ways to express, words, and tones possible for the simple insertion of one body part into another, and for all his valiant attempts and vast experience in the subject, he simply couldn't find the right combination.

By the time the sisters came back late Thursday morning, Rick was tearing his hair in frustration, furious with himself that he hadn't brought his unattractive lovers to consummation. Also awfully distressed that the honeymoon with his sweet pupdog was ending, he tried to put on a cheerful face as the sisters came in the door.

When she saw Martha, Oná raced over and leapt joyfully about her ankles, yipping a greeting. Martha picked her up in a cuddle, exclaiming, "Oh, sweetie-pie, Mama missed you so much!" Oná went wild licking Martha's chin, and Rick's heart broke. He realized that she wasn't his lucky dog anymore—he'd just been puppy-sitting. Fussing over the dog, the sisters probably didn't notice his tears.

Martha and Barbie simply couldn't believe he'd been snowed in and then had sunshine so much of the time, but he swore it was so, that he really did see Mt. Rainier again. For more proof, he produced the snowballs he'd saved for them in their freezer. They were also incredulous that he'd written so much over the holidays. Rick had numbered the pages, and it was around 96 where he ran into the brick wall. Wisely, the failed pages were trashed.

Rick said goodbye to sweet Oná with more tears and returned to Little Sweden feeling cut off at the knees. After all the recent doggie walks, the lonely trek home was filled with grief both for his loss and for Luke's. He looked out from the deck and was saddened that his Rainier was once again shrouded in cloud.

Doing a silent Greek dance of woe, Rick thought fondly of dear Luke and decided to free his ugly hero from limbo. Whether or not it was good writing, with a string he tied up the yellow

pages in a big roll, and not feeling dramatic enough to burn them, tossed it in the trash. To put this in perspective, you should know that apart from Luke's story, I've hung onto everything I've written, though a couple pieces were sadly lost in a computer crash. *C'est la vie moderne.*

#

Speaking of computers, the clock on mine says it's time to go the gym. Writing about the writer's retreat has taken me a good part of the day, and I'll pick it up right here tomorrow. Tonight Mack has invited me to a play I've never heard of, the title of which I even now can't recall. I'm sure it will be scintillating. ...

...It wasn't exactly scintillating, more like pulsating. The play went from one emotional explosion to the next, and I couldn't understand what they all got so worked up about. Mack remarked that it wasn't a very successful production, quite forgettable. So I've now forgotten its title again on purpose. After the flop we called it a night, and my young friend promised to read my new pages this morning. He did and found Pope Henri and the Tavola night hilarious.

Today I hope I've got the time to write about the aftermath of Rick's fiction therapy. Poor Luke's thoughts and issues had of course been Rick's own, and now he started seeing the world differently. Perhaps not more clearly, but definitely differently.

#

Desai had been right that writing fiction would be good therapy for our lonely pirate. During those entranced weeks, Rick hadn't thought even once about not having a boyfriend. Instead, he'd worked through his anti-ugliness and gotten a fresh view on other people. He'd also come to realize that people aren't what they look like, but what they do, which happens still to be my opinion. We can never see who someone is inside, just what they do on the outside. How they act. Then we've got to deduce the 'who.'

This revelation turned Rick's search for romance into a whole new ballgame. Always before he'd known immediately and unambiguously if he was attracted to a guy. He was either attractive or not. If he was, there was lightning; if not... Gradually falling into love without any sexual impetus was an alien concept. For Rick passion wasn't something to be planted. It didn't sprout like a seed to be tended over a season to fruition. Love had always bloomed for him in that first instant, a full-blown flower, or not. Then he'd have time find out who the Who is. Now he'd just have to do it backwards.

January and February were wonderfully mild under the unbroken cover of clouds, dripping off and on as it pleased them. Rick walked on campus among the thronging student bodies watching them with interest and without judging their 'looks.' He started analyzing the different postures and strides of passersby as possible indications of the Who and then realized those were also 'looks.' Unfortunately, so were their facial expressions, but those looks might be clues to the moods or attitudes of the elusive Who. Even with his new more liberal approach, Rick still didn't get to deduce a new Who. The new ballgame was continuing a no-hitter.

With the Winter Quarter, Rick went back to working dinners at the female farm, and his social life returned to the same ebb level as before. He saw a few movies with Betsy and the second Richard, including "From Russia with Love" and "My Fair Lady." Rick was all set to replant the passion he'd felt for the pleasant guy when they'd first met but still got no eye contact from the Seattle sufferer.

Betsy had started seeing a fellow, another Little Sweden boarder named Bob, and Rick went out with them to see "Marriage Italian Style." He reveled in the visions of lovely Sophia Loren, his favorite movie star, and felt very grateful to his friends for inviting the fugitive faerie along to be a third wheel.

The only thing that kept him sane was being able to take Oná for walks. He tried not to think about her not being his doggie anymore. Maybe that was why he was having such bad luck at love. At least he could still savor the puppy love. But even their walks produced no social encounters. Seattlitis sufferers wouldn't even look at dogs, even cute ones.

#

Considering his perennial problem of Too Damned Many Women, Rick was now starting to feel unsure about them being a separate species. They were persons too, just persons who looked different, that difference merely being various protuberances or lack thereof. In fact the women he'd met here in Seattle, the sorority sisters included, were all very warm and friendly. Oddly, women seemed almost immune to Seattlitis.

To compound the TDMW situation, Rick met a girl grad student in his new Old Church Slavonic class who was extremely friendly from the first day. Over the weeks they chatted off and on, both amused to be studying a weird dead language. It was a new experience for him to meet someone who shared his insane interest in Slavic Linguistics. He couldn't miss the sick joke on him that her name was Ronnie.

Rick never bothered to describe Ronnie in the journal, but I think I remember her having freckles and brownish hair. In their chats before or after class, she naturally heard about his degenerate past in New Orleans, though for professional reasons he didn't mention being gay. After all, Ronnie was a classmate and had no need to know.

When Ronnie heard about his plans to go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, she wanted to go too. She'd buy a ticket, stay with her sister in Metairie, and they could fly together. Rick wasn't thrilled. Ungallantly, he figured Ronnie would just have to take care of herself in the deluge of Carnival—like everybody else.

After OCS class one day, Ronnie asked if Rick would like to come with her that evening to a folk dance club meeting. He was hesitant since folk dance meant specific steps and figures and all, and he was no good at choreographed things. When she mentioned Greek though, he decided to go. In the almost dry evening they met after his shift at the sorority at a campus building near 45<sup>th</sup>. Bunches of students were clustered about in a bright room, many wearing fancy folk costumes like on the Lawrence Welk Show. Rick described the evening in detail.

#

Dear Me,

...Waiting on a long bench for the meeting to come to order, Ronnie sat real close and assured me that I was going to have fun. She talked so enthusiastically about her years of folk-dancing that I had to smile. I haven't met anyone else with such a passion for doing anything, much less dancing. When the first group gathered, she took my hand and urged me up, but I chose just to watch.

They executed some synchronized middle-European jig, everyone stepping the same steps at the same time and then doing it again, and again, and... I saw joy flare up here or there in a dancer, but most seemed to be making the complicated moves mechanically.

Between dances Ronnie sat with me on the bench, valiantly attempting to converse about ethnicities. Fortunately that being something I could relate to, I remarked on my experience with Indians, how they're so mystical and spiritual and all that. Taking my hand confidentially, she said, "I know what you mean."

I wouldn't join in the next dance either, a fortunate choice. It was a Slovak number, a very intricate interweaving melee. It suddenly dawned on me why the rows of folks moving in lockstep patterns was rubbing me the wrong way. This was Apollonian dance striving for a pure, rational, aesthetic ideal, but in my dance I'm a Dionysian dervish, a male maenad swept up in the ecstasy of god-maddened motion.



Ronnie danced a lot with her friends, and I watched a lot. The ethnic music was actually invigorating, and my body quivered with moves totally unlike those being stomped out on the dance floor. Between dances Ronnie became ever more solicitous of my comfort, and I told her if they'd play something Greek, I'd do a sailor dance for them.

Later the fellow at the phonograph found a recording of *bouzouki* music, and I took the floor with the whole club watching. Raising my arms, I stepped into the music, into the dance. The music was perfect, spiraling into frenzy, circling up toward the sun. Until I felt the silken tether, the rope that takes madness to cut. But in the middle of a folk dance club wasn't the place to go cutting ropes. I fluttered around on the tether only briefly and finished with skips and a slap on my heel. There was some applause, and then the club meeting was apparently over.

Though I never go anywhere without mine, Ronnie didn't bring an umbrella (foolish virgin!), and since it was raining again, I walked her home. Her place was just east of Little Sweden on one of those streets at the bottom of the cliff. All the way there she hung on my arm under the umbrella and while we talked, gave it little squeezes. She seemed awfully affectionate, and the ovarian urgency in her voice gave me great pause.

In spite of myself, I started entertaining a heretical thought, dismissed it, and swallowing my distaste, thought it again. After all, Ronnie seemed to be the only one in Seattle who wanted a piece of me. *[I neglected to mention earlier that Rick was also not a virgin heterosexually speaking. The previous summer he and an elfin dance partner named Linda had given it a shot purely as a scientific experiment. While there were pleasurable aspects to sticking it up a woman's crotch, it wasn't something he particularly cared to do again. Rick was very clear in his preference for certain protuberances and the lack of udders—oops!—others.]* Here I've been nearly four months without a crumb of nookie. Since sweet Nelson! Also I figured that an uninspired orgasm would still be better than no orgasm at all. That's how I rationalized becoming a heretic.

As we said goodnight at her gate, Ronnie leaned forward, and I perfunctorily gave her a peck on the lips. Betraying my every instinct, I bit the bullet and said as seductively as I could under the circumstances, "Should I come in so we... could...?"

Ronnie smiled shyly and asked, "We could what?"

Now never in my experience had I found it necessary to make the intimate proposition. If this were a normal situation with a guy, by now it would've been a foregone conclusion. I mumbled awkwardly, "You know... We could get it on."

Whether it was my phraseology or my point, I'll never know. Ronnie's demeanor became sterner than the back end of a boat. Tight-lipped, she stepped back, out from under my umbrella, with a final "I don't think so." After a moment to let the rejection sink in, she added, "Good night," and turned away through the gate.

I stood in the wet dark feeling stunned. I've never ever been rejected before. Then came the thrill of relief that I dodged that bullet. Unwittingly, I escaped by the skin of my teeth. Now I've got to stop even considering having perverted sex with a female. Heading up the hill, I mused that maybe now Ronnie might not come to New Orleans, not a half-bad return for my being a jackass.

#

Before their next OCS class two days later, Rick tried to be a proper gentleman and apologized to Ronnie for being rude. She said he hadn't been rude at all and hoped he hadn't been offended by her. Rick said truthfully that he wasn't at all bothered by her rejection. Now that Ronnie definitely needed to know, he told her he was gay. When Ronnie politely asked why he'd put the moves on her then, his excuse was temporary insanity. What she may have thought about those comments, one must wonder.

After this adult exchange the two continued as friendly, intellectual comrades in classes but went to no more folk dance affairs. And Ronnie still planned to go to Mardi Gras with Rick.

#

.v.

It's taken a good while to roll out the Ronnie affair, mostly due to having to slog through so many yellow pages of the journal. Also, the disgraceful scene at her gate was rather painful to transcribe. I shudder to think that Rick's raging hormones almost drove him to an unnatural act, and I'm eternally grateful to Ronnie for that first (and truthfully, the last) rejection in my life.

On the other hand, Henri's letters are very easy to read in his semi-printed script. Their correspondence continued through the winter unabated. While Rick's romantic perspectives remained as cloud-shrouded as Mt. Rainer, Henri's caring letters shone like bright spots of sunlight into his dreary days.

When Pope Henri found out Rick would be coming back to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, he started a countdown from Twelfth Night, the traditional start of the Mardi Gras season. His updates on the Holy Carouse in La Casa were both architectural (the opening of a window in the wall between bars in the First and Second Rooms) and sociologically rather unique.

His Holiness made almost nightly pilgrimages to their beloved La Casa de los Marinos, now wearing his white papal skullcap and dancing in a holy frenzy for Rick, who tragically could not, being in bitter exile in the northwestern wilderness. On weekends Pope Henri would bring a silver candelabrum and place it on top of the new juke box in the Third Room in reverence for the blessed St. Norman. The pontiff's affectionate devotions were very touching for a dance- and whoopee-starved faerie. Rick rather enjoyed being glorified.

The HCBC grew as an institution when in late January the Pope consecrated La Casa as the Basilica of La Marina, the Second Room as the Grotto of St. Norman, and the Third Room, Rick thought a bit selfishly, as the papal chapel. In the spirit of the HCBC, in one of Rick's letters he imagined a monastic order—the Davidine Brothers—and in a papal Bull, Henri promptly instituted Holy Orders in the HCBC. As Abbot of the Davidines, he chose the newly appointed Bluejay Tony, Rick's old lover, whom His Holiness had met at a party in Rick's old Audubon Street apartment (the one they used to call the Rising Sun). Quite an overlap.

Another overlap was another new Bluejay, Rick's sweet Paul of last summer, who was going to lend them his lovely apartment on Ursulines for Carnival (the one the fictional Luke had rented). When Rick wrote back that he'd be staying with Desai, the pious prelate understood his need to be with the Indian father of his soul.

The Pope's fervent prayer was that Rick stay with him that Friday night, as he had to work all Saturday and Sunday as a shipping controller in the Port of New Orleans, of all things. But he'd be off on Monday and Fat Tuesday. After that the papal missives were full of holy visions and poetic imaginings of Rick's ceremonious return to La Casa, the Basilica. (Allow me to digress briefly: This fantasy was happening some years before New Orleans' Cathedral of St. Louis, King of France, was designated as a Basilica by one Pope in Rome or another.)

The HCBC Pope's most elaborate proposal, either a poetic apotheosis or a psychotic break, was a rescue mission to spirit St. Norman away to his Grotto. Henri himself will lead a 56-float parade with hundreds of *flambeaux* (marching torch bearers) to melt away the grey Seattle fog. Float riders will be recruited from La Casa, the Gin Mill, and Notre Dame Seminary, and they will whisk the saint away and fly on a gilded wagon to their Basilica for the Ball of the Mystick Krewe of Gidding. Go for it!

#

On Friday, February 26, Rick and Ronnie flew to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Against his better judgment, he agreed to take her to La Casa, and they were to meet at 11:30 in front of the Cathedral by the gate into Jackson Square. From the plane Ronnie took a cab to her sister's

place in Metairie, and Rick rode buses to the place on Broadway where Desai was living with old friend Frances. They had a spare bedroom for him (though he wasn't sure how often he'd need it), and she served a great chicken curry for supper, such being Desai's naturally preferred cuisine. Soon it came time for St. Norman's ceremonial return to the Basilica.

The following journal entries were written only *après le deluge*, once Rick was safely back at Little Sweden. They are but the highlights. Exercising my seniority as author, I've edited out extraneous or irrelevant comments and details.

#

Dear Me...

... Freshening up from the trip, I changed into clothes more appropriate for my saintly return to La Casa: my trademark in the past, a pair of green corduroy jeans clinging closely to my nubile contours, and my favorite Madras shirt, which often comes unbuttoned of its own accord to display my hairy chest.

With me thus loaded for bear, Desai and I took the Freret Jet, a sentimental ride with my beloved by my side. We got off at Canal Street and strolled into the Quarter down Royal. As we cut across on Conti past where Alphonse used to live to Chartres, I quivered with excitement. Holy Charlie Brown! St. Norman was home! It was early enough, per my plan, for us to stop by the Napoleon House, that emperor's almost-refuge on the corner of St. Louis, for a drink in the Music Room.

With nothing but Beethoven intruding on our private world, we reminisced, and when I started crying, Desai said, "Be strong, Norman. Remember, you're a tiger stalking through the jungle of this world." His brand of spiritual teaching has been formative for my budding faerie psyche, and now I'm taking this latest admonition very much to heart.

In due time, we left for Jackson Square to meet up with Ronnie, who was waiting patiently by the heavy wrought-iron gateway. She was politely pleased to meet Desai, having heard much about him, of course, and walked femininely between us down St. Peter to Decatur. By this point I was a wreck of anticipation.

La Casa de los Marinos was only one block away! Okay, two short blocks with that strange little street in between. Past Fong smelling Chinese... The throb of Latin music in the night air... The dark doorway under its little sign, La Marina... Desai opened the swinging door, and we swam into the crowds and smoky, beery darkness in the First Room, into a sea of thunderous music from its omnipotent jukebox.

An immediate right turn through the crush and roaring rhythm brought us into the Second Room, my sacred Grotto, equally crammed to the walls with shouting sailors, whores, and assorted less professional debauchees, some trying to dance. A glance at Ronnie, desperately clinging to my arm, said she'd lost all previous bravado about sailor bars. Desai and I escorted her up the slight ramp and into the Third Room, the inner sanctum of the Basilica, stopping so she (and I) could fully appreciate the spectacle before us.

Just as jammed with loud revelers, but with different thundering music from the new juke box, the upper walls were still full of murals of swirling bodies, motorcycles, bulls, and matadors. The figures were a mad dream mirroring the mayhem on the floor below. I noted that the clock over the bar, as for many years past, still reads ten of three. Debauchery is timeless. Also, above the roiling crush, atop the garish new juke box, flickered tiny flames on the holy candelabrum.

We wormed our way between densely standing and desperately dancing bodies toward the back, breaking suddenly into a relative opening near the juke box. Gathered there were about a dozen folks in blue skullcaps and among them, a humble Henri I in a white one. Many of the pontiff's College of Bluejays were my old friends or lovers, and the crowd was full of various familiars who hadn't yet recognized me.

I stopped, overcome, looking around dumbly at the crowd and all the memories. When I looked back at the pope, Henri held his hands in reverent prayer. He bowed his head to me without a

word. Sensing that this was a pretty important moment for him, depraved saint meets mad pope and all, I walked solemnly up and kissed him on the skullcap. The sacred consistory, to a Bluejay, fell to its knees in religious awe.

Desai and Ronnie stood back while I got mobbed and mauled in embraces. Here were my tall Tony, shy Paul, wild roommate Rolfe, even some Tulane friends, other pals from forever, and favorite dancing partners Fontaine and Donna. When I got back to Henri, who'd observed the mobbing ecstatically, he lifted his right hand, and with an innate sense of ceremony, I bowed my head humbly for the papal blessing.

"We welcome you, St. Norman de La Casa!" Henri yelled over the crashing music, dark eyes big behind his thick, black-rimmed glasses. "We and our Holy Church welcome you home." He turned to the crowd and screamed, "Rejoice!" For a moment the music lost out to the shouts and whistles. Now that's what I call a triumphal return, I thought with appropriate humility.

Across the music I managed to present an astonished Ronnie to his eminence Henri I. I thought maybe she might have genuflected. When I introduced Desai, whom His Holiness hadn't known before in other than myth, they just shook hands, the Pope properly awestruck by the spiritual father of St. Norman. In his twinkling eye, I saw that my beloved was intensely amused by the popery.

With a kiss, Bluejay Tony stuck a Dixie in my hand, and the carouse took off like a rocket. Suddenly I was dancing again, here a merengue with Fontaine, there a pachanga with Donna, more merengues with strange women from the crowd. Once, barmaid Angie forsook her post in the First Room to dance a cumbia with me. Ronnie watched, mesmerized. Desai smiled his mystical smile.

Out of the crowd suddenly appeared the stately, gorgeous Lucita I'd known for years. She led me into a mind-bending *pasa doble*. The crowd even drew back to give us space for our graceful passes. As to be expected, my shirt was long since unbuttoned, clinging precariously to sweating shoulders. Ronnie eventually gathered her courage and tried to dance a merengue with me, I admit fairly successfully, but my hand on her waist felt her body stiff as a board.

Way too long deprived of the ecstasy of dance, and fortified by thirstily drunk Dixies, I soon danced myself into one hell of a holy, honking frenzy. With reverent decorum, the pontiff and his court observed this Rapture of St. Norman. The saint danced till the clock over the bar was almost right on and was finally willing, though it was still relatively early Seattle time, to call it a night.

Desai took care of Ronnie, escorting her to a cab, and Henri and I walked the several blocks to Ursulines. It was so utterly familiar on the way and in Paul's wonderful apartment with his big flower paintings on the walls and his huge, soft bed. I soon combined a tender memory of Paul and the taboo thrill of violating a reigning pope to create intricate rites probably unique in ecclesiastical history. It was a grand finale for five months of saintly celibacy.

#

.vi.

Let me tell you, transcribing Rick's journal is downright tedious. He wrote so small that when I look away from the page, I can't find where I left off. This last bit wore me out, and I decided to take a short vacation from the keyboard, just a day though. My social life has really taken off with my new friends.

Yesterday, Saturday, Deirdre and Lynn invited Mack and me on an outing to the local hot springs. We sat around in the pool with at least a dozen other folks of various types and shapes, all of us nude. Deirdre complimented me on my physique, and indeed I'm in much better shape than many of the other guys there were. Mack doesn't count—he's so tall and thin.

I can't remember ever having a problem with being nude, especially in some guy's bed, and was even in a naturist group some decades ago. This casual soaking with new friends in a crowd of naked strangers, some with notable features, showed how different the world now is

than in Rick's time. Oh, the hay that Casanova could've made in a hot spring. It staggers the mind. But I won't play that what-if game. He lived on a different planet called Seattle.

Eventually Lynn asked how the story's coming along. Having read the most recent pages that morning, Mack gave them background on Pope Henri and the HCBC and briefly described the return of St. Norman to La Casa. He did it a lot better than I could've. The women were both interested in reading it, and I invited them over for dinner next week.

Last night I met the bunch at the Titsling and danced with abandon. I think it could become a habit. This morning I slept in, had breakfast, and am now ready to forge onward.

#

Henri and Rick got up early Saturday morning for him to get to work at the Port, on the hook till Sunday night. At the gate, the pontiff bestowed a parting blessing on St. Norman. Rick marveled that Henri seemed so madly in love with him, mad being the operative word. But then he got realistic. Pope Henri I was in love with St. Norman de La Casa, of whom he was merely an incarnation. Rick hoped he'd played his role in the magical mystery play with artistry on the dance floor and spirituality in the papal bedchamber.

He caught the Jet back to Broadway and napped till noon and lunch with Desai and Frances. It was a beautiful warm Saturday, and he and Desai visited his old haunts around Tulane, the Student Center and campus. In nebulous philosophical discussion, they ambled past the old Rising Sun just to see its blue door half-hidden by bushes and didn't disturb Tony, who was probably still abed with somebody.

In the campus bookstore Rick bought a green kite, and they went into Audubon Park to fly it. While they were constructing the contraption, Desai took both Rick's hands in his and said, "Norman, my friend, I wish you could always be happy as you were last night."

They switched off on the task of flying the kite, all the while chattering like old times. Desai spoke of the virtues of Rick's suffering in Seattle, claiming, "Only by suffering can you recognize joy." Rick argued that he never had any difficulty recognizing joy, like the present moment. Being with his beloved friend again was the true point of coming back for Mardi Gras.

When the kite crashed into a live oak, they lay on the shady grass under it, and Rick was even happier than last night. Happier, that is, until Desai dropped his bomb. "I'll have to go back to India soon." Rick had known his friend's student visa had expired and for some reason Frances wouldn't marry him, so it had been inevitable, but it was still horrifying.

Here's what he wrote about the next night of revelry.

#

Dear Me,

...The witching hour arrived early, around nine thirty. We'd spend some time together in the Gin Mill before Desai's job at the Jax Brewery. We walked from the bus down Decatur to the Gin Mill, that Greek sailor dive, its dark doorway right across from the columned Customs Building.

Sweet toothless Alice was working the bar, proudly sporting her rolls of flesh over, under, and inside a skimpy halter top. A couple shiploads of swarthy, black-haired sailors filled the booths and tables, and several were dancing. Seeing me, Alice ran out from behind the bar shrieking, "*Agape mou!*" and grabbed me in a pillowy hug. Our first beers were on the house.

I sat with my beloved at a table in the back and enjoyed the view. Several carousing sailors displayed credentials of passing naughtical interest. Their tables were crammed with beer bottles, full and empty, and glasses likewise. The number on a table is supposed to show how much fun is being had at said table and is usually a fair gauge.

My preference runs to the younger sailor, one still young enough to be versatile, and possibly even affectionate. Once out of their early 20's, Greek men's orifices slam tight shut, and they forget

how to do anything but bump. Now, there's nothing wrong with getting bumped, mind you, but at times one would like to do some bumping too. When one of my favorite songs started, just such a dark-haired young sailor came out to dance. Desai nodded approvingly when I also got up to dance. The young one gave me a challenging glance, and we stepped, twirled and glided, almost together but not quite yet. Another great thing about Greek sailors: They dance with each other.

Afterwards, we went back to our tables. (It was way too early for me to get wound up yet.) I watched as an older sailor grabbed my young one's arm and hauled him out the back door, probably his jealous lover. Greek sailors are often operatically jealous over their *eromenoi*, especially when I'm around. Desai had bought another beer, his last before work, but mine was hardly touched yet. Much more motion was needed before my whistle would need wetting.

Soon I was back on my feet in a line dance with several sailors. There was no formal pattern of steps, just hold hands and skip along to the music. Dancing past the booth, I saw my young one cornered in it by his *erastes*, who turned and looked right at me.

It was Bambi! My cute sailor with the long mustache from two years ago. He gave me a big wink, jumped up from the booth, and broke into the line beside me, flashing the grin that won my body, if not my heart. He squeezed my hand, clearly with bumping on his mind. As we danced past our corner table, what to my wondering eyes should appear, sitting there with Desai, but a beaming Ronnie. Damn! Bambi's ardent messages continued through my hand in his, and doubly distracted, I finished the dance wondering what in the hell's she doing here?

At the end of the dance, Bambi seized me in a huge embrace with a loud "*Agape mou!*" and hauled me over to their booth. He introduced his equally swarthy Mediterranean mates, none of whom spoke English either, and warily presented his *eromenos*, a seductively embarrassed Nikos. They offered me a beer from their over-loaded table, but I indicated mine on the table in back, where Desai and Ronnie were safely observing.

Bambi and his friends escorted me over there and surrounding the table, enthusiastically met my friends with much shaking of hands. Before I knew it, my problem was solved. The sailors almost bodily conveyed Ronnie back to their booth. With a lady, Greek sailors are always borderline unctuous in their polite attentions. They installed her on a prominent chair and grandiosely offered a glass of cloudy *ouzo*, the traditional Greek drink for getting acquainted.

Desai and I also had to drink toasts to new friendships. When we were no longer necessary in the sailors' buzzing round the queen bee, Desai explained that he'd told Ronnie last night that we'd be here tonight. She'd come down to this dark waterfront street on her own, taking a walk on the wild side. I had to hand it to her for bravery above and beyond the call of femininity. Then Desai left for the brewery, and I turned to my new job as Ronnie's companion.

Dancing blithely around once more to an intoxicating *bouzouki* number, I watched Ronnie being entertained by her unintelligible court of swarthy sailors and was again impressed. She was reigning quite comfortably over her royal navy. I also noticed, meanwhile, a close conference between Bambi and Nikos.

Afterwards, the sailor boy came back out to dance again, keeping a bit away, but well within my gravitational range. In one of my turnabouts, I caught Bambi's eye. Smiling, he nodded. Then I locked on the gleaming, inviting eye of lovely Nikos, who began orbiting slowly around me, spiraling ever closer. Sadly, the song ended before the little Ganymede could crash into my Jovian atmosphere. Nikos excitedly seized my hand and pulled me out the back door.

Out back was a parking lot of sorts in the middle of the block, dark but for a lamp high on the wall. As I well knew, off to the right behind some banana trees was the best place to back my aroused young mariner bodily up against the dark brick wall and kiss him. His tongue spoke perfect English. After only a few thrusts of my hips against his, Nikos gasped into my mouth in the slow, moaning rhythm of ejaculating.

Shortly, when I brought Bambi's boy back inside the bar, weak-kneed and starry-eyed, he took the pacified Nikos into the booth beside him. I shook their hands with "*Efkharisto*." Ronnie gave me a questioning look, but I just shrugged. After all, I'd told her I was gay.

The next song was "Never on Sunday," and the sailors got Ronnie up to dance that in-line thing with arms linked and synchronized steps. She was an expert at it and glowed with the divine light of a true dancer. Ronnie was willingly called upon to dance that impossible way several more times to other songs, all the sailors wanting their chance to link arms with her, still very respectfully, of course. Between exertions, they plied her with *ouzo*, and I worried for her maidenhead, be it extant or otherwise. But Ronnie seemed to dance and laugh with no sign of the potent liquor's usual effects.

When their line-dance marathon was over, and I'd enjoyed a few more Zorba dances, I invaded the sailors' party and snatched away their guest of honor, my words audible to the whole Hellenic navy, "*Vamos a La Casa!*" The sailors exchanged looks, clearly thinking I was taking her home, as though she were my woman, perish the thought. They bid her long, formal Greek farewells, which she accepted regally. Out on quiet, dark Decatur Street, she laughed lightly, "That was really fun!" She had no concept of how much fun I had.

#

It was going on one when we got to La Casa, and the carouse was in full flux of a Saturday. This being just before Mardi Gras only made it denser and louder, even more than last night. In the Third Room Ronnie and I tried to obey the uproarious song "*Á Bailar Merengue*," but it was so crowded we could barely dance. Meanwhile I looked around for some avenue of escape. Although Ronnie was an impressive dancer and brave young woman, being in charge of her for the evening wasn't exactly a priority in my itinerary.

I figured no room to dance was a good reason to leave. Lying through my teeth, I claimed at merely one-thirty in the morning to be ready to go home. Ronnie was unused to these late nights and was okay with going. We fought our way back out onto Decatur, and like a god-send, found an empty cab at the light at St. Ann. Getting in, Ronnie told me what a good time she'd had, and I didn't say anything more committal about tomorrow than, "See you later."

That taken care of, I did what I'd always do whenever La Casa is too crowded, trot over to Dixie's. On this pre-Carnival weekend the famous watering hole was packed with hot stuff, many in glitter, masks, feather boas, and lingerie. I took a position holding up the front wall to peruse the populace, enjoying being free of women, and reminisced. Over there by the window I first rubbed legs with my Cajun baby Butch. Against that back wall I once nabbed a succulent crypto-juvenile named Lenny for a half-hour's eager sodomy. By the jukebox...

Having paid due respects to Dixie's in about fifteen minutes, I walked up Bourbon to Lafitte's in Exile, also the scene of adventures in the past. I was outrageously lucky to find a stool at the back side of the circular bar. Over a Dixie beer, I surveyed the crowd, remembering not to judge by looks, but it was hard not to pause over the pretty guys. I was trying to look for a nice guy, but how do you hunt for something you can't see? Across the bar sat an oblivious guy, almost featureless in face and formless in body, short hair neither brown nor blond. Kindly, one would say he wasn't bad looking, and honestly, not in any way good looking. Wondering if he might be a nice guy, I watched him get off the barstool and disappear into the crowd.

My attention was drawn toward the front wall where flashes of shapely bare shoulders shone sporadically through the shifting crowd. Fresh flesh always draws the eye, I remarked to myself, whereupon a hand rested on my arm.

The oblivious guy was at my shoulder saying, "Excuse me." He didn't give me time to do so and asked, "Do you know me?"

"Why, no," I said, taken quite by surprise.

"Oh. You were looking at me like you recognized me."

"Uh, no, I don't," I admitted, searching his open face. "I was just thinking about something."

"Oh. Well, I recognize you." The smile changed his face from oval to round. "You're a wild dancer! Hi." He held out his hand. "I'm Jim."

I shook it, enjoying the flattery. "Where'd you see me dance?"

"In a dive over on Decatur Street—last year at Mardi Gras." Jim's pale eyes livened as he confided, "You were dancing without a shirt on a barstool. I bet I watched you for two hours. So what's your name?"

That had to be the night I lost my other Madras shirt. "That was La Casa," I explained and replied grandly, "You can call me Norman. That is, Saint Norman, patron of sailors on shore leave." Jim's laughter was bubbly. "Norman! I knew you had to be demented!" He clapped me jovially on the shoulder and leaning closer, added, "No offense..."

So close, I saw gray hairs on Jim's temples and more in his short hair. At first I'd figured him for maybe thirty, young enough, but now, with a little shudder, I almost started to... Damn! Why'd he have to be old? Jim turned out to be in fact thirty-seven, as far as this kid was concerned, unequivocally old. But I let that slide. As a professor of Medieval and Renaissance History at a college in Kentucky, he got extra points. That was almost as esoteric as Slavic studies, which Jim thought in perfect harmony with my dementia.

He always came to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, his annual and only escape from a cruel planet he called Kaintfucky. I described my own exile on the cruel planet Abstinencia. Jim said he never worried about a place to sleep. During Mardi Gras, who slept anyway? Naps one could take wherever, whenever. Showing me his blue backpack, he boasted, "I travel light."

Admiring his attitude, in the spirit of Mardi Gras, I cried, "*Vamos a La Casa!*" Jim chugged the last of his beer, crumpled the can in his fist, and shouted, "*Vive Mardi Gras!*"

#

With these festive *cris de cœur*, we summoned the deluge. Stepping out of Lafitte's onto Bourbon, Jim and I were swept up and away in the surging flood of Carnival. The rest of the night was a blur streaking by too fast to catch detail—Royal Street—Third Room—Cumbia!—Fried Rice—Dawn over Decatur—Broadway—Morning-bright bed—Coitus!

After our brief nap, we had lunch with Desai and Frances, who found Jim very charming. After that I can't coherently remember the next three days. It was like time was suspended, cause and effect came untied, events shattered into still-shots shuffled and spliced at random, places disintegrated into somewhere else, familiar faces floated close and then faded into a background of parades, massed and masked bodies, mad music, screams of glee, more parades, beads, feathers, beer cans, writhing naked... Maybe you get the idea, Old Me. [*I most certainly do.*] There's no way I could keep track of it all. It was the deluge of Carnival.

The only festive spectacle I can nail to a specific time was the Comus parade on Fat Tuesday. It rolled right after dark with the *flambeaux* dancing along afore and aside the floats, the torches flickering on phantasmagorical creatures and gilded scenes of wild pomp and glitter. Using my old Mardi Gras strategy, I took Jim to catch it on the inside corner of its turn at Royal and St. Peter to get maximum exposure to the throws, a largesse of beads and doubloons. Needing no souvenirs in my carouse, I gave my booty to nearby shorter and slower folk.

At any one of the shuffled moments, be it day or night, I could be drunk or sober, exhausted or exhilarated, dancing or draped over the bar, hungry or thirsty or not, asleep or not, laughing or crying with friends, hugging or fending off strangers, flirting with a Latin or Greek sailor, kissing or... In dreamlike moments with Henri, Desai, Ronnie, Frances, Rolfe, Tony, and other friends, they were as inundated as I, swirling around in the maelstrom of merriment.

Throughout those three days, Jim, now a devotee of St. Norman, was the single lifeline for my sanity. He was ever beside me, ever ebullient, exciting, affectionate, athletic, protective, permissive, encouraging, willing, able, and hot as a firecracker. We fornicated frequently, again on the Broadway bed, on a couch at a party, on the floor in a hallway somewhere, and up against a dark tree along the levee beside the brewery, doing what Jim calls a "tupenny upright."



Too early on Ash Wednesday morning, Jim reluctantly left me and the commodious bed on Broadway to return to horrid Kaintfucky. He got into his cab, looked up at me sadly, and said, "Well, Norman, here we go back to our cruel planets." Holding my hand through the cab window, he added, "*Carne vale*, kiddo."

#

Rick's goodbyes with Desai were tearful. His Indian friend held him close, reminding him that he was a tiger in this jungle of life. (I can still feel that animal power in me, but nowadays it's more that of a jaguar.) It was only on the plane with Ronnie, who was lost in a post-Mardi Gras stunned trance, that Tricky Rick realized with a cold wash of horror the Latin meaning of Jim's farewell. And here he was sailing back to the cruel planet Abstinence. His magic mountain was wrapped in vast banks of cloud.

Though I'm still not given to superstition, portents, or such, you can't argue with true coincidence. This Ash Wednesday when Jim bade Rick a fond *Carne vale* was March 3, 1965, and in exactly one year to the day our pirate's life will change utterly. Wait for it.

#

This evening Kevin came by for a visit. Mack and I hadn't heard yet about his Friday night dinner date with Liam and hoped for an update. Kevin's wreath of curls was now an electric blue, which he explained as a new mood. He plopped on the sofa and smiled secretively, which piqued my curiosity.

While I poured our wine, again a cheap table variety, Mack remarked, "Well, Kev, you sure look like the cat that ate the canary."

"I had duck—à l'orange."

Mack pried. "What did Liam have?"

Kevin smirked. "That's for me to know and you to find out, dude."

"Maybe I will." Mack grinned lasciviously, and Kevin frowned.

Trying to get down to business, I asked, "So did you guys have any dessert?"

Kevin sighed, "Not quite." Mack and I remained respectfully silent. "We went back to his place and listened to music." He paused, abashed. "I only made it to first base. You know, a bird in the hand." When we'd chuckled at his expression, he added brightly, "We're getting together again next weekend."

I poured him some more wine. "Here's to the next inning and a home run."

Mack had me print off the pages of the Gin Mill episode, and after reading them, my blue-locked friend exclaimed, "Behind a banana tree?! Wow!"

"I really want to know," Mack remarked, "what Rick did besides kiss that sailor kid."

"Here, look." I pointed out the word 'shortly' starting the next paragraph. "That's plenty of time, darlin'. Whatever else happened is for me to know and you to imagine."

###

## CHAPTER 4. ENCHANTMENT

.i.

In a word, coming back to Seattle was harsh. Rick still couldn't think of it as coming home. After his Mardi Gras escape, he painfully felt the awesome abyss, like interstellar space, between his former life in New Orleans and this purported life in Seattle. His first few days back at classes and at work at the sorority were anesthetized by hallucinatory memories, and seeing all the Seattlitic faces again gave him the heebie-jeebies, like watching robots.

That Sunday evening the sisters had Rick and the other chums over for a big welcome home dinner, and he chattered on and on about the Mardi Gras madness. His account was

seriously bowdlerized with no mention of tupenny uprights but was colorful and wild enough to impress his sedate friends. Over the dinner they also talked about various plans for the coming summer. No one had any but Betsy, who was thinking of doing summer school.

Though in a tiny lobe of his brain Rick was imagining going back to New Orleans, with the Woodrow Wilson running out at the end of the spring quarter, he'd probably have to get a job here in Seattle. That noxious prospect and the disaster waiting to happen, Desai's departure, were simply more than he could bear.

When things got too awful to think about, Rick had a facile way of ignoring them and distracting himself from oppressive reality with lovely fantasies. He now turned to a favorite metaphorical activity, stalking the rare and elusive nookie bird. You should know that this gustatory delicacy is distantly related to the famously inedible frumious bandersnatch.

The big news was that by mid-March it started drying out a bit, and later there were occasional bright and even partly cloudy days (heavy on the cloudy part). Flashes of sun were invigorating. By early April there were whole clear days of earth-warming and -drying sunshine. Rick celebrated the sporadic appearances of magnificent Rainier with spirited dances on the deck and took Oná on wonderfully bright spring walks.

#

Rick's correspondence with His Holiness Henri I continued rapid-fire. The epiphany of St. Norman in the Basilica was credited with "hatching" the Pope into life at last, and his letters grew much more alive than all the glorious delusions of the HCBC. His recurrent professions of love for Rick were both simpler and more convincing.

Quite early along, Henri managed to see the movie "Zorba," and they both ran out and bought the soundtrack record. He played his in convocation with his Bluejays in the Music Room of the Napoleon House, and Rick danced madly on his deck in his Greek way.

The pontiff continued to perform the sacred dance for them both in La Casa, sending reports on chums and crowds. He lamented the invasion of the Third Room by younger novice carousers with no sense of rhythm. He even ran into Desai and had a long, impressive talk.

Part and parcel of Henri's hatching was moving right after Mardi Gras into the Ursulines apartment with Paul. His remarks on the new relationship weren't explicit, but considering the one bed in the place, Rick could read conjugality between the lines.

Hatchling Henri also advised of nights spent with Tony in Rick's old bed on Audubon Street. It was hugely gratifying for him that Henri was experiencing his old lovers and serving as his dancing viceroy on Decatur Street. Vicarious is a lot better than nothing.

By early April Henri finally fessed up to being in love with Paul. There was nothing ecumenical about it in the least. His simple admission was incredibly touching. The difficulty was that early on Rick had written about possibly coming back to New Orleans for the summer and living with Henri, who excitedly hoped to get them the fabulous penthouse in the Sultan's Harem house on Orleans and Dauphine, and when that fell through, he got a lead to a palatial flat on Chartres. Now Henri's love for Paul changed all that.

#

Let me digress a moment to remark apropos young Kevin's first inning with Liam. I truly appreciate his success in making it to first base. With Rick's history of home runs you probably think he had no experience with such hard-fought ballgames, but not so. Seattle's pitchers were formidable. To mix sports metaphors, when it was finally Rick's turn at bat, he came out swinging.

#

In early April Rick's advisor Professor Abernathy, caught him after the History of Russian class to talk. He noted Rick's lack of social contact with classmates and with friendly concern advised him to go to the Russian Club meetings and get to know some other students. Being a grad student and excellent speaker of the language, apparently Rick had something of an obligation to help the poor undergrads struggling to learn Russian. He figured that it might be a good hunting ground for the wild nookie bird. Here's what he wrote after the meeting.

Dear Me,

...The Russian Club meeting was in a classroom where about a dozen youths sat in vague groups at the desks. I took a desk in the middle of them. Backsliding into beauty bigotry, I surveyed the flock of turkeys. Some toms spread nice fans and wagged passable wattles though.

Stragglers entered, joining this or that bunch, and the last to arrive, a tall guy with a proud crest of brown curls, was apparently without flock. He walked gracefully over and sat at the desk beside me, smiled at me, brown-eyed, for twice as long as legal in Seattle, and then turned his delicate profile to the front where a pasty, pimpled kid was calling us to order.

I kept a sidling eye on this strange bird, from first glance clearly not a turkey, and definitely not a bandersnatch. While he listened to the club's mundane matters, I checked him thoroughly up, down, and out: a boyishly voluptuous mouth, finely curved nose, and lanky, with great posture (i.e., hot body). He was expensively dressed: fluffy sweater, linen pants that looked sinfully soft, fashion-plate shoes. It looked like I'd finally found me a fine-feathered specimen of the exotic nookie.

The nonsensical palaver of the meeting droned on, and while pretending to listen, I felt my neighbor looking at me. Not to spook him, I didn't move. Then the pimple at the front of the room suddenly asked me to introduce myself. In Russian, I greeted them as friends and named myself Ruslan Romanovich, (an alias chosen long ago for just such a club), and rattled off graduating from Tulane and now blah-blah at U-Dub.

That apparently being the meeting's last business, the others stood up, but the rare creature next to me stayed sitting and greeted me formally in good Russian. He was called Ilya, truly, with a Russian mother. As though he was following me, we walked together toward 45<sup>th</sup> Street with Ilya telling Ruslan about his sophomore life living with clueless parents and his attendant emotional difficulties. Appreciating his subtle, graceful stride, angelic face, and brown curls, I decided to make things perfectly clear by asking if he had a boyfriend. For a moment Ilya looked down blushing and then said a couple, but not for very long.

At the big street, Ilya stopped and said he had to get home by five or his mother would worry—and that long bus ride back to Olympia. He promised to see me at next Tuesday's club meeting. I asked if he's by chance a prince. His great-grandfather was one.

#

There was a week of fevered anticipation, and finally it was Tuesday again. Rick wrote:

Dear Me,

...Waiting at the entrance to the building, I planned to waylay Ilya and snatch him away from the meeting. Jogging down the sidewalk and waving, Ilya ran up to me like an elegant crane and wrapped me in fluttering wings, whispering a Russian endearment in my ear.

Without discussion, we two birds of fine feather immediately ditched the meeting and flew with long, flaming tails trailing back to Little Sweden. Fortunately Ilya didn't even notice my NEED NOOKIE NOW sign. Once inside my golden nest, I put on Stravinsky's "*Le Sacre du Printemps*," Ilya's preference. Though appropriate, I'd have gone for "The Firebird" myself.

I led Ilya by the hand out onto the incredible deck to show off my pet mountain. He took my other hand as well and led me into a whirling rite with the music, round and round, hooting and whooping with laughter. By George! It was the mysterious mating dance of the crested nookie fowl, harbingers of spring.

Somehow I steered Ilya back into my bower. Circling around the room, ritually fluttering and displaying our plumage, we lunged in for swift pecks on cheeks and noses, coyly avoiding the lips. I tried to maneuver my eagerly bobbing and hopping suitor toward the bed, but Ilya resisted deliciously. I finally managed to jab my pointy tongue straight into his mouth.

The kiss knocked us down onto the bed, breast bone to bone. Ilya wiggled under me, moaning through his nose in avian ecstasy. Slave to my gonads, I reached down between us to touch his desire. Ilya also reached down—and pulled my hand away! With a heave, he wrestled us over and sat up on my hips with a look that would ignite a stone. One of us sure needed to get naked pretty damn quick. I started in on his belt buckle, but he grabbed my hands.

Brown eyes panicking, he whispered in Russian, “No. God, please no!”

I stopped, horrified, switching to English. “No? Why the hell not?”

“Oh, Ruslan, I can’t!”

I stroked the longing in his soft pants. “Sure, you can. Let’s get these old pants off.”

Ilya struggled up off me, crying, begging, “No, please. It’s wrong!”

I leapt up right behind him, almost shouting, “Wrong!? What’s wrong?”

Ilya’s tears started. The record chose that moment to be over. In the silence he mumbled, “To do that...” He turned to the wall and sobbed, “...to do those sick things.”

“Sick?!” I sputtered, furious over our *coitus* so stupidly, unnecessarily *interruptus*. In spite of my outrage, I tried to focus on his real problem. The poor baby has to be a victim of some vicious orthodoxy. No wonder the boyfriends didn’t last long. They never even got to first base. “Okay, Ilyusha,” I sighed, “Let me guess. You hate yourself for being gay, right?”

“But I’m not a queer,” he sniffled miserably. “I’m just not. I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am.” I stroked the soft sweater on his back, surely cashmere, and added (in Russian), “You’ve got to love yourself, dear one.”

“I have to go.” Turning to the door, he tried to smooth his lovely feathers.

“Okay. If you change your mind,” I said, “you know where I am. But if you do come back, Ilyusha, you better be ready to rock and roll.”

Letting my self-loathing Russian prince out the door with a resigned bye, I went out to watch him go down the stairs and was startled to find Betsy standing in the hall by her door. She lifted her brows eloquently and asked archly, “Can I borrow your sign?”

“Sure.” Pulling the useless piece of trash off my door, I handed it to Betsy with a sly smile. “Maybe it’ll work for you.”

#

.ii.

Today while I was eating my egg salad lunch over a bargain book catalog, I got a call from young Johnny asking how the story’s coming along. I said it’s coming along. He asked me to email what I’ve got so far for him to read, and he’ll get it to the others. The idea of doing this thing in instalments is comforting. When I told Johnny about Carol and Janet looking into how to make it widely available for free, he said he’ll ask Jason, the computer pro, for ideas too.

I emailed it to him right up through the previous page, which is actually a rather good spot for a break. Now things will start getting serious for Rick, if still nonsensical. You might say this is when fate steps in, but I don’t believe in fate. Suffice it to say that this story would never have happened were it not for a perky Pekingese named Oná, the fateful pupdog. And now the course of events sped up and as I said before, got serious.

#

The following weekend was the holiday celebrating the ritual slaughter and resurrection of another deity. For Rick, the holiday meant time off to celebrate the spring now burgeoning everywhere in flowers and new leaves under sunny skies. On Good Friday afternoon he took

Oná to Ravenna and danced with her on the hillside feeling like a magnificent striped feline frolicking in the spring. Then he skipped festively back to Little Sweden, planning to return to Ravenna on the morrow. The weather was too splendid to be indoors.

The letter was waiting for him. With trepidation he went out on the deck to open it. Frances wrote that on Monday afternoon Desai had been caught with his expired student visa. They'd taken him away, and he'd be deported back to Bombay on Friday—today!

That disaster that had been hovering over him like the Hindenburg exploded in flames and crashed down on Rick's head in a crown of fire. His wail of woe poured out over the treetops and down the hillside to the lake. With Zorba on the phonograph, he danced on the deck for Desai who was being carried off—at this very moment!—to a galaxy impossibly far away.

Rick wailed and lamented the loss of this beloved friend and father of his soul until time to feed the Sisters of Perpetual Appetite. Afterwards, feeling like a wounded animal, he went straight to bed and hell in a hand basket for most of the next thirty-six hours. Betsy kindly called in sick to the sorority for him. It wasn't exactly sleep, but a delirium lasting through a rainy Saturday and into a sunny Easter morning. He awoke feeling okay but still rather delirious.

Here's what Rick wrote about that holiday:

Dear Me,

...On my way back from the bathroom, I ran into Betsy in the hall. She marveled that I'm again amongst the living and said Richard the Twooth's parents had asked us out to their place on the shore for a cookout in the afternoon.

I rode with Betsy and her new boyfriend Bob, that fellow Little Swede, in his fancy car. He's a nice fellow, but I still wouldn't have recognized him outside the context of the breakfast table. We followed Gene and the sisters in his VW around to the south end of Puget Sound.

The Twooth's folks, a warm and pleasant, round-faced couple, were grilling a huge salmon just caught that morning. Their place is on a bank maybe twenty feet above the water. The shore of Puget Sound curves around an inlet facing mostly west, and a broad expanse of it can be seen from their tree-studded lawn. Golden Oná was in canine heaven, running about on the green grass and yapping with the resident cocker spaniel, black and white.

A pitiful survivor of my own private earthquake, I needed solitude and begged off from the group to go down to the water. There were steps down the steep wooded and bushy bank. The tide was out, and a few feet of muddy, stony flat edged the sharply rising bank. The water barely lapped on the shore, only moving with the breeze. The afternoon was wonderfully brillig, a balm for my bruises, though I still felt half-dead and half-mad from the agony.

Not far down along the narrow sunny beach, I stopped to sit at the foot of the bank in the shade of a white-flowering tree. Watching across the wide, glistening water for slithy toves, I gingerly felt around the gaping hole in my chest, the wound I'll now wear forever.

Some while later, my uffish thoughts were interrupted by a couple walking up the beach holding hands, a hallmark of the frumious ilk. They didn't see me resting there by the Tumtum tree. The male, blond as any hereabouts, was stunning, and remember, that's coming from someone newly risen from the dead.

The female was burbling something I didn't care to hear, her gaze off across the inlet where the borogoves were all mimsy. When the male noticed me, he flashed a blue-eyed smile that locked on mine. Instantly I recognized his noble species as my own. He gave a small wave of his wingtip in greeting, and I saluted his magnificence with mine.

The gleam of gold on his feather-finger. How horrible—a splendid nookie bird in captivity. The poor creature! His tender look begged me to save him, to free him from the Jubjub bird. But what could I do? I blew him a kiss. Then the wife turned and was startled to see me. I simply said hi, and she hurried her captive off along the tide-flat.

I was so sad for the sweet bird in his cage, but I did indeed feel risen from the dead, blessedly alive again, a whole new animal—a tiger. And the world itself seemed new too, a magical, incomprehensible jungle, where I've simply got to rely on my tiger instinct. A surge of wild animal power made me gyre and gimble on the stony wabe.

Much relieved but still grieving, I eventually went galumphing back to the crowd at our cookout. The salmon was fabulous, as were the local oysters.

#

The Monday of the following week was Rick's birthday, his twenty-third, and entering his twenty-fourth year was a good time to get his locks shorn, but not too short. By now his hair was down to his shoulders and rather a pain to take care of. It was a little traumatic for his self-image as a fringe faerie, but Betsy said the new cut was sexy, so he was satisfied.

He didn't tell her (or anyone else) about it being his birthday and went with Oná to Ravenna for a private festival in the frabjous afternoon. Taking off his shirt, he lay on it with the sun on his back and watched some teenaged boys kicking a soccer ball around. Oná scampered around with them until she got tired of never catching up with the ball. Once, the prettiest boy chased the ball to Rick's slope, stopped it, cast him a shining glance, and kicked the ball.

Watching the beamish boy race away, Rick thanked the universe for the birthday present. In celebration, he jumped up and did a tiger dance on the hillside, wondering if maybe spring might prove to be the miracle cure for Seattlitis. First there was that look from Ilya, and now this soccer player had actually looked at him too. It was exhilarating to finally be visible.

At the sorority several of the sisters complimented Rick's haircut, and regardless the source of admiration, it made him feel even better about the shearing. That evening he went to see "A Shot in the Dark" with Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau, hands-down the funniest film he'd ever seen. After the fits of laughter, he felt purged, flushed, scrubbed clean of the noxious crud accumulated in the past year. Now he had a whole new year to make into something truly super, callooh, callay!

In the theater lobby Rick ran into Barbie with Richard the Twooth, who both liked his haircut. Rick was pleased to see them out together but sad that clearly the spring hadn't cured the Twooth of Seattlitis. His eyes stayed studiously averted. Barbie invited Rick back to the apartment with them for a drink and pooch-visit. I'll let him describe the visit.

Dear Me,

...Sipping at a scotch and soda, I cuddled little Oná and chatted. When I asked Martha where Gene was this evening, she explained that he was lying low for a while—because her real boyfriend Tim was coming from Michigan to visit for a couple days. Big of Gene, I thought.

Then she laid it on me. Could I possibly let Barbie stay at my place tomorrow and Wednesday nights to give them some, you know, privacy? The two twin beds in their bedroom, as I well knew from sleeping in one over the holidays, were too close together for private activities in one to go unnoticed from the other.

Barbie gave me a plaintive, waif-ish look. To consider me as a solution, they must really be scraping bottom now this night before. Why in the hell was the Twooth just sitting there and staring at the opposite wall? He apparently has a great big apartment. But when you get right down to it, I figured, for a girl to bunk with a queen is actually a nice safe sort of situation.

Trying not to hesitate for too long, I weighed hospitality against inconvenience. Of course, I've got the big double bed, but I'd have to wear pajamas, something I hate. Ultimately, I casually allowed as how a house-guest would be okay for a couple nights. The sisters were very grateful, and the Twooth actually gave me a momentary glance of thanks.

#

Tuesday evening after the feeding frenzy, Rick went over and met Tim, a toothsome, slender fellow with bright brown eyes glinting with possibilities. Yes, indeed! Tim was a nookie bird in frumious plumage. Rick would've gaily blown Tim's cover, so to speak, but the cute guy was Martha's party. After a short walk with Oná, he escorted Barbie and her overnight bag back to Little Sweden.

While Barbie rocked and read, Rick wrote a letter to Henri highly recommending last night's hilarious film. Then Barbie decided to go down the hall and visit Betsy, and he relished the solitude. When his guest returned, they agreed that it was time to go to bed. While she was in the bathroom, Rick changed into a T-shirt and sweat pants, the best he could do for sleep wear. Barbie came back in a long nightgown. Lying down at a good distance from the girl, he felt weird in clothes but quickly managed to fall asleep.

As a gracious host, in the morning Rick walked Barbie part way home, only turning off for his Serbo-Croatian class. That evening after feeding the females at the farm, he came late to the big dinner at the apartment with Martha and Tim, just in time for dessert. Tim kept giving Rick brazen looks, taunting his inner beast, but he managed to restrain the tiger and be properly sociable with everyone. The Twooth was there, as well as Betsy and Bob.

They walked with Rick and Barbie back to Little Sweden afterwards, where Betsy broke out a new jug of Tavola, and Rick put on the soundtrack of "Black Orpheus." This impromptu party was the Twooth's first time to Rick's digs, and he greatly appreciated the deck, though there wasn't much view at night without a moon. Once the extraneous people left, Barbie and Rick got ready for bed same as before.

#

Dear Me,

After writing to you yesterday afternoon about the successfully chaste night with a woman in my bed, I did trough duty for the sorority sisters and then had dessert at the real sisters' dinner party, a delicious custard Martha calls Pompadour Pudding. Sadly, I couldn't sample the tempting Figgie Pudding the Tim kept offering me with his big brown eyes. But I told my tiger he'd simply have to sleep tonight. In the jungle, the quiet jungle...

Writing to you this afternoon, Old Me, I'd rather not mention last night, but for some sick reason you may want to remember the experience. [*I do, for no good reason.*]

I slept soundly dreaming of my tiger a-prowl through the dark jungle, like in that Henri Rousseau painting. Then something moved—maybe Barbie bumped my shoulder—and still half in dream, some instinct made me seize the body lying next to me. How we got my sweatpants down and her nightgown up, I have no idea, but I mounted the female with all the finesse of a rooster in rut. Barbie simply lay docilely under me accepting the brief insertion. Before you could say, "Cock-a-doodle-doo," the cock-a-deedle was done with an imperceptible climax.

Rolling off her, I muttered, "I'm sorry." I pulled up my pants and since Barbie said nothing and didn't even move, pulled her nightgown down. Then I buried my face in the pillow, mortified. Wondering what on earth she must think about my crude seduction.

Cowardly, this morning I left my violated guest sleeping and snuck out of the room. In the bathroom on the cold reality of the toilet I cursed my miserable weakness and stupidity. After all my resolution and revulsion, I'd just screwed someone without any desire—just for the sheer animal sex of it. And a woman! For the first time in my life, a stabbing pain of true regret twisted in my gut, but strain as I might, I couldn't pass it. Humbly repenting my brutishness did no good. It's not true that any orgasm's better than none.

At breakfast in the main house, I sucked on coffee along with other sleep-logged boarders. Jim raised an eyebrow, probably having seen my female guest. Better acquainted after last evening, Bob gave me a half-hearted morning-after greeting. I stirred the viscous grey remorse of my oatmeal,

unable to appreciate its brown sugar and plump raisins. All of a sudden a loud cricket-chirp started. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Just as suddenly, everyone but I got up from the table and marched like soldiers out the door.

Naturally, I had to go see what in the world was going on. The crickets were going wild. By the time I got to the front door, the others were out in the street—which undulated in mysteriously slow waves under them, the big sycamores shaking wildly. I grabbed the door frame to steady myself and felt the awful chirping coming from the house itself. First the brick chimney on the fraternity next door crashed across our front yard, and then a stone one down the way collapsed in a heap of rocks.

The earthquake lasted about a minute [scoring a serious 6.5 on the Richter scale, as I learned later]. Cowering in the doorway, I wasn't really afraid, just frozen in awe. There was something magical about the earth moving like that. I considered the medieval notion of natural disasters as divine retribution for the wickedness of mankind but flatly rejected that. My foul deed wasn't wicked, just something animals do all the time. I found it easier to accept the earthquake as a stern message to avoid such misbehavior in the future.

When the quake was over, it seemed like another different world, one on a new angle or level. I raced next door and upstairs to find Betsy crying in the hall. Barbie was crying too, huddled on the mattress, too terrified to talk, even about last night's diddle. She was awakened by the bookcase right beside the bed tipping over and dumping my books everywhere. My philodendron got scrunched.

I was profoundly grateful not to have to speak about the dirty water under the bridge. Waiting for the girls to get dressed so we could go check on Martha, I wondered again with chagrin what poor Barbie must have felt about that summary hump in the dark with not so much as a kiss. Perhaps it's unkind of me to doubt she could've enjoyed it any less than I did. When they were ready to go, Barbie gave me a bright, friendly smile conveying neither rebuke nor absolution and hopefully no memory of last night's regrettable experience. Maybe the trauma of the earthquake has given her amnesia. I'd like some of that myself.

#

*.iii.*

Yesterday evening's invite to dinner at George and Mario's house was a pleasure. Mack told me they've got a nice place on the edge of town but neglected to mention the spectacular grounds and swimming pool. Jason and Johnny came also, and the six of us lounged poolside with drinks enjoying the western evening light. I asked George about upcoming engagements, and he spoke excitedly about a gig in Cincinnati next week and another at the end of the month in Mobile. Mario said he's hoping to get a role for him with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. It sounds like his career is off to a good start.

Very soon Johnny brought up the subject of my writing, which he's now calling my memoir. To my surprise, he's already copied it to our friends, so everybody there had read that first installment up through the feathery fiasco with Ilya. I found their enthusiastic compliments a bit unnerving. Jason commented that he'd found the Mardi Gras sequences "smoking hot," and George particularly enjoyed all Henri's papal folderol and the return of St. Norman to La Casa.

Mario was the one to ask what really happened behind the banana tree with Nikos, and Mack explained the literary trick for me. Johnny thought it was a perfect way to make the reader envision the most mind-boggling sex acts. I laughed and explained using that one-word trick because I simply couldn't describe what did happen. Just like Rick couldn't write the love scene in his holiday novel. I again refused to say precisely how Rick ravished that sailor boy.

George commented on the sequence with Ilya that his problem is still so common with gay youth today, especially those raised among fundamentalists. Jason thought Rick's phrase "vicious orthodoxy" a perfect description of those types. Self-consciously, Mario asked if Rick's hunt for nookie birds meant he was looking for big dicks, and with a wink at his embarrassment



concerning that touchy subject, I explained that the term was now much broader—for any bird capable of producing nookie in appreciable quantity.

Amid general hilarity we went inside to the dining room, a high-ceilinged, many-windowed space in which the large table didn't look all that big. The eastern views were sweeping panoramas of valleys and low mountains. Mario had made us enormous amounts of a marvelous paella, which we devoured avidly. Jason told us about Deirdre and Lynn's wedding plans for about six weeks hence at the nature center in the nearby foothills.

Then our hosts talked about their adoption plans which are still in the research phase. Johnny asked if they wanted a boy or a girl, and it turned out George wants a girl and Mario a boy. Mack suggested they try and get a discount on two, but I warned that when it comes to having kids, one and one makes three. I listened to the table talk in increasing wonderment at the new freedom of the gay world. How amazing it is to have lived to see us set free. Only half a century. Now if I can just live long enough see some other social stupidities eradicated, but I fear that may be wishful thinking.

Mario had orchestrated the dinner so that Liam arrived to join us for a dessert of rowdy rum cake, a special Puerto Rican recipe. Kevin's heartthrob had been at a community college class in Spanish literature and was currently struggling through passages from Don Quixote. Liam is excruciatingly attractive, especially when he smiles with a twist of the lip that gives him a dimple. I found out he's indeed Black Irish.

When Mack asked me if Rick had ever bagged an Irishman for his United Nations list, I admitted he hadn't and remarked archly to Liam that it still isn't too late to join the club. He blushed nicely and innocently asked what club. George kindly explained that this old man was once a gay Don Juan with conquests from all over the world. It was my turn to blush nicely.

Mack remarked that Liam really should read the memoir I'm writing, and Johnny ran out to get a printout from his car. When he got back with the sheaf of pages, Mack announced to the group that he'd read in the afternoon that Rick bangs a girl. Everyone was scandalized. I claimed it was an accident, just a mindless and animalistic mating. Jason said he'd once had anonymous sex like that, and so had everyone else. But the companionship in misdeed didn't make me feel any better about Rick's terrible hospitality and weak will.

Over our post-prandial coffee, Jason brought up his thoughts about what to do with the stuff I'm writing. He figures it's great for Johnny to copy it to his gay history class, but to "put it out there" somehow for free should be a snap. We can just set up a website with the memoir for free download to the world. Johnny added that then it will simply be a matter of publicizing it being available. I have a hard time seeing that as a simple matter, but didn't comment. Mario, ever the business man, suggested making it a wiki sort of site, something like gaymemoirs.com, where gay people can post their life stories for people to read for free.

I hugely appreciated my friends' synergy on my story but told them I'm taking a break from the writing for a bit to work on something else—a coloring book—and finish the drawing currently under way. Maybe I can get back to the memoir in a week or so. I explained that it's icons of Aztec deities. As might be expected, they were nonplused by the weirdness.

On the way back to my place, Mack wondered about some of the strange words Rick used in that Easter sequence on the stony beach that he'd read this afternoon. He didn't know the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll, and so I recited the first verse for him. I said Rick had apparently used those words to reflect the nonsensical nature of the new world he found himself in after rising from the dead. Mack thought that made sense.

Mack came in to see my Aztec drawings, which I'd not bored him with before. I showed off the icon of Chalchiuhtotolin, The Jade Turkey, god of young warriors, my first foray into martial art, which he found remarkable. With a hug, he called me a turquoise turkey.

#

This morning after breakfast I zipped off that account of last night's dinner and with a second cup of coffee, immediately switched from word processor to graphics program, spending a couple hours on a cameo figure of a monkey blowing on a conch shell. It's to be an accessory in the icon of the God of the Wind, Ehecatl. At any rate...

I was still cleaning up the lines when Carol called to say she and Janet had thought of a strategy for distribution. They figure we can find some gay organization website to post it, maybe in instalments, as a free e-book. I was properly grateful for their creative thought and told Carol about Jason's thought to make a website to do just that. She said she'd talk to him.

As we were saying goodbye, she mentioned getting the email from Johnny and assured me they'd get it read soon. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to dive back into the pixels.

#

For the next several days I swam around in that virtual sea of black and white pixels, only coming ashore for the schedule of daily activities like meals, gym, family, Mack, etc. I find the "envisioning" of my drawings just as engrossing as the "articulating" of my writing, and I can drift off in a trance over either as I tramp along on the treadmill. Perhaps there's something psychologically revealing about me that I like to tread barefoot on the mill.

One morning while I was playing with designs for a circular pattern, Carol called again to give me their reactions to the first instalment. Both liked the holiday novel episode and Rick's wild Mardi Gras experience, of course, and felt the Ilya debacle quite poignant. Oh, and Janet will be seeing Jason next week for lunch to talk about the website idea. Fortunately, the too damned many women thing and Ronnie affair didn't particularly bother the women. Janet was concerned, however, about Rick's retreat into a fantasy world of nookie birds. I told her that it will only get worse as Rick starts believing in magic.

Apart from going dancing at the Titsling that Saturday night with my young friends, including Kevin now with a blond wreath of curls and the divine Liam on their latest rendezvous, I worked all weekend on eye-wobbling details of the god's regalia. When Mack came over Sunday evening, he passed on a rumor that our pirate friend managed to board Liam's ship but had no details on what booty was snatched.

Here it is now a Wednesday, and I'm weary of my visual digital game, surely as hypnotic and addictive as the video games that stultify today's young folk, but at least a productive activity. On my Ehecatl icon I still have the weird crest and the birds of the directions to do, but they'll wait while I turn back to my verbal digital game.

#

*.iv.*

After the earthquake, Rick very quickly swept the dirt under the rug along with that other ugly dust ball of a summer job and gave it no more thought. Barbie never referred to their dalliance in any way, and whenever he'd show up for a walk-date with Oná, their friendly relations continued as before. The big thing was that the earthquake ended Martha's liaison with Tim, and Gene moved up to the A-Team in her affections.

In the magnificent spring Rick started sitting between classes on the grassy Quad by Smith Hall to sunbathe, the way he was used to doing at Tulane. It felt odd since no one else was doing it, but tanning wasn't as weird as the guy that rode a unicycle all over campus.

Besides, being conspicuous was good advertising. Rick hoped his shirtless manliness might attract some appropriate attention, but no.

For the flood of students on the sidewalks, he was apparently as invisible as when fully clothed. Once Rick accepted that invisibility, it was liberating, and he got up to do a silent Greek dance like Zorba on the beach. At first he wondered if such spontaneous public dancing might look insane, but if no one could see him anyway... Besides, if Seattle wouldn't give him places to dance, he'd just have to dance wherever and whenever he wanted. Spring demanded it. Dancing was his right, his art, and he'd make it whether or not anybody cared to look.

On the afternoon dog-walks, Rick went frequently to Ravenna. While he cavorted on the hillside like a spastic sprite, Oná explored down in the ravine. In these more private effusions, he found his silent dance evolving and growing with leaps, swirls, and impromptu poses.

Of one such Ravenna recital, Rick wrote:

Dear Me,

...On this fine sunny day, a perfect *après midi d'un faun*, I danced in Ravenna again. I'm no Nijinsky by any stretch of the imagination, but my body vibrates with divine force and the music in my head. My dance now is moving into slow sweeping motions and geometric forms, the way a satyr dances, a cadenza of lascivious prancing.

To my surprise, a fellow passing nearby suddenly started copying me. I continued my satyr-stomp, and he curved arm for arm, lifted foot for foot. He had blond hair as long as my best, held back with a red band around his forehead, and an endearing face with a thin little beard tufting his chin. He was lithe in tattered jeans and rumpled shirt and had a truly joyous blue eye, the first I've found in all these months in Seattle. Our coordinated movements were thrilling. Eventually, as though by mutual agreement, we broke from the dance.

Stepping up to me with a huge smile, the guy exclaimed, "You're beautiful, man!" and seized me in a hug. When he let go, he said, "That was some cool 'tie chee.'" He flashed that smile again, said, "Peace, brother," and trotted off toward a girl in an old-fashioned dress, colored scarves, and beads. He threw his arm around her, and they walked off across the slope.

How thrilling to meet a real, live fringe, definitely my kind of guy. I did indeed feel beautiful but had to wonder what 'tie chee' might be. Back at Little Sweden, Betsy kindly explained about the Chinese martial art called *tai chi*. I really like the concept of impeccability of motion and will have to work on that.

At the sorority house in the evening, one of the girls beckoned to me, the one who always speaks French with the servants. "*Garçon!*" Approaching, I suavely inclined my head for her wishes. She lowered her voice and said, "*Vous êtes très beau.*"

Maybe she'd actually seen me dancing on campus. "*Merci, mademoiselle,*" I replied with a nod, adding, "*C'est vrai?*" My interrogative intonation was rhetorical. Then I sashayed saucily off to the kitchen. Feeling beautiful makes me even hornier, like there should be little points poking up through my hair.

#

Longing to see some skin other than his own, Rick realized one afternoon that he could go to the swimming pool. While there was ample skin, the flesh it covered wasn't necessarily all that attractive. In the journal he commented: There were some fine backs, of course, shapely thighs and chests, cute noses, full crotches, and flat tummies, but too few notable buttocks. Sadly, most charms existed separately, rarely more than one on a single body.

The wonderful thing was that swimming laps made his shoulders and whole body feel tuned and pumped, in other words, even more beautiful. It was puzzling why, even in his revealing blue Speedo, Rick remained invisible. Except for once. While he was in the shower,

he caught two freshman-type boys sneaking looks at his crotch, for what that was worth from typical curious adolescents.

Even unappreciated, Rick got to feeling like beauty incarnate, an Adonis. Okay, a hairy Adonis with crooked teeth, but a red-hot number nonetheless. He possessed such charming features: fantastic thighs and chest, exceptional nose, smooth belly, and fully filled Speedo, front and back. Why then, o why, didn't anybody care? His satyr horns were now two inches long.

#

One evening Betsy snagged Rick coming back from work at the sorority with an invitation to the sisters' for a 'drinkie-poo.' Gene and Richard the Twooth were there, and Rick was pleased to see Barbie paying warm attention to his friend and little to the Lionheart.

Gene made a toast to the imminent end of the term and to the summer to come. They solemnly drank to that, and he enthusiastically announced a great summer job opportunity. A new hotel-casino at Lake Tahoe was about to open, and they were looking for summer-off college folk. Gene wanted to do it and invited the rest of them along as a U-Dub contingent.

Clearly having signed on to the idea already, both sisters nodded excitedly. Betsy, the Twooth, and Rick wanted some time to decide. Deciding big things was Rick's least favorite task, and something as big as going away for the summer would be fraught with consequences.

To help think things through, he wrote a long letter to the Pope. Going back to New Orleans didn't make much sense now with Henri and Paul's new relationship and especially since Rick had no money to go there in the first place. Wherever he spent the summer, he'd have to get a job. In New Orleans or Seattle either one there'd be the horror of looking for one, which couldn't be put off much longer in any case.

Now here was a strangely exciting opportunity, a summer at Lake Tahoe that even came with a job in a casino. That made a lot more sense than sticking around by himself on the planet Abstinencia and working in some boring store or office. With the contingent, he'd even have the comfort of friends at Tahoe. Besides, if Rick decided on Tahoe, then there wouldn't be any more vexing decisions to make. It was definitely the path of least resistance. And also, something told him that the famous resort would provide great nookie hunting.

By the next day, they'd all decided. The Twooth would come along too, but Betsy decided to stay at UDub for the summer quarter. She could live at the apartment while the gals were away. So it would be a party of five. Rick was fine with being the odd number out and sincerely hoped Barbie and the Twooth were finally getting involved. And he'd go hunting.

#

.v.

On Friday afternoon while Rick was getting ready for work at the sorority, he got a call from Gene. It was the next Monday before he could write about what happened.

Dear Me,

...Gene asked if I'd be willing to help with a kids' campout tomorrow and Sunday. One of the regular counselors had fallen sick. It sounded like fun, and at work I arranged to take tomorrow off...

...It turned out to be fun after a fashion, but more like exciting and challenging. From the very first moment of the experience, too busy for conscious thought, I was literally snatched out of my usual world of female energy (and self-involvement), and tossed into a whirlpool of juvenile masculine energy (with my focus now exclusively on somebody other than myself).

The Cub Scout campout was at Fort Lawton, a woodsy place in Northwest Seattle with a lighthouse on a point. The parents delivered their little scouts and camping gear well before eleven on Saturday morning, some twenty six-, seven-, and eight-year old boys. From that moment on, we

five counselors, Gene, I, and three harried young fathers, could only try assiduously to contain and direct, forget truly control or lead, the swirling horde of kids, a cyclone of small bodies racing about and shouting for no apparent reason.

With an insane amount of ado, we shepherded the cats. Each of us had a pack of five little creatures virtually sparkling with exuberance who never faced in the same direction, never listened to anything said to them, never knew what they were supposed to be doing or where we were going, and never stopped chattering like demented squirrels.

I kept my cubs moving along through a cheese sandwich lunch at the campsite, afternoon hike of slow progress through woods to the point, and tour of lighthouse. An equally slow trek back to camp for frenetic games of balls bouncing and skinny arms and legs flailing. Standing aside to watch the mayhem, I observed to Gene that the three dads seemed unperturbed. Can people really become accustomed to such chaos?

The campfire supper was hamburgers and potato salad, prepared and consumed with maximum confusion and commotion, numerous accidents, intensely emotional responses to mayonnaise or mustard, bald-faced power plays, and tears of injured pride or fingers. The marshmallow roast was a repeat with different lines. Largely ignored by the squabbling and scuffling scouts, one of the dads plodded through a stupid ghost story and then another.

Sweeter words were never uttered than those of another dad finally announcing bedtime. That in itself was a production of surpassing complexity. A bedded cub rarely stayed that way for more than a moment. My five were all in one big tent, and it took a good half-hour of stern commands and pitiful pleas to confine them finally in their sleeping bags.

Gene and I shared a tent between those of our blushes of boys. He asked if I was having fun yet. Honestly, I couldn't tell. The ground sure was hard to sleep on, and I needed a pillow. My discomfort was brief, however. There was a sniveling whimper outside. One of mine was huddling outside their tent crying, the little seven-ish one with no front teeth named Josh. He was crying because at home he always sleeps with his big brother. Josh snuggled against me and begged, "Can I sleep with you?" So he crawled into my sleeping bag, cuddling against my side like his big brother, and within moments was in dreamland.

Contemplating the whirlwind of the day, I didn't go there myself for a while. Then the child sleeping next to me awoke tenderly paternal feelings. At 16 a deranged romantic, I'd dreamed of the sons that Annette and I would have someday. I'd even drawn pictures of those five beautiful boys, and little Josh looked a lot like the one I'd named Marc.

It was a curious contemplation for a gay guy, this progeny thing. Once I'd acknowledged being gay, I put away all those fantasies as inoperable and irrelevant. Procreation no longer a purpose in my life, I was left with creation and recreation, both very joyful and fulfilling missions. Inarguably there were ample breeders to ensure survival of the human species without my admittedly superior genes dripping back into the pool.

Reveille came pretty early, and the chaos resumed for the cubs' breakfast. It was a free-for-all over the selection of cereals, and jugs of milk and orange juice flowed variously into mouths, down shirts, or onto the ground. Then the parents arrived, the cubs disappeared, and we five veterans were left to clean up in the splendid, peaceful morning in the woods.

#

On the next Saturday of that magnificent May Gene took Rick oyster hunting at a fantastic oyster bed he'd found at the south end of Puget Sound. At low tide they climbed through a fence with a bushel basket each, ran across the tide-flat to the shallows, and gathered monster mollusks. Many were a good foot long.

Rick hoped that the outing alone with Gene would be a good opportunity to build a friendship. They shared stuff about their childhoods, but otherwise Gene wouldn't talk about

himself. He listened to Rick's complaints about social life in Seattle with embarrassed smiles. So they didn't make much headway beyond the congenial acquaintanceship.

Some of the oysters weighed in at a half-pound. The sisters cooked them in every conceivable way for the rest of the week. Of course, oysters probably weren't the best food for a nookie-deprived faerie. Under the influence of Martha's oyster stew, Rick started feeling like he had a rack of antlers on his head. But the slurping and gnawing sorority girls were an effective temporary antidote for the aphrodisiac, way better than salt-peter.

#

Thus encumbered with hormonal headgear, Rick kept having fits of St. Norman's Dance on campus and at Ravenna and while swimming at the pool. On the last Saturday in the lusty month of May, he swam in the morning, enjoying many choreographed laps and the sexy magnificence of his shoulders. When he hauled himself out of the pool, he stood a moment watching the other swimmers and felt tremendously beautiful, like a rutting elk.

After lunch at Little Sweden, Rick picked up Oná for another Ravenna outing. On the following very distressed Sunday morning he wrote about the experience.

Dear Me,

...I said I'd take Oná to Ravenna, and Barbie asked, "Oh, Richie, can I come along?"

It was a battle between knee-jerk selfishness and second-thought civility. Unable to come out and say, like Garbo, I want to be alone, I showed my towel and mumbled, "Well, I was going to... uh... sunbathe and do some stuff." I didn't want to mention my public dancing. Now, lots of strange folks have seen, if not watched, me dancing on campus, but perhaps hypocritically, I hesitated to reveal my insanity to close friends. Barbie said she hadn't seen the park since last fall—before the rains came. Besides, I figured, she was so cool about that trickle of water under our bridges. Reluctantly, I again played the chivalrous gentleman.

On the way to Ravenna, Barbie carried the conversation with mundane matters while I concentrated on keeping Oná going and not stopping to sniff everything vile. Barbie talked excitedly about the summer at Tahoe and what she'd read about it. The lake and mountains are exciting, but mostly I look forward to meeting young men for fun and games. My remark to that effect put the quietus on our talk for a while.

When we walked out onto the park grass, Barbie found it hard in her shoes, nice ones with low heels, and took them off. Crossing the grassy lawn with shoes in hand, Barbie did look rather cute, I had to admit, like a little russet-haired nymph in the classically natural setting of Ravenna. Letting Oná off her leash, I looked longingly over at my dancing ground, my fairy circle, and sadly put aside dancing for today.

We left towel and shoes in the shade of a tree and walked down to the creek sparkling in the ravine. Oná immediately chased a frog into the water. The greenery and flowers were luscious, like the crisp, emerald watercress waving in the stream. Barbie pointed out a curious short reed growing beside the water. "It's a kind of rush called *equisetum*," she said with a surprising authority, "or horsetail. It's a really old plant—from the Paleocene." She picked a few of the two-foot stems.

"From so long ago!" I exclaimed. It felt somehow magical with age.

"It spreads by spores—like moss or fungus." Barbie's impressive knowledge came, she explained, from a freshman botany course, and showed me the horsetail's hollow segments. This humble rush was the most primordial thing I'd ever seen and definitely one with magical potential. It was an evolutionary hero, survivor of geological ages, mass extinctions, and global cataclysms, fittest of the fit, a supernatural asexual progenitor.

With her bouquet of horsetails, Barbie and I climbed the slope up to the shady spot. I spread out my towel for her, took off my shirt, and sat close by in the sun. A small drum began a rhythmic thumping from across the field where someone was playing a bongo. The beat throbbed through me.

When I looked over at Barbie, she smiled brightly and waved a horsetail at me, scattering spores around like pixie dust.

The drumming came from across the valley where a group of colorful folk were gathered, and someone started playing a guitar. Several began a line dance. One of the guys waved. It was my peace brother with a white headband this time. Of course I waved back. When Barbie asked who I was waving at, I said just somebody I ran into the other day and suggested we go over and meet them. "Let's not," she said quickly and waved the horsetails at me again. "They're just a bunch of fringeys."

I looked over at the group with longing. Indeed these are the mythical beings I've sought all year long, the people I should've been with all these months. I wanted to race right over there and...

She gathered up her shoes and said, "Anyway, I need to go home now."

I immediately thought, great—you take Oná home, and I'll stay here. But sometimes being a gentleman really sucks. What could I do but walk girl and dog back home? Casting wistful glances at the fringeys, I retrieved Oná from her exploration of the weeds and followed Barbie up the slope to the street. For just a moment, instead of like an elk, I felt like a magic unicorn captured by a maiden. Only this maiden's no virgin, as I can personally attest.

Walking down 12<sup>th</sup>, our conversation was minimal, and Oná provided most of our entertainment. Meanwhile, Barbie waved her sheaf of horsetails around like wands, and I mentally rubbed the itchy velvet off my antlers. Soon as I got girl and dog home, I'd head right back up to the park and meet those fringeys.

At the apartment I unleashed Oná in the hall, and Barbie thrust the bouquet of horsetails at me with, "Here, Richie, hold these a minute while I get a vase." Holding them for her, I felt their raspy roughness and smelled a swampy fragrance—maybe the spores—and at that point everything turned into a dream. Only in the haze of it, I was again a rutting elk, a mighty stag in the forest.

I swear to you, Old Me, I have no memory of anything beyond the feeling of some primal penetration taking place. [*I believe you, Young Me.*] I was entranced, under an enchantment. After that vase moment, the first thing I remember is turning up 47<sup>th</sup> past the sorority house, thinking I'll be working there shortly, and I hurried on back to Little Sweden.

Safely in my room with a bit of time yet, I beat myself soundly about the head and shoulders for the idiocy I've wrought once again. Then it became clear to me that those infernal horsetails witched me, cast a dark Darwinian spell over me. That's not to call Barbie a sorceress like Circe or such nonsense, but something sure as hell turned me into a mindless animal. At least an elk's a lot grander than a swine, which would be far more appropriate. Now it's time for some more bitter remorse.

#

Writing this latest took two full days, with requisite gym breaks, and didn't come easily. (Discussing one's flaws and failures takes some fancy footwork to keep from sounding defensive or dismissive.) Thank goodness for all the usable journal entries with details I never would've remembered. No, thank you, dear Young Me. Goodness had nothing to do with it.

As soon as I'd transcribed that stuff about feeling bewitched, Kevin called to say he'd read the instalment Johnny sent, and now he really wants to go to Mardi Gras. Of course he had the usual question about behind the banana tree and got the same answer. Then Kevin shyly remarked that his hot pursuit of Liam is getting somewhere. After our dancing the other night at the Titsling, he made it to second base, but I didn't ask for gory details. His sports metaphor had the same effect as my "shortly" in spurring the imagination.

After Kevin's call, I walked over to the grocery store to shop for dinner tonight with Deirdre and Lynn. Mack has some work meeting and can't come. On the walk I wondered how all Rick's attempts to be visible, sunbathing, dancing, swimming, could have failed so miserably. Could the people in Seattle in the sixties (apart from one sorority sister) really have been so homophobic as to be blind to his beauty? He put it right out there, free for the taking. Was

Barbie really attracted to him or simply because of proximity was she the passive victim (and beneficiary) of his animal lust?

As far as I can recall, and Rick certainly couldn't, even in that second copulation, there was no kiss or display of affection by either of them. This certainly isn't looking like any love story. So what kind of story is it? I guess it's a life story—with an improv plot. Even when thoroughly planned, isn't life still just improvisation? What matters is how well or poorly we improvise. Thinking of Rick's public dances, maybe life is the ultimate performance art. This brings me back to my personal mantra: We are what we do.

Now I've got to make dinner. I hear we're also what we eat.

#

At supper that evening I learned the history of Deirdre and Lynn's relationship, now of two years' duration, and myriad details of their wedding plans. As for their history, they got together in a tent on a campout in the mountains and have continued their outdoor interest ever since. We reminisced about our trips to the glorious national parks in this part of the country.

Over dessert they remarked on their reading of *Carne Vale* with expected reactions to the Mardi Gras naughtiness and sympathy for Rick's plight. Deirdre also read over the nookie bird scene in this chapter and thinks it sounds like a dream. The memory's also rather like a dream.

Later on Johnny called to see if I've got anything ready yet. I promised to send him what's done. It's at an appropriate chapter break. He says a guy in his class has made a transcript of *The Pirate Prince* that we can use as a first chapter of the memoir. I was pleased to hear that and asked if I could please make some "authorial" edits and additions first. I'll build in a wedding-day framework around telling that pirate story, add a few narrative sequences to characterize my new young friends, and insert a few photos for visual interest. Now I'll take a break and draw that crest and bird details and wrap up the icon of the Wind God. Shouldn't take long. Then I'll ship this off to my "bookie."

#

## CHAPTER 5. THE TREASURE GALLEON

.i.

Now twice burnt, our horny hero Rick was thrice shy of hetero-sex and quadrupally mortified by his brutish bestiality. Sure, he was the one who did the dirty deed, but Rick still felt somehow compromised, not by Barbie but by sheer biology. As well as his poor friend, he'd violated himself, betrayed himself and his own nature. In short, he'd fallen from faerie grace.

In that foul mood of self-recrimination and disgrace, feeding the females that evening was especially revolting. Back in his room, Rick spent the rest of the evening journaling about the horrendous day and then slept the fitful sleep of the demoralized.

Even the fitful sleep helped a bit, and on the glorious Sunday morning, Rick took Oná to Ravenna per usual. He wrote later:

Dear Me,

...When I came in to pick up the pooch, Martha and Barbie were in their robes having coffee. They both gave me perfectly normal, casual greetings like any other time, and I tried to sound just as normal and casual. No tones of voice, no particular expressions, and of course no reference to anything questionable. I declined coffee and left with the pup as soon as feasible.

Obviously, for purposes of our Tahoe casino cohort—we leave in only two weeks—Barbie and I will have no personal connection, so to speak, all our previous indiscretions merely sound and fury signifying nothing. We're simply pals. Lord, let her take a shine to the Twooth.



I mean, we've never uttered a single word of invitation, endearment, or other than civil conversation with each other. Hah! We've never even kissed. (At least I don't think we have.) Now it's over and done with. I'm just going to have to steer clear of being alone with her, and we don't ever have to speak of it again. I just need to find me a guy!

In the park Oná and I frisked around on my dancing ground, and I tried to dance the way I used to—before the witching—before I fell from grace... Without much success, I lay down on the grass, staring up into the sky. While Oná scrambled on me and licked at my chin, I tried to empty my mind of the traumas.

When she scampered off down to the creek, I lay there spread-eagle like the guy in that Da Vinci drawing and experimented with motionless dance. With my eyes closed, the touch of the earth seemed to lift me. I was rising slowly, slowly... Not daring to open my eyes, I felt the earth beneath me disappear and myself floating like a mote of dust in the sunlight. Later, when the ground was again supporting me, I opened my eyes and felt somehow healed.

#

Rick may have felt healed, but this Old Me contends that he'd just managed to nimbly disassociate from the distressing emotions and blithely walk away from the regrettable horsetail experience. Barbie was apparently doing the same, so Rick would just get on with life. With a new sense of artistic license, he perpetrated campus and park dances and swam happy laps like meditations, physical poems, on beauty, peace, joy, and flying free.

Denial seriously ramps up one's mental and physical energy. With Rick's misdeed forgiven and forgotten, he felt back in faerie grace once more, and his moving body became an engine of rapture. Ignoring the imminent Tahoe change simply fueled that rapture. Then on Thursday, he finally had to think about it:

Dear Me,

...As I was leaving for the feedlot, Betsy caught me in the hall and asked me to come over to the sisters' place afterwards for a Tahoe meeting. All my doggie visits this week being easy enough, I felt possibly up to a closer social occasion. Walking down 12<sup>th</sup>, I practiced my casual, nonchalant entrance, and the real thing came off pretty good. Barbie and I simply said friendly hi's and went about talking with the others.

Gene ran the planning meeting quite smoothly. We quickly set the schedule for me to move out of Little Sweden next Friday. Betsy will move later into the apartment for the summer. I'll talk to Sean about leaving my furniture to come back in the fall and will stay that night with Gene. On Saturday morning he, the Twooth, and I will leave by 10 am. Martha and Barbie will stay on an extra week for Barbie's graduation and their parents' visit. Then they'll all drive with our little Oná to Tahoe by the next Saturday. Of course, I know she's not mine anymore, but I still love that frisky, funny goldfish-pooch so much.

Gene also has our trip logistics all planned out. We'll arrive in Tahoe on Sunday and find a place for us all to stay. Casino training will be Monday afternoon and evening, and the grand opening will be on Tuesday. It all was so suddenly and excitingly real for me. Walking Betsy home to Little Sweden, I remarked how till now I've just been dancing along day to day, and now suddenly here are all these big changes. She assures me I'll have fun. Tomorrow the countdown starts: eight days!

#

*.ii.*

The morning of Day Seven, Saturday, one week left, Rick went again to the pool. Here's what he wrote about the unusual experience:

Dear Me,

...Like dancing in the water, every stroke was thrilling. After several laps, a guy started swimming in the next lane. From what I glimpsed on his turns, he looked well-proportioned (i.e., hot). After a few more laps I stopped to hang on the end for a breather. So did he.

He slipped off the blue swim cap and shook out dark hair, almost as long as mine. (I don't wear a cap.) Then he looked me straight in the eye. Both still breathing hard, we held the gaze for several beats before I cracked and said hi. He stuck out his hand with, "Hi, I'm Lane."

Shaking it, I said, "I'm Rich." [This is clearly when Rick finally accepts his new name.] A snap of visceral energy shot through our touch.

"Good for you!" Lane laughed at his joke, and I joined in. His dark eyes were captivating. I nearly swooned that it was finally happening, the spirit connection between heavenly bodies, that merging of force fields I've been seeking all year.

With a flash of eye-lightning, he said, "You're a pretty hot swimmer, guy."

I replied pointedly, "Takes one to know one."

Lane looked away, maybe blushing, and slipped his cap back on. Pulling up into the kick-off position, he said, "So let's do it!" And he shot off like an arrow.

With joy infusing my strokes, I caught up with Lane quickly, and we swam for maybe ten more laps in splendid coordination. Going in one direction, as I'd lift my head to breathe, I saw him and felt our arms stroking in perfect synchrony. Going in the other, I could literally feel Lane's eye on me like a warm light.

When we stopped again at the edge, gasping, Lane slipped off his cap and with a high voltage smile, said, "Well, I'm about ready to go. How about you, Rich?"

"Whenever," I said between gasps and jubilantly added, "Wherever."

This time Lane blushed and quickly climbed up out of the pool. His smooth body in the little black Speedo was lithe and fulsome fore and aft, young, probably a sophomore. Remembering to breathe, I also hauled out. On the way to the locker room, he remarked, "You know, I've seen you around campus. You do yoga or something?"

"I do lots of things," I admitted mysteriously and checked out Lane's feet, also lovely. "I like to move, dance, swim, whatever. I haven't seen..."

"Saturday morning's my only..." We were telepaths.

I was suddenly horrified to realize that next Saturday I'd be in a VW heading for... That meant I really had to seize today. Going ahead of me into the shower room, blessedly empty in this lunchtime hour, Lane said with a boyish grin, "It's fun moving with you like that."

While we peeled out of our swimsuits by the showers, Lane turned away and presented a perfect rump. Looking over an equally perfect shoulder at me admiring it, he grinned again and asked, "So, Rich, what's your major?"

"Slavic studies. Yours?" I moved closer, almost close enough to touch the...

"Psychology," Lane said, turning to reveal an appendage of no small import.

"Trying to figure yourself out?" I joked.

"I'd rather figure you out," he fired back with another megawatt look and glanced down at my own respectable appendage.

Using adjacent showerheads, we stood under spray, soaping up our bodies and watching each other. Together, we washed behind, sharing soapy, slippery sensations and perking up in front. Generating that much power in the shower, we really should've been electrocuted.

Unable to stand it anymore, I asked, "Wanna come home with me?"

"What for?" he asked and rinsed his hair under the spray.

I assumed his question flirtatious and also rinsing off, answered the same way, "Well, Lane, you know, for some shenanigans."

"Hey, Rich, listen," he said, turning off his shower, shaking his wet hair, and waving his hands, "I'm not a queer or anything like that!" Then he switched off all circuits and quickly covered his crotch.

"Could've fooled me," I sighed and also turned off my shower. I'd have laughed at Lane's protest if I hadn't wanted to scream at him. Challenging his classic denial, I asked, "So what were we up to just now?"

He turned away, confused, offering again that perfect view, and rationalized, "We were just taking a shower. Getting to be friends. Did you think I'm...?"

"Oh, I see." To confuse him further, I parried, "But you think I'm...?"

Grabbing his towel from the hook, he denied again, "Oh, no! I didn't mean... I'm sorry." He smiled weakly. "I know you're just a regular guy." Just then a fellow came walking through the locker room, and we silently towed off, eyes still on each other, till he was gone.

Alone again, I touched Lane's arm and said, "You're wrong, Lane. I am gay." He looked at me with frightened, desperate eyes. Suddenly we were red-on-black nudes on an Attic vase, older man with beloved youth. Gently I said, "Know thyself, my friend."

Desperately, Lane reached for his underpants, and struggled to fit his treasures into the tight whites. Underwear not being one of my customs, I reluctantly stepped into my own disgruntled pants. With our privates covered, Lane relaxed and smiled at me, flashing a tiny sparkle of our fire again.

"I've got to think... I just don't know..."

Then other people started coming into the locker room, and we finished dressing in silence. Lane kept looking at me anxiously, desirously, and apologetically. Unspecific in the now public place, I gave it another try. "You sure you don't wanna?"

He shook his head sadly. "No, Rich. I need to..."

I wrote my phone number on a scrap of paper towel and handed it to him. "Call me, Lane. But soon—I leave this Friday for the summer."

His face crumbled. "Oh, no! Why?"

"Summer job. At Lake Tahoe."

Lane sadly said, "Oh. Okay." He waved the scrap of paper promisingly. Out on the sidewalk we parted with a lingering handshake.

Walking home was an agony of love delayed. Such hopes ride on that slip of paper. With a brief sailor's dance on the walkway, I begged the power that is, please, let lovely Lane know himself before Friday. Why do these things always have to happen at the last possible moment? It's so unfair. Where was Lane a month ago? Everything would have been different.

Vivid images of his intoxicating nudity consumed the rest of my afternoon and the hours at work. In the evening, I was too distracted to read and visited Betsy for a Tavola party. I tried not to bore her with too many effusions about my splendid new acquaintance. When I got ready for bed, I put on my record of Debussy's "*La Mer*" and curled up among my pillows to let the music of the sea soothe my longings.

Instead, the waves washed over me in a thrill of electricity. Like by telepathy, I again felt Lane's desire. Somewhere near, he also lay in the dark in his own bed desiring me. In that tender dark I gathered his warmth into my arms and kissed his hungry mouth. Our bodies clung together, hands stroking sides and hips, and spreading Lane's sleek swimmer thighs, I filled him like waves crashing against cliffs. This morning I awoke, to my surprise, in my own bed alone.

#

I've been chiding Mack about his lack of physical activity, and yesterday afternoon he went with me to the gym to see what it's like. First we did some stretching, and then I gave him a tour of the workout machines. He tried some of my favorites and spent a good while on the elliptical. I prefer the treadmill. Being Norwegian, Mack of course agreed that the sauna

afterwards is the absolute icing on the cake. I hope he decides to start working out. I'm not complaining, mind you, but his long, lean body could use a bit more definition.

We came back to my place for some supper, and while I whipped us up a wild salad, Mack read over the past few pages. As I expected, he really enjoyed the sexy pool scene with Lane and said it felt almost like a scene in a movie. Then he asked what was going to happen now. Naturally I divulged nothing. Also as expected, he asked, "Does that last paragraph mean what I think it means?"

"It probably does, darlin'," I teased, "no matter what it is you're thinking."

He laughed. "Well, it sure sounds like masturbating to me."

"Could be," I evaded and tossed the salad. "Stranger things have happened. But remember, Rick—I mean Rich—also had some other very vivid fantasies."

"I mean, Rich, I'm not opposed to whacking off." Mack laughed again and tweaked my cheek. "At least when you've got no other choice."

"I agree," I proclaimed and served his plate.

Taking it with a wicked smile, he said, "It's nice to have another choice."

"It is indeed." I served my own salad, and over supper we discussed his upcoming week away in Los Angeles. He also reported that according to Mario, George's performance in Cincinnati was a triumph, and there'll be a party this Saturday to celebrate.

#

### .iii.

This morning over breakfast I pondered on how Rick—now Rich—had recorded the apparently exact and whole conversation with Lane. Not that there was that much of it to remember, and he wrote about it the very next morning. As far as making a good scene in a movie, I'm not so sure. Though maybe Rich did indeed intend it as skin flick as we used to call sexy movies. The vivid memory is much appreciated.

Okay, let's get on with it. Once again Rich's urge to merge was cut off at the pass. At least Lane had that slip of paper. Only six more days in Seattle, and then our pirate would be sailing his ship, paradoxically, over the mountains to an alpine lake. How's that for twisting an overworked metaphor? On Day Six in the countdown, Sunday, he picked up Oná early and went straight to Ravenna.

Dear Me, [*By now Young Me rarely had any comments for this Old Me. I miss them.*]

...No one was about in the early morning to disturb the green slopes and breezes, only I dancing in my fairy circle with a romping pup. My dance was on fire from making love with Lane, albeit telepathically. I swooped round and round over the crests and troughs of waves like a great long-winged seabird.

Pausing to rest a moment, I saw him sitting over there under a tree watching me, my long-haired peace brother with a yellow headband today. He waved an invitation to come over and got up to embrace me with another, "Beautiful, man!" When we sat down on the grass, Oná jumped into his lap. Petting her, he asked me, "How'd you ever get so wild?"

"I grew up in the woods. Never got tamed."

"So who are you, wild man?"

"I'm Rich—grad student—amateur dancer—and gay."

"I'm Rory, unemployed singer, straight arrow, and a Leo." Shaking his mane, he roared just like the MGM lion.

"I'm Taurus. And I seem to be the only honest-to-god faerie in Seattle."

"No, I know a couple queer guys. You need to go to San Francisco, Rich. Queer city!"

"Yeh, I know," I sighed. It was bitter realizing that horrible, irreparable mistake I've made. "I should've gone to San Francisco State," I admitted. "But I'm leaving Saturday for Lake Tahoe—to work in a casino for the summer."

"A casino!? Wow! That'll really be something else."

"I guess so. At least I hope so. So, Rory, what do you sing?"

"Kinda folk-rock, you know, like Dylan..."

"I only know folk stuff like Joan Baez. I love her '*Plaisir d'Amour*.'"

Cuddling Oná like a little lion in his lap, Rory sang the song for me, perfectly, all the way through. Seeing my tears at the end, he took my hand and said, "May a rainbow shine in your window, brother." Then he chuckled. "You know, Rich, last week Celia saw you here, man, and she said you were levitating. The chick's psychic. When she's whacked out, she sees things."

"Maybe I did. And last night I think I may have bi-located."

"Whoa! You must be some kind of ascendant master, man."

"Not that I know of. But I do have a Hindu friend who taught me lots of stuff."

"There you go. I knew it." We were quiet listening to the breeze in the leaves. Then Rory said, "Hey, let's dance some."

We jumped up and danced with Oná racing around our feet, each moving in his own graceful way but relating smoothly. Dancing with Rory was full of beauty, joy, and affection, and I didn't want it to stop. But it did, and Rory embraced me again. "I gotta go, Rich. But when you're back, come find me here, okay?"

"Okay. I will. Take good care, Rory—brother."

"Peace—and love, brother." He gave another MGM roar and walked away up the slope. Oná and I danced for a good while longer to work off the excitement of meeting a kindred spirit at last. And again too late...

#

Day Six wasn't over yet. Back at Little Sweden Rich got a call from Richard the Twooth with an invite to dinner with the bunch that evening at his place. Then they'd go see a movie called "Dr. Strangelove" with Peter Sellers.

Dear Me,

...I rode over with Bob and Betsy around five o'clock. The Twooth's apartment is on Queen Anne Hill, a high-class neighborhood with big, wealthy-looking houses, in an English basement. It's big enough for our group of seven to eat on lap trays around the chairs and sofa. Our gracious host cooked *coq au vin* and some tasty vegetables for us.

Both his antique furniture and continental cuisine were impressive, not to mention the fancy silverware. He's keeping the place for the summer, so I figure our pleasant Seattlitic friend must be of considerably more means than this poor country cousin. Then I recalled his parents' big house on the shore—where they don't actually live. Hmmm.

Our group conversations go in fits and spurts and in unpredictable directions. Usually about nothing more profound than politics, they often don't come to any resolution and only rarely raise a good point which often gets blown away by a digression. Everyone speaks with civility, authority, and sophistication, even though we might not always make sense, and oddest of all, there never seems to be any personal content. But then, we're all academics.

In terms of topics, Betsy can always be counted on for international items, and Gene's great at expounding on a purportedly pertinent piece of English literature. The sisters and the Twooth do well with volleys from subject to subject so quickly that I, like clueless Bob, an economist, often can't follow. I spare them any stuff about my esoteric studies or rich inner life, but at times I can't resist playing Froggie the Gremlin (from the Buster Brown Show of my childhood) by tossing in a totally unrelated, often absurd topic to see where the ball will go.

At the movie Barbie wound up sitting between the Twooth and me on the end of the row. While we quietly awaited the film, I tried to think objectively about the cute girl beside me. She's a great chum and always so pleasant. In Tahoe we'll keep it that way. If she has any sense, she'll snag the Twooth for a boyfriend. He's obviously a great catch. I said a prayer for that to happen in Tahoe.

The movie was like nothing I've ever seen. It makes horror funny and humor gruesome: the black glove, the insane general, Slim Pickens riding the bomb, and the apocalyptic, idyllic finale. It shocked me right out of my complacent self-absorption, at least momentarily, to wonder about this Cold War thing. How appalling that the world's apparently divided between US (United States) and THEM (The Horrible Empire of Moscow). Or maybe it's THEM (the heroic emancipators of Moscow) and US (united slaves). But I won't think about that.

#

As the days counted down through annoying final exams, Rich continued terpsichorean outbursts here and there on campus and relaxing outings with Oná. He also suffered stoically the last days of his scullery servitude at the sorority and obsessively checked for a phone message from Lane. Then it came down to Day one, Friday. Moving day. The last day. Rich wrote about it later that evening, only slightly drunk.

Dear Me,

...Today has flown by faster than any day I've ever lived. Seems like only a couple hours: last final exam (Serbo-Croatian), semi-final campus dance, final bag lunch by Stan, final visit to the Slavic office, final arrangements for the summer, final campus dance, final twenty laps at the pool, semi-final (futile) check of the phone message board, and final shift at the sorority trough. My French-speaking admirer wished me a polite, "*Bon voyage, monsieur Richard.*"

Back at Little Sweden, there was again no message. Out on the deck I had a last intimate *tête á tête* with my beloved Rainier, its peak glowing pink in the last rays of the sun, an early fat moon floating above. The pink and moon reflected off of Lake Washington, a magical scene I can hold on to till the fall. Finally I went inside and picking up my suitcase, noticed my philodendron. With an armload of vine, I closed the door on my sweet room and went downstairs. There, almost shining, was a paper pinned to the message board.

I dropped the suitcase, put the vine on the hall table, and grabbed the note: "Rich: bon voy—want to—C U pool fall—Lane—8:15 p." The handwriting and telegraphic style were Crawford's, the guy in the room by the phone. Only five minutes ago. No phone number! Want to. Pool fall. My love loves me! Stuffing the note in my pocket, I grabbed up the suitcase and staggered out the door. Half a block down, I turned and went back for the philodendron.

At the apartment, the bunch was already slightly lubricated in a *bon voyage* party. I accepted a scotch and soda from Barbie. By now, even without alcohol, I was only operating on a few brain cells. All the same, I managed to chat civilly with Betsy and Bob, wishing them a great summer in Seattle. I was even socially conscious enough to congratulate Barbie, joking, "Congraduations!"

My second drink made coherent thought difficult, so I resorted to simply asking questions. Like asking Martha about the plans for their parents' visit. That's always a good way to keep other people talking. Soon we voyagers three called it a night. Saying goodbye at the door, we looked forward to getting together again in just one week in Tahoe.

Now here I am in Gene's strange apartment about to crash on his sofa, still a bit tipsy from the Scotch. How marvelous that it's my last night in Seattle—for the nonce. Tomorrow I'll be off into the unknown. No, no, wait! I don't have to go. I can stay here in Seattle—go back to Little Sweden, find a job waiting tables—Hey! The Space Needle! How cool would that be? And I can go back to the pool tomorrow and find Lane for a glorious summer together. Wait. Hold on. I can't back out now. I'm going to Tahoe, to a fancy resort with scads of cute guys to romp with on the mountainsides like goats, to frolic with in the lake like otters. Oh, well, I've got to get some sleep now.

#

## .iv.

After yesterday's marathon of transcription from Rich's journal, a little breather was in order before jumping back into the fray. This early morning I sat out on my balcony with coffee to contemplate that long-ago trip to Tahoe and wonder if maybe that lazy-ass, wimpy decision to simply go with the flow was Rich's second horrid, irreparable mistake. Forgive me for the What If. What if he really had stayed in Seattle for the summer for a wild affair with Lane?

My futile wondering was interrupted, as I'd hoped, by my mysterious neighbor walking his black and white terrier down the sidewalk past the apartment complex across the way. It's too far to make out his features, but he looks like an attractive Hispanic, Native American, or East Indian youth. Almost every day for well over a year I've seen him strolling down the walk, often focused on a smart phone, and appreciated his oblivious beauty as an old man will. Today, as ever, he cast not one glance up in my direction.

My futile admiration of the youth afar was itself interrupted by a phone call from Janet reporting on her talk with Jason yesterday. They've come up with a website idea and want to lunch today to run it by me. We'll meet at that new brew-pub by the museum. Janet also remarked that on reading the last pages of that chapter, she thinks Barbie really was a sorceress, though maybe not consciously.

## #

Dear Mack brought me a magnifier stand so young Rich's minuscule script is much easier to transcribe. A good thing because I'm going to let him tell much of the story for a while with my intermittent remarks. So here we've got a lazy-ass, wimpy gay pirate yanked out of his context in Seattle and crammed into a VW bug with two straight guys and \$163 to his name. Luckily, Gene and the Twooth would front costs till he earns some dough in the casino.

Again I'm thankful that Rich described the trip to Tahoe, if not vividly, at least sketchily:

Dear Me,

Hi, Old Me. Surely you've traveled all over the world [*I haven't.*], but I hope you'll enjoy remembering this scenic road-trip. [*I do, darlin', even if it's not exactly Kerouac.*] It's sort of my first real one, though I went on some long car-trips with the folks as a kid, but I always had my nose in a book. The only landmark I can recall ever actually seeing is El Capitan Mountain in Texas. Well, our trip to Tahoe was more mountains than you can shake a stick at.

Everywhere the scenery was spectacular, enormous forests and vast valleys. As my majestic Rainier withdrew to the north behind us, another snowy summit arose, not quite so high maybe, which driver Gene identified as Mt. St. Helens. [*Let us pause in awe of that volcano's eruption fifteen years later.*] I'd studied up on all the geography. Getting closer to Oregon another towering white massif reared up in the southeast, Mt. Hood. In southern Oregon, we stopped by the turnoff for Crater Lake and ate more sandwiches for dinner as the full-moon rose between mountain peaks.



**Mt. St. Helen's**



**Mt. Hood**



**Mt. Shasta**

Northern California was vast, dark forests with constant signs for deer. Gene barely missed a buck standing in the road and staring. Somewhere in the wilderness south of incredible Mount Shasta, its glaciers gleaming in the moonlight, we stopped for a nap. Somehow Gene got comfy with the steering wheel, and in the back seat Twooth managed to rest across the suitcases. Scrunched up in the small seat, I dozed with my head on a folded jacket halfway out the bug's open window. Later, I suddenly woke up with something rough rubbing on my cheek. A triangular head with big pointy ears was breathing in my face. At my startled squawk, it raced away. A cute little deer had kissed me.

Of course, I'd woken Gene and the Twooth, who laughed at the kissing deer. So we set off again for Susanville, a hundred miles from anywhere on the map, where we got gas and a diner breakfast. From there the road headed south for more hours through a confusion of wooded hills and splendid mountains that Captain Gene called the Sierra Nevada.

Topping the zillionth rise, we came on a wide view of Lake Tahoe straight ahead, deep blue, almost cobalt, like a shadow of the azure sky. It stretched off into the distance between mountain ranges. Gene supplied specifics: 22 miles long, 1,600 feet deep. How amazing that the surface of Tahoe is at 6,200 feet in altitude. More than a mile higher than New Orleans—or even Seattle. As we descended toward the northern shore, Tahoe's blue looked surreal, not water but a pure pigment.

Our road ran along the forested eastern shore some twenty miles to Stateline, Nevada, a cluster of buildings and side streets away from the shore. Here at the foot of Tahoe stood three casinos, a modest Barney's, a medium-sized Harrah's, and by far the largest, the new Sahara-Tahoe. Our future place of employment was a beige-brown hotel tower of many, perhaps twenty, floors rising from a broad pavilion containing the casino about to be grandly opened.



**Lake Tahoe**  
The blue is really this unreal!



**Sahara-Tahoe Hotel & Casino**  
Grand opening in June, 1965  
That's not sky in the background.

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#

Arriving just after eleven, we immediately checked in with at the Sahara office to see a Mrs. Scarpellino, for instructions and about places to rent. A middle-aged, black-haired woman, she was sweet as syrup taking our names and handing us schedules for tomorrow's training. Gene asked about a place with room for five. She shook her head sadly with, "Nothing that big. Two bedrooms are the best you'll do."

The Twooth turned to our kindly advisor and said, "Could you excuse us, please? We need to have a discussion." She smiled understandingly, and we stepped out of the office into a broad, plush-carpeted hallway, eerily quiet in the pre-opening noon.

"How many bedrooms?" Gene asked, adding quickly, "One for Martha and me."

"One for me!" Twooth and I both chorused.

Gene shrugged and said, "And one for Barbie makes four. Two two-bedrooms."

Agreed, we went back into the office. Checking her list of rentals in this tiny town, Mrs. Scarpellino ran her finger down a page and came up with four options. The first three were way too expensive, but the fourth sounded reasonable and not too far away.



Thinking clearly, Twooth asked about one-bedrooms. She sighed, "Most of them are taken already, guys. Past couple days..." She quickly added, "Best bet's up at the Pine Cone Resort." We remembered passing and admiring the spread of log cabins under big pines not a half-mile back up the road. She told us the rent, first, last and deposit.

"That's the best bet?" I choked, and she nodded apologetically. It was many times more than I could swallow. If I wanted to take any money at all back to school with me, I could afford maybe a quarter of that exorbitant amount.

Gene got the details on the two-bedroom and the key so we could check it and the Pine Cone out. The woman smiled at me affectionately and patted my hand. "And you, *bambino caro*, you need a haircut. Nice and short, okay?" She tweaked my cheek with more than maternal energy. "There's a barbershop just down the road." I was mortified.

#

The two-bedroom place was across the line in a settlement called Al Tahoe, California, not much bigger than Stateline, Nevada, in easy walking distance to the Sahara. Some way back a dirt road at 907 Rubicon Trail sat a two-storey duplex quite by itself against the woods. The upstairs with a long balcony was the available part, and it turned out to be a very comfortable, spacious place furnished in modern style. Gene felt it would be great for him and the girls.

At the Pine Cone Resort we were impressed by the charming blond log cabins. They had three singles left, and Twooth declared immediately that he wanted one. He and Gene turned to the silent one. "So would I," I sighed, "but I can't afford it." They looked at me sadly. "Well, first, last, and deposit is like paying for the whole summer up front. No can do."

We stood under the tall pines in a quandary. Then Twooth remarked tentatively, "I sort of thought, Rich... well... didn't we, Gene?" Gene looked confused, and staring at something off to my right, the Twooth went on, "...that you'd be sleeping with Barbie."

"Doing what?" I may have shouted.

Gene spoke soothingly, "We all thought since you and Barbie... you know..."

Dropping onto the pine-needles, I held my head and moaned, "No, no, no!" They all knew the terrible thing I did! Bracing myself, I looked up. "Look, you know I'm gay. It was an accident—a mistake—I didn't mean to... I'm so sorry! She..." I don't know what I was going to say. The Twooth looked up at the sky, and Gene literally bit his lip. Scrambling for a way out of this fix, I suggested, "How about I just sleep in the living room over at the Rubicon place? I can pay a quarter of the rent and sleep on the couch."

Gene nodded, "Yeah, that might work." Of course, I shuddered to think that Barbie might be expecting... (Maybe I'll wind up just camping out in the woods.)

We hurried back to sweet Mrs. Scarpellino and made those arrangements. She suggested we look for lunch at Heidi's Pancake House down the road in California. In another log building, this one dark brown, we had big burgers and spoke little. Some great apple pie finally broke the ice, and the Twooth ribbed me about having to get my hair cut. The barbershop was right next door to Heidi's, but I wanted to wait till tomorrow morning to undergo the ordeal.

After unloading the Twooth and his stuff into his dear cabin on the slope at the Pine Cone, Gene and I hauled ours up the outside stairway into the Rubicon apartment. Then we agreed a nap was necessary what with so little sleep last night, not to mention all his driving. The couch destined for my bed was really uncomfortable, but putting the cushions on the floor solved the problem.

But it was no good. I was too wired to sleep. Instead, I hauled out my pad and wrote these pages about the trip so far. Gene will probably sleep a while, so I think I'll explore. ...

#

I barely managed to get through those pages when it was time to leave for lunch with my young friends. Johnny joined us, so with Janet and Jason, it was a whole passel of J's. They showed me a mockup for a website under my name on which we can simply post instalments of the memoir. Jason said he's googled me (Funny, I didn't feel a thing.), and discovered I've got

some other books. I admitted to a few nonfiction books and a couple novels from rather long ago, all published in one way or another but essentially unread. My advisors recommend we post it all on the site for free download, like a potlatch ceremony, and I'm amenable.

Jason remarked later that he really likes what I've done to *The Pirate Prince*. He thinks the inserted narration does a lot to turn all of them into real characters and likes the photos. Janet pointed out that my continuing comments on them and our expanding relationships are a great counterpoint. What do you know? Maybe this is an "experimental" memoir.

"Speaking of relationships, Rich," Johnny casually commented, "what about Mack?"

"What about Mack?" I echoed.

Janet asked confidentially, "Are you going to make an honest man of him?"

I replied evasively (and anachronistically), "Don't worry. My intentions are perfectly honorable." True or not, that seemed to cover the subject to their satisfaction.

#

Rich managed to write about his exploration late that same night after a full evening:

Dear Me,

I left the apartment around 5:30. No sign of whoever lives downstairs. The closest house is several stones' throws away back up the Rubicon. Across our Trail is a wide field, behind the house are dense woods, and farther on, the trail piddles away into a path into more woods. I was thrilled for this first solitude since last Friday, feeling the glory of this new place, breathing the thin mountain air redolent of pine and strangely, vanilla. Lowering in the brilliant blue sky, the sun cast a faint amber glow over trees and field.

Down the Trail, some hundreds of yards into the woods, the path seemed to lead northwesterly toward the southern shore of the lake. Returning to the field, I used the blessed solitude for a first Tahoe dance to celebrate my arrival. It was my solo version of *Swan Lake*, hopping and bounding about among flowering weeds and click-winged grasshoppers.

As arranged, Gene and I drove up to get the Twooth at seven-thirty, and we went to dinner at the restaurant in Harrah's. To get to it, you have to cross a wide area of casino, full of people sitting at slot machines and black-jack tables and standing around roulette and craps tables, glamorous things I've only ever seen in movies. The noise and smoke were palpable.

The restaurant's a lot fancier than places I'm used to, and pricier, but the service was remarkably fast. While he served our dessert, I asked our waiter, a nice-looking guy who looked possibly a partying type, about any local nightlife spot. He gave me an incredulous look, nodded toward the crowded casino, and said, "You're looking at it. And Barney's sucks."

I couldn't believe my ears. "I mean, is there a dance bar somewhere around?"

"Might be a country dance place over in Reno," he replied, breaking my heart. There went a whole batch of my summer fantasies right out the window.

After dinner we partook of the nightlife out in the casino where the other two played slot machines, winning nothing. I thought about maybe playing roulette but wasn't about to buy chips. Mystified, we watched a game of craps. Meanwhile, as is my wont I also watched the milling, gambling crowds for signs of nookie but found none.

I was struck by the glazed expression on almost every face in the crowd. These faces weren't simply blank like folks with Seattlitis. These were wild-eyed and yet dazed, like hypnotized by the possibility of winning on the next bet, card, or roll of the dice. Pondering on these crowds of oblivious, fixated folks, I bemoaned my prospects for a dalliance.

Around nine-thirty we went across the street to Barney's, smaller but with equal smoke and noise, and did more of the same observing. The difference was that while in Barney's I actually observed a blackjack table with a dealer of immediate interest. It was his air of beautiful aloofness and

utter, serene control that caught my eye. I could tell that he, like I, is no gambler, but will blithely part fools from their lucre.

While my comrades played more slot machines, I hung around the table of interest watching that dealer. He has dark curly hair and very fine lips. I lounged against a post and appreciated his rapt dealing, deft flipping of cards, his shuffling almost sleight-of-hand. A couple times only he glanced for the briefest instant away from his table and players at me with a penetrating eye, and I was fulfilled.

When we got back to the Rubicon, I could hardly keep my eyes open but made myself catch up on these pages. Tomorrow it starts. I can't believe I have to get my hair cut!

#

.v.

On Monday morning they picked up the Twooth and over pancakes, eggs, and bacon at Heidi's discussed the casino jobs they might wind up with. For evident reasons, Rick aimed for dealing blackjack. While the other two went grocery shopping, Rick went to the barbershop next door, cleverly called Jack the Clipper, where our long-haired hero submitted to being shorn. It came out not quite a crewcut, but still so short his ears stuck out. Diplomatically, neither of his comrades remarked on Rick's revolting transformation.

Captain Gene then drove them on a grand tour of Tahoe. Since there was no road along the western shore, they simply went north back up the eastern shore, a short way around the head of the lake, and then back. The repetitive route didn't matter. It was all scenes of bewitching beauty. Rick commented in the journal on the drive: *At every turn, past every towering tree, spread the serene, shimmering, bluest blue water to the far mountains blushing bluish in the lake's cobalt glow. Once an elegant white sailboat scudded across the wind-rippled surface.*

The training session at the Sahara, (a painfully incongruous name) started that afternoon in a huge theater with over a hundred trainees with demonstrations of all the various games of chance. Then in rotating groups they engaged in each one, both playing and running the games. Rick's turns at dealing blackjack were not his best work, and in playing, his every bet went bust.

His last rotation was at Keno, a curious game with numbered Ping-Pong balls bubbling around in a big globe. The job was writing the Keno tickets for the players, copying their checked numbers onto official forms with a Chinese ink-brush. The writer had to strive for uniform, calligraphic brush-strokes, which appealed to Rick's artistic side.

After a free buffet dinner in the casino's restaurant, the Seattle three were advised that they'd all be Keno writers. For three more hours the group of about forty guys (most also with sticky-out ears) and girls practiced calligraphy. Not only must the Keno writer strive for impeccable dabs, but he or she must to do it fast and accurately. Rick actually found the training more fun than work and was pleased with the assignment.

Afterwards, they got logistical instructions on shift assignments. The cohort was kept collegially together for one of the night shifts, eight pm to four am, Sundays off. They were to pick up their uniform shirts at the locker room before each shift and leave them there after work. (The guys had to supply their own black pants and shoes.) The short-sleeved shirts' thin vertical stripes of ochre, orange, yellow, and off-red were intended to look desert-ish, as in Saharan. To Rick's faerie eye they were atrocious, but not as horrific as the girls' short dresses.

#

Dear Me,

We all agreed last night to take the free day today to ourselves, sleeping as we see fit to prepare for our first all-nighter. The Twooth wants to settle into his cabin, and adventurous Gene will drive to Carson City, the capitol of Nevada, just across the mountains to the east. I'll explore the woods. Then we'll get back together at six for dinner at Heidi's joint before work. I woke up real early,

quietly ate some cereal, and fixed a bologna sandwich for lunch. Borrowing Gene's canteen and backpack, I stepped out into a breaking morning.

The clarity of the sunlight and air here is energizing. The resinous fragrance fires my limbs like that Greek wine *retsina*. Walking away from the apartment down the Trail, I looked closely at the tall pines for the first time and realized that they aren't anything like the pines around our house in Arkansas. In comparison, these are huge, with craggy reddish bark and great long needles. The scattered cones are enormous.

In no hurry, I digressed right and left for strange plants, many with flowers in this last week of spring. Ambling down the path that veers northward, I relished finally being alone with nature again. The path weaves round about and up and down through more forest, past fields and clearings with nary a sign of habitation. The occasional barbed wire fence served no logical purpose. My trek (which without all the dithering would've taken about 15 minutes), brought me to the edge of the forest, but no lake was in sight.

Before me lay a vast wetland with hummocks of low vegetation, reeds, and short trees between patches of water. Far beyond rose dark bluish mountains against the light bluer sky. I'd come to the foot of the lake. There was enough firm ground to make a squiggly way into the wetland, an astounding maze, but having no thread or breadcrumbs, I didn't dare go far into the labyrinth.

Happily, that was far enough to discover a tiny shrubless and be-flowered meadow, a greensward to flop upon. In the splendid privacy of nature, for my celebratory morning dance, I left my clothes behind and joined all the birds zipping about, the red-winged blackbirds perching on cattails, and raptors floating in the sky, sailing high on the Tahoe winds.

Toward noon, clouds began piling up over the mountains and lake. Having had enough sun on my nakedness anyway, I munched lunch on the way back home. Halfway there, the wind started to bluster, and the heavens darkened ominously as a storm spread its overtaking wings.

The rain came just before I made it up our steps. Standing on our balcony porch, I watched the splendid downpour and breathed the unbelievable air. A stab of lightning and quick snap of thunder thrilled me. Take that Seattle! This was what rain is supposed to be like. Real rain! The wet fragrance on the breezes was intoxicating, exhilarating.

Back in the empty apartment, I quickly jotted down this discovery of the fantastic fen. Now I'm going to sleep some more before the first night at work.

#

Dear Me,

Before I woke up yesterday afternoon, Gene had returned and gotten ready for work, which left the bathroom for my leisurely ablutions. Per plan we dined at Heidi's and got to the casino even earlier than the required seven-thirty. There were crowds of cars in the lots and throngs of people all over the place.

In the evening's full daylight, colored lights faintly flashed and glowed dimly all over the tower and pavilion of the Sahara-Tahoe Resort Hotel and Casino. For the Grand Opening, a searchlight stood out front waving a beam that disappeared into the still blue sky. A sign touted it as the world's largest casino, but even though vast, I had doubts about that grandiose claim.

In the locker room we picked up our striped shirts, and once I got mine on, it didn't feel so ugly. My badge gave my name with "New Orleans, Louisiana" because they'd asked my home town. No way was I going to say Seattle. The locker guy remarked on the huge storm that broke right at noon for the Grand Opening and rather dampened the ceremonies.

We eight-to-four workers gathered at the Keno desks, two separate kiosks for the Red and the Blue games with eight writers stationed at each. Gene, the Twooth, I, and two girls named Darlene (from Los Angeles) and Georgia (from Omaha) would be relief writers covering stations for the other writers' breaks. Folks worked an hour and a half, had a half-hour break, and then another stint, etc. With an hour off mid-shift for lunch, it wasn't a bad schedule.

I immediately fell into my old restaurant mode, me on this side of the counter and the customer on that. Over there was a roiling mass of players in lines at each writer's desk waiting either to register a ticket or claim a win. Of course, the reason for speed in writing Keno is to get as many players into each game as possible. The games ran every ten minutes or so, and our Chinese brushes simply flew as we splashed the pointed black dabs.

By the first break at nine-thirty, my head was spinning from the intense commotion. Beyond the desk it was a kaleidoscope of anonymous faces, noses, eyes, mouths, and hairdos, a cacophony of gabbling. I went outside into the parking lot to get away from the clanging and hubbub, nothing like the good, clean din and music in La Casa. How I longed for a merengue.

In the distance behind the casino, the broad lake lay blacker than the sky. Now in the true dark, the casino's lights gleamed almost obscenely. The spotlight's beam swept across the starry sky, its only competition the newly risen waning moon. In my eye, the Sahara became an enchanted golden ship, a be-jeweled treasure galleon, floating on a magic lake. I felt a perverse pride in being on the crew for its maiden voyage. *[I think this is when Rick ceased being a pirate and turned into a legitimate sailor.]*

The night's work was three more such shifts, too busy for thought. The lunch hour between eleven- and twelve-thirties was good for a sandwich to recoup my energy. The two o'clock break saved my sanity, and only as the clock inched toward four did the crowds of players start to thin out. By four o'clock I was pitifully exhausted and greeted my replacement, another big-eared guy named Steven from Indianapolis, as a savior.

We Seattle three regrouped and breakfasted at Heidi's, which clearly would be the routine. Excited and exhausted, watching the morning grow light outside, we chattered about this first night's experience and concluded that six nights a week at this rate isn't going to be any picnic in the park.

#

.vi.

Even with the magnifier stand, that took longer than I expected, two days actually. In the meantime, yesterday afternoon at the gym Mack showed up with Kevin in tow. His wreath of curls is again bright green. Smitten with Liam's sculpted physique, our friend is inspired to work on his own. After my ten-cent tour of the machines, I suggested he look into free weights, which I know nothing about. I gather that's how one really gets shapely muscles.

We all worked through a moderate routine spending a good while on cycles and such, and in due course retired to the sauna, a new experience for Kevin. We had the hotbox all to our naked selves. I mentioned lunching with the three J's and remarked on talking about Mack.

"What did they say about me?" he naturally wondered.

"Not much, darlin'," I lied. "They just wonder if I'll make an honest man of you."

"Impossible!" Kevin chuckled.

Looking at me with an unreadable expression, Mack asked, "Do you think you can?"

"Might be too much work," I replied dubiously.

Kevin caught my gist and remarked to Mack, "Might be worth some work, dude."

Flustered, Mack said, "I need cold water," and left the sauna.

"Okay, Rich, have you two been playing around or what?"

"Let's say the bases are loaded." Smiling at my friend's confusion, I asked, "So, Kev, when's your next inning with Liam?"

"Tomorrow night at the party. Damn! What am I gonna do, Rich?"

"What do you wanna do, darlin'?"

"Seriously... I think I'm really falling in love with him."

“So you’re not just after Liam’s booty anymore?” He shook his head. “Too bad, kiddo. Be careful. Straight guys surrender their booties a lot quicker than their hearts.”

As Mack came back in, dripping wet from the shower, Kevin stage-whispered at me, “Don’t say anything... He’s back.”

Mack asked suspiciously, “What were you two talking about?”

“Your batting average, slugger,” I lied again.

“It must be pretty good,” Kevin remarked, “with a bat that big.” Embarrassed, Mack turned away to face the stove and offered us a view just as impressive.

With that lascivious digression, I’ll return to our Tahoe tale and hope to make good progress before George’s party tonight.

#

Rich’s next four days, the last precious days of spring, were idyllic. Busy nights at work, mornings in sleep, and brilliant afternoons to live. The upturned schedule was easy given his earlier history of nocturnal carousing. However, the players’ avaricious “good times” in the casino, though stoked by ample alcohol, seemed like a gross parody of his pure debauches in La Casa’s Third Room.

His description of the job is a rather striking metaphor. Hopeful fortune-seekers surge around the bows of our Red and Blue Keno reefs in waves, like vast schools of vari-colored fish in a lucky sea. In my embrasure I sit dabbing tickets and waving my Chinese brush like an anemone’s amethyst tentacles snatching gullible cash from the swirling water. As you might imagine, much less frequently do I pay off a winning ticket and then nothing very big.

Later, Rich sweetly remembered me. By the way, Old Me, just so you don’t forget such details of this Tahoe summer, I’ll remind you of the magnificent monetary lure of the Keno game at the Sahara-Tahoe. You play anywhere from one to fifteen numbers (out of eighty) betting from fifty cents to ten dollars. “Hitting them all” can win up to a staggering \$25,000. Insiders say the 6-spot ticket has the best odds, though top prize on it is only \$12,400.

Each morning Rich would wind down with the guys over breakfast-as-dinner, write in his journal, and try to be abed by five-thirty for maybe six hours sleep. That way he’d grab a bite and be out the door at noon. On Wednesday he went to the “beach” behind the Sahara and its parking lots where he hoped to find some friendly otters to frolic with.

Dear Me,

...Lawns slope gently to the lake’s edge, which is verged by a narrow strip of kidnapped ocean sand making a sad, dislocated beach. Almost as sad as our desert shirts. Deploring the abortive landscape design, I picked a sunny spot on the grass behind. The slight slope’s perfect exposure for afternoon sun. Among scattered sunbathers, none eye-catching, I spread my towel and stepped out of my clothes. My blue Speedo went unnoticed by the multitude.

The beach, perhaps fifteen feet wide, is used mostly as a shoreline path, great sand to wiggle your toes in. However, only the hardy dare cross it to the blue water, which is wondrous cold. By rushing, I could only splash in up to mid-thigh before my feet got numb. When I staggered out onto the alien sand, my legs had a blue tinge, as though dyed by the cobalt of Tahoe. An Oriental gentleman raced across the beach and made a running dive into the lake. Surfacing, he swam quite energetically in a small arc and quickly clambered out looking markedly green. I canceled all my splashing and frolicking otter fantasies. There ought to be icebergs drifting about in that Arctic water.

My watery ambitions thus thwarted, I retreated to the towel and sprawled in the sun on my back to toast the tummy. The only intrusion on my peace was the occasional buzz of a motorboat skimming past like a voracious aquatic insect. Lying there in the singing silence of closed eyes, I felt a shift, like a gear switching, and the electric sensation of Lane’s presence.

With eyes still shut, I could see him standing over me in his black Speedo. He reached down and took my hand. Arising without effort, I knew I was dreaming. Lane stepped forward, and we melded into one substance that spread out thin and white like a triangular sail. We skimmed silently across the halcyon lake, tacking into coves and out and running wildly on the wind. A kite lifting into sky, we swooped over the lake and spiraled up into the sun.

Awake again, I turned over onto my stomach. And still wide awake, I imagined Lane's body under me as firm as the earth. It lifted us, and we floated over the lawn. Magic snakes, we twisted one round the other in tangles of blue, green, and black and plunged headlong into the lake. Unutterably happy creatures, we coiled and swam as one amid floating mountains of ice, leaving flashes of golden fire in our wake.

Opening my eyes to grass and distant mounds of other sunbathers, I pondered madness. Am I mad to have such ecstatic, hallucinatory fantasies? To be delusional, I think you've got to believe the fantasy's real. Always aware of fantasizing, maybe I've got an overactive fantasy gland, like an anterior phantasmal cortex stimulated by elevated levels of testosterone. Then it dawned on me what's goosing my cortex: I'm in love.

#

Be that as it may, when Rich had enough of sunbathing, he hiked back to his new-found fen for the later afternoon golden light. In the glade (his glen in the fen) he danced to avian music and then made a cautious incursion into the labyrinth of peninsulas, islets, and isthmuses (isthmi?), trying not to get lost amongst meandering rills and pools. He lamented not being a painter or photographer to capture the beauty of this marshy maze suffused with pellucid light and embraced by lake-blued mountains.

His schedule of afternoons at the beach followed by walks into the wetlands immediately became enshrined as happy habit. At the beach every day almost everybody was different than the day before, all tourists who'd be gone again tomorrow. Such turnover wasn't promising for dalliance, but the views were sometimes intriguing. It's always good to see somebody a second time as cause to acknowledge each other.

Parading around to display his remarkable Speedo, Rich perused the lawn's scantily clad temporary population, purely academically of course, observing various features worth footnoting. If the male sunbather's eyes were closed, Rick would brazenly read between his lines. Meanwhile, he hoped that behind their closed eyes, these sun-slugs might be happily enjoying fantasies not unlike his own magic snakes.

Early Saturday afternoon, Gene and Rich prepared for the arrival of the sisters and their folks that evening. They cleaned the place thoroughly and got it all fresh and ready for the girls. The story for the parents was to be that they had the right bedroom, Gene the left, and Rich, the tramp on the living room floor, was in transit to a place of his own in a few days. I suppose that sounded marginally plausible. Then Rich took the hike to his glen in the fen and tried to dance away his nervousness. It didn't work.

Dear Me,

...Instead, I lay on the greensward spread-eagle in the sun and thought hard. Shortly I'll be seeing Barbie again, the woman I've twice violated. Before that talk with my comrades, I'd figured she's written that off, as have I, but if she's told the others about... it must have meant more to her than I thought. So now this reunion of the Seattle cohort felt painfully awkward.

Suppose Barbie is actually expecting to sleep with me. What if, knowing full well that I'm gay, she's harboring lustful thoughts behind that cute smile and brown eyes? I'll just have to quash such fantasies quickly, though civilly, of course.

Maybe I really should find another place. Anywhere else. Why should I have to worry about Barbie's hopes or expectations? And why would she be hoping for anything anyway? Those two sorry pokes ought to have been more than enough to turn her off completely.

The more I thought, the more nervous I got. Like football, dealing with amorous females isn't a game faeries excel at. I'll have to, as we say in the trade, play my cards close to the chest and hope for a lucky draw if I want to get out of this game with the shirt on my back.

#

Richard the Twooth came over from the Pine Cone for the travelers' arrival, and the guys hung out at loose ends waiting. Rich finally went outside into the field and indulged in nervous jigs in the tall grasses. Shortly after five, a fancy blue Chevy came rolling down the Trail.

...Crossing the Rubicon again, I watched them get out of the car, an older short couple from the front, and from the back, the sisters with Oná wiggling in Martha's arms. Barbie smiled brightly, waving to me and to Gene and Richard, who were hustling down the steps. Then out of the back seat also came another older woman, a sudden wild card in the deal.

Martha introduced us guys for handshakes, conventional greetings, and almost disarming smiles. Their father, whom they called Papa, was Bob, a slightly rotund, graying man a tad shorter than I. Their mother, whom they called Nana, was also a Martha, of a pair with her husband, but shorter still. The wild card was Aunt Ginny, Bob's sister, a thin matron who smiled and gave us guys a very penetrating look.

In the brief round of hi's, Barbie looked at me amusedly, almost laughing, and giggled, "Oh, Richie, you look so funny!" Of course, it was my short haircut and flapping ears. The others also chuckled, but I took no offense, considering funny-looking a good defense against feminine wiles. Don't look for any Prince Charming around here, fair maiden!

While Gene and the Twooth brought the girls' luggage in, I snuggled little Oná who was wildly excited to see me. I'd missed the poochie awfully. The folks already had rooms at the Sahara and offered to take us all to dinner at Harrah's. But first we'd have drinks.

Sitting around the living room with us two Richards on the floor, we had scotch and sodas and joined Bob's toast to beautiful Lake Tahoe. There were short interrogations of each unrelated male about our home towns, scholarly fields, and such identifiers. My admission of Slavic Linguistics got an enthusiastic response from Bob, who's a professor of Romance Languages at the University of Michigan.

Barbie rarely looked at me, and then with a pleasant, blank expression. More often it was Aunt Ginny's eye I caught inspecting me dubiously, protective of her nieces' virtue perhaps? So as not to ignore Barbie completely, I asked how she enjoyed graduating. She shrugged, glad it was over. Big Martha exclaimed how proud they were. Then we drove over to Harrah's for dinner.

The eight of us sat with me between Gene and little Martha and Barbie across the table between the Twooth and Aunt Ginny. Whenever Barbie looked at me, she was clearly still amused by my ears. I ordered prime rib, amazingly rare, something I've only ever read about.

Like a travelogue, the family members tossed around a bewildering sequence of anecdotes. They'd stayed a night in Portland, visited a seaside town, and saw Crater Lake. When the wine arrived, Bob drank to a happy-go-lucky summer for the Seattle-Tahoe crew.

Big Martha described today's forested drive past Shasta and raved about the marvelous mountain. Barbie was impressed with the incredibly blue lake. Over our salads, Aunt Ginny explained that the folks had picked her up in Minneapolis for her first trip out west. There followed many more anecdotes lasting right through our entrees.

The whole while, we three outsiders sat there listening, smiling, eating, drinking, and mentally flopping around like silent, goggle-eyed fish in the family's net. Then my fish's eye observed a busboy with obvious talents. His graceful removal of my empty plate was quite skillful. Surreptitiously, I observed him expertly bending to place our plates in a cart.



We guys hustled through dessert (chocolate mousse) to race off to work, leaving the family to relax with coffees. Later they'd come over to the Sahara and see us on the job. I'd had so much beef and potatoes that I couldn't finish the mousse anyway.

Right after my first break, the family showed up across my Keno desk. They got in line to play tickets with me, 6-spots as I'd recommended. My spots on their copies were dabbed perfectly. They hung around nearby waiting for the game to be called. When the balls were drawn and the game done, Barbie jumped around exulting, "I've won! I won!" Her dollar ticket had hit five of the six, and I paid her the \$110.

Lady Luck gave me a smooch too around three-thirty when the game boss asked us three to work overtime, another break and shift. That timed things well for meeting the family for an early breakfast at Heidi's. They were all Sunday-morning chipper, up early to take a drive around Carson City, Squaw Valley, and Donner Pass. It was an ambitious itinerary.

Over our coffees, Gene announced that he's found the girls jobs. They can start tomorrow morning as chambermaids in the Sahara Hotel. Beyond startled, it was hard to read the girls' reactions, but little Martha quickly exclaimed, "Perfect!" Everyone agreed. Barbie seemed quite excited at the domestic prospect, probably another woman thing.

Having worked all night plus some, we guys sat goggle-eyed yet again over our pancakes and listened to Bob's remarks on matters political and academic. Finally back home, I tore the couch apart and threw my worn out butt down.

Waking up a bit late this Sunday, I didn't go beaching but made myself write all this for you, Old Me. I don't know why, but it feels important to get it down on paper. [*You're psychic, darlin'*]. Anyway, I've still got time for a walk to my marshy maze.

#

.vii.

On the greensward, Rich did several dances agonizing over the need to find another place to live, which naturally led to no firm conclusions. Back at the Rubicon, he found Gene and the Twooth making a dinner for everyone, trout amandine and various fixings. They'd all had a few drinks by the time the big blue car finally came gliding down the Rubicon.

Dear Me,

...It's amazing how much fluster and flurry a family of five can generate, especially with a frenetic dog, in simply getting out of a car, climbing some steps, and coming in a door. All the while, they carried on excitedly about the great driving trip. It helped me a lot to have had those scotch and sodas beforehand.

Dinner was blessedly quick in coming with big glasses of white wine, which Bob found very "fruity." I liked it if only for that. The trout was again something I'd never had, but delicious. Gene and the Twooth were thanked profusely. The idle I also applauded their cooking.

Afterwards, we hauled chairs down to the field and sat with coffee to watch the exploding sunset. What with work, I'd been missing the Tahoe sunsets and was enthralled by the washes of color across sky and mountains. The eventual dark called for another drink to contemplate all the stars popping out, a more brilliant panorama of Milky Way and confused constellations than I've ever seen before. Outside on my work breaks they're always obscured by the casino's lights.

Leaving for the hotel, the folks offered the Twooth a ride back to Pine Cone, and I bummed a ride too. The cohort was surprised, but I explained that on your night off you really should stay up and sleep in the morning like usual. We'd meet up at Heidi's for breakfast early before the girls go to their new job and the folks take off for home.

#

I said goodnight to the folks in the lot of the Sahara. Since casino workers aren't supposed to go into our places of employment on off hours, I walked across the road to Barney's. Unable to bring

myself to gamble, I simply stood around watching players at their games, feeling somehow sedated by this experience with the girls' family. Even when I lived with my own family back in Arkansas, there wasn't any such sense of togetherness and mutual affection. Actually, it was rather the opposite, but that was in another life. It amazed me how the girls' folks so gladly welcomed us guys into their circle.

Picking up another scotch and soda to sharpen my senses, I set off in search of the deft blackjack dealer, who wasn't at his table. With the night's sole hope stolen away, the wander began back and forth between Barney's and Harrah's, punctuated with more drinks, futile scans of the crowds for nookie birds, a wee hours' snack or two, infrequent and unsuccessful attacks on the dime slot machines, and a sheaf of losing 6-spot Keno tickets.

Religiously I made periodic pilgrimages to the blackjack table only to find it otherwise inhabited. My rotten luck that he'd also be off tonight, or that I'd come round each time on his break. Around three, on overload with all the people, jangle, booze, and horniness, I wandered drunkenly across the road and off into the darkness behind my glistening treasure galleon.

Sitting on the strange sand by the water's edge, I let the dark quiet soothe my battered senses. A slice of waning moon was just rising, not bright enough to diminish the starry splatter all around, and a cool breeze breathed on my face, a chill draught off the frigid lake. Kicking off my shoes, I danced on the dark lawn, a tipsy bird of the night, first an owl with huge eyes and silent flight and then a bat with gossamer wings streaking around among the stars.

It had to be after four, only three more hours till breakfast, when I staggered back across the parking lot toward Barney's. A short way down the empty road another walker appeared out of the darkness heading north, coming my way. It was a guy; closer and I recognized my lovely dealer. Bingo! Approaching him, I used my Vincent Price voice, "Good morrow, sir." Surprised, the guy said hi, and I asked, "Where were you all night, Mr. Black Jack?"

He stopped his stride right beside me where we could see each other well. "Oh, they had me on poker all night," he said and checked me out approvingly. "Why?"

He was indeed interesting, handsome like Alphonse, my lanky luscious Colombian. In flirting mode, I admitted, "Oh, I was just looking for you. Thinking maybe we could..."

As my eloquent ellipsis dragged on, he raised an eyebrow, perhaps recognizing his ardent cruiser of the other night, and said, "It would be great, but I've got a lover."

"Oh..." I stuck out my hand anyway. "I'm Rich. I write Keno at the Sahara." He shook it strongly. "I'm Daryl. Good to meet you." He glanced northward up the dark road. "Just got off and I'm heading home—to the Pine Cone. Where are you going, cute thing?"

His endearment choked me up. "That's the problem. No, I've got a place," I stumbled. "I'm here with this bunch from Seattle, you see, and there's this girl..." Daryl waited patiently. "Anyway I really need to find somewhere else. Know anybody who needs a roommate?"

"Nope," Daryl sighed, again glancing northward, anxious to get home to his sweet lover.

So I said, "Good night, Daryl. I'll pop over on breaks sometimes and wave to you."

He patted my shoulder. "Better not, honey. They'll think we've got something going."

"Don't I wish," I chuckled sadly.

"No," Daryl said quickly, "I mean a scam."

With a wave, I sighed, "Okay. Wish me luck."

"This place is full of it," he laughed, also waved, and moved on into the dark. I prowled on, awfully disappointed but heartened by at last meeting a bird of my feather.

#

In the dawn, Rich staggered back to the Rubicon, and still inebriated, journaled that day off. Then he quietly washed up and waited on the balcony for the others to get themselves together. Having slept the night, Gene and the girls were all bushy-tailed and bright-eyed. Gene dropped Rich and the sisters at Heidi's and went to pick up Richard the Twooth.

Dear Me,

...Martha, Barbie, and I started with coffee. Martha was curious what I did all night, and with effort I described my peripatetic bouncing between Barney's and Harrah's, in the course of which I'd lost a whole two dollars on slot machines. For color, I remarked on meeting handsome Daryl and gratefully noted no particular reaction on Barbie's part.

Shortly, the folks arrived with big hugs all around, and two minutes later Gene and the Twooth came in. Conversations swirled around my sleepy head, tossing me about like flotsam on waves. Almost in a coma, I watched the much beloved oldsters, appreciating their happiness and warmth towards me, the odd wad.

Before I could fall asleep, we were outside by the log railing hugging and bidding farewells to Bob, big Martha, and Aunt Ginny. The others climbed into the VW to take the girls to their new job. This frazzled faerie's walk home in the bright morning was very slow and dreamy, and on my nest of cushions I cuddled with Oná for the first time in so terribly long. She licked my cheek, and I was out like a light.

When I awoke, having the place all to myself and pooch was a pleasure, but sleeping till almost three... I fed Oná, made myself a PB&J, and pranced with her down my yellow-brick road into the woods to the fen. On my glade I danced for the start of the new summer, and then the pupdog and I carefully explored the maze some more. We found a spot of fairly open water maybe a hundred yards across, and there were hordes of ducks all over the place.

After work, the girls looked rather the worse for wear. Martha exclaimed about how hard it is to make up king-size beds, and Barbie figured she'd set a lifetime record in number of bathrooms cleaned. They thought it was special getting to clean the folks' rooms. Gene and I offered heartfelt sympathy and suggested dinner soon at Heidi's.

Conversation amongst our five at dinner was much more relaxed now. The girls talked about their day more casually. Feeling great after my sleep, I wished Gene and Twooth good luck at work after being up all day. They were confident they'd have no trouble, but this old carouser knew better.

When I remarked about how wonderful the folks had been to us, Barbie said, "That's because you're wonderful too!" She wasn't looking at me, so I hoped she'd truly meant second person plural.

Gene drove the girls back home, and I strode off with the Twooth to the Sahara. On the way, I danced a skip or two, exhilarated at making it through the minefield in one piece.

#

*.viii.*

Again Mack drove Kevin and me to George's party, which fortunately started at nine. Our friend's curls were now a dark green like a laurel wreath. The place was very festive with bright banners here and there and dramatic colored lighting indoors and out. The crowd looked like half the Titsling, with the rest artsy types and local socialites. Several of those I recognized from professional years past. It was a comfortable, modern mix of gays and straights.

On the terrace was a lounge area and a cute bartender. The vast living room was transformed into a dance palace with more wild lighting and another bar also cutely tended, and in the dining room was a spread of hors d'oeuvres to choke a Clydesdale. It was mobbed and fast disappearing. Our friends do know how to throw a party.

We found George holding court in the crowded kitchen and congratulated him on his performance. He whispered to me that the party was secretly for his birthday—all of 24—so nobody'd bring him presents. I sighed and left him to the greetings of more party guests. Then Mario took us off to check out the dance setup in the living room.

A jaw-dropping young blond firecracker was bopping around behind the computer console playing some marvelous electronic dance music (EDM), most unusual, a splendid interweaving of sprightly rhythms with intriguing, pleasant sounds. I couldn't stand still.

Mario explained, "That's Lars. He's damn good."

"Oh," I remarked archly, "Norwegian maybe?"

"Swedish," Mack answered quickly and punched my shoulder. "We know him."

"I'm trying to get him a regular gig with the Titsling," Mario said, "maybe on Thursday nights." The lighting shifted, and Lars was silhouetted against the bright wall, with his headphones looking like a frenetic Hopi maiden. Mario added, "Lars is a man with a mission. He wants to kiss every man he meets."

"Good idea," I laughed, "a lot more do-able than balling the United Nations."

We all laughed and Mario warned, "Nobody leaves tonight without a kiss from Lars."

"Is that a promise?" I asked hopefully, and Mack frowned at me. "Goodness," I laughed, "he almost sounds like that Hindu woman who goes around hugging everybody."

Kevin snorted again. "He's a Druid."

Taking me by the hand, Mack said, "We might as well get it over with. Come on."

He led me through the crowd of dancers to the console, caught the DJ's attention, and shouted my introduction. The vision zipped out from behind his machines, said a smiling hi, grabbed me close, and before I could say boo, locked lips with me. His nimble tongue didn't take no for an answer, and all the neurons in my brain started firing wildly. After an endless moment that wasn't quite long enough, Lars stepped back and said brightly, "Nice to meet you, Rich." Then he merrily hopped back behind his sound board.

Mack gently led me away from the epiphany. At the bar, the tender cutie gave me a ginger ale, which my friends thought quaint, and we made our way through the crowd toward the terrace. By the kitchen Kevin left us to lie in wait for Liam to arrive. Out on the terrace we found a bevy of lounging lesbians including those I now know and many others.

Carol had brought her son Jet along, a tiny tow-head who at two is quite a party person. He careened around like an awkward butterfly between all the women, reveling in their friendly attentions. When I sat down, he toddled over to me and joyfully babbled, "Rappa!" Janet explained that he thought I'm Carol's dad, whom he's only seen once about a month ago and who's got a white mustache too. I mentioned that my own grandsons call me "Pa-poo," which is actually Greek for grandfather, and I coached the toddler to say it.

Lifting Jet up onto my knee, I did that old "This is the way the lady rides..." When we got to the galloping farmer part, the tyke convulsed with laughter, as did everyone else. Of course, he insisted we do it again. Afterwards one of the older women, maybe in her late thirties, remarked that she remembered her own grandfather doing that with her as a tot. Carol played the routine with Jet and got the same laughter. I was pleased to pass on the tradition.

#

While someone else entertained Jet, Mack and I walked over to the cute bar for refills and ran into Deirdre and Lynn. Lynn asked if I'd like to do them a favor. Being fatherless, she wants me to give her away at the wedding now only four weeks off. Honored, I agreed to, and we shared affectionate hugs. That's when Kevin showed up, distraught.

"Help!" he whined, "Misty nabbed him as soon as he came in the door!"

"Who's Misty?" I quite reasonably inquired.

"Liam's old girlfriend," he moaned.

Deirdre filled me in. "She dumped him a few months ago and now wants him back."

Kevin whined again, "'But he said he can't stand her anymore.'"

Lynn laughed, "Who can? I think I'm qualified to call her a controlling bitch."

“She dragged him out onto the dance floor. Rich, what am I gonna do? He’s just too polite to tell her to go away.”

“Well, Kev, I imagine a pirate would save the fair Liam from that dragon-lady.” Perhaps too cavalier with other people’s lives, I suggested, “You could go out there and cut in on them. Tell her to back off—you’ve got dibs on Liam now.” He stared at me in dismay. “No, go on, kiddo. You’ve got the right, darlin’.” He still hesitated.

“Just do it, dude,” Mack urged. “Say: Back off, baby-cakes! He’s mine.”

Deirdre gave Kevin a shove in the right direction. “Kick her big butt, honey.”

We all rejoined Jet’s fascinated audience. Janet got me talking about my grandsons, which started a general conversation about heredity, sexuality, and gender identity. That’s when Jason and Johnny showed up. They’d been out on the dance floor and brought tidings of what my piratical suggestion wrought.

Johnny explained. “Kevin danced right up to Misty and told her to beat it, baby-cakes.” Mack roared with laughter.

Jason said, “She just stood there with her mouth open, and Liam waved bye-bye.”

“I’ve never seen a white person get that red in the face,” Johnny laughed.

“She just started crying and ran away,” Jason reported, sounding a bit disappointed.

Lynn proclaimed emphatically, “Mission accomplished.” The rest were pleased with the outcome, but I felt a twinge of pity for this unknown Misty, bitch or not. But I guess them’s the breaks in the game of love.

While I had him at hand, I told Johnny he’ll get this next chapter of TWAS by Monday when I’ve had time to proof it. Of course, that’s my acronym for *There Was a Ship*. Quite clever, don’t you think? In turn, Jason asked me to lunch at the pub on Monday so we can review the webpage mockup. An exciting prospect.

#

By then, ‘twas high time to hit the dance floor, and I urged Mack to come with me. He claims he can’t dance. I told him if he ever wants to be an honest man, he’s got to start dancing, but Mack said he’d rather stay dishonest tonight. I remarked that especially if he wants to be dishonest tonight, he’d damn well better dance with me. That did the trick.

While giving Mack lessons to the thrilling music of DJ Lars, it came to me that at the Titsling, this kiss jockey could use the stage-name Otto. Just saying. I started Mack with bouncing to the main rhythm, moved on to bringing hips and shoulders into play with the minors, and then to combinations and rhythmic phrases, in which Lars is a virtuoso. I noticed some of our dancing neighbors auditing our class, including Deirdre and Lynn.

‘Twas a wonder to see Mack’s growing enthusiasm and enjoyment. If he pays attention, he’s got good control and coordination, a rare talent in the longer-limbed. We kept dancing for some numbers and then took a drink break. Mack remarked that I’m a hot old man. I asked what he plans to do about it, and he said guess. I could well imagine the nefarious activities he had in mind. With new shots of energy, we proceeded to dance ourselves into a stupor.

When it was time to go, Kevin advised that he’d ride with Liam and see where he winds up. His green curls definitely looked like the laurel wreath of a victor. We wished him happy pirating. After goodnights to our friends, we staggered out the door, and once in Mack’s car, shared a dishonest kiss.

###

**CHAPTER 6. DOUBLE OR NOTHING***.i.*

Here it is Wednesday morning already. Ever since George's party last Saturday night, I haven't found the intestinal fortitude to dive back into the tale of Young Rich at Tahoe. There have been so many other things to do...

Sunday after our brunch at the French pastry shop, I drove Mack to the airport for his flight to LA and came back home in a daze of disbelief. Try as I might, I can't think of the last time a guy ever said he loves me. Oh, wait, it was Steve, the poet, in 1972, a hundred times. There you go, more than 40 years ago. Good grief! I've got fifty years on him. Sure, I've heard about those mythical young guys who like old men, but I never figured to meet such a unicorn, much less one who likes me.

Monday morning I emailed the Treasure Galleon to Johnny and then breakfasted with an older woman friend, again at the pastry shop. When I commented on my romantic consternation, she poo-pooed my confusion and advised abandoning myself to unrestrained passion. Good advice, I'm sure, but I'm sorely out of practice.

At lunch Jason hauled out his laptop and showed me the model website they've cooked up. He explained the items I'll have to write and suggested we get a good photo of me. Seems Deirdre wants to shoot me, so to speak. I was delighted, and when I praised his work, he revealed that in fact Mack had put it all together for me, which was even more delightful.

Johnny called just then on my cell. He wondered if I really need that last section about George's party and all the friends. I feel it shows how different gay life is today than when Rick could only meet a kindred spirit literally like a ship passing in the night. Next he remarked on all the Mack and Kevin stuff. "It's strange, Rich—like they're characters in your story."

"They are," I admitted. "All of you are. It's like a reality show about an old man telling a story of long ago."

That afternoon, again to avoid diving back into Young Rich's tale, I doodled on my next Aztec icon. It will be Huehuecoyotl, the Old Coyote, who among other things is the deity of youth, sexuality, and male beauty. Satisfied with creating an abstractly pornographic motif useful for a multitude of designs, I took off for the gym.

Kevin, his curly wreath now fuchsia, was treading a mill in a somber state of mind. Concerned, I asked the matter, and he said, "Liam doesn't want to have sex until he's sure he can trust me. How in the hell am I supposed to get him to trust me?"

"You know, Kevin," I ventured to advise, "I bet Liam just wants to be sure he loves you. So all you can do is be lovable. You're good at that, darlin'."

Then in brighter spirits, my young friend remarked on the Mack scenario, and I babbled on about ridiculous May-December romances and the absurdity of an old man in love. Kevin said, "It's not absurd, Rich. I think it's sweet. I bet you just want to be sure you love him."

Fortified by our mutual counseling session, I rolled on home for a full evening of playing with that sexy motif. By bedtime I'd constructed an intricate border for the icon, and then I let myself wonder affectionately how Mack's doing in Los Angeles.

Yesterday morning I was all stoked to start this new chapter but got distracted with a new graphic thought about my naughty motif. That was just as good, since Deirdre and Lynn called late morning and hauled me off to a picnic-hike up our local lookout mountain. My stamina isn't what it used to be, but with occasional rest-breaks I managed heroically. At the summit Deirdre took several photos of me, one of which looked halfway decent in the little view screen. Though the joyous company of the young lovers was invigorating, I got home in the evening exhausted.

Today I'm again feeling all fired up to write, but guess what—I've just now remembered those blurbs I've got to write for the website. Darn!

#

Honestly, I got up this morning fully intending to resume the voyage of the Faerie Prince, and I will do so, promise.

But first, let me exuberate appropriately about this historic date. The first thing I heard on NPR this morning was that the Supreme Court has validated gay marriage across the country. All these years of struggle have paid off with triumph. Blessed be all my brothers and sisters whose courage and strength have won the righteous battle for our honor.

I stood in the kitchen in stunned gratitude. The decision yesterday to uphold Affordable Healthcare had already amazed me as a too-rare sign of judicial sanity. Now this thunderbolt of justice, as our President calls it. I gave a cheer and over my grapefruit half celebrated that I've actually lived long enough to see my outlaw life validated.

Besides the socially momentous nature of this occasion, I can't help noting that today's decision has happened exactly fifty years to the week after we left Young Rich prowling Tahoe in search of love. You can weigh the irony of that chronological coincidence after reading this next chapter. I'll bite a bullet now and pick up the tale where our hero naively thinks that he's managed to dance his way through a minefield.

#

Our pirate Tricky Rick has now become a legitimate sailor called Richie Rich (Ignore the unfortunate comic book reference.), on the glittering treasure ship Sahara. He relished the glamour of the betting crowds, the noisy fragrance of money in the air, and his glorious role in the fickle game of fortune. Settling into the easy rhythm of shifts and breaks, after work Rich slept the sleep of the righteous and then played away the afternoons with Oná at fen or beach.

The juxtaposed work schedules meant Rich didn't have to see Barbie all that much. First was in the mornings when the girls got up and ready for work. Happily reunited with Oná, he'd be cuddled up with her on the couch cushions and already asleep for at least an hour when the girls would quietly get up and have breakfast. He'd wake up just enough to mumble, "Good morning, ladies," from his pile in the corner.

The second passing of ships happened in the evenings, after and before respective shifts. When the girls got off work they'd make dinner for the cohort. Rich truly did appreciate Martha and Barbie's dedication to the female calling and blessed their nurturing hearts. He was also impressed by their teamwork in cooking, their coordination of tasks like chopping veggies or browning onions and keeping an eye on the recipes, all the while chatting blithely about the process. He'd never before encountered such sheer sisterhood and was touched.

As you can well imagine, with such a convenient arrangement and Barbie clearly posing no threat to his faerie virtue, Rich quickly forgot all about looking for another place to live, and his thoughts turned again to romance. Afternoons with the pooch at the beach he'd amble about on parade scanning the prone bodies on the grass round about and wondering where all the boys were. Then he'd lie down on his towel to watch clouds move swiftly across the sky and take a fantasy romp with lovely Lane.

Afternoons with Oná at the fen were joyful with nature dances and intimate imaginings with Lane. Rich wrote in the journal about that Thursday's flight of fantasy:

Dear Me,

...Whirling around, I started hearing the theme of Ravel's "Bolero" in my head, and it swept Lane and me into its crescendos. Flowers of sheer, fragrant blessedness bloomed inside us. After the

blaring finale, I fell down on the ground panting and wondering again if maybe I've lost my marbles. Such bliss as this simply isn't normal for human beings.

Gathering up my remaining marbles, I headed home for dinner. The girls had made a pan of spaghetti with hamburger, cheese and pecans. It tasted great, and everyone enthused over it. I noticed that Martha and Barbie both seemed a bit subdued, not saying much and mostly looking at their plates. The Twooth must have noticed too because he asked if they were okay. Martha assured us they were fine, but Barbie had a blank expression, almost puzzled.

Not wanting to get into the dangerous game of trying to figure women out, I accepted that they were fine and helped Gene wash dishes. Afterwards I went into the bathroom to wash up for work. Coming back out, I found Barbie alone sitting at the table with a glass of wine.

She looked down at her hands and said, "Richie, dear, I've got something to tell you." Worried that maybe I'd said or done something rude or wrong again, I plopped down to listen. She said, "I missed a period." Her brown eyes got big in surprise or fright.

I wondered, "What?" [*Believe me, Rich knew absolutely nothing about the menstrual cycle.*]

Barbie composed her features and whispered, "I may be pregnant." No words came out of my open mouth. She continued, business-like, "I'll make a doctor appointment tomorrow."

Then from outside Gene hollered for me to come on or we'd be late for work.

#

.ii.

Stupefied by the announcement, Rich dabbed his Keno tickets that night like a ghostly machine. On breaks standing like a zombie out in the dark by the lake, he kept hearing those two words, may be, those two cruel words. Maybe or maybe not. Suddenly everything depended on a roll of the dice, and this bet was double or nothing. On the three am break Rich finally let himself scream his pain and fear out over the dark waters of Tahoe.

Friday afternoon he retreated with Oná to his marshy refuge like a wounded creature, wandering listlessly among the hummocks and waterways. Tormented by the probabilities, he luckily stayed conscious enough not to get lost and made it home by suppertime.

Barbie welcomed him with a drink and the news that her doctor appointment was for Monday afternoon. That left them both in limbo for the next two days. Rich could tell that Barbie was terribly distressed too, but he didn't know what to say. He followed her example and kept a pleasant smile and easy manner through the meal.

In that manner Saturday passed without incident or reference to the situation, and supper was eaten with conversation as amiable as before Thursday's bomb. The others all seemed even better than Rich at putting things out of mind. The main news was Gene's plan for their Sunday evening off, dinner at a Chinese place in Carson City. Rich wrote later about that day off.

Dear Me,

...Overtime seems to be a frequent thing, and I love it for the extra dough. Getting home two hours later yesterday morning, I found the girls already up. Since it was also their day off, and they'd be around the apartment, Barbie let me sleep in her bedroom. Lying in her bed was disturbing, but I was too tired to agonize.

When Gene and I got up around one, for the first time, I had the honor of escorting the cohort to the Sahara's beach for a sunny afternoon on the lawn. We spread towel around my usual spot, and they made the requisite remarks on the beauty of the lake. Unveiling my Speedo, I was keenly aware that no one but Gene had ever seen so much of my skin.

When I lay down, Barbie looked away. Her green one-piece went well with her auburn hair and showed for the first time her smallish breasts and round hips and thighs, quite shapely as those



things go, but of scant allure for me. The Twooth mercifully distracted me by commenting on how hairy I am. Hairy faeries appreciate homage from the hairless.

Instead of being all by myself and Oná, with this company I felt more attuned to the grassy society. We chatted just as casually as the vacationers. Like everybody, we wandered down to the sand to test the cold water and shiver. Promenading about the lawn, we watched the sunbathers bask and roll around like seals, a few like walruses.

I watched a group of three guys arrive and settle several yards away on beach blankets. One of them, a fine blond, peeled down to a riveting red Speedo. Stretching like a tawny cat, he lay down on his yellow blanket, raising two superb scarlet convexities. The other two guys in drab black and blue suits weren't half bad either. The focus of my attention being unmistakable, Barbie innocuously asked, "Are they flits?"

Letting her silly, genteel term pass, I replied emphatically "I certainly hope so."

They all laughed, and Martha said, "Richie, you're terrible."

"No, I'm not," I said. "We need a lot more faeries around here." Nobody laughed.

On another meandering walkabout with Oná, I observed that Two Red Hills had turned over and become one scarlet mound. His nod of approbation made my blood boil. To cool off, I left the pooch with the bunch, ran across the sand, and dived headlong into the icy lake. Surfacing a few yards out, I swam frantically back to shore and scrambled out on already numb, bluish feet. My friends thought I was crazy, but the guy gave me another nod, so it was well worth the discomfort.

...Till now we hadn't needed to fit all five of us into the VW, so our early evening drive to Carson City was a tad cramped. Being larger, the Twooth sat in front, and I was squashed up in back with Martha and Barbie. The latter shifted back and forth between her sister's and my laps. Chatting brightly, she sat on my thighs like on an uncomfortable chair. Her weight and mashing of my personal space gave me the freaking heebie-jeebies.

Cap'n Gene took us on a tour of the town, charming with picturesque steeples on the hillsides, white spires in the sunset. The first truly western town I've ever seen, Carson City had a curious cowboy-saloon feeling. The Chinese restaurant was fancier than I expected, all hung with paper lanterns and streamers, candles and flowers on the tables. I had shrimp fried rice and got a taste of everybody else's dish as well. With all of us stuffed to the gills, the return trip in the beetle was even more cramped.

On the dark ride home, I talked to the guys some more about living and working a nocturnal schedule, stressing that it doesn't work to mix and match with the diurnal. So it behooves us guys to stay up the rest of the night, or till as late as we can manage. After all, it isn't the days but the nights that we've got off.

Gene and Twooth bought my argument, so I avoided a repeat of last Sunday's solitary night. It was great in their company, because we didn't have to talk about the current ticklish situation. We wandered the other casinos trying our luck here or there. Gene lost a bit at blackjack, the Twooth won a modest amount at roulette, and I almost broke even playing six-spots. Once from a careful distance, I caught Daryl's eye at his blackjack table and got a glance of greeting that sufficed for comfort in my lonesome night.

#

Dear Me,

...Barbie's doctor appointment was for two in the afternoon. She got some time off, and I met her at the Sahara hotel. She looked cute and chipper, but I could tell she was all tense. A few words of greeting and we walked down the road, a couple blocks south and over one, with even fewer. Several modest shops and offices huddled in a line between groves of those towering conifers. At the doctor's door, Barbie bravely took my hands with a tight smile and said, "We'll see, Richie."

Waiting outside awash in elemental terror, I staggered over into the neighboring grove where the giant pines lofted their crowns into the sapphire sky. Conquering my panic, I embraced a vast

trunk and sank my face into a canyon in its craggy, cracked bark. That's how I discovered where the Tahoe air gets that mysterious hint of vanilla.

Barbie soon came out of the office with a yes. One month. Then she burst into tears. Though reeling inside, I instinctively put my arms around her and let her cry for us both. Quietly, face still to my shoulder, she asked hollowly, "Are you going to marry me?" Without an answer, I took her by the hand, and we walked back down the street.

#

In spite of our recent judicial inspiration, these last few pages were quite painful to write, as I'm sure you'll appreciate, though so much of it was just transcribing. To bring the tale down to that brutal question was a push so I could get to the gym and thence to pick up my grandson Jammes from his adventure camp kayaking trip. After that was dinner out and a disappointing movie with an old friend, who is nonetheless somewhat younger than I. And there wasn't a moment or the strength to write any more of the pain over the weekend. It's, as I believe Mehitabel the cat once said, "the eternal struggle between art and life archy"

Two things took me away from my noble efforts, Mack's getting back home on Saturday morning and the fact that it was Gay Pride weekend. After I gave my Viking a warm welcome, we went for brunch and then downtown for the parade and festivities on the square. Everywhere the mood was jubilant over Friday's landmark ruling and the new inclusive country we now live in. Starry-eyed with joy, Mack danced with me by the bandstand, and I reveled in the ancient emotions he awoke in me.

The celebrating crowd around us was also fascinating, largely very young and outlandish. Uniformly outlandish, one might say. In attempts to be seen as individuals, the kids had so many tortured or neglected hairstyles, mangled or mongrelized wardrobes, indecipherable tattoos, and improbable piercings, often all on one and the same body, that they all looked alike. It was the rare crew-cut, plainly dressed, and unadorned dork who really stood out from the crowd. Or old folks like me, of course.

The first gay pride event I ever attended was in DC, maybe in 1974 or 75. Again, four decades ago. I proudly wore a beige T-shirt that innocuously said, "A day without human rights is like a day without sunshine." Pride events became a habit for me, and in 1982 my then lover and I wound up on the front page of the Denver Post for the celebration there. While not out on the street demonstrating to legislatures, conventions, and such, I still claim some small share in this historic victory. And so does Tricky Rick if only for being a faerie pioneer in the dark ages of the early sixties, several years before Stonewall.

In the later afternoon we went to a dance on the roof terrace of a fancy new hotel and found most of our other young friends, including Kevin, who looked quite "lovable" in a yellow tank top, scandalously short cutoffs, and glittery flip-flops. I remarked that Tricky Rick would have heartily approved of his pirate attire. We had drinks and only danced a bit to save our energies for later.

Mack and I took some pizza back to my place and lay around recuperating with music and intimacy. Refreshed and invigorated, we got to the pride party at the Convention Center at ten and found a huge crowd, the gang of young friends, and favorite DJ Oona at the console—like the Titsling on steroids. It almost could have been La Casa de los Marineros at Mardi Gras, but for no whores or sailors. Three hours of jubilation was enough, and then I happily went home with Mack. That was my first time in decades to sleep in someone else's bed.

Sunday was also a day off from work on TWAS as it was a family trip into the western mountains to take Jammes to a week-long music camp, his first time away from Mom and Dad. The ride was also my first time out of town in months and very welcome, particularly for the

splendid mountain and canyon views. We got home late in the evening, and I called Mack with an affectionate good night. This affair is turning into a lot more than I ever imagined possible.

Now here we are on Monday morning, and I can pick up the story of Richie Rich again.

#

.iii.

Holding Barbie's hand was as much for my comfort as for hers. I followed her lead down the street in a solemn state of shock, wondering how this can have possibly happened. Simple: through my own stupid, bestial fucking. Why didn't I even think about using a rubber? Of course, if I'd had to put one of those ridiculous things on, none of this would've happened in the first place. So I have no one to blame but myself.

Shortly, her tears having stopped, Barbie spoke up. "I'm so sorry, Richie. It's my fault."

I was touched. "No, I'm sorry, Barbie. I was the one who—"

"—The stuff I used just didn't work," she said. I was speechless. "It was a contraceptive foam, but it didn't..." Then her tears flowed again.

We went back to the hotel for her to work out the day's shift and said bye at the door. Her expression seemed bright and brave, a lot more so than I felt as I wandered out onto the lawn at the beach. Dutifully eyeballing the rare tender males grilling on the grass, I flopped down fully clothed and agonized. Insidiously, I soon realized the import of Barbie having used some "stuff." Did that mean she'd been hoping...? Well, if so, she certainly got her wish.

Feeling horribly trapped, I wandered home, picked up Oná, and again fled to my marshy maze. Several dances eased the pain somewhat, but not the horror. I was left with the ache of having lost every last shred of my virginity, of my elemental innocence. Then Oná and I took a desperate nap on the flowery glade, which steeled me for the evening.

Over dinner, Barbie announced the news to Gene and the Twooth, and words can't express my discomfort. She was impressively calm and matter-of-fact about the whole thing, but I remained frantically speechless. On the ride to work, when the guys started in about "doing the right thing," some might say I was rude in requesting their silence. The right thing is of course a supremely subjective concept, and as yet I've no idea what it is for me.

#

The next day Rich got a letter from Henri about his blooming love affair with Paul. They had moved into that palatial apartment on Chartres Street and were having a lovely summer. The enviable news simply sharpened his torment, which was worse than any ever suffered by the novice martyr St. Norman in his exile. The afternoon escapes were a mainstay of his suspect sanity, all week long bouncing mindlessly back and forth between beach and fen, frantically seeking relief from the reality he couldn't bear to face.

Oná roamed around impudently investigating sun-drunk neighbors at the beach but perversely only bothered girls. The scarlet-bottomed guy didn't show up again, a grief which demanded daily sobering dips in the lake. On Friday, Rich set an amazing record of nearly 45 icy seconds. The blue tinge wasn't as obvious now on his brown-as-a-berry body.

The fen was a far better place to agonize actively. In his dances Rich found a perfect hurricane roaring inside his head. In the week of afternoons, with his beloved Desai's Hindu wisdom from the other side of the world, he succeeded in downgrading the mental monster to a mere tropical brainstorm, and then to manageable cerebral squalls.

Suppers with the others were as usual delicious and chatty as the cohort expertly avoided mentioning, even obliquely, the matter at hand. Rich found that every time he looked at Barbie, he simply couldn't believe that inside... And whenever he didn't look at her, he could feel her waiting, watching him like a bird watches a snake—or like a cat watches a mouse. But he wasn't anywhere near ready to deal with her perilous question.

A monkey wrench fell into Rich's confusion at supper on Thursday when Cap'n Gene announced that he'd arranged with Mr. Andy, game boss for Blue Keno, for the girls to switch jobs. They'd get trained on Friday evening and start on Saturday night as Keno runners in those ugly desert-striped short dresses. Rich recoiled at the thought, but since he was a sage in these matters, he again stressed that to switch schedules they really had to stay up extra late that night and sleep even later on Saturday.

This new coordination of schedules caused Rich great trepidation. It meant that the cohort would all be awake at the same time, and what would that do to his free afternoons? On Saturday, just to be safe, he got up extra early and spirited Oná off to the fen, where he blithely danced around ignoring his problem.

Back at the apartment, Rich found his housemates up and wondering where he'd gone, likely fearing the rooster had flown the coop. Offhandedly he said he'd just gone for a walk, and they all gathered up their stuff for the afternoon at the beach.

#

Here I am again writing about things that happened exactly half a century ago. This coming Sunday is Independence Day, July 4, 2015, as was Rich's next Sunday in 1965. He wrote about that Saturday night at work in the casino.

Dear Me,

...My mechanical dabbing of numbers on Keno tickets was punctuated with business visits by our new runner girls with their proxy tickets. Martha and Barbie seemed to hold up well as our shift stretched into the wee hours. Parts of breaks overlapped for us, and in our brief chances to talk, I was glad to find them still thrilled with the work.

In one transaction at my window, Barbie took her copied tickets from me with a big smile and "Thanks, sweetie." The next player in line didn't seem to notice my short hair standing on end. That innocuous endearment gave me the creeps. I quickly rationalized it as simply a Keno runner's customer service parlance but was thankful not to hear it from her again.

Late in my shift, after three, the game boss for Red Keno, Mr. Leo, a stout bald fellow in an ill-fitting, expensive suit, asked me to work overtime. So when the others got off at four, I bid them good morning and a happy Fourth of July. The extra hours of much lighter ticket-dabbing for die-hard players gave time for spurts of low-level cerebral activity, like musing on life on a south sea island.

Once free from the Keno desk, I cashed my week's check at the window and with a fuller, but not appreciably fatter billfold, walked to Heidi's again. In the brightening Fourth of July morning, my tired steps crunched along in the gravel. Too distraught for breakfast, I simply had a cup of caffeine and headed down the road in the ironic morning of Independence Day.

On the next building down from Heidi's, a simple log place I'd paid no attention to before, was a small sign beside its door. It was the bus station, and the sign showed the schedule of arrivals and departures. Taking it as a divine signal, I bought a ticket.

The next bus to Reno left fifteen minutes later, and I sat catatonically at its window not seeing the mountains and valleys we passed by or through with dream speed. I was going back to New Orleans to stay the summer on Chartres with Henri and Paul, and then... Tired, strained, and drained, I couldn't think beyond that.

Rolling into the station at Carson City shook me awake enough to realize in horror that I was leaving little Oná behind—and abandoning my journal hidden in my suitcase. [*I'm gratified that he worried so much about Old Me.*] Then to wonder about what the guys would think when they wake up and find me gone for real this time. And there it was, the monstrous thought of Barbie's despair. Suddenly I became acutely aware of the miraculous new being sprouting in her body. Possibly a son! A sudden burst of almost joy yanked me up out of the seat and pushed me off the bus.

There was another bus back to Tahoe in about an hour, good for a quick ham and eggs in the diner. Still dozing, I made the inglorious return trip weaving fantasies around the mere thought of a son. Without ever intending, by total accident, the quintessential accident (random chance?)... Okay, so it might be a girl too, but we're talking gut instincts here.

My ignominious attempt to bolt finally brought me, disgusted and stymied, back to the Rubicon shortly before eleven, well before the others got up, but I didn't go into the apartment. Instead, around back in the woods, I took a leak and sought a pine-needle bank to curl up on. The slam of Gene's car door woke me, and he hollered, "It's not here!" I got up and went inside, probably looking like I'd been slept in. Barbie was in the kitchen and stated neutrally, "You didn't come home." The undertones of recrimination, fear, and pain made me cringe.

To proclaim my independence, I casually lied, "I went home with a guy." The three were shocked into a silence that made me regret being so insensitive. After all, Barbie and I both were caught up in this predicament together, and she'd been admirably restrained. It was ignoble of me to lie like that, but I didn't apologize. She just smiled in confusion at my falsehood.

Dismissing my shocking remark, Martha announced that they were all off to the beach again. I begged off, claiming truthfully, but to them I'm sure suggestively, not to have had much sleep yet. First though, I wrote this all down and then collapsed on my cushions for the rest of the miserable holiday afternoon, uncomfortably because they took Oná with them.

#

.iv.

I'm proud of myself for plowing through that traumatic week in 1965 in time to do the gym, an activity now even more important to counterbalance all the sitting at the keyboard. My new boyfriend, if you will, young Mack showed up for a workout as arranged. We took turns on the machines, one exercising and the other watching appreciatively.

In the sauna after, he said he'd now read the *Treasure Galleon* and was glad that Young Rich had gotten so nicely settled in Tahoe with the job in the casino, the wetlands, and the beach, but it was too bad there weren't any hot guys around. I came right out and asked him how he felt about the parts about him.

"I love it," he grinned and asked shyly, "So I'm impressive?"

"Fore and aft," I said. "You've got a great aft. But how about the party and all?"

"It's really odd, you know, Rich, reading about myself."

"Well, darlin', I'm trying to keep it clean. Unless you want more about what we did after George's party..."

"No. I'm good to remember that. But if you're writing about us now, I've got to watch what I say. It feels like there's an open mike."

Back at my place, we whipped up a *linguini con vongole* supper for Janet, Carol, and little Jet. While the toddler played with a pile of plastic containers, we sat around after and talked about their reading of the *Treasure Galleon*. Janet remarked that she had the feeling of something about to happen. Carol was pleased that Jet appeared in the story. She felt that Young Rich was right to look for another place to extricate himself from the cohort since the others meant so little to him. Janet rightly figured it was the dog, little Oná, that kept him there. And Mack summarized, "Yes, indeed, the fateful pupdog."

My young man-friend didn't stay the night. Leaving rather later in the evening, Mack kissed me goodnight and said in parting, "Keep it clean." I promised to try and so will leave that inexplicit evening interlude to your fertile imagination.

#

Over the next week, with everyone being on the same schedule at the casino, for Rich the closeness of the Seattle cohort got to feeling like quicksand. Almost every waking moment, the bunch hung together and inexorably drew him into everything. As crew members on the good ship Sahara all night every night, the Seattle five were bound together even more closely. Their lunches and breaks often coinciding, Rich lost many of those comforting solitudes in the parking lot, his dances on the dark deserted beach, and 6-spots in Barney's.

The others seemed to thrive on the togetherness, but Rich found it claustrophobic. He was fine going to the beach with them sometimes—if they felt like it—and otherwise would go alone with Oná. But the only way to continue his walks to the faerie fen was to get up early before the rest and take off with the pooch.

Returning from a restorative dance that Wednesday, he found Barbie up with coffee, and she asked where he'd been. When he told her about the fantastic maze of a marsh at the *Fond du Lac* (in honor of her French major), she wanted to go along the next day. So on Thursday they walked down the path with Oná and minimal, neutral conversation.

Stopping at the verge of his magical fenland, she looked around and said, "It's just an awful, icky swamp." Sorely disappointed at her negative reaction to his natural wonder, Rick sadly figured *chacun á son gout*, and they headed back home.

On the way, Barbie asked him that question again, but he still didn't have an answer. He kept struggling not to think of that question, to pretend it didn't exist. He'd let himself think occasionally about the sur-reality of fatherhood but not about the related question of husbandhood. Anybody nowadays will recognize this as pure denial. Why agonize over an answer to a nonexistent question?

That afternoon Rich got to go alone with Oná to the beach and took a hasty swim for a shock treatment. He wrote later about how, shivering on his towel, in his mind he is again: running down, down the lawn again to icy Tahoe and diving headlong into the frigid lake. For that tortuous minute swimming like mad straight out from the shore. No going back, no way for anyone to rescue... The chill invades my muscles, rimes over my eyes, limbs stiffening and blood freezing, my body now blue as cobalt Tahoe, an idol carved in lapis, slowly sinking down into the indigo shadows of the immense depths. Supreme peace drifting down, down, and disappearing forever from the world above, infinite relief escaping all the pain and confusion.

Rich awoke from his suicide fantasy with a start of horror. How could he even think about damaging the divine temple of his body? And then came the same misgivings as he'd suffered on the bus. Forgive me for being so summary about these dramatic matters, but truthfully, his journal is an almost incoherent jumble at this point. Understandably.

But about that evening, he achieved a brief flash of coherence:

...On my two-thirty break, I made off for Barney's to drop a buck on six, and ran into Daryl out front on his break too. Squeezing my hand, he asked, "Had any luck yet, Rich?"

"Nothing but bad," I reported, sighing. "She's pregnant."

Daryl shuddered. "Well, pretty boy, looks like you been a bad dog."

"That's about the size of it," I sighed again.

He shook his head as we walked into the casino together, saying only, "Bad, bad doggie." Before going back to his table, Daryl added, "Good luck, baby." I lost a dollar on his parting wish.

#

Dear Me,

...My two-thirty break on Sunday morning wound up in company with Barbie and Martha in the austere staff lounge, new but already tacky. Martha asked Barbie and me if we'd help her out later. The Blue game boss, the same Mr. Andy who gave them the jobs, was pressuring her to go out with

him. He knew about Gene, of course, but was an insistent Italian not to be deterred. She'd agreed to go for a drink after the shift and wanted the two of us to come along.

Mr. Andy had gotten Mr. Leo to make Gene work overtime and keep him out of the way. She needed to keep on the good side of her boss and figured over a drink she'd be able to talk him down into a civil relationship. But she really needed our supportive presence. The absurd suggestion made us both laugh, but Martha was also not to be deterred.

All changed into our civvies, we trooped into the fancy lounge, otherwise off limits, and got to socialize with management. Mr. Andy was a dark-haired, dapper young Italian in a shiny suit, very much a Mafia type. Behind his style and perfect hair, my connoisseur eye discerned a very plain face. At first taken aback by us attending his *tête á tête* with the lovely blonde, he was polite to her sister and friend, already known to him professionally of course.

We sat at a big round table in the dimly lit lounge, Barbie and I on one side like the proper chaperones we were at a discrete remove from the other where Mr. Andy and Martha chatted. He ordered us all drinks called Rusty Nails, a concoction of scotch and Drambuie. They were silken smooth and sneaky, an effective means of disposing of witnesses.

Barbie and I couldn't hear anything being said across the table and had no energy for talking to each other. Another Rusty Nail arrived before we'd finished the first one. Getting drunk and drunker, Barbie and I slouched horribly in our seats. On the other side of the table, Martha was talking up a quiet storm at Mr. Andy, who watched her in stunned fascination. Neither of them seemed affected by the booze.

Barbie finished her drink and with a sweet slur asked her question again. I took another drink from the waitress and again didn't know. She wondered when I'd know. I supposed soon enough. She said softly, "I just don't know what to do." I cursed myself for my heartless answer. Just as softly, she said, "After the baby... we can get a divorce." Barbie's desperate tears tore me up inside with intense sympathy for her and guilty anguish for myself. Though it felt really weird, I took her hand again, and we sat patiently with our drunken thoughts.

When we got up from the table to call it a night, I almost fell down, and the girls both looked woozy. Mr. Andy must not have drunk but one because he seemed just as dapper and suave as ever. He even drove us home in his Cadillac. We nearly crawled up the steps into the apartment, and fully dressed, the three of us toppled like trees across Barbie's bed.

#

Rich went on procrastinating and avoiding until Wednesday afternoon when things came to a metaphorical head, and he finally thought them through.

Dear Me,

...At the fen I decided to explore its boundaries. Oná and I took a walk north alongside the wetland, skirting the bog by the edge of the woods. We actually made it to the lakeshore, a bank where the lake is visible beyond a low reedy island.

On the grassy shore I danced like sailing o'er the deep blue of Tahoe in my swift caravel [*the ship we now call the Faerie Prince*]. With sails full, I raced on the wind, but then the gale suddenly subsided, and my sails sagged. All turned timeless, motionless, and idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean, becalmed like my life now in Tahoe. Up in the rigging, holding to the mast like Doré's mariner, I tried to summon the wind. I scanned the still sea, feeling utterly lost with a miserable weight hanging on my neck, like that albatross.

When did I kill this bird that made the breeze to blow? What wrong did I commit to bring this disaster down upon my faerie ship? Reviewing my conscience, all I could find were those two stupid fornications last spring. So I fucked a female. I mean, that's what the male of a species is supposed to do. I simply played out my biological role automatically that first time, and if that had been all...

But the second time under the horsetail enchantment... Apparently, even if she wanted me to, I simply took Barbie like a beast, without love, without even a semblance of desire, using her like an

object, a thing. No one deserves to be treated like a thing, and I'd never want that done unto me. Oh, Lord, there it is, my crime. I broke the Golden Rule!

In an act of contrition, I danced round and around, whirling until finally falling down. Oná scrambled on top of me with sloppy kisses, and I knew I'd have to try and love Barbie now. But how could I, an affirmed faerie creature, ever be in love with her, an unequivocal female? Could I ever come to desire her physically? Supremely doubtful. Might our friendship ever grow into a romantic relationship? Inconceivable. All I could imagine was maybe a warm, close, loving kindness. But how much must I care for and cherish Barbie for it to amount to love?

And do I really have to marry her? Of course, Barbie has every right to expect me to. If I were a girl who got knocked up, whosever fault it was, I'd certainly want the oaf to marry me. There's that pesky Golden Rule again. Obviously, I'm biologically obliged to take care of her and our incipient child, to be a father. My father's a distant, angry, and arbitrarily abusive man, not a good role model. Please, Lord, let me be the loving father I haven't had.

Happily or not, my conundrum was finally resolved, and I lay in the grass with Oná, drifting off into the dreamless sleep of the relieved—or condemned. So I got back to the apartment later than usual to find my three friends at the dining table awake with coffee. Used to my icky-swamp walks, they weren't concerned. Barbie gave me a tender, hopeful smile. After pouring a cup for myself, I sat down, worked my jaw a couple times, and made it say, "Okay, I'll do it."

#

.v.

That effusion took a couple days in and around my usual elderly routines. This week while Jammes is away at his music camp, I haven't had the usual taxi duty picking him up after his summer camps. Instead I've been affectionately busy with my dear Mack. You know, workouts, dinners, times alone together, and all that. It's amazing that he really seems to like listening to the weird nonsense I tend to chatter about. So today, Wednesday, he took off from work, and we went on an outing with George and Mario.

At some point I'd told them about my long-time getaway not far to the north, a mountain canyon with a stream rushing over boulders and stands of ancient ponderosas. We rode there in Mario's old SUV and hiked the high and narrow cliff-side path to my favorite spot. The water pours over three falls between mammoth boulders into a pool. One at the foot of a looming cliff has a broad flat surface prime for our picnic and sunbathing.

We cached our picnic in a shady crevice, leapt out of our clothes, and in a trice we were all splashing in the pool and under the waterfalls with much hooting and horsing around, but not for too long because the water was pretty cold, nothing like Tahoe of course. Soon we crawled out onto the boulder to dry off and warm up in the sun and chat.

On the half-hour car trip we'd already talked about the newlyweds' further research into adoption, George's upcoming engagements, Mario's progress in becoming a talent agent, and Mack's secret hope to do a graphic novel, a surprise to us all. George and Mario commented favorably on their reading of the *Treasure Galleon* and appreciated their roles in the frame.

Our nude conversation went in other more casual directions. At one point George asked if I knew how to act. I was sorry I didn't really, having only been in one play decades ago, and he remarked that Mario was after him to take acting lessons to get into movies.

Unsolicited, Mack suggested, "In the right kind of movie, you won't even have to act."

"No, no," Mario objected. "George will be Hollywood. I'll do the porn."

"In your dreams, querido," George said sternly. I diplomatically figured acting lessons might be helpful for operatic roles, and he sighed, "That's what everybody says—it's just so hard doing something you don't want to do. Why do I have to take lessons? I'm a natural actor."



Mario kept his wise spouse's mouth shut, but I decided to challenge George's claim. "Okay, then... Get mad at me!"

"Why?"

"You know why, darlin'."

George stared at me and then tried on an angry face that looked like a naked Angry Bird. He started sputtering, you... you... and then gave up, his fake wrath fled. "I guess I don't know how to get mad on call."

"Yeh," I said, "learning how to act unnaturally takes exercise and practice, just like music. That's what Young Rich had to learn all on his own."

Mario gave me a grateful look. and took out his camera. Mack and I posed for a shot together by the rocky cliff face, his taller arm draped easily over my shoulder. I obliged by taking one of the splendidly nude couple embracing in waterfall froth.

#

Mack made dinner for me at his place, a splendid stir-fry with shrimp, bok choy, seaweed, and those odd black Chinese mushrooms. Afterwards, while we cuddled on his sofa to his current favorite music, of course totally unfamiliar to me, I asked about his plans for the graphic novel he mentioned in the morning.

He shrugged sadly. "I'm doing great with the graphic part, but I don't have a story." He jumped up and brought me a folder of sketches. There were muscular warrior figures, seductive females, mechanical monsters, futuristic buildings in exotic landscapes, all in fine-line detail and an almost abstract style. Embarrassed by my appreciation of his work, Mack said, "I've been drawing since the ninth grade."

I was quite impressed by my new paramour's ambition and talent and mentioned that I just happen to have in my bag of old tricks an outline for a graphic novel from several years ago, actually written about when he'd started drawing. "Kind of historical science fantasy," I explained, "with extraterrestrials, advanced technology, and a wild gay super hero."

Mack's excited interest excited my interest, and I wound up staying over again.

#

Home again this morning after a night of passion, I can't help feeling a bit guilty when our Richie Rich has been deprived of nookie for so terribly long. And now he's just agreed to marry a woman. Trying to be mature about the disaster, he figured he'd just have to sleep in the wretched bed he'd stupidly made.

Speaking of beds, on that Thursday morning's walk home from breakfast at Heidi's, Barbie asked Richie to come sleep in her bed now that they were engaged. However, he insisted on remaining single for as long as possible and sleeping on his cushions on the floor with Oná. Since the sisters didn't abide a dog in their beds, he was adamant about it.

Over the next few days, arrangements for the wedding were made by Cap'n Gene and Martha, the designated best man and bridesmaid respectively, for a church in Carson. Raised vaguely Episcopalian, Barbie wasn't actually very religious but wanted a church. The raging heathen, Rich would've chosen anywhere else but was in no state to deal with such matters.

Those first few days of the engagement were very hard for someone in a state of near catatonia. As you know, relating to a female didn't come naturally to our fallen faerie, and doing it with affection was even more of a challenge. By the weekend, Rich still hadn't even brought himself to touch Barbie in any sort of caress. Spoken endearments would take even longer.

Saturday morning on their midnight lunch break in the staff lounge, Barbie carefully asked Richie if when they were married, he'd still be a flit. His honest answer was, like Popeye

the Sailorman, “I am what I am. I’ll always be gay. But I’ll try and act straight.” Neither he nor she had any idea how much talent and practice that role would demand. Rich wondered if it might help to get a lobotomy.

#

At least the betrothed couple got off on one good foot. Barbie didn’t care to go to the beach except on weekends, so Rich’s beach and fen outings were authorized whenever there wasn’t something else they’d “agreed” to do. That Saturday afternoon, the cohort went to the *faux* beach behind the Sahara.

Dear Me,

...By now I’m sporting a champion tan and draw many eyes from the vacationers. My pale companions commended me on my coppery tone, but Oná simply wouldn’t yank down my Speedo. They were quite impressed by my ice-swimming, almost a minute now, and laughed at my shivers.

Later, I got up to stretch my legs and walked north along the sad strip of sand. Farther up the shore I came to a wide meadow between lake and road beside a lightly wooded campground. Across the field a group of young folks was standing around, some sitting on a rail fence, just far enough away to lose precise detail.

A lean youth with very black hair walked for a ways along the fence, and something impalpable in his shape and gait screamed of my long lost first love, Peter. It was he, my beautiful Peter. I had only to run across the field to him, and we’d... It’s he I’ll marry—we’ll share our lives. I swear it was like the last temptation of Christ, this vision of a happy life with my darling, my treasure, forever and ever after.

Standing there nearly naked in the bright summer field, I watched beautiful, beloved Peter over there by the fence, now sitting on its rail, and lived through many blessed years of loving him. But when our bliss was over, I turned back to the beach and the fate I’ve made for myself. I got Gene to come with me for an icy swim, and he made perhaps twenty seconds. The girls did no more than dip dainty feet. The Twooth claimed he has hydrophobia.

#

.vi.

As we now know, Rich’s tempting vision of marrying Peter was premature by fifty years, but it helped him understand that such happiness simply wasn’t an option for him in any case. His only option was to “do the right thing.” He and Barbie had performed an undeniably societal act, i.e. conceived a child, and society’s rules at that time were crystal clear about the consequences, or if you will, punishment. Rich was under the implacable sentence to wed.

You folks of this new century won’t think of an unplanned pregnancy as such a hopeless situation, what with various medical and social remedies available nowadays. But remember, this happened eight years before *Roe v. Wade*. And also, being born out of wedlock isn’t such a stigma anymore. But nice middle-class kids like Barbie and Rich—(Okay, maybe he was just lower-middle or even upper-lower.)—didn’t know anything about illegal options.

At least leisurely, the days flowed along in the soothing routines. For Rich the times spent with Barbie were exhausting exercises in empathy and patience. Trying to engage wholeheartedly in her conversations, he listened for her hopes and concerns, but her thoughts and perspectives always seemed so alien to his own. This was the first test of his acting talent, to portray caring about things that didn’t matter a whit to him, all the while wondering how in the hell it could’ve come to this sorry pass.

Barbie always acted relaxed and cheerful, her invariably pleasant expressions unreadable for him, the language expert. Though he’d still made no move toward physical intimacy in word or deed, the next Sunday at the beach she ventured an affectionate touch on his cheek and to his

dismay, called him, “Richie, honey.” Trying not to flinch, he took hold of her hand, more to forestall further touching than to show affection, but she smiled happily at the gesture.

#

Dear Me,

...Martha had made her spectacular pot roast for supper. While we enjoyed it, I tried to smile warmly whenever Barbie looked at me, a smile of appreciation for the child she’s carrying. It was genuine because I feel a real gratitude for what this little auburn-haired woman will have to go through. Avoiding that distressing topic, I noted that Barbie hadn’t eaten much and offered her the bowl of roasted carrots. “Here, have some more... darlin’.” That belatedly added little word, so easily said to friend or stranger in New Orleans, cost me dearly, but it paid off in her apparent pleasure.

Cap’n Gene chose right then to bring up a necessary ritual. “You know, Richie, we need to get you some rings.” My initial thought was that rings could get screwed, but I had the wit to swallow that and reply that we’d just get Barbie one. I wanted no ring. Why would I ever want to advertise being enthralled by—no, make that in thrall to—a female? We agreed to zip over to Carson Thursday afternoon and find her one.

All I could reasonably afford was a simple gold band. The cost of a diamond was stratospheric. When we got home, I showed it to Barbie, hoping it would be okay. She said it would work fine. Shocked by her off-hand tone, I guessed maybe Barbie isn’t any happier about getting hitched than I. In truth, I’m not such great husband material—a borderline madman and rabid faerie slut, not to mention poor as an un-churched rodent. Grateful for her forbearance, I stroked her cheek in a first caress. It came naturally.

#

The wedding was set for one o’clock at a Presbyterian church on Monday, July 26. Being off Sunday night, they’d be able to make such an ungodly hour. When the folks at work got the news, there were many congratulations, which Rich tried to accept gracefully, though each was a bitter pill. An older woman writer on the Red game, a platinum blond called Lucky, invited them to her place in Carson after for a party and wedding dinner. Rich liked Lucky, who was always cheery and light-hearted, and whenever he’d say hi, she’d ask, “Who’s high?”

The other Sahara girls at work threw a wedding shower for Barbie on Saturday night before the shift, and she got presents of several pieces of risqué lingerie. When she showed them to Rich on their break, he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. All the clichés about marriage annoyed the shit out of him, the lewd and lascivious aspects particularly unnerving.

Dear Me,

...This evening [*Sunday*] the guys insisted I go out with them for a stag party, appropriately termed since a stag of sorts was what got me into this fix. I agreed to, but only if there are no naked ladies. We sat in a booth in the lounge at Harrah’s, and on a sentimental whim I ordered *ouzo*. They actually had it in stock.

First Gene raised a glass to the bride. We drank. Then the Twooth proposed a toast to the groom. I took an ironic sip and followed up with a toast to golden Oná, the prime cause of everything. They laughed and drank to the pooch. Awkward about getting personal, the Twooth looked off toward the bar and naïvely asked if I was excited about tomorrow.

“Oh, yes. You have no idea,” I said, unable to disguise my sarcasm. Leaning in confidentially I said, “I’m going to tell you guys something you’re never to repeat to a living soul.” They braced themselves with a slug of drink and listened. “I’m as excited,” I confided, “as a samurai committing *hara-kiri*. As excited as a witch tied to a stake! As... As...”

Twooth helped me out with, “As Marie Antoinette at the guillotine?”

"You got it!" I said. We all had a good, if sardonic, laugh, which lightened the tone considerably. After that short stag party, we went home to play bridge with the girls till three. And then I wrote this. Tomorrow, the guillotine.

#

Dear Me,

Being close to my size, Gene loaned me his sport coat and tie to dress up nicely for the wedding ceremony. I haven't worn a tie since graduation photos and so felt very gawky. I told Barbie she looked quite lovely in her pretty beige and cream dress with matching hat. I was glad no one had a camera. Unfortunately, on the drive to Carson our finery took a drubbing from squishing into the VW. Again Barbie sat on my lap, now draping her arm round my neck and as was her bridal right, making a little too free with the cuddling.

The white wooden church was one of those steeples I'd seen before, a kirk on the hill. The rickety old minister, Rev. Prichard, met us at the door and ushered us inside to a spot in front of the altar railing. Best Man and Bridesmaid flanked Groom and Bride, and the other Member of the wedding, faithful friend Sir Richard the Twooth, having given away the Bride, sat in the front pew to witness the calamity. There'd been no music for the bridal march.

At first the Reverend didn't seem to know what he was doing, or at least had lost his train of thought for a moment. The Bride and Groom looked at each other tenderly, fearfully. Out of the corner of his eye, the Groom clearly saw the shotguns trained on Bride and himself.

Of the nuptial incantations the Groom understood not a word. The Bride gazed at the minister with serious attention and said she did. The Groom missed most of his question. Replying anyway that he did too, he heard the vorpal blade go snicker-snack.

The Groom put the Ring on the Bride's finger and kissed her lightly. Then it was over. Rev. Pritchard filled out and signed the form.

As the Man and Wife walked down the church steps holding hands, Martha threw a fistful of rice at us. Some got down the back of my collar.

#

...At Lucky's little white house in Carson, she'd laid out a big table of food for our wedding dinner, and there was a wedding cake decorated with little plastic figures. But first we had to have the party with celebratory drinks. I reverted to gin and tonic. Our party of six sat around her plush living room chatting. The room was all white and gold with red accents, looking like a fertilized egg.

After wishing us wedded bliss, Lucky proved to be an entertaining raconteuse. Her stories of three marriages thus far were worthy of stage monologues. A fourth husband was yet to be identified. Of course, I could've matched her scene for scene out of my salacious past but diplomatically restrained myself in front of my new spouse. Barbie was quiet, almost in a trance, which was how I felt. We sat there staring while, with three drinks on empty stomachs, everyone else got loquacious. We heard some humorous episodes from Gene and Twooth that they'd never have told otherwise.

Significantly soused, we fell on the chicken, ham, and fixings and demolished it all in short shrift. Barbie and I had to cut the cake in a very certain way with a strange fancy-bladed knife. Along with it, Lucky served us some heavy-duty coffee. We all needed to sober up for the drive back to the Sahara for work.

Lucky was also on Keno duty that night and offered for Barbie and me to ride with her in comfort, a relief also for the old bug. Backing her Buick out of the garage, Lucky asked, perhaps seriously, "You two really want to go to work? I could zip you down to Vegas for a quickie."

Barbie gripped my hand tightly. For a beat or two I considered that temptation and then answered weakly, "Work." Lucky laughed and took us back up to Tahoe. That night Barbie made extra tips as a new bride with good reason to blush.

#

*.vii.*

I didn't want to interrupt the inexorable flow of stuff about Rich's wedding to talk about this, but I took a break yesterday evening for a much anticipated workout, dinner, and evening with Mack. Relaxing after eating, I gave him the graphic novel synopsis, far too long to read right then, and a thumbnail sketch of the characters and the quest, which is perhaps even more important philosophically than saving the world.

We went on google and looked at images of the ancient civilization in which the story is set. Mack got inspired by the styles of architecture, costume, and art. I'm thrilled. He could be the one I've been hoping for, the artist to materialize my imaginings. I know that this thing is a block-buster, but I simply don't have the talent. So what if I do draw weird stylized Aztec gods? I'm looking for a cross between Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and Tom of Finland. I can't wait to see what he comes up with.

Also, I'm really pleased to see my dear Mack get excited about something other than me. To be frank, the intensity of our affair has been exhausting for this old guy, not emotionally mind you, but physically. Okay, sexually. Sure, it's like riding a bicycle, but after 25 years off the pedal, it takes some training to ride in a race, especially uphill. When we set the synopsis aside, my wonderful trainer put me through another set of exercises designed to improve my stamina.

#

This afternoon Mack called to apologize that he wanted to stay home tonight and read the story, maybe even do some sketches. I didn't have a problem with that for reasons already mentioned. Anyway, Friday we'd do gym and go out dancing at the Titsling. I was savoring the prospect of a restful evening of writing, albeit writing less than titillating material, when the merry phone rang again.

Jason wondered if I'd care to dine with him at seven at his favorite Vietnamese place. With Johnny away, he was feeling lonely, and Deirdre would come along for company. Of course, I accepted. Pleased, he added ominously, "I need to talk to you."

At the restaurant I learned that Johnny's off visiting family in West Virginia for his mother's birthday, and Jason wants to talk about his absent boyfriend. Deirdre, his best pal ever since childhood, and he have talked, and she suggested asking for my advice.

Over our huge bowls of noodle soup, he calmly explained that Johnny now wants to be a pirate—to have an open relationship and freedom to go marauding on occasion. Poor Jason hated the thought but didn't feel right refusing. He was quite distraught at the thought of losing Johnny over it. What should he do?

I stressed first that I've had no personal experience in open relationships or for that matter, in relationship counseling. Then I put on my wise old man hat and said, "So let him—only with some hard rules. Remember, he's still very young and needs to enjoy his prowess."

"Thank you, Rich," Deirdre said, raising her jasmine tea in a toast. "That's what I told him, but he's too jealous of anybody touching his sweet little thang."

"I just worry about him finding someone else."

"That's a worry in any relationship, darlin'. Open or not. You might too."

"So, Rich, what kind of rules could there be?"

"You tell me what rules would make you feel okay about it."

"Well, how about that I never know about it?"

"Jason, dude! Not good," Deirdre scolded. "Then Johnny would have to live a double life, and you'll lose half of him right off."

“She’s right,” I said, happy to agree with her wisdom. “Maybe a better rule would be that you can’t do anybody you know. Only strangers.”

“Yeh, you can talk about them as much as you want, but always know you two are the ones who are together.”

Her sagacity impressed me. I offered a spontaneous amendment. “And no more than once with the same person.”

“Why just once?”

“Well, maybe twice with a very good reason,” I waffled. “But no more, because three times is the charm. Then all bets are off, darlin’.”

While Jason played with his noodles and pondered, Deirdre pursued the subject. “Of course, an open relationship could involve three-ways, you know. Or group sex.”

“No group sex!” he exclaimed.

“Another good rule,” I noted. “But how about three-ways with you?”

“Never!”

“Bad word,” she snorted. “Just say hardly ever.”

“But I don’t want anybody else,” he griped. “Just Johnny...”

I was going to say something about things changing but said instead, “You know, Jason, it’s great that you guys nowadays can talk about these things and work them out.”

He smiled weakly and said, “If we can...”

I put my point differently. “I mean, back when I was your age, nobody thought to talk about their relationships or knew how, much less dared to discuss sexual mechanics.”

Deirdre shook her head in disbelief. “How’d anybody ever work things out?”

“Basically you didn’t,” I recalled. “A relationship just went on until it didn’t. People didn’t talk about whys and wherefores or about boundaries, needs being met, or such.” My friends didn’t know what to say, so I continued, “I tell you, life for Young Rich would’ve been a whole lot easier if he and Barbie had been able to talk about their needs.”

With a sly look, Jason asked, “Have you talked to Mack yet about his?”

“Well, not specifically.”

“You should,” Deirdre said and snatched up the bill before I could grab it.

#

Yesterday morning after breakfast I quickly wrote the preceding and then happily switched back to drawing for my next Aztec icon. That frame I concocted a week or so ago has places for twelve small vignettes surrounding the Old Coyote, some to be scenes of copulation. Inspired by my recent stamina training, I worked all day on configuring two bodies obviously but not explicitly in coitus. The trick was doing it so that flipping and rotating the image made four apparently different couples.

Pleased with my cleverness, I trotted off to the gym and my fervent young friend. While we changed in the locker room, he carried on about how much he loves the graphic story. “It’s got so much sex and combat. And those giants! Wait till you see what I sketched last night.”

I managed to wait till after some of Mack’s special lamb chops, spinach, and wild rice to see his handiwork and was thrilled that his drawings really look like my fantasy. He had some questions about the plot, answering which led into some more of my weird alternative history stuff. Mack listened with fascinated attention and then kissed me so emphatically that I totally lost my train of thought.

Back on track somewhat later, we went out to the Titsling as planned for an evening of dance with the gang. I was happy to see and hear that Lars was at the console, our kissing DJ. Mario had indeed managed to get him the gig, and his music was fantastic.

The whole gang was there, Liam included. To Kevin's dismay, he was with some new girl. Without Johnny, Jason was forlorn but soon danced with abandon. Our lesbian contingent was festive in celebration of Carol's birthday, and a gay old time was had by all.

On the way home in the car, I remarked that Deirdre thought I ought to talk to him about his needs. Mack gave me a dubious look. I asked outright, "So what do you need, darlin'?"

Without looking away from the road, he said, "All of you."

I laughed. "Well, we're all that's left. What do you want to do with us?"

"I bet I can think of something exciting," he said and turned to me with a shy smile.

"Tell me, Rich old man, do you love me yet?"

"Sort of feels like it—but I need another treatment to make sure."

###

## 7. HONEYMOON

.i.

Funny how young folks need so much more sleep than us oldsters. As usual I was awake this Saturday morning not long past dawn and leaving Mack to snuggle his pillows, I hit the quiet keyboard, in short shrift wrapping up *Double or Nothing*. I'll send it to Johnny on Monday when he's back from his family visit. Checking in on my snoozing Viking, I stood a moment in the doorway admiring his long limbs wrapped in the serpentine coils of white sheet.

The latest treatment was splendidly successful, and I'm now pretty sure I love this darling boy. It's almost the way I felt so long ago for my wonderful lovers like Kenny or Chi—but they've got stories of their own. Comparing Young Rich's lack of amorous inspiration a half-century ago with Old Rich's happiness today is poignant but serves no purpose.

Happily, I left the coffee pot on warm, the computer up on the last chapter, and a note on the table for Mack: Off to the Farmers Market. Will bring us yummy stuff for breakfast.

In no more than an hour I got back with my shopping bag full of salad greens and buckwheat sprouts and found my lovely paramour with his coffee, nude at the computer and already reading the last page of *Double or Nothing*. While Mack finished, I set out our pastries and waited. He looked at me, blushing, and said, "Good grief, reading about us is like instant replay." He jumped up, grabbed me in a naked embrace, and asked, "Do you love me yet?"

"Guess," I teased and kissed him. Our breakfast was only briefly delayed.

Munching his chocolate croissant, Mack remarked that the chapter certainly drags Young Rich through the mill. "And spits him out a married man," he sighed.

"Now comes the hard work," I said around my own croissant, dreading to have to write about it. "Having a wife was a whole new ball game for the pirate prince."

"At least I know he survived," Mack said with a wink, "and isn't married again—yet."

I let the loaded reference pass without reaction and took our plates to the sink.

Mack needed to put in some overtime at his office, and we planned to meet at the gym in the later afternoon. In the meantime, I'm going to tackle the next chapter. Since it's mostly journal entries to transcribe from his minuscule hand, I can probably make some hay.

#

As the newlyweds were occupied with nocturnal Keno matters in the casino, the formal wedding night was necessarily, to the groom's enormous relief, briefly postponed. The cohort had all gotten the next two nights off from work and everyone was going on the honeymoon to

San Francisco. After their shifts and a wedding breakfast at Heidi's, they went back to apartments to grab some quick shuteye before the trip. Perhaps too dismissively, the exhausted Rich gave his equally exhausted new wife a good morning kiss and retired on his usual couch cushions to snuggle with Oná.

It was only a couple days later that he managed to journal about the honeymoon trip:

Dear Me,

Awake earliest after fitful napping, Oná and I put coffee on and went for her call of nature into the sunny field across the Rubicon. Answering my own call behind a bush, I prayed to the universe for strength. The others got up in about an hour, my new wife greeting me with a cheerful, "Good morning, sweetie."

"Good morning," I said brightly and added, "Barbara... dear." I poured her coffee and handing her the cup, saw the surprise in her eye. "I like the name Barbara," I explained.

"But it sounds like you're mad at me, Richie."

"Oh, no, Barbara—I respect you. I just don't want my wife to be some silly doll, and I'm certainly no plastic Ken."

She giggled and asked, "Should I call you Richard then?"

"Just Rich would be great—if you can." As I expected though, within moments Barbara was calling me Richie again.

We piled like clowns with suitcases and fluffy little Oná into the VW and at the Pine Cone rearranged to squeeze the Twooth in too. Barbara sat on my lap in the back seat, her arm now intimately draped around my shoulders, and snuggled. Numbing my legs, her body again felt alien, too warm and too soft. For the long hours of the trip through Sacramento and across California to the bay, my brain shut down due to matrimonial overload. Out of order. Sorry for any inconvenience. Nobody home, but there's a bunch of bats up in the belfry. Luckily, long silences probably hid my new-husband horrors fairly well.

Arriving in the evening, we checked into a motel, left our stuff in rooms on the second floor, and went to dinner at a French place Martha had heard of. *Très chic*, I ordered something with a fancy name that turned out to be chicken breast in the strangest barbecue-ish sauce I've ever tasted. Imbibing on wine as much as seemly, I emboldened myself for the motel room awaiting us. Even a faerie knows the carnal traditions of a wedding night, whether or not any maidenheads are involved, and there certainly weren't in this case.

#

...Our motel room's dim lamps softened its charm-free interior, providing just a hint of romantic glow. While Barbara was in the bathroom, I put on my sweat pants for pajamas and prayed for some way to get out of this mess. I knew that would take a miracle, but there was always hope. When Barbara came out of the bathroom in her white nightgown, she looked at my hairy chest with a frightened smile. My own smile was surely just as fearful.

In the bathroom I washed and brushed long and carefully, all the while trying not to look in the mirror where a strange married man kept staring back at me. When I went back out into the bedroom, Barbara lay under the white sheet, sensuously posing her draped body with one bare breast almost showing. And I was supposed to act like this was a turn-on?

Now her smile was different, brighter, and lifting the sheet, she displayed her nude body, rather like a red-headed Renoir nymph, soft and curvaceous, attractive only if you're into that kind of thing. Not being in the slightest, I cringed and stupidly asked, "Do we really have to?"

Her inviting smile collapsed into distress. "But we're married now, Richie. It's our wedding night." When I simply stood there gaping like an idiot, she dropped the sheet and started to cry. I suddenly realized what a terrible hurt I'd done her by my brutal question, by not desiring her. After all, I promised to act straight, and now Barbara has conjugal rights that are conversely my conjugal duty. So I dropped the sweat pants and got under the sheet beside her.



Barbara stopped crying and looked at me hopefully. Feeling awful for her distress, I moved closer and dutifully kissed her for the first time for real. She was slow to open her lips and when she did, it did nothing whatsoever to charge my battery. What finally got me going was recalling a boggling fantasy kiss with Lane and touching this strange body beside me, more as scientific exploration than sensual caress.

She lay there silently, possibly enjoying my touches, and when I climbed on top of her, she spread her legs just enough to carefully insert Tab A into Slot B. Underneath me, her body was soft, passive and impassive, utterly different than a strong, enthusiastic male body. With me desperately fantasizing Lane's sleek thighs, our copulation lasted too long, but Barbara bore with it as energetically as a pillow. With a man in me, it always felt like fireworks, Roman candles, sparklers, and I couldn't have held still for love nor money.

The hard-won climax was in a trite word anticlimactic, likely for both of us. Though I'd ceremonially consummated the marriage, there was no sense of consummation or fulfillment—just a huge sadness at somehow having been diminished, even worse than those other two times. Barbara said it was great, which seriously made me wonder about her frame of reference. If this ranked as great, she mustn't have ever made much whoopee before, poor thing.

#

The next day for our honeymoon tour of San Francisco, Cap'n Gene took us around to many of the city's landmarks, Fisherman's Wharf, Golden Gate Bridge, Chinatown, streetcars, and a bewildering assortment of neighborhoods of fancy old-fashioned houses. There was a galvanizing view from a high bluff of the Pacific, across the sea to the edge of the world. It sang like a siren to the sailor in me, but the other sights only registered on my reeling mind as mere concepts, forget details.

Well, forget all but one detail. In Golden Gate Park I sighted a pair of lovely young faeries sitting close on a shady bench, each talking to the only other person in the world. I dared not stare lest I betray their presence to my cohort, who were discussing dinner plans and totally oblivious to this wonder of nature. In passing by, I saw the silken cords of passion tying the two lovebirds together. How horribly ironic that here I was now in the fabled faggot city on the bay, another faerie-land like the French Quarter—but with a woman. Wife on arm, I found it horribly easy to act like a straight tourist gawking dumbly at stuff. Dumb being the operative word.

Our second dinner was in a very ethnic Chinatown restaurant, tasty new stuff for me like black seaweed and funny mushrooms. Back in the motel, I went into the bathroom to get ready for bed first and then sat in the easy chair reading brochures of the places we'd seen and praying hopelessly that last night's sex would suffice for maybe the next week. Barbara lingered in the bathroom for some time, long enough for me to get sick to my stomach with distress.

Eventually Barbara came out of the bathroom in a lacey nightgown and posed coyly in the doorway, opening the gown to show off that silly, supposedly sexy lingerie from the wedding shower. Involuntarily, I started to laugh, which turned into a sob, and then into a fit of choking. She thumped me on the back till I calmed down and explained that her get-up reminded me of the strippers on Bourbon Street.

Crestfallen, she closed her gown. "You don't think it looks seductive, honey?"

"No," I said as gently as I could and against my better judgement, added, "I'm sorry, Barbara, but I can't act that straight. Remember, I'm a faerie."

She giggled uncomfortably. "No, you're not, Richie. Last night..."

"Last night we had sex," I agreed. "That part of acting straight is relatively easy."

Barbara sadly went back into the bathroom to change into her other nightgown. Then we formally kissed goodnight and stayed on our own sides of the bed. Going to sleep, I figured another call to marital duty would come soon enough anyway. In the morning, I gave my new wife a friendly good morning kiss, and we packed for the drive back to Tahoe.

#

*.ii.*

My young Mack showed up as agreed at the gym and greeted me in the locker room with a kiss, my first ever in 35 years at the gym. Working out with him was a daze of contentment, a peaceful, dreamlike delight. Afterwards we went to his place for dinner with Jason, Kevin, and Mario (George being away again on a gig). While he cooked, we others sat with wine and cheese in the living room, and Jason started the conversation out with a bang by proudly announcing that last night at the Titsling he'd hooked up with a guy. We gasped.

Jason had decided to see what an open relationship feels like. He'd taken a hunky guy named Harry home from the Titsling and felt the experiment was quite enjoyable. Nothing he really cared to do again, but Harry was a sweet guy, and it made him feel attractive and alive.

I remarked that those were good feelings indeed, and Mario asked if he'd tell Johnny about this Harry. Jason chortled, "You bet! In detail. He wants an open relationship, and I'll give him one alright."

Kevin chuckled, "A pre-emptive blow, so to speak."

Always pragmatic, I asked, "So what did you learn from Harry, darlin'?"

Without hesitating, Jason answered, "That I really love Johnny."

Kevin muttered something about lucky stiff, and I innocently asked him if he'd managed to get rid of the girl that Liam was with last night. He hung his head and sighed. "No. He left with her, but he said he'd see me tonight."

Mario also offered Kevin a cheesed cracker and opined, "Liam's such a prick-tease." We were shocked. "I've seen him do this before—flirts with a guy to get him going, and then runs off and boinks a woman."

"Well, he's not getting away with it this time," Kevin proclaimed. "Liam's going to boink me or else!"

I left them discussing strategies to achieve Kevin's boinking and helped my tasty chef with setting the table with a tremendous paella and an insane salad with mango dressing. When the feeding frenzy had slacked off, Mack announced, "This Thursday's my birthday." We expressed happy surprise. "I'll be 24." I did the gruesome math.

Mario immediately volunteered to have a party at their place. "George gets back Tuesday and loves to do parties."

"That would be great," Mack and then offhandedly remarked, "I think I'll get a tattoo."

Now both Mario and Kevin have tasteful designs on their shoulders which are perfectly fine, but the thought of some image, any image, permanently marking my lovely young man's ivory... I cautiously asked, "Like what?"

Mack smiled at my discomfort and said, "You choose something, Rich. You know, brand me as yours."

"Yeh, like a Rocking R," Kevin offered.

Jason added, "On the left buttock."

Trying to hide my over-whelm, I said, "I better think about it some."

#

The Titsling is of course the only place to go on a Saturday night. Our dining group adjourned to that bumptious dance-hall where Lars presided over the sound. Liam was in evidence at a table full of women, many of the lesbian persuasion, Deirdre and Lynn among them. Kevin set off on his quest with our best wishes. While we were getting drinks at the bar, Mario informed us that Liam sometimes even tries to seduce dykes—but only the fems. The group's expert opinion was that Liam desperately needs a ferocious buggering.

As we socialized and bounded about on the dance floor, I purposely tried not to notice anything happening with Kevin and Liam. It was more than enough just being with Mack and being seen with Mack. I wasn't sure which of us actually belonged to the other. We danced a lot, just the two of us, in a brilliant globe of rhythm and each other.

I'm usually good for a couple hours on the dance floor, and that's when I started to poop out. Mack hugged me, laughing that he already wore out a while ago. That's when Kevin showed up. "You about ready to go?" he asked with little expression.

We were indeed ready, and I diplomatically asked, "And Liam?"

Kevin grinned nervously. "I told him it's now or never. I said, if he doesn't come home with me tonight, he can kiss my pirate ass goodbye."

Mack looked around and seeing no Liam, asked, "So where is he?"

"Still deciding," Kevin sighed. "He's got five more minutes."

I was impressed by his firmness and congratulated him on the ultimatum. We'd no sooner gotten back to the table with Jason and several other youngsters when Liam showed up at Kevin's shoulder with a quiet "Here I am." He tousled our victorious friend's fuchsia locks, and we smiled fondly at the tender scene.

On the ride to Kevin's, Mack and I kept Liam in conversation, learning a great deal more about him. For a few things: He's a farm boy from Ohio, graduated Kent State, and now works in advertising for an outdoor recreation magazine. Besides a body builder, also an avid skier. I remarked that he's rather a hot property, and Kevin muttered a deep growl of agreement. We dropped them off with Mack's admonition: "You be good boys now."

#

This splendid Fourth of July morning while my Mack slept peacefully on, I left a little love note, zipped by my place to pick up some fresh clothes, and got to the kids' house by ten. The kids are of course my daughter Aimée and son-in-law, Rich. We headed back into the mountains to fetch Jammes from his music camp. On the lovely ride I proudly announced having met a new man-friend.

Like the rest of the family, they've been aware forever that I'm gay and long ago were even good friends with my former partner. But for the past 25 years, they've also known that I've had no amorous involvements. So the news of Mack was as surprising to them as it is to me. I let them adjust to that basic surprise before mentioning his shocking youth.

Rich gave me a congratulatory grin, but Aimée was taken aback. "Daddy," she choked, "he's just a kid. I could be his mother!"

"You certainly could," I laughed and proceeded to tell them about my new boyfriend, including his working on my graphic novel idea. I also took the opportunity to talk about my other young gay friends. Since they already knew about my penchant for dancing, the Titsling was just another chapter in my mania.

We stopped for lunch in a kitschy frontier-style saloon and then drove up the canyon to the camp, just in time for the graduation ceremony and concert. All was a bustle of families come to retrieve their offspring, many with at least one dog to add to the havoc. The campers were arrayed on bleachers at the rear of the performance space, and we found Jammes back row center, notable for the star-spangled Uncle Sam top hat perched on his long-haired head.

The ceremony itself was mercifully brief, and the performances by instrumentalists of various levels in orchestral groups were impressive. Jammes played trumpet in one set and in another his familiar saxophone. I was amazed that they did a favorite piece by Shostakovich,

beautifully. There was an exquisite girls' chorus, and for a finale all the campers and audience sang The Star Spangled Banner. I was moved to grandfatherly and patriotic tears.

On the ride back down the canyon, Jammes was as animated as I've ever seen him in talking about the great time he had and exciting activities like sleeping out under the stars on the mountainside. His sleeping bag kept sliding downhill.

While he happily rambled on, I admired his delicate face with those braces and stubborn nose, wondering if he resembles me in any way. My oldest, Ike in Atlanta, has always looked strikingly like I did at his age, but he's much better looking than I ever was. Then I noticed that my grandson here actually looks like Mack might've looked at twelve. Jammes is well on his way to being as long and lean as my sweet Viking, already only an inch shorter than I.

#

*.iii.*

Back at home late in the afternoon, I called Mack and found him in an artistic frenzy. He'd spent the day so far sketching basic models for the main characters and wanted to put in a few more hours yet. I wanted to do some more writing anyway (catching up on the above), and we agreed to dine Chinese.

Honestly, I almost feel like these contemporary comments are turning into another journal. Oh, well, it is after all the tale of telling a story. And now I've even got some time left to tell some more of it, anticlimactic though it may be.

#

It's indicative that after the honeymoon, Richie Rich's journal gets rather sketchy and monotonous. The reprieve from connubial duty didn't last long. The second morning after work the call came when Barbara again presented her nude body for his ministrations. He doesn't describe the task but remarks that it's gotten somewhat easier, if no more thrilling or fulfilling.

In general Rich had husband duty every couple or three days (mornings), and Barbara always lay passively smiling up at him, accepting his practiced touches and ceremonial kiss. Even *in flagrante*, she mostly didn't embrace him but lay with arms at her side, rarely touching his body, his beauty. Playing this unsupported role quickly became mechanical.

To inspire performances, Rich tried weaving fantasies of Lane and making use of the fleeting advantage to do what had to be done. But that was horribly frustrating. When he tried to think just about Barbara while thrusting into her, it was always like tossing water on a fire. Soon he started thinking of having sex with her as generously giving her what she wanted. To that extent he felt it was a true expression of affection. That rationale made it much easier.

Everybody slipped easily back into Tahoe's topsy-turvy nocturnal schedule with mornings night and afternoons morning. August was glorious summer resplendent with sun and storm. Pleasantly unlike the dead, wet heat of summer in New Orleans, Tahoe's pristine mountain air was all piney with balmy breezes. For Rich every quiet moment in the fragrant outdoors at beach or fen redeemed an hour in the casino's cigarette smoke and clamor.

The cohort hung even more closely together now, having essentially turned into a family, that of Rich with wife, sister-in-law, and potential brother-in-law. The Twooth, probably someone's distant cousin, assumed Rich's former role as fifth wheel. Together all night as Keno crew, their breaks were often spent together, but sometimes Rich would skip out for a dance on the dark beach or a futile 6-spot at Barney's (with cautious wave to Daryl).

Besides working, they basically did everything together, eating, shopping, loafing, and playing bridge. Barbara and Rich also enjoyed rousing games of gin rummy. There being no

television set at the Rubicon, sometimes the others went to the Pine Cone to watch the news on Twooth's set. Rich preferred to stay at home with Oná in welcome solitude.

He adamantly had no interest in watching television (as do I to this day), and current events weren't of any interest either. He appreciated the rarefied isolation of the casino resort, a strange sort of ivory tower. He had no idea what was going on in the outside world, who was hot, or who was not. His one serious problem was that he missed his music. Memory music for dancing on the fen was getting all jumbled up, and so he started making up his own compositions like a stew of Vivaldi and Beethoven. But they served the purpose.

Even though Gene and the Twooth weren't what you'd call close friends, their pleasant male company at home and beach helped to counter-balance the mega-overdose of female companionship. In that way, the closeness of that larger group was a tremendous comfort for the new husband. What if, like most newlyweds, Barbara and he now had to live together all alone? That scary two-person scenario far exceeded his acting ability.

The curious thing was that Barbara waited till a whole two weeks after the wedding to call her folks and break the news. Right after the honeymoon, Rich had written to his folks about the wedding at their new address in San Antonio. His mother's answer was surprised and pleased, but there was of course no word from his father. Barbara told Rich that Papa and Nana were thrilled to have him as a son-in-law, mistakenly thinking him a nice boy, and were glad of his academic career. (He'd spoken earlier with Papa about going on for a doctorate and into university teaching. What else could a Slavic scholar shoot for?)

#

It was as though getting married knocked Rich into a time warp. In the journal, his days started blending into a much faster flow than before, losing detail. He worries about not thinking much anymore, about feeling mentally numb, and most of the thoughts he does think are about how to relate to this other person in his life, the struggle to see things from Barbara's alien perspective, to understand, support, and feel affection for her.

Here and there in the journal are comments of minimal biographical note:

Dear Me,

...This afternoon I sat idly on the couch scratching Oná's furry ear with one hand and while she read a magazine, twiddled a lock of Barbara's lovely auburn hair with the other. I realized then that my passionless feelings for this wife of mine are the same kind of affection and care that one feels for a pet. After all, people truly do love their cats or dogs. I've apparently traded my dog for a wife and have to make sure she's fed and sheltered—and petted.

I must admit that there's a darling puppy-like quality about Barbara at times. It's not as though she hangs on me or clings, but she hovers close like waiting for any attention. She avidly dogs my steps, trying to see what I'm doing, even getting a glass of water, which means I've got to write to you, Old Me, when she's busy. Her brown-eyed smiles are as opaque to interpretation as any canine's supposedly adoring gaze.

It's lucky we started off as such good friends, and so it's easy to pet Barbara. I try often to hold her hand, give her pats on the arm or shoulder, or stroke her hair. Kissing is a different matter. I hope this sincere, if manufactured, affection will keep her content. I find it's easier to call her darlin' than dear, and I try not to cringe when she calls me sweetie.

...Walking with Barbara down a Reno street [*on a Sunday off*], I saw in a shop window a big poster of Sonny and Cher for their #1 song "I Got You Babe!" I've heard it a couple times on Gene's car radio and figure it's morbidly appropriate to my predicament. I envy Sonny his long hair. Another new song I've heard on the radio is the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." It's now my theme-song.

...We went this evening [*another Sunday off*], to a show in the Sahara theater, a reputedly well-known new comedian named Don Rickles. All set for a new Red Skelton, I was absolutely appalled at this new style of comedy. Call me a prig, but Rickles was vile and insulting. I'd never say such things to anyone, but when he did, I sometimes had to laugh in spite of myself.

...At a show in Harrah's theater, a musical revue of questionable taste, among the scantily clad, feather-bedecked male dancers, I recognized my beach blond. (I saw the beauty again at the beach the other day and got a subtle nod of greeting.) I was thrilled to see that he and his pretty friends are show-boys, finely plumed nookie birds indeed. Not to disturb Barbara's peace of mind by voicing a torrid piece of mine, I gave no sign of the thrill or frustration.

...This morning on the walk home from breakfast at Heidi's, I got Barbara to sniff at one of those huge conifers, which I'd recently learned is called a Ponderosa. She was unimpressed by the bark's sweet vanilla fragrance and just thought it curious. Sadly, I accepted that some of us are nature spirits and some aren't. I wonder what excites her interest but haven't got a clue.

...Like this morning, I've managed to perform on call for this whole month of August, but it always leaves me feeling drained. It would be misery but for the soporific, anesthetic effect of this pretense of passion. Now I'm even sleeping extra hours and feel sluggish when awake.

When we got up today and sat at the lunch table (Martha and Gene off on an errand), Barbara put her hand on mine and asked, "Are you alright, Richie?"

"Sure, I'm fine, darlin'," I lied around a bite of toast.

She stroked my cheek. "I mean, are you alright not being a flit?"

"I still am," I insisted again, choking back a howl, and didn't lie. "But it's really hard." I put the toast down and covered my eyes, although they were agonizingly dry.

Barbara whispered, "I'm so sorry, honey." Her sympathy and the sudden awareness of the baby inside her small body soothed me, my gratitude feeling even more like love.

...This morning our boss Mr. Leo yanked my leash and ordered me to get a haircut, my last disfigurement having been a month before for the wedding. Disgruntled, I sat again in Jack the Clipper's shop waiting and reading old Time magazines, a horrifying story about 50,000 new troops to Viet Nam and the first pictures of Mars taken by Mariner IV—boringly weird.

Then Daryl walked in the door, smiled, and came over to me. "Hey, Rich." He sat in the chair beside me. "What's the bad puppy up to now?"

"Nothing I want, that's for sure." I nodded in the direction of the barber, who was blithely clipping an old man's thin hair.

Darryl mussed my barely muss-able hair. "Too bad. Longer hair makes you look hot."

Thinking how I could show him hot, I said shamelessly, "You look pretty hot yourself."

"Thanks," Daryl said, embarrassed. "So what happened with the girl?"

I tossed the Time on the table and sighed, "Married her."

Daryl looked away with a sad, horrified expression. Finally he said, "I'm really sorry, Rich."

Then he laughed and added, "But I guess I should congratulate you."

"Just wish me luck. I'm going to need a lot of it to stay sane."

"No, no," he chuckled, "you don't want to stay sane, my dear. One can't be sane and happy at the same time." He considered the two of us ahead of him in line for a haircut (including an older man sitting across the room with a newspaper), and said, "I think I'll bop over to Heidi's for lunch and come back later. Wanna join me?"

"Thanks, but I can't. I'm next—and gotta get home."

"To the little wife," Daryl said without sarcasm but with a sympathetic smile. "Pietro's waiting for me too." His lover's name sounded like music to my faerie ear. So if I go crazy, I can be happy? I thought I already was nuts.

#

## .iv.

I barely managed to write through those dog days of that long ago August in time to meet my young man for chow fun. Mack brought a sheaf of his pencil sketches from the afternoon, and I marveled over them for quite a while. The level of beefcake was right on the noodle, and the faces were like dream-angels. He explained that he has a graphics program that will move the characters around however he wants in various settings. His embarrassed pleasure at my praise was so cute that I got up, walked around the table, and kissed him.

Of course I described the day's mountain journey and concert, as well as my grandson's enthusiasm for the experience. I remarked that they were scandalized when I told them about him—but okay with it all, and Mack excitedly asked when he was going to meet them. I figured fairly soon I'd arrange for us all to go out to dinner. He countered with, "They should come to my birthday party on Thursday." Not a half-bad idea.

Back at my place, I quickly emailed the chapter to Johnny to await his return tomorrow morning. After that, our idleness was interrupted only by a call from Lynn to talk about the wedding plans and get the various events onto my calendar. Only three weeks away. Otherwise, yesterday evening Mack and I accomplished nothing constructive and had great fun doing it.

Today being a work-day for my guy, I will dutifully plow through some more of our sad tale of a gay guy trying to act straight. I use the word plow since Rich cynically wrote at one point that having sex is like plowing a field or running a race. I'm the ox plodding along dragging the plow, the runner slogging along, one foot after the other, to the finish line.

#

By September, Richie Rich's attempts to act like a straight husband were still amateurish at best. He was still rehearsing—with dropped lines, missed cues, drifting off-script, and unfocused rote deliveries. No academy awards. Barbara, on the other hand, expertly portrayed the happy, attentive and affectionate spouse.

Dear Me,

...Recently I've noticed that sometimes, when Barbara isn't aware of me looking, her face lapses into a blankness, her puppy-bright eyes dimming in a sad, worried way. Yesterday evening while I was dealing a hand of gin rummy, she did it again. Finishing the deal, I asked if something was maybe wrong. Have I done something? She crinkled her sweet smile, tears welled, and she choked out, "You've never said you love me."

"No, I haven't," I agreed and added in my defense, "but you haven't either."

Dismayed, Barbara reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Oh, Richie, sweetie, sure I did, didn't I? You know I love you, I do!"

I gave her my oft-rehearsed satisfied smile, stroked her hand, and replied, "I do sort of love you, darlin'." Her expression told me I'd messed up, and I scrambled to recover. "I do ... love you, Barbara, a lot. I'm just not in love with you." She sadly stared at her cards. "And I can't act like I am."

She smiled, resignedly. "I know, sweetie. But you're a wonderful husband."

The devil made me ask her, "Are you in love with me?"

It took her a long moment to answer, "No. But I do sort of love you too, Richie."

A kiss sealed our alliance of affection, and I proceeded to beat her mercilessly at gin. As I feared, when we were next abed this morning, there were connubial dues to pay.

#

I haven't mentioned them much, but Rich managed many visits to the beach and walks to the fen. Those times by himself were the mainstay of his supposed sanity. Dancing up storms or wide-winged flights over the lake, it was a splendid breakthrough when he learned to dance to the subtle silence of Tahoe's wildness, often with new, almost mystical tempos.

Meanwhile, between such effusions, Rich and Oná methodically explored the marshy maze. Using many balls of twine, like a nude Theseus, he and the dog traced their way into the labyrinth, seeking its secret heart. For weeks he tried paths along hummocks and beside channels, string trailing behind, always keeping an eye out for the Minotaur.

For weeks Rich went through the routines of casino work and marital life automatically without much thought of anything, his fits of love-longing-loneliness becoming ever fewer and farther between. It wasn't really numbness he felt, but the absence of anything, like an amputation with only a vague sensation of a ghost life once his.

Rich never found the mythical man-bull or the secret heart of his fen. On his last walk there with Oná, they danced a farewell on the greensward for all the chirping birds. On the fifteenth everyone moved out of the Rubicon Trail apartment. Gene and the girls were driving back to Ann Arbor, and then he'd go on to his folks in Monongahela, Pennsylvania. Rich and the Twooth would stay on in Tahoe for a week's more work, and he moved to a cabin at the Pine Cone. It was really cheap this late in the season.

The next day he wrote about the parting:

Dear Me,

...After breakfast they were ready to take off by nine, and we said our farewells outside Heidi's. I hugged Barbara for some moments, consoling her that it would be only ten days apart (ten days for me to breathe again). We kissed, and I helped her into the back seat. After a goodbye cuddle, I handed frisky Oná to Martha. Loaded to the gills, Gene's trusty beige bug chugged off up the road. The Twooth and I waved and followed on foot toward the Pine Cone.

Though our conversations generally avoided the personal, I remarked how strange it was suddenly to be apart from Barbara after these months.

He chuckled, "Now you can go out and get naughty."

"Easier said than done," I sighed and teased, "Where do you go to get naughty?" He said nothing. Solely out of innocent curiosity, I asked, "Do you even know how to get naughty?"

"Afraid not," Twooth sighed, which I figure probably also means he's afraid to. But our moment long past, I didn't feel like giving him lessons in introductory naughtiness.

Late to bed after last night's work, we trudged wearily up the road to the Pine Cone. My lovely log cabin also sits up the mountainside, not far above his, full of a rough-hewn ranch-style bed where I grabbed some sleep, in heaven to be sleeping alone. How amazing to think that. For years an empty bed had been the bane of my existence.

In the afternoon I hiked up the wild mountainside and right away found a new special spot, the broad, smooth stump of a once monumental Ponderosa pine. Judging by the immense number of rings, it was a couple centuries old when felled. This splendid pedestal with a wide view out across treetops over Tahoe, bluer than lapis lazuli, became my stage for a dance to these last days of summer.

All night at work I kept an eye out for a guy to provide my first marital infidelity, naturally spotting no one. One break was on the beach for a dark dance to summon up someone, and another was at Barney's for a smile from Daryl and a loser 6-spot. On the way out, I saw the beach blond dancer coming in with his bevy of show-boy friends and stood there on the steps feeling like Charlie Brown. It gave me a new understanding of Henri's wacky church.

Back at the cabin in the bright morning light, I've been sitting here on the steps to write this entry and now will leap into my blessedly empty bed.

#

.v.

Each day the two Richards walked the road back and forth to the Sahara for work, ate whatever meal you wanted to call it at Heidi's, and otherwise left each other to their own



devices. Their company was pleasant and conversation wider ranging than with the others of the cohort. The Twooth enjoyed talking about his favorite novels, and Rich was happy to listen, knowing he'd probably never read them himself. Besides, there wasn't a lot he could talk about on his part, certainly not about his anguish.

Between Keno writing and hikes up the mountain to his stump, Rich's precious week of liberty, of wife-less-ness, sped by with little of note, except on Friday.

Dear Me,

...Before hiking, I took a warm-up stroll around the Resort, appreciating its peace and wishing I could've afforded... But I've got to concede that living at Pine Cone wouldn't have changed anything. Barbara would still turn up pregnant, and the rest follows like clockwork, no matter where I'm living. Fate doesn't care what path you take to get to its chosen destination.

Circling around the north end of the place, I noticed some guys come out of a cabin way down near the road. Even at the distance I recognized Daryl and the dancer. They jumped right into a green car and drove away. Holy Charlie Brown! So he's Pietro. They're living in that little honeymoon cabin. I leaned against a big tree and imagined... What if my Tahoe summer had been as bright as theirs, as full of passion and peace? If Lane and I...

Before Barbara, I've never cohabitated with anybody. Sure, Eric stayed with me for a while in New Orleans, but he was just a guest in my bed. I'd like to believe in the utopian possibility of living happily ever after with a lover, but that doesn't happen. It can't. Many of my men could've so easily been life-mates, yet there were always good reasons for us to move on.

This wistful regret reminded me that this being married isn't a life sentence. I can serve out my debt to society and get out of this clink, a convicted husband but a free divorcee. It's already going on four months, and by late February or early March... Then by next summer, I'll be free again. Out of the fires of the coming ordeal, my faerie phoenix will rise again.

Bracing myself to endure the relatively short incarceration, I resolve to strive heroically for a happy enough married life with Barbara meanwhile.

#

Three more nights' work, and Rich left the Sahara-Tahoe casino for the last time, ceasing forever to be a Keno writer, and bade fond farewell to his treasure galleon, still a-glitter in the pale dawn hour. Before he got back to Pine Cone, it had faded away, dissolving in the light of autumn's first morning. A good morning's sleep, and that last Tahoe afternoon Rich tramped up the mountain for the last time to his stage to dance a fierce fandango for fall. He managed to resurrect the fallen Ponderosa.

#

.vi.

I was on such a roll with the story yesterday that I didn't stop to note interruptions in the writing about those last days at Tahoe. First I suddenly remembered to call my daughter and invite them to Mack's birthday party on Thursday. Jammes generally has lots of homework, so they'll only drop by to meet the birthday boy and have some cake.

Next came a call from Johnny, who had just read Double or Nothing. He remarked with sympathy on the rapid-fire way young Rich suddenly wound up married and then thanked me for my advice to Jason on the open relationship matter. He likes the ground rules. "Jason already told me about Harry, and we're both cool." I appreciated their easy accord. "But you know, Rich," he added, "it feels real strange reading about myself in your story."

"It's our story too," I objected. "You're part of it, darlin'. And I hope you'll go out there and whip us some good action for me to write about." He clearly didn't know what to say to that, and we signed off till later.

Not long and it was Mack on the phone to let me know he'd talked to Kevin, who reported an athletic weekend with Liam. They apparently didn't get out of bed till Monday morning for work. It did my sentimental old heart good to think of those two...

Wrapping up that bit about Rich's last Tahoe dance, I zipped off to pick up my grandson after school and get him to his jujitsu class. Then straight to the gym where Mack and I took adjacent treadmills and dutifully trod along in splendid unison.

I asked what he'd like for his birthday, and he replied, "I already told you: all of you."

"I believe we're all here. What else?"

"I want your tattoo. Thought of anything yet?"

I suggested his Aztec birth day-name, which I'd already looked up online and found to be 6 House, a temple with six dots. I explained, "Xochiquetzal, the goddess of love and artistic inspiration, is ruler of the number six. House is a lucky day, indicates nobility and intelligence—but please, please, don't put it on your butt, darlin'. Nobody gets to see your butt but me."

"And guys in the sauna." He blew me a kiss and punched up his pace, which I also adjusted accordingly for my own shorter legs. "Besides," I added, "it'll always be your ceremonial name, even when you're not mine anymore." His loving smile soothed my concerns on that tender topic. We agreed on the back of his left hand.

My concept was of an elegant Aztec temple, maybe two and a half inches high, with an ornate crest and vivid colors. And six is a great number for the rainbow of colors. Designing it took me all evening, and on emailing it to Mack, I shuddered to think what I'm wreaking.

Now having digressed about my own happy situation, with the whole day ahead I'll try to get somewhere in the story of our newly married faerie prince. Let's return now to those fabled days of yesteryear when Rich's traumatic Tahoe sojourn was coming to an end.

#

No longer employed at the glamorous Sahara-Tahoe, that Monday evening the two Richards celebrated their last night at the magic lake with a dinner in the casino's ritzy restaurant. Only several days later did he report in the journal about that last supper.

Dear Me,

...On the walk to the Sahara my mouth started to taste like ashes, and by the time we ordered, I got to feeling downright crappy. My pork loin looked fabulous, but I couldn't taste anything, even the cinnamon applesauce. So our going-away dinner was pretty subdued and casual until after the chocolate cake that I could only bear to sample, when Twooth inspected his empty wine glass and remarked, "You really don't look so good, Rich."

"Well, thanks a lot," I replied with a weak laugh. "It's been a hard summer, and I've still got a long row to hoe."

"You know, Rich," he said, looking away as though for our waiter. "I'm so sorry how this all happened. I really had such different hopes for our summer."

"Likewise."

"Now that you and Barbie..." Twooth began and looked at me directly, his dark eyes actually meeting mine. "...I guess it doesn't matter now."

I could only nod and rush off to the men's room for the Roman remedy. On the walk back to Pine Cone I got to feeling a bit better and made it all the way under my own power. I climbed the path up to my cabin with several sets of steps and many moans. It was already after ten, and to ease back into a diurnal routine, I wanted to stay up only till midnight.

Still feeling yucky and vaguely nauseous, I lay down on the bed, staring at the walls of golden logs, and pondered how Twooth and I missed our golden opportunity. We both broke the good old

Golden Rule by not doing unto the other what we wanted the other to do unto us. After all, one of us had to make the first move. He had the excuse of Seattlitis. I was just stupid.

#

Morning came on Tuesday quite tentatively with a queasy stomach and a nagging pain between my eyes. Twooth's bus to Seattle was leaving a bit after mine to Michigan, and so we rode together in the Pine Cone's van down the road to Heidi's. He was cheerful over his healthy breakfast, but feeling woozy, I barely managed coffee. Watching him eat, out of the blue I asked, "Does it really not matter now?"

He gave me a gentle, serious gaze, shrugged, and said, "Not really, Rich."

We walked quietly over to the bus station, that scene of my Independence Day fiasco, where I watched them slide my bag into the luggage compartment. Then, forgetting hygiene, I surprised dear Richard the Twooth with a diseased hug, bid him a fond goodbye, and crawled on board.

The bus ride went on for an eternity, a purgatory of crowded, stinking discomfort, all the while with me descending into delirium. In Carson I was conscious enough to recognize the station where I'd once gotten off, but nothing else of the landscape or inhabited environs penetrated my fog of misery. Late Thursday night, the eternal two and a half plague-ridden days had only gotten me to Des Moines. Barely coherent, I called Barbara from the station.

Apparently, when one dies in Des Moines, the airline angels miraculously whisk you off to an afterlife in Detroit. Feverish, filthy, and probably foul-smelling, I caught a red-eye flight, first class no less, beside a young suit who dozed the whole way. I fixated on the fascinating folds of those expensive slacks in his lap.

Early in the morning in Detroit, Barbara and her folks rescued my insensate body at the gate and hauled it to Ann Arbor, where it was laid in a bed. In the evening I was able to greet my new mother- and father-in-law properly, raising a weak hand from the bedcovers. Little Martha made me drink plenty water, and Barbara stayed close by for my needs, of which there were few beyond sleep.

#

...Throughout the weekend I stayed bed-ridden, in rare lucid moments eating or drinking, staggering to the bathroom, and even managing hazy conversations with the family. One of those evenings, maybe Saturday, Gene appeared out of nowhere, back from Pennsylvania. In chats with Papa, I again appreciated his clear thinking on things academic and political. Nana, Big Martha, was motherly, feeding me salubrious soups with marvelous homemade breads.

Sunday evening I awoke feeling good enough to get dressed and struggle upstairs with Barbara's help. Slowly, slowly she gave me a tour of the big sprawling house, much finer than anywhere I've ever lived. Nana made us a feast of a dinner, a standing rib roast. It came with the same yummy Yorkshire pudding Martha once made. The plates were big heavy blue ceramic with fishes, a set they'd bought on a trip to France.

The six of us, three couples, sat round the elegant dining table, and I got a distinct sense of being absorbed into the family unit. These people were now attaching to me, encrusting my faerie ship like coral on a sunken wreck, drawing me into their world. This new son-in-law aspect of acting straight was intimidating.

As we dug into the dessert, baked apples, Barbara cleared her throat and said brightly, "Richie and I have an announcement." For a moment she left that hanging portentously in the air and then announced, "We're having a baby!" I was impressed with her aplomb and positive intonation. She's a much better thespian than I.

Martha squealed in delight, exactly as though she'd had no idea. "How perfect! I'm going to be an aunt!" Gene also exclaimed something about wonderful. The folks welcomed the prospect of becoming grandparents. Meanwhile I silently ran through my entire repertoire of pleased expressions and was truly pleased to hear no inquiry about due date.

In the quiet evening while the rest sat around reading magazines, I finally managed to write this all down for you, Old Me. I hope the memories aren't too painful. [*Not too.*] ...

#

...It's great to be up and mobile again. This morning Barbara, Oná, and I went outside for a walk in the sun. She was perfectly beamish that I'm finally recovering and held my arm affectionately. The folks' house sits near the top of a grassy hillside looking out over a small wooded river valley, another hillside sunny across the way. For my introduction to the Midwest, it was a pretty good view.

Barbara soon went back inside, leaving me on the grassy slope with the pooch. I did some stretches which slipped automatically into a grateful adagio for surviving the pestilence. To the family watching from the screened porch above, it must have looked like chaotic calisthenics, proof of the profound weirdness of their new son-in-law.

In my dance I understood that I'm no longer who I was before Tahoe. The disease was a transformation, my passage from flighty faerie boy into grown-up gay man, albeit a married one. Dancing the new identity was thrilling, but I still cried hot tears for the departed youth. When Barbara called to me from the porch to come up for lunch, I knew that this new gay man is now irrevocably named Richie—for family. For school and such, I'll just be Richard.

Right after that lunch of Nana's stupendous clam chowder and tearful goodbyes, Gene and Martha left with Oná on their long drive back to Seattle. A nap through most of the afternoon helped my recuperation, leaving me fit for playing bridge in the evening. Nana's a shrewd player, and we're good partners, bidding and making two small slams. Papa keeps pretending to forget what's trump. In surprising fact, it was fun.

#

...Today we drove into downtown Ann Arbor, which locals called A-Square. I noticed nothing unusual about the town to denote Midwest, the houses as normal as anywhere. Papa did a drive-by of the beautiful University for my academic appreciation, and we lunched in a student place as full of plants as a jungle.

After lunch, at a department store, with Barbara guiding tasteful choices, we bought me costumes more suitable for the role of her husband: stylish shirts, dressy slacks, fancy shoes, and a sport coat. The dowdy duds made me feel extremely unattractive, not at all sexy like in my usual body-hugging wardrobe.

For that matter, once his commodity gets cornered by a wife, what does a straight guy have to advertise anyway? Like a helpless patient in a hospital, a malleable lump on a gurney, I stoically suffered the family's gentle surgeries to reshape my image, to mash my round faerie peg into their square straight hole.

#

The next day the still gay man and his pregnant wife flew back to Seattle, passing close by the staggering summit of Rainier's massif. Richie apologized to his magic mountain for having flirted so ficklely with other lesser peaks over the summer. He moored his bedraggled faerie ship to a glacier for safe harbor till spring when they'd be free again for a new voyage of adventure. Then our sailor resignedly rode the airplane down into the straight city of Seattle, now truly his home port.

#

*.vii.*

The newlyweds' return to Seattle was an easy transition. Friend Betsy had graciously found them a great place to live at 4206 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE, just down the street from the girls' apartment (now Martha and Gene's), the right half of the first floor in a square house with a wrap-around porch and picture window. With curving roof lines like a short pagoda, the house squatted on a slight knoll with two flights of steps up the slope.



Richie thought the place had the feel of a Shinto shrine. The one-bedroom apartment had well-worn furnishings and a grandmotherly musty smell that he enjoyed. Barbara made no comment on their future quarters, negative or otherwise.

Gene and Martha arrived in the VW that same afternoon, understandably frazzled by the long trip, though sweet Oná was as frisky as ever and excitedly licked Richie's face. Right off, Gene and he moved Betsy's stuff back to Little Sweden. Under the new circumstances, she was moving into Richie's old room. Out on the balcony, he admired the autumn gold trees down the hillside and briefly danced a salute to his mystical mountain.

For a quick, festive home-coming, they all got together with the Twooth, Betsy, and Bob for supper at the Olympia. The Twooth had gotten the Tahoe crud but didn't get really sick till he got home and not as bad as Richie.

The following day, Gene and Richie hauled furniture hither and thither, his desk from Little Sweden and rocker from the apartment. Afterwards, as Barbara and Martha were off shopping, he blithely swept all the floors to Vivaldi's mandolins, reveling in real music again, and then curled up on the old sofa with his beloved Doré folios. It was enormously comforting to settle into a new place and live with music and art again.

On Friday morning there were appointments with the Slavic Department to work out arrangements, and then Richie went to the pool. He wanted to get into shape for seeing Lane on the morrow. He hadn't let himself think much about lovely Lane since Tahoe, much less anything else, but all the while he'd been anxious to see the boy again and maybe...



His hopes for meeting up with Lane at the pool on Saturday went awry. Barbara required him to go downtown with her to shop for more household necessities. He also got her into the old bookstore to check out its cookbooks while he looked at the old stuff. For a mere twelve dollars he found another big Doré volume, "Paradise Lost," Milton's title alone compelling and symbolic for our fallen faerie. What clinched the sale, of course, were the leathery-winged angels tumbling lushly down from heaven—and beautiful Lucifer sexily brooding in exile.

When they got back from shopping, Richie borrowed Oná and headed for Ravenna. Approaching the park along the street of blazing golden trees, he ran into that girl Rory called Celia, who was dressed in colored scarves with bangles and beads. When he said hi, she said, "Oh, hi! I didn't recognize you, Rich. Your aura's so different."

He asked if Rory was anywhere around, but she said that he'd moved to San Francisco back in July. "He told me if I saw you, to tell you: Keep on looking for the rainbow." She hugged him and said, "Peace, brother."

In Ravenna's riot of fall color, for maybe an hour, Richie and Oná danced on the hillside. Then he returned almost willingly to the confines of wedlock.

#

In honor of the Tahoe cohort's return, on Sunday the Twooth's folks threw another cookout at their place on the shore. While the others sat on the terrace with drinks, the husband and wife then took a walk down by the water. The tide was out again, the flat an easy path along the shore, its wooded bank now gilded with autumn. They walked and talked about their poor household finances. (This year his fellowship and salary as Russian instructor still wasn't enough for two, much less the future third.) Barbara said Papa had offered to help out with a couple hundred dollars a month, and Richie did a pirouette of thanksgiving.

That night, the group of seven friends trooped to the theater for the movie "The Great Race." From the very opening Richie was in stitches at the hysterical scenes, the noise-seeking torpedo, the rocket-propelled railcar, the hayloft and pigsty... Even now remembering them causes Old Me great belly laughs. Jack Lemmon will live forever as the villainous Professor Fate with his demonic laugh and "Push the button, Max!" Followed by the inevitable explosion. Not to mention the most grandiose pie-fight in the history of the world.

Yet again the magic of a funny movie flushed out Richie's clogged mental plumbing, setting him up for the more sober and somber task of being a married graduate student.

#

I've found summarizing Richie's rather diffuse journal entries of this time difficult. Simply noting various activities, he gave few details of these first days back in Seattle, and I had to supply many from my creaky memory. I got to this point in the story just in time to pick up Jammes, hit the gym briefly, and head over to Carol's place. She'd called earlier to invite us to dinner this evening.

Mack met me there at six-thirty. While Carol cooked, Janet and Jet entertained us in the living room with drinks. The toddler has learned to do awkward somersaults and laughs uproariously with each.

Meanwhile Mack showed off the still tender fresh tattoo on his hand. The colors are more muted and darker than I'd envisioned, but that's the way it usually is when dreams become reality. I explained the meaning of his name 6 House, and both women wanted to know their day-names too. Janet got on [azteccalendar.com](http://azteccalendar.com) to find out. She's 8 Rabbit, and Carol's 3 Water. Jet turned out to be 7 Snake, which is also the day-name of the god of young corn, Chicomecoatl. Mine, 2 Reed, is also that of the god Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror.

Having already read Double or Nothing, Janet congratulated me for being such a moral character with all that stuff about the Golden Rule. I assured her that it's still my guiding principle. With a smirk, Mack said, "You should see how he does unto me!"

Janet giggled. "I think I'd enjoy that."

"Me too," Carol called from the kitchen.

Mack snuggled up close on the sofa. "We could sell tickets."

"If we're putting on a show, darlin', we'll need some more rehearsals."

We had lamb chops, salad, asparagus, new potatoes, and mint jelly, my kind of meal. Afterwards Carol brought me a brown paper grocery bag. "So, Rich," she said ceremoniously, "I've got a present for you." To my utter amazement, in the bag was a record album, Annette's Pajama Party, music from her 1964 movie of that name.

On the cover she strikes supposedly seductive poses in (quite modest) pajamas and sixties bouffant hairdos. Trying not to cringe, I thanked Carol for the thought, explaining that Rick never saw any of her movies or heard any of her later records. I only remember the curly-haired Mouseketeer with that name across her breasts, which is probably why the memory of her is still

so poignant. Janet showed me the record liner advertising her other albums like Hawaiianne, Italiannette, and the beach party scores. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear them.

Explaining that she'd found it in the collection of her recently deceased great uncle Fred, Carol put the record on her old phonograph. For the first time in half a century, I heard the bright voice that enchanted my teenage years. It was moving, but more disturbing than touching. We only played a couple of the songs because I couldn't bear to listen to more. All the same, the record is now part of my own collection. Someday a descendant will find it and wonder, "Who in the heck is that?" (And: "What are you supposed to do with this weird disc?") I wonder if Uncle Fred had a crush on Annette. Most boys did, but I think Dick truly was in love with her.

#

*.viii.*

Barely inside the door of my apartment, Mack and I staged an impromptu rehearsal on the living room carpet and tightened up our timing considerably. When all were properly done unto, we decided to spend the rest of the evening on our projects. Wanting to do one more quick scene of Richie's return to Seattle and wrap up this chapter, I parked in my lounge with laptop, and Mack lounged beautifully on the sofa with pad and pencil. It shouldn't take very long to transcribe what Richie wrote for that first Monday of the quarter.

Dear Me,

...My first course as a full-fledged Russian instructor is scheduled for a convenient nine o'clock on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. My own classes fit well around them. Besides good old Serbo-Croatian and linguistic stuff, I've also signed up to take Polish and an intriguing class in modern Russian poetry, a busy schedule.

Standing in front of my first class gave me a charge. There are fourteen boys and girls of the freshman persuasion and four sophomore girls, all those sparkly eyes fixed on me. Five boys definitely deserve further study. First came the introduction to the Cyrillic alphabet. They tried hard to print their names in the alien letters, often mixing up the b and v and the p and r. It was fun, and I was sorry for the class to be over.

With a free hour before my first Polish class, I sat by the quadrangle by Smith Hall enjoying the glorious sun on golden sycamores. Suddenly I realized that it wasn't raining. Last year school started in rain, and I wouldn't have been sitting out here in all this autumn glory between classes like this. Last year I was long-haired faerie Rick, St. Norman in Torment, and now I'm a short-haired expectant father called Richie.

Reflexively, I leapt up from the bench to dance. Without planning, it became a dance of thanksgiving for the blessed new being Barbara's carrying, our miracle child, the literal seed of my loins. Thanksgiving for Barbara herself who's always so sweet and affectionate to this husband so rudely thrust upon her. With bounding leaps, I resolved to cherish and support her in the coming months of our 'confinement.'

I staggered out of that emotional whirl and into a lament for missing Lane on Saturday. Now he's lost to me, and with me being married now... With eyes closed in the pain of it, I danced out my grief that our stars have so untimely crossed. Oppressed by our love's sad fate, I slowed to a standstill and opened my eyes.

Right in front of me, Lane was standing there, his eyes radiating joy, his dark hair endearingly longer. He said, "Rich..." and laughed. "Your hair's so short! Saturday..."

"Lane... I couldn't make..."

Once again we were telepathic. I stared into his eyes feeling passion.

He stepped forward and took my hands. "Oh, thank you, thank you!" he chortled and spun me around on the lawn. "You were so right!" he exulted and hugged me. I was too surprised to speak and

simply savored him in my arms. Lane spoke into my ear, "Rich, I know myself now. I am gay. I dreamed of us... together."

We let go of each other, and I mumbled, "Lane... I dreamed about you all summer." My hopes for his love revived, and I stared dumbly at his beautiful face, hardly believing.

He led me over to the bench, speaking confidentially, excitedly, "Oh, Rich, I'm so in love!" I was speechless with joy. Lane raced jubilantly on. "I've got a boyfriend—Tommy! We met at the Fourth of July picnic. He's so beautiful!"

It was like a bucket of cold water over the head. With much effort, I said, "That's great!" He beamed at me, and I added, "I wasn't so lucky. I got a girl pregnant and had to marry her."

Lane's lovely face paled in horror. "Oh, Rich, I'm so sorry."

"No, Lane, don't be sorry," I said, feeling unnaturally calm. "I'll manage."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I just went crazy, I guess."

Lane took my hand. "Good luck, Rich. He squeezed it affectionately and then looked down at his watch. It broke the spell. "Oh—I've got class."

"Me too."

We stood up, and with a sad smile, Lane said, "Bye, Rich. See you around."

"See you," I echoed and feeling utterly desolate, watched him walk away with wings on his heels. Stunned, I staggered off to Polish.

By the time I got home for lunch, my mood was back under control, and I was able to regale Barbara with several silly-sounding Polish words. As a Russian speaker, I find Polish a very amusing language. It sounds suspiciously like tongue-tied Russian. I have a hard time not laughing at the nasalized vowels and the constant stress on penultimate syllables.

#

Indeed that transcription went quite quickly, and since my Mack is still sketching furiously over on the sofa, I'll take a moment to congratulate myself for slogging through this chapter of the Voyage of the Faerie Prince, the Honeymoon. When Lane dropped his bombshell, the honeymoon was definitely over. Now Richie will concentrate on playing the demanding role of devoted husband to gravid wife.

But let's leave all that for the next chapter. Right now I'm in the mood to draw and work on Huehuecoyotl, the Old Coyote. I still have to do his feather headdress, cloak and regalia and two more vignettes. It's just as exciting to draw something I envision as it is to write something I remember—or imagine. And for the first time, I'm experiencing the joy of companionship in my art with Mack working just as maniacally on his graphics.

Wow! Those days slipped by in an artistic frenzy for both of us. He's got a fabulous story-board together for the first 'stanza' of the novel with sex scenes that will curl your hair. I finished the final pieces of the Old Coyote icon, 5 Flower, god of music, and 5 Lizard, god of sexual excess. All the while, Mack and I have shared workouts at the gym, some meals and nights with each other and generally reveled in our creativity.

#

Then last night was Mack's birthday party. George and Mario made their lovely home quite festive with balloons drifting around all over the place and streamers draped everywhere. The table was piled with hors d'oeuvres, a three-storey chocolate cake, and a pile of presents.

My family arrived only a few minutes after Mack and me, and though they'd just had dinner, Jammes, the hollow-legged twelve year-old, made a beeline for the food table. I made the introductions and watched their various reactions. Son-in-law Rich clearly hadn't expected someone as tall as he, and daughter Aimée smiled dubiously.



When Jammes came back with a plate of food, he politely shook hands with Mack and said, "So you're Papou's boyfriend now?"

"I think you could say that—now," Mack admitted with a Cheshire grin.

"Cool. So Happy Birthday," Jammes said with his braceful grin.

Aimée exclaimed, "You two could be brothers!" It was true.

Jammes admired Mack's new tattoo, and learning that it's his Aztec day-name, 6 House, he was delighted. "I'm 3 Jaguar," he crowed. "That would make a great tattoo too!" His parents postponed that idea indefinitely.

I took them around the lovely house to meet others of my new young friends. First we greeted our hosts George and Mario, who were bustling around in the kitchen, and I introduced them as the newlyweds. Then we found the cluster of Jason, Johnny, and Kevin at the bar. The latter's crown of curls is now golden and quite striking, I assume in celebration of his conquest of Liam, who was to arrive later.

Johnny told them about working on the website for my memoir and complimented my interesting personal history. Jammes asked innocently, "What's so interesting about it?"

Mack laughed, "It's X-rated, dude. You can read it in a few more years."

Jammes frowned and quickly recovered. "When are they gonna cut the cake?"

"Soon enough," said his mother, effectively dismissing the subject.

We found the lesbian contingent out by the pool playing with Jet. Jammes, who's always great with little kids, took over so we all could meet and talk like adults. Aimée talked with Carol about her older sister Jake who used to be a lesbian and had a boy too. Janet wondered about the "used to be" and learned that Jake is now married to a man.

"These things happen," Deirdre remarked. "I did that once—when I was young and stupid. Now I'm old and wise, and in two weeks, I'm going to marry this beautiful woman."

Lynn said, "Your dad's going to give me away. You guys have to come too."

Carol added, "Jet's the ring-bearer, Jason's best man, and George will be bridesmaid."

Lynn beamed. "Wait till you see him in that flouncy green chiffon."

"Hey, Jammes," Deirdre said, "We got two rings. How about you be my ring-bearer? You know, help little Jet out."

"Keep him going in the right direction," Janet laughed.

"Yeh, I'd like that," Jammes said with a look at his parents, who didn't object.

"Besides," Carol commented, "you can come to the rehearsal dinner too." She clearly knows the way to a hungry boy's heart.

#

Just then Mario appropriately announced on the PA system that it was time for cake. Everybody gathered in the huge living room, where the cake had been moved onto a vast sideboard, and Mario called Mack to come up with him for the ceremony. While he extolled my young man's great virtue (and obliquely, his prowess), Mack looked humbly at the floor.

Pausing, Mario motioned to George, who sat down at the piano in the corner. "Now, we're going to sing," he warned, "like it or not." George played a flowery introduction and led us in an emotional version of the old tune, which for poetics he changed to "dear Mack-aroni." The birthday boy was obviously touched.

With no more ado, the caterers served the cake in super-large portions. Aimée only let Jammes have a small piece, but I gave him some bites of mine. That's what grandfathers are for. He kept eyeing the pile of presents and finally asked Mack when he was going to open them. Hesitating, Mack said, "Oh, later on I will. I expect there's some X-rated stuff in there too."

“Like what?” Jammes prodded.

“None of your beeswax,” I answered for my guy, not to get into such mature matters.

Right then Lars fired up his music system, and some in the crowd started dancing. To her son’s obvious disgust, Aimée said it was time for them to go so he could do his homework.

Mack and I walked them out to their car for goodbyes. He walked with Aimée and Rich up front chatting about his work, and Jammes and I lagged behind on the sidewalk. When I thanked him for agreeing to be Deirdre’s ring-bearer, he shrugged and said, “Sure.” Shortly, he asked, “Papou, can I ask you a question?”

“Forty two,” I instantly replied with our standing joke.

“Are you and Mack going to get married?”

“Whoa, kiddo! Let’s not rush things.” That’s a subject I do not wish to think about at this stage of the game. But how amazing that now that’s something one so young can so easily and freely think about!

Among Mack’s birthday presents were two outrageous dildoes and jars and tubes of designer lubricants. I anticipate exciting adventures in the near future.

###

## 8. GRAVIDITY

### *.i.*

Right after Mack’s birthday party I spent some time reworking the Honeymoon chapter and then fired it off to Johnny for posting. Soon I got calls with feedback from the group, and there were some rather interesting perspectives. For instance, both Kevin and Lynn were troubled by Rich-Richie’s conjugal “duty,” considering it tantamount to being a sex slave. I figured that’s how most women have had it throughout history and got no argument there.

Carol was disturbed by his plan to divorce Barbara afterwards, feeling that this was an awfully cynical attitude. Perhaps that’s so, but I guess it’s the only way he could find hope in the desperate situation. A light at the end of the tunnel. Janet was impressed by his sincere attempts to relate affectionately to Barbara and totally understood the pet syndrome. She said, “I think most women would welcome being cherished and loved like a pet rather than like a servant or household appliance.” A poignant point.

Mack said only how sorry he was for me going through that ordeal. Clearly embarrassed at seeing intimate details of our affair in print, he refrained from comment on the mentions of that subject we’ve yet to discuss. Let’s not rush things.

Johnny and Jason commented on how sad it was to see poor Richie getting sucked into the straight world, even though he held tight onto his gay identity. Johnny gave me the most constructive criticism when he remarked, “You know, Rich—in the next chapter there should be less stuff about all of us nowadays. It kind of distracts me from his story.”

Joking, I urged him to give me more exciting material to write about, but I’ve taken his point to heart. Besides, nowadays all of us are in quite happy situations, and such are usually fairly boring subjects to write about. Over the next week until the wedding, I promise to write only (more or less) about Barbara and Richie’s several months of pregnancy. I don’t know if the title I’ve concocted for this chapter is a real word, but that’s what I intend it to mean, the term of pregnancy. Here goes.

#

Trying to act like a straight guy meant that Richie had to convince his inner faerie to settle down, maybe like go into suspended animation? They had many a talk about that, but the little guy always put up a fight, arguing and throwing tantrums. Richie thought of that part of

himself as a winged boy much smaller than Cupid, with a special tiny arrow, cute as a bug. But the bug refused to hibernate. During the past two married months, his faerie buddy had taken occasional cat-naps, but see an attractive male, and he'd snap wide awake. Unable to put him in a pumpkin shell or stuff him into a lamp, Rich tried to ignore his constant noise, but he knew that sooner or later, he'd probably have to slip the sprite a mickey.

Otherwise, acting straight was a no-brainer. Pretending to be Seattlitic, Rich just put on a civil face with blinds drawn behind his eyes, constantly reminding himself where the sausage is supposedly supposed to be hidden. Swagger and maintain a macho demeanor in all situations, and remember that other males are to be dominated and subjugated. Females too, and then some. Make it clear you're the boss, and your way is always both right and wise. Oh, and always walk around like you've got a broomstick up your butt—or wish you did.

#

Dear Me,

...Holding hands, Barbara and I sat on the bench on our front porch, a lofty perch above the street, to wait for Gene and Martha and go out to celebrate of our first day of classes. She leaned close and asked, "Are you okay, Richie? You're so quiet, sweetie." I hastily claimed that I was fine, but she asked, "Are you afraid about the baby?"

"No." That wasn't what worried me.

"Well, I am," she said and laid her head on my shoulder.

"I know, darlin'." What more could I say? After all, she'll have to do it all. I'll just be watching.

We shared more moments of silence gazing out into the gathering dark, streetlights casting their glowing spheres here and there, till Gene's Volkswagen pulled up at the curb. I helped Barbara carefully down the high steps, and we clambered into the beetle's tiny back seat.

With wife on arm, so apparently straight, I swaggered into the loud and crowded Red Robin. The bustling hangout was a bright hubbub of shouting, laughing, and milling, pushing collegiate folks. Following Gene and Martha, we worked our way with great difficulty through the boisterous crowd. To play my role to the hilt, I didn't look directly at any male, but even with my eyes downcast, I was assaulted by the rounded seat of one guy's pants. Aware that with my big baby blues I'm a pretty good-looking guy, I gave appreciative women aloofly masculine looks.

We finally crossed over to the table being held by Betsy and the Twooth, right beside the great wide windows. They look out into the dark where the delicate arc of the Queen Anne Bridge fades off into the night, spanning the chasm over a canal.

The others already had a martini and a draft beer respectively. Perusing the menu, we waited for service with scattered remarks about impressions and experiences from the first day of classes. I said something witty about my class in Polish. Everyone was laughing when the waiter walked up to the table, and we all stopped in mid-giggle. A stunning Norse god in a white shirt bursting at the chest buttons, he was either totally unaware of his magnificence or joyously reveling in it.

I didn't let myself look long enough to guess which. Instead I glanced around at my friends who all sat there transfixed and muttered their drink and dinner orders. Gazing out the dark window (where his reflection hovered like an angel), I nonchalantly ordered an Olympia beer and a hamburger, medium rare. He asked significantly, "Would you like anything with it?" Involuntarily, I turned to the vision of his smile, seeing exactly what I wanted with it, and quickly drawing the blinds shut, I ordered onion rings.

The frantic buzzing in my head was from my inner faerie, whom I'd come to think of as Tinker Bo. He was in a perfect tizzy. To put him back to sleep, I talked about my first day's Intro Russian class and my students' difficulty learning the new alphabet. By the time I got done, my friends were bored and Bo was fast asleep.

Each appearance of the incredible waiter cast a subtle enchantment over us. Once Gene remarked, "Wow! He should be in movies."

Our celebratory dinner progressed with the usual conversations, and in one of my many lapses of attention, I remembered what celebration used to mean to me. I'd be up on a barstool dancing a crazy cumbia. At the thought dancing on a barstool here in the Red Robin, I chuckled ruefully.

Barbara noticed and asked, "What's funny, Richie?"

Quickly inventing, I said, "Oh, just thinking about that funny movie the other night." Like Professor Fate, I commanded, "Push the button, Max!" Everyone laughed as intended. Give me the lines, and I can play the part.

Back at home, I obediently performed the requisite task—without even seeking inspiration in images of a waiter. Nonetheless, when we lay back supposedly sated, Barbara soon asked into the dark, "Didn't you think that waiter was handsome, honey?"

Curious if maybe she'd been fantasizing about the waiter instead of me, I answered lightly, "Sure, for what that's worth. Why do you ask?"

"You never even looked at him."

"Sure I did," I said, vividly recalling his reflection. "I saw he had a nice nose."

She laughed into the dark, and said goodnight. Reminded, my buddy Bo was wide awake and played around with images of more than just the waiter's nose.

#

Richie's Russian class met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. After a break he had Polish class, and then in the afternoons a linguistics class in Phonetics. On Tuesdays and Thursdays were Serbo-Croatian again in the morning, and in the afternoon an intriguing class in modern Russian poetry. For his literary bent, that was the icing on the cake. I wouldn't blame you for thinking this a less than scintillating curriculum. For him, however, it was enthralling.

Walking back and forth across campus between apartment and Smith Hall, he was like an excitable horse with mental blinders, not letting himself look at the passing student bodies. Out of sight, out of mind. That did a pretty good job of stultifying the horny sprite in his head, but it was like walking through a featureless fog.

It was so much easier between classes to be at home alone in the apartment—since Barbara had started her job at the French department office—no boys to avoid looking at. With all the time available between classes, he could've gone back to swimming at the University pool, but that would have been like jumping into the fire. All Richie needed was a parade of scantily clad swimmer bodies to avoid looking at. Besides, he didn't want to risk running into Lane again. Remember: out of sight, out of mind.

But let me tell you, there were some real sneaky Petes out there. No matter how blindly Richie staggered around campus, how carefully he hid in the library, or how obliviously he sat in a class, more often than not some guy would manage to intrude on his field of vision, maybe just a part of him like an arm or the back of his head, and if those parts were at all attractive, the sight would knock him for a loop. Out of sight, out of mind. A fragile philosophy that.

Sometimes in those solitary hours at home, he'd dance about in the living room to his records of Vivaldi, Bach, etc. Since the glorious autumn weather held all week, before the rains would inevitably turn the gold to soggy leaves, on Thursday afternoon he took Oná to Ravenna. Quickly losing his shirt, he danced a Tahoe dance in whirling circles around the sunny grass, soaring on wide wings across the sky.

#

Dear Me,

Yesterday morning [*Saturday*] I escorted Barbara on errands she could've done just as well alone or with Martha, a shopping trip downtown (ostensibly for a new pair of unmentionables). Much as I tried to keep smiling and engaged while we wandered the aisles in stores and inspected items of

feminine apparel, I'm sure my boredom showed. At least I was useful as a beast of burden, but the heaviest load was not letting myself eyeball passing males.

Happy to be off from her work, Barbara was bright and cheery enough for the both of us. We had a festive seafood lunch at the Space Needle restaurant and watched the lovely city passing around us, then the western expanses of Puget Sound and Olympic peninsula. As always, we found something inconsequential to chat about over lunch and on the bus ride back home. To be kindly honest, whatever we talked about didn't make much impression on me. By now I've gotten used to operating on automatic pilot, only paying enough attention to cope with questions. I figured that was all part of playing it straight.

That whole afternoon we thoroughly cleaned the apartment, the mindless chores of scrubbing and sweeping a great way to zone out. Even though Barbara and I don't have much to talk about beyond mundane things, we're always perfectly civil and pleasant. She naturally has no interest in my arcane academics, and conversely, I've got no idea what she's interested in, besides liking nice clothes.

One of my personal rules, a corollary of the Golden one, is that everyone deserves kindness and respect, so like a proper husband, I generally acquiesce to Barbara's ideas and decisions. When you get right down to it, it's all the same to me whether we do this or that, go here or there. I simply have to make it through these next several months as patiently as possible and live with the consequences of doing the right thing.

In the evening Martha and Gene came down to our place for a dinner of meatloaf, and when they left, we sat around with our books. Curled up in my big chair, I looked out the picture window into the dark recalling places where people spend Saturday nights in revelry and gaiety. Dancing. But not here. A memory appeared like a film on the black screen of the night: I walk my usual route down Toulouse Street, my shadow from the streetlight outpacing me along the ancient brick walls, toward La Casa, mi casa, de los Marineros. I can smell the muddy river and rotting blossoms of New Orleans and feel the pounding merengue music from the corner, just like last spring. Over the swinging door the modest sign LA MARINA... When the film faded, the window merely reflected me and my wife in domestic bliss, like a Norman Rockwell scene.

Afterwards, lying in bed in the dark, Barbara slightly snuggled up to my shoulder, such gestures usually a cue, but hoping to procrastinate for at least another night, I just lay there on my back. She lightly stroked my hairy chest and asked, "Richie, honey, are you happy?"

Deciding to be gently honest, I said, "Not particularly." To make it kinder still, I stroked her hand and added, "But that doesn't matter. I'll manage."

"I just want to make you happy."

Recognizing this call to conjugal duty, I obediently let her try.

#

.ii.

The rains started the next morning, and Richie's dances on campus or *sur l'herbe* in Ravenna ceased. While Barbara was off at her job, he'd make do with the living room, careful to avoid corners of furniture in leaps. It was splendid having actual music. Dance put him onto another plane, into another reality. His academic studies did something like that too, but on a mental or intellectual plane, if there was any difference. Whatever the plane, sex was irrelevant, simply a mechanical activity. He found it relatively easy to turn off emotionally and get on with tasks at hand. If you don't think about what you're missing, soon you won't even miss it.

But living off the emotional grid was problematic. Cutting off or denying sexual emotions means that other less desirable feelings start leaking over the edges. Flashes of anger over stupid little things, almost rage reminding him of his father's furies. Sometimes, briefly, he'd suffer from inchoate fears or depression. When Barbara wanted him to have a wedding

ring, Richie numbly put on one that she chose, gold, with a tiny diamond. He wore it as just another piece of the straight costume, but it still put him in a major funk for days.

In this unbalanced psychological state, Richie somehow stayed minimally functional in the marriage, reasonably cheerful and personable with Barbara and friends, and maximally focused on his studies. His inner faerie slumbered fitfully, and to the outside observer, he was apparently a happily married man. He had the ring to prove it.

October and November were Barbara's fifth and sixth months and a time when the pregnancy was really starting to show. Richie was fascinated to watch the bulge growing in her body. She seemed to be content with their quiet lifestyle, her job, and of course, having her sister Martha so close by. The girls spent a great deal of time together and conversed with each other for hours, a blessed relief from husbandly companion duty.

It was great with Martha and Gene living just up the street, like a family circle. Gene graciously drove them places in his bug, rainy jaunts into the Cascades or around the Sound, just to get out. But they didn't see much of Betsy or the Twooth anymore, those single people out somewhere gallivanting. Not like married folks who sat around at home vegetating, or more specifically for Barbara and Richie, 'carnating.'

One evening in late October, over dinner Barbara remarked out of the blue that she wanted to have the baby naturally. Confused, Richie had to learn about anesthetics and such. The upshot was that she wanted them to take lessons in something called the Lamaze method. The other husbands in the classes looked just as stunned as he felt. Doing the exercises with little Barbara's body made the whole thing glaringly real for him—too real, and after class he'd virtually be comatose. When the few classes were over, they were supposed to keep practicing at home, but in about a week, they stopped the exercises, and neither mentioned it again.

#

While the language and linguistics classes were exciting and fun, it was the poetry class that really captured Richie's imagination. The works of the Symbolists, Acmeists, and Futurists ignited a spark of poetry in him, making him feel much more sensitive to the use of words. Even in English he'd find himself bemused by the sheer poetics of a phrase.

The girl he knew from last year, Ronnie, was in that poetry class too. What with Richie now being a married man, they were on an easy, amenable footing. Ronnie and he competed in translating poems by a possibly insane Russian Futurist named Velemir Khlebnikov. A good example is a section he translated from the long poem "Zangezi:"

*Fleegitives across the blue sky,  
Nilusive flocks of nihillusions,  
They flood into otherverses.  
Flighnauts flying in selfar space!  
They flee into the uneverse,  
A torrent of winged thisity,  
A deluge of cosmic notity,  
In the sky's farever of attimes.*

No doubt Richie's fascination with this beautifully strange poetry says something about his mental state. It's also testimony to his appalling lack of academic guidance that he decided to do his master's thesis on Khlebnikov's poetics. At the time this seemed an inspired subject for a degree in Slavic Linguistics, if not very significant in the larger scheme of things.

#

Dear Me,

...Last night we went to see the Beatles' new movie "Help!" It was so utterly nutty that I felt completely purged again. I mean, sacrifices and shrinking potions, Buckingham Palace! Gene was the only one who appreciated the absurd humor as much as I. What disturbed my sleeping sprite though, was the catchy refrain in the theme song:

*Help me if you can, I'm feeling down,  
And I do appreciate you being 'round.  
Help me get my feet back on the ground.  
Won't you please, please help me.*

It was the song I should be singing to Barbara, I realized, since she's now become my best friend. I truly did appreciate her "being 'round"—and getting rounder every day. Tinker Bo kept singing it in my ear, sarcastically, but sounded sincerely plaintive. When I told him to shut up, he had a snit and nastily accused me of getting fat.

Nasty or not, my faerie self is right. What with Barbara's wonderful wifely cuisine, I've been putting on pounds around the middle. My splendid flat stomach isn't all that flat now, my navel distinctly an 'innie,' and I've got incipient love-handles. If I don't want to lose my slender, boyish figure, I'm going to have to cut back on my chow. ...

*[Richie's resolution was soon tested by Thanksgiving:]*

...Having the largest kitchen and most commodious dining room, we had the coterie over to feast at our place. Actually, the Twooth was absent, off with his family on the shore. So we were six, Martha, Gene, Betsy and her on-again, off-again big boyfriend Bob who speaks rarely and always seems to be somewhere else.

Barbara and Martha cooked madly all day, and there was great camaraderie and gratitude around the groaning table. By blabbering fairly continuously, I avoided eating very much of the fowl and fare, but I lost it on Martha's dressing and gravy. To celebrate I had only a small piece of the pecan pie. A big surprise with dessert was Betsy's happy announcement that she and Bob are going to get married in January. Amid all the congratulations, I watched Bob smiling serenely and silently, either happy or horrified. This is when I learned the many social uses of an idiot smile.

Throughout the feasting, I struggled with the thought that today is now the fourth anniversary of being with my first love, blue-eyed Peter. When I started my traditional lament for what should have been, Bo told me to shut up so he can get some sleep.

Clearly under the influence of his poetry class, the next day Richie started writing a poem about Peter. The premise was that he'd come upon a high-spirited colt down by the riverside, only just managed to stroke its velvet nose before it galloped away, unbroken. For days he obsessed with the poem, massaging every word, tweaking them for just the right tonalities. His inner faerie called him a nutcase. Ultimately, he decided there were no words for what he wanted to say, or perhaps he just didn't know the right ones.

#

The week after Thanksgiving, Barbara decided she was getting too pregnant to work anymore and left her job in the French Department. Having her home during the days immediately meant big changes in Richie's life. She didn't care for classical music, so no more parlor dances or musical accompaniment in general. He had to study in strange quietude. It must have gotten to Barbara too. Soon she sent him out to get a radio which she tuned to a fairly gentle popular music station (with lots of Beatles music). That proved a passable background for Richie's studies because he could easily tune it out.

Though it wasn't conducive to schoolwork, he sometimes took long walks under his trusty black umbrella, sloshing along the rainy December streets, way too wet for Oná to deal with. One afternoon he wandered into Ravenna and stood a long while under a dripping tree enjoying the solitude. Looking down to the creek and its fateful horse-tails, he thought poetically how this was a time of rain...

It reminded him of the hit song he'd heard on the new radio called "Turn, Turn, Turn," apparently with words from Ecclesiastes: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born..." Yes, indeed, this was, and also a time to be borne. He took comfort knowing the months left in his tenure as a husband would soon pass.

That same evening in an after-dinner conversation, Barbara actually raised the subject of sex. Very apologetically, she said she was too pregnant now for them to "do it" anymore. Not about to object to this fantastic reprieve, Richie assured her that it was fine. Here was license to forget about sex entirely. Complications arose. Switching off his sexual side also seemed to shut him down physically and mentally. He started feeling sluggish, only vaguely operational. To mask the vacancy behind his eyes, he practiced Bob's enigmatic grin. It looked to everybody like he was happy as a clam, when, in fact, he was merely unconscious as a clam.

#

*.iii.*

For the holidays the little family went again to visit the girls' parents in Ann Arbor. Martha and Barbara took Oná on a plane, and Gene and Richie drove. Rather, Gene drove. Never having learned to drive, Richie rode shotgun and read aloud from a book Gene brought called "The Lord of the Rings." His description of the trip may provide literary commentary.

Dear Me,

...Somewhere in eastern Washington, I pulled the book out of his bag to find that it was Part II of the trilogy, "The Two Towers." The synopsis of Part I was quite dramatic and confusing, but at least it gave an idea of what was going on. I read out the table of contents for Books Three and Four, and since we were taking pot luck anyway, Gene chose to start in Book Four with The Taming of Sméagol. We met the two characters, Frodo and Sam, strange creatures called hobbits, struggling through the barren hills of Eryn Muir, probably not unlike the barren hills we were passing through.

From there on, as Gene and I rolled into wooded Idaho, things got increasingly confusing and ominous. And by the time the hobbits encountered the disgusting creature Gollum, we were profoundly hooked, confusion be damned. The best part was that we could stop for literary discussions whenever. By nightfall, I'd read through Book Four. We both were freaked out by the scene in Shelob's lair and impressed by the cliff-hanging setup for Part III, Return of the King.

In Montana we ran into weather. Most of the night was blowing snow, some even drifting, but Gene wasn't troubled. I dozed off, but he kept on driving and only woke me around three because we were coming into an ice-fog that was building up on the windshield. While he struggled to see, driving slowly through the haze, I wrapped up so good I could barely see and standing up through the sun-roof, scraped the ice away. I got caked in ice too, miserable work. Then Gene got us behind a big semi where we could follow along comfortably in its fog-shadow.

With the dawn, we'd gotten most of the way across South Dakota, and I back-tracked to read Book Three. We learned a great deal about Middle Earth with a whole new cast of characters and exotic settings. I was enchanted with Treebeard, the mobile tree. By Iowa, we'd finished that too and agreed that the tower of Isengard and the palantir were powerful mythic creations.

Late afternoon saw us in Iowa City, where I'd arranged a stop-by visit with Jane, my old *merengue* partner for so many nights in La Casa. She's also married now—to a writer in the famous Writers Workshop there. They live in a rural area in a white clapboard house. As beautifully blond as



when we'd debauched together four years before, Jane welcomed Gene and me with cups of tea. Her husband Jim was off at school, she said, and her new baby son was asleep in the bedroom. We looked at each other with wonder at what our lives have become. We asked each other if we were happy, assured that we were, and smiled blissfully to prove it. In about half an hour, we had to push on, and I hugged Jane. We didn't say goodbye, just waved.

Evening caught us going into Illinois, and Gene finally admitted he needed sleep. We stopped in a grubby little motel for beds and slept all night like the dead. In the early morning we cleaned up, shaved, and hit the road again, arriving in snowy Ann Arbor by mid-afternoon. By that time my brain was numb with the long travel, the trip a blur of mountains, Middle Earth, snow and ice, endless plains and towns, and several walking trees.

#

Gene took off the next day for Monongahela again, and Richie had 2 ½ weeks without studies to occupy his mind, just the larger family with Papa and Nana. They made frequent trips into downtown Ann Arbor for restaurants or shopping, and he was impressed how well Papa drove in the snow. In fact, it was the most snow he'd ever seen, even more than the past year's holiday snow in Seattle. The cold wasn't really all that bad, they insisted, since the temperature was only in the upper 20's, but as a true hot-blooded Southerner, he considered anything under freezing absolutely arctic.

On one such outing, Richie popped into a bookstore for the whole set of J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy. As the five of them did things in shifting groups, he found times to visit Middle Earth from the beginning. There was a fantastic easy chair in the downstairs family room. Early on he got to Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday party and his speech to the assembled hobbits: "I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve." Richie laughed so hard and long that he almost passed out.

Of course, there was a family ritual with the Christmas tree, not at all religious. He did the manual labor of lugging it around and setting it up on the base. It reminded him of the tree he'd cut back home in Arkansas and dragged home through the snowy woods. This family's decorations and piles of presents were much fancier than Richie's family had ever had. Being absorbed into it was a warm feeling, and he almost felt engaged in the holiday spirit.

For the whole holiday there was deep snow all around the folks' house. The open hillside was blindingly white across the valley to the other hill. Richie sometimes sat on the cold porch and contemplated the alien scene of bare tree branches against the white ground and colorless sky. It was hard to believe there was any such planet as Seattle, any little pagoda perched on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, or that just inside was a woman with a belly that kept on getting bigger and bigger.

#

During the snowy holidays, Papa was warm with Richie, while a bit professorial. During their long, intelligent conversations about history and politics, Papa would smile at him with open affection. By the end of the visit Richie felt like he'd found a new father. The warmth he felt from Papa was way more than he'd ever felt for his own father. They hadn't been in touch since that short letter back in September about expecting the baby and that equally short pleased reply from his mother. (Barbara had made him sign a Christmas card to them.)

It wasn't possible to get to know Nana in the same way. Always busy at something, she said little except when they were at meals together. Then she talked brightly about trips they had taken, recalling fond memories they all shared. Richie noticed early along was that Nana was a virtuoso of the pleasant smile with nuances ranging from simple contentment through mild amusement to outright jollity. Over the holidays Richie added several expressions to his own acting repertoire of useful smiles.

The big entertainment for the holidays was going to see the new James Bond movie, “Thunderball.” It had plenty of violence but wasn’t as good as “Goldfinger.” For New Year’s Eve they stayed up for a champagne toast to 1966, and feeling grandiose, Richie toasted his new family, giving what he intended as a beatific smile. For New Year’s dinner, Nana laid out a total feast with prime rib and Yorkshire pudding, half a dozen vegetables, and two pies, including mince, his favorite. All his waist watching went right out the window.

#

A few days into January, Gene got back from Pennsylvania and spent a while with the family. At the end of the week he, Martha, and Oná took off in the VW for the long drive back to Seattle, and the next day Richie and Barbara flew. For most of the trip they sat quietly, read magazines, and napped. His journal records a later conversation.

Dear Me,

...Hours later when we were passing the summit of Mt. Rainier, I told Barbara about falling in love with the fabulous peak last year when first coming to Seattle.

She suddenly asked, “Did you enjoy the holidays, honey?”

Looking back, I had to say that yes, I did, and putting on a grateful smile, remarked on how wonderful Papa and Nana were to me, all the great food (patting my stomach), and how glad I was to be away from the snow, even if it was back to the Seattle rains.

She laughed and stroked my arm. “Richie, I’m so glad—you seem happy again.”

“I don’t think I’ve been unhappy,” I involuntarily argued with an innocent smile.

“But not really happy,” she sighed. “Are you now?”

“Enough.” Further analysis of the state of my happiness was unnecessary.

Barbara squeezed my hand. “I wish I could do something, sweetie, you know, to help.”

“Don’t worry, darlin’. You’re helping me get my feet back on the ground,” I said. Truth be told, I did feel fine now that she wasn’t expecting sex from me. Life is so much simpler without that. She seemed content with my answer. Later as I lugged suitcases through the rain up our long steps, I did feel a small flash of happiness being back to this odd pagoda house on the knoll. And another flash realizing that now we’re coming into the home stretch.

#

That first morning at home when they got up and Barbara take off her nightgown, Richie was shocked that her belly suddenly looked so much bigger than before. She said the baby had even started kicking. That afternoon she called him over, and feeling the movement inside her abdomen made him weak in the knees.

Starting this eighth month, the pregnancy really took over their lives. Though Barbara continued to cook, Richie tried to do most of the household chores so she wouldn’t exert herself, per her doctor at the University hospital. He’d never realized how dirty a place could get in just a couple days and quickly came to appreciate Barbara’s efforts in picking up after him. Doctor’s orders were also that for proper nourishment, she was supposed to drink a pint of brown ale every day. She didn’t like the thick, dark beer, nor did Richie, but she did it for the baby.

Also following medical instructions of the time, they took frequent walks with a huge umbrella along the wet streets around the University. With February’s occasionally dry, less often bright, days, they sometimes took Oná on walks all the way to Ravenna, slowly of course. Though sorely tempted, Richie didn’t let himself dance on the soggy lawn.

Some evenings they walked to the Student Center on campus just to be around people and shared a special treat like a piece of carrot cake. One time afterwards, they dropped by the game room and played snooker, both comically inept with the cues. Barbara was too funny maneuvering around her protuberance trying to make shots.

Week after week she got bigger and bigger until the walks were no longer advisable, and she lay most of the time on the sofa or on the bed. Throughout it all she stayed smiling and bright. Richie tried always to be pleasant and affectionate, helping her with anything she needed, and to his surprise, concern for her automatically became the focus of life. With sex no longer a factor, his faerie self was apparently comatose.

#

Throughout all the caregiving, Richie paid appropriate attention to his classes. This quarter was heavily into Slavic linguistics with morphology, syntax, comparative, and historical, each of which was a whole world of intellectual wonder for him. He didn't really miss the poetry class of last quarter, having sunk up to his ears into the poetry of thesis work.

You may recall my mentioning that Richie chose to write his thesis on the unusual poetics of the Russian Futurist named Velimir Khlebnikov. This excessively obscure (and esoteric) subject occupied any free moments he could find in the routines of caring for the expectant mother. Comfortable in the big chair by the picture window, he labored over translations and pored through dictionaries.

In particular, he loved the Russian dictionary that was alphabetized backwards, i.e., from the end to the beginning of the word. That way you got all words with the same suffix or ending, a neat trick, like freedom, boredom, whoredom, chiefdom, kingdom, martyrdom, wisdom, etc. The problem was that you couldn't check that one out of the library. One day when he went there to check some more suffixes.

Dear Me,

...On my walk to the Library it was dreary but vaguely dry, no sign of my mountain in the greyness. With nothing to compete, the fantastic Gothic Library was even more beautiful. But the cavernous nave of the reading room looks too much like the cathedral at Loyola for my taste.

On my way in, I noticed a couple guys sitting on the grand staircase, close together in conversation, somehow intimate. Before instinctively looking away, I recognized one as my Russian prince from last year, Ilya—the nookie bird who flew away. Of course, being focused on his friend, he didn't see me. For a moment I watched them smile at each other, speaking in words only they could hear. So Ilya has a boyfriend now, a cute kid of the usual Seattle Scandinavian sort, and I felt sadly happy for him.

But when I sat down with my dictionary at a table in reading room, I couldn't stop thinking about the beautiful boyfriends. Or maybe they aren't yet. Maybe they're still innocent—like I once was. The thought woke Bo up. He turned over, growled, and promptly went back to sleep.

#

*.iv.*

I trust you'll forgive me for interrupting this gripping historical narrative with an authorial comment about developments amongst my new young friends. Namely, they are all quite taken with my Viking's day-name tattoo and have asked me to lay out designs for theirs. Carol plans to use hers, 3 Water, as a logo on stationery, and Janet wants to use hers, 8 Rabbit, as an embroidered monogram. Deirdre turned out to be 3 Rain, and Lynn 10 Eagle.

The guys have looked up their day-names too: Jason—10 Earthquake; Johnny—9 Wind; Kevin—11 Crocodile; Liam—9 Deer; George—1 Dog; and Mario—7 Lizard. Fortunately, most of these designs are already in good shape from my old Aztec calendar book. We'll just have to see what my friends decide to do with them.

Meanwhile we're all excitedly preparing for the wedding of 3 Rain and 10 Eagle. 6 House suggests that 2 Reed (yours truly) and 3 Jaguar (Jammes) might wear tuxedos. That remains to be seen.

#

The much-anticipated wedding of Betsy and her Bob was set for January 27, with Martha as bridesmaid and the Twooth for Best Man. There was a very festive atmosphere amongst the group for the week leading up to the big day. A wedding party dinner (with Barbara, Richie, and Gene kindly included) was scheduled the night before at a fancy Chinese restaurant downtown.

Dear Me,

...We arrived little late with Gene and Martha to find the other three waiting at a big round table. As soon as we sat down, Betsy announced calmly, "The wedding's off." We all dithered in amazement and looked at Bob, who wore an unnervingly angelic smile. When I checked in with the Twooth, he just lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "We had a talk this afternoon," Betsy casually added, "and decided not now." Bob silently nodded in agreement.

Martha was the first to recover. She said, "Maybe we should just go—"

"—Oh, no!" Betsy cut off the idea. "Let's have a nice dinner anyway."

We were all hungry, so that was the easy way out. We ordered a great Chinese feast and shared lively conversations about subjects totally unrelated to the current romantic disaster. Through it all, Bob said virtually nothing, his smile now like a grimace. I wanted to tell him, "Rejoice, man! You got out of it." But I thought better. That dinner, one of the more awkward situations I've ever encountered, proved that simple civility works wonders. I also learned the importance of modulating my own fixed smile occasionally.

#

Rolling on into February, the less wet days sometimes became verifiably dry, though heavily overcast, only rarely partially clear. It was dry and sunny one day when Richie walked again to the Library. There to the southeast floated Rainier, his magic mountain, its snowy peak hovering like a triangular cloud over the tiny Cascades. Thrilled, he dropped his stuff on the pavement and danced for the joy of life. Several people stopped to watch and when he finished, they clapped. Always before, folks had simply ignored him, and he was unsure whether to be pleased or mortified.

The next day, also bright, he made it to Ravenna with Oná and enjoyed an afternoon spate of sun on the dancing lawn. Few people were around, and he bounded about like a goat, drunk with the exhilaration of early spring, of these long months finally coming to an end, of the baby soon to be born. Though Barbara and he had never spoken about their hopes for boy or girl, truth was he wanted a boy, of course. On the way home, he convinced himself that he'd be satisfied with whichever.

#

Soon it was Gene's birthday, and the family of four again went out to celebrate at the Red Robin. Richie found it a disturbing evening:

Dear Me,

...Barbara and I haven't been there for quite some time, nor out to other restaurants much either, so it was a welcome event. We got another table by the huge windows and were hardly seated when the waiter appeared. I looked at him and froze. He smiled at me and said, "Well, hi there. You still Rich?"

I laughed and said, "No. Now I'm Richie."

"Richie Rich," Lane chuckled and turning to the rest of us asked, "What can I get you folks to drink?" He was just as handsome as I remembered. I tried not to stare as he wrote down the orders.

Afterwards, Barbara asked how I knew the waiter, and I explained meeting him last year at the swimming pool. Trying to be dismissive, I lied, "I don't even remember his name."

"It's Lane," Gene volunteered. "He's waited on us a few times before."

"Good looking guy," Martha remarked.

Barbara said, "Richie, honey, you really should start swimming again."

Wearing my contented cow smile, I simply nodded at her suggestion. Not to think of Lane, I attended to our conversation as much as possible. When Lane brought our drinks, he gave me one of those high-voltage smiles. I did the best happy grin I could and thanked him kindly.

The girls went off to the restroom leaving Gene and me with our beers. After only a moment, he asked, "So, Richie, how are you holding up?"

Unused to being asked such a personal thing, I answered half-truthfully, "Fairly well." That sufficed for intimate exchanges, and Gene started telling me about something interesting he'd found in "Beowulf."

When Lane brought our food and served me he said, "You should come swimming again."

"That's what I just told him," Barbara said emphatically, pleased with the support.

Lane served her plate and said, "He's real good."

We ate in typical silence for a few minutes before Martha said, "You know, Geno, you could go swimming too." I allowed him to argue that one down for the both of us.

A few more times to see Lane till dinner was over, mercifully with only smiles, and on our way out, he passed me with another one and a quick, "I'll look for you."

Of course, I couldn't even think about taking up swimming again, not with the baby coming so soon—and not with Lane looking for me. To my great relief Barbara didn't mention it again. And anyway, I'm getting my body back into shape by dietary means.

#

For Valentine's Day on Monday Richie gave Barbara a standard box of chocolates and pretty card. The next day was Mardi Gras, already a year now since Richie went home—since Saint Norman de la Casa, patron of sailors on shore leave, returned to his Basilica and danced a transfigured merengue for Pope Henri I. He found it an emotional day.

Dear Me,

...Since it was one of those rare sunny days, I took the hour after my Russian class for a quick walk to Ravenna, almost at a trot. On my hillside dancing ground I marched in my own private parade and then did a capricious jig in honor of Rex. Nevertheless, I still felt bereft.

Back at home after my one o'clock Syntax class, I sat with Barbara at the table with a cup of tea while she reluctantly worked on her daily glass of brown ale. I tried to tell her what Mardi Gras was like, the mad carousing and dancing, the incredible crowds and fantastic parades. She smiled understandingly, but I knew she couldn't really. You've got to experience carnival to appreciate its glory. Talking about it just brought up precious memories of past carnivals and made me sad again. So I gave up on the attempt and stared into my empty cup.

Barbara patted my hand and said, "Oh, Richie, I'm sorry it's so boring here, honey."

"Oh, no," I was quick to deny, "It's not boring. I've got you and the baby to think about—and all the great classes." In a moment I added, "There should just be some kind of jubilation sometimes."

Mid-afternoon, list in hand, I was all set to go to the grocery store when the phone rang. It was my mother in San Antonio. My father died. Mother sounded very calm and matter of fact describing his collapse two days ago, the hospital, and his sudden death a couple hours ago. I took the news the same way, and since words of sympathy and consolation were useless, I just assured her that I'll be on the next plane possible. I hung up the phone thinking, yes, this is a time to be born—and a time to die.

Barbara had been standing at my side listening, her brown eyes big with alarm, knowing only that it was my mother and I'd be going... I gave her the news, and she hugged me in sympathy. I assured her I was fine—because I was. On hearing Mother's words, I'd known instantly that this event

really had no effect on my life beyond making me catch a plane and leave my pregnant wife about to have our baby.

Now I recognized the fear in Barbara's eyes and hugged her too with, "Don't worry, darlin'. I'll get back quick as I can. It's still nearly two weeks... The baby will wait for its Pop." We both chuckled at that, relieving our fears for the moment. She said she'd call the airlines, but first she called Martha to share the news. I dutifully left for the grocery store.

Walking alone along the sidewalk was a great time for reflection. Away from my family now for nearly six years, I no longer feel them any part of my life. That was a different version of me living with them back there on Penney Hill in Arkansas, and even then I'd felt no particular emotional connection to them. And now Daddy's gone.

Maybe we were so separate because we almost never did things together and rarely ate meals together. With the café across the highway, we'd just pop in whenever, order whatever, and sit somewhere, counter or booth, to eat by ourselves. These past months of constant companionship and meals with and by Barbara definitely make me feel more family than ever before.

Thinking about being a whole different person then, I have to admit that even my fancy-free faggot of the past five years was a different being than who I am now. Married, I now have a strange new identity. No, it wasn't the marriage that changed me into someone else. It was that Ravenna afternoon, the fateful enchantment that turned me into a progenitor. Then I remembered my little buddy inside my head patiently waiting for freedom. I told him it won't be long now. In a fit of unseemly jubilation, I skipped along the sidewalk.

#

.v.

Richie managed to journal in great detail about the trip to San Antonio:

Dear Me,

...I got to San Antonio early in the evening and took a cab to the strange address I'd never seen. It was a small white house sitting out all by itself in an open field with a few similar houses scattered far and wide across a treeless expanse in a grid of wire fences. Walking up the dirt drive with my suitcase, I got over my horror at the alien place and steeled myself for whatever was to come. It would only take a couple days.

Mother came out of the screen door very excited to see me, and we hugged for some long moments. She seemed almost as small as Barbara in my arms. I could feel her little sobs against my chest. When we drew apart, she took my face between her hands, and her eyes were dry, light blue like mine, with an expression that was unreadable. I assumed it was still the shock. What shocked me was that she looked so much older than I remembered. She was in her mid-forties—and now Daddy was dead at fifty!

She took me inside to a living room full of several people in fancy western clothes whom she introduced as their square-dance club friends who had come by to keep her company before going out to their regular dance night. Taken aback by the strangely dressed people, I couldn't hope to remember any of their names.

Mother sat me down beside her on the sofa and holding my hand, proceeded to tell me all the details of Daddy's demise, struck down while pruning the bushes beside the house and from there on out. The dancers had brought many pots and bowls of food, but I declined for the moment, my appetite forgotten.

Scarcely had Mother finished the story when my sister Judy arrived, having taken a bus down from her college in Kansas, a freshman aiming for veterinary school. She was crying before she got in the door. I hugged her and was surprised at how big she is, almost my size, as well as at how beautiful she looks as a dark-haired young woman instead of a gawky adolescent. Mother sat her down on the sofa and told the tale all over again, almost verbatim. Judy also wasn't ready to eat anything.

Throughout, the group of dancers had sat around the living room and in the dining room conversing quietly or listening again with deep sympathy to the sad history. After this telling, one of the ladies in frilly skirts and petticoats told Mother they had to be going now to get to the hall in time for the dance.

I saw Mother's look of resignation and suggested she go along with them. Everyone was shocked, but Mother's eyes lit up. I told her, "Go on. You need to get on with your life." When Judy seconded the idea, Mother was up and off to change into her finery. When she came back in her fancy blouse and skirts and twirled around to show off her sewing handiwork, I was impressed by how lovely she actually is.

When they were all out the door, Judy hugged me again and said, "Thanks, big brother." Then we dived into the vast amounts of food in the kitchen and over dinner caught up on each other's affairs. She was very pleased about soon becoming an aunt to my baby. I told her all about Barbara and the rest of my new family. When full, we called it a day, and she took the guest room.

I took the couch in the living room and woke up on Mother's return. I hugged her and asked if she had fun. She smiled brightly and said, "Yes, lots. It's good to dance." After we kissed goodnight, I lay back down and understood where my compulsion to dance comes from. It's genetic. And she was right. Inspired, I got up again and silently danced in the dark to the memory of Albinoni's adagio.

...Over our breakfast, Mother announced to Judy and me, "I'm sorry, but I've got some more bad news." The news was that Daddy wanted Judy to have his arsenal of guns and me to have his collection of fishing stuff. However, the day before yesterday when Mother was away with funeral arrangements, someone broke into the house and stole them all. She figured probably one of Daddy's fishing buddies.

Judy said she didn't care about the guns anyway. I just regretted Grandpa's old shotgun with the scrollwork that I used when Daddy took me deer-hunting. Nor did I care about the rods, but there was still a box of lures and flies he'd tied. I would only miss the blue fly-rod from that one time he took me fishing on the Cossatot.

Mother said I should look around his stuff in the garage for what I might want. The various tools and his taxidermy pieces were of no interest of course. As a filial token, I wound up taking the Sears drill in its red box that I gave him for Christmas when I was ten. It fit well into my luggage.

*[Maybe 20 years ago, I had some workmen doing something for me, and someone stole the drill too. I still have the metal box. The purloined legacy.]*

...At the funeral home Daddy's coffin was festooned with flowers (for which he'd never had any affinity), and a few folks hovered reverently around, possibly some of yesterday's square-dancers for all I knew. In our sad procession past the corpse, I was relieved to think that this was no longer my father. Its face was slightly pale, composed in a strange slight smile apparently meant to convey peace, an expression I'd never seen on it before, surreal in its benevolence.

In long moments looking into the coffin, Judy wept and sobbed, but neither Mother nor I did. I couldn't guess what kind of grief Mother felt looking dry-eyed down at the body of her husband, but I felt only pity. I felt horribly sad for him, that he'd been so unhappy in life, so furious at it for not being what he wanted. Whatever that was. He had his family, his hunting and fishing, but something was still missing, and it made him an angry, cruel man. From my biased perspective, I suspected that he was gay and simply couldn't deal with it. Maybe, I thought, here was another example of genetics, and I should learn this object lesson.

All afternoon was spent sitting around the viewing room accepting consolations from folks come to pay their respects. I slipped into a half-sentient state and almost wore out my grieving, grateful smile. Far too often I stepped outside for some sunshine. Sheer patience finally got us back to Mother's house for another smorgasbord of donated food and visiting well-wishers. I politely but painfully listened to their reminiscences of Daddy that sounded like tales of a stranger. They certainly didn't want to hear my reminiscences.

...The funeral was at one o'clock—in a Catholic church. I'd not been in one for a good five years, ever since walking out of that Gothic cathedral at Loyola a free heathen spirit, and sitting in this one gave me the willies. The box with Daddy's mortal remains was up by the altar rail, and we sat on the front pew for the solemn pomp and ceremony. Judy wept throughout, and Mother did too at times, only slowly and sedately.

Objectively as possible, I watched the priest's magical motions and incantations and suddenly recalled that hysterical money-in-the-coffin sequence in "Huckleberry Finn" where the King of France talks about "funeral orgies." Covering my face, I hoped my stifled chuckles looked like genuine sobs. After all, for public image it really behooved a grieving son to break down with emotion at some point.

Standing graveside in the cemetery between my mother and sister, I watched the box go down into the ground and thought goodbye. But I took that thought no further.

Again we spent the evening in the company of Mother's friends, many the same couples as before. Clearly they wanted to keep us from spending any time alone grieving. The family had only moved to San Antonio a bit over a year ago and their having so many friends already was surprising. I did wonder at first who of these guys might have been Daddy's fishing or hunting buddies but also took that thought no further. Probably the friends' method of constant company was helpful for Mother and Judy's bereavement. I found it a more useful way to pass the hours than if I'd just been left alone twiddling my thumbs.

Their constant presence also kept Mother, Judy, and me from talking to each other personally. We never spoke about this change in our lives and what we'll do now. Though there was no opportunity, I'm sorry to say that I, now the sole male member of the family, didn't ask what the females were facing or planning. I was just trying to get through this and back to my own family. In less than two weeks...

...This morning, Mother and Judy took me to the airport. Alone in the car, we still didn't speak of the future. On the plane I wanted to sleep to make the time literally fly, but all I could think about was the baby soon to burst into this world. Then I finally fell asleep and slept right past Rainier.

#

.vi.

How's that for an uninterrupted story? Alright, there was one digression. You don't know about the several others, like arranging for tuxedos for Jammes and me, and a whole day off designing day-signs. George had heard from Mack about interpretations that go along with the day-names and asked about his. So I pulled out my old calendar book and pieced together a 'reading' for 1 Dog, while feeling like some crackpot astrologer. But it's what the Aztecs believed. I warned George to keep an open mind:

The day 1 Dog is important because it begins a 13-day 'week,' a very lucky or propitious week, which is ruled by Xipe Totec, the Flayed God, who's the god of spring and renewal, lord of the sunset, and the spirit of liberation. The number one, also lucky, naturally signifies beginnings, and is ruled by Xiuhtecuhtli, Lord of the Turquoise, who is the god of fire, lord of time, and the center of all things, the spindle of the universe. The day Dog is neutral for luck or fate and is ruled by Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the Land of the Dead, god of all you'd imagine for such a title. Also, the Dog accompanies the dead on their journey to Mictlan.

George was fascinated by the dramatic meanings of his day-name, concepts he said he'd have to think on, like a Tarot reading. I asked what time he was born—11:30 in the morning—and advised that then he's 1 Dog Day, probably from the Aztecs' fourth hour, which is also ruled by some deity or other. "If you'd been born at night," I told him, "you'd be 1 Dog Night. The Aztec calendar actually has a 3 Dog Night."

Dazzled by the strangeness, he said excitedly, "You know, Rich, there's got to be something big you can do with all this."



"I'm sure there's something big you could do with it, darlin'," I laughed. "Feel free."

"Let me talk to Mario. He always knows what to do."

I told him about the ideas that Carol and Janet have and left it at that.

#

Meanwhile, there are some developments to report on the romantic front. Where to start? Okay, Kevin. Since the conquest of Liam, he's been following my advice not to demand anything and just make sure he's close at hand should an urge arise. We're told that there have been two more urges. I gather the second arose rather urgently at the Titsling last Saturday night and was dealt with in the back seat of Liam's car. Who knows where that pair's headed, but they seem to be enjoying the ride.

In his now open relationship, Johnny has yet to hook up with any unknown stranger. Jason and he amended their agreement, adding a rule against online contacts, which I wholeheartedly support. In my old-fashioned opinion extra-marital involvements should come from real human contacts in real situations with honest mutual attraction. Not from product marketing to targeted audiences or comparison shopping for a favorite brand. The one-time shot rule may cause some frustration, but I think it's something most adults can and have lived with. One-night stands can be spectacularly memorable.

So Johnny's sexploration has yet to begin. I told him that to get anywhere with anyone he's simply got to go out by himself. He can't go everywhere all the time with Jason, no matter how much they want to be together. They'll have to build alone time into their relationship if they really want extra-curricular activities. They're planning to go out separately next Saturday night and meet for brunch Sunday morning to report on their piratical forays.

The female contingent is of course already comfortable in their relationships. Deirdre and Lynn are happily wound up in their wedding arrangements, and Carol and Janet are so comfortable that they're thinking about marrying too. This flurry of wedding bells is a bit unnerving after my half-century when this was inconceivable. Let's do the time warp again.

Apparently, if they do marry, Janet wants to look into adopting a baby to round out the family. I asked which gender she prefers, and she said, "A boy, of course. Jet needs a little brother more than a little sister." Whatever her reasons for that opinion, I agreed that two moms are surely enough female energy for the kid. In the same vein, George and Mario are still investigating adoption and are inclined to a girl or two. My best wishes to both couples.

Which brings me to the last pair in our group, me and my splendid new boyfriend. Mack and I seem to have achieved a good balance of together and alone time. His office work and graphic novel project have made a comfortable schedule for both of us. With my life-long love of solitude, it works for me. Whenever we can be together, at gym, meals, goofing off, or in bed, it's a special time that this old man can hardly believe is happening.

In his project my young man has been sketching wildly, forging on into the second stanza of the story, which involves even more sex, including bestiality. Mack finds it inspirational for our intimate moments. The other day he decided that instead of a graphic novel, he wants to make it a series of animated videos to post on YouTube. I frankly think that's a genius idea. He'll need voices for the characters and thinks George would do a great hero. But voice-casting is still a ways down the road. I'm so pleased that he's running with this ball.

#

The wedding will be at the nature center out in the foothills of the eastern mountains, on the idyllic lawn under great trees surrounding a beautiful old mansion. Our wedding party walked through the ceremony with the officiant, a wispy woman of shamanistic inclination who

advised us how to deploy various items of ritual paraphernalia. More than once Jammes gave me dubious looks, but this isn't his first encounter with pagan folderol. Right now he thinks he's an atheist, but I expect he'll turn pagan sooner or later. Myself, I'm still a generic heathen.

With the addition of significant others and Jet's parents, we lacked only Kevin (and Liam) for the gang to all be there at the rehearsal dinner, for which we took over nearly half of a favorite Chinese restaurant. It has a super buffet, so Jammes was in hog heaven. He sat next to Mack, and they talked briskly about computer-related subjects way beyond me, except for the stuff about Mack's graphic programs and capabilities.

I talked with George and Mario about their ideas for the Aztec birth day-signs. Mario, the promoter, was quite into it, envisioning a whole suite of personalized items labelled with the respective 'horoscope' readings.

Knowing my old calendar book, Janet suggested, "You should put those gods and goddesses on things too. They'd make hot T-shirts, linens, cards... placemats... I'm even thinking about getting a tattoo of that Obsidian Butterfly goddess on my back."

"That's what I'm saying," Mario said. "The possibilities are monumental."

Their enthusiasm was beautiful. "Don't forget the calendars," I said to toss another log on the fire. "Whatever you guys want to do with this Aztec stuff, you can consider all my designs yours and do whatever you want with them."

"Are you serious?" George asked, amazed.

"Sure am, darlin'. I'm too old to work that hard anymore."

Mario's mind was working. "Maybe we can form a company and make the stuff."

Satisfied that I'd sparked their interest, I turned away from the ad hoc subcommittee on strategy to the young men on my left. Jammes was telling Mack about his hopes for next year's seventh grade. He's got to move up to a middle school, and we've been looking at the charter and private school options. He's signed up for the charter lotteries, and we should know soon what we're facing.

As soon as we'd had lychee nuts and almond cookies for dessert, I took Jammes home to do homework. On the way he said he likes Mack a lot. He's impressed that Mack even knows some of his favorite video games. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Boys will be boys.

#

My delivery made, I went over to Mack's place. He spent a good while showing me his animation program and all the cool stuff he can do with it. I was overawed. For another good while we discussed this second stanza of the story and optimal perspectives on the sexual and action scenes. Agreeing that the climactic fight scene should morph into monumental fornication, we rehearsed a naughty scenario and wound up in a naked heap on the floor.

Cuddled up on the rug, we blissfully breathed and squeezed for some moments, and then Mack lifted his hand and contemplated his tattoo. "I love it," he sighed.

"It is very pretty alright."

"How come you never said anything about it before? I see you looking at it all the time."

"Well, to be frank, darlin', it kind of freaks me out."

"It does? Why's that?"

"Seeing my art on you—permanent. Like a petroglyph or a heart carved on a tree."

"That's what's so great, Rich old man. I get to wear your art—my day-name—forever!"

"I feel like a vandal for defacing your perfect body," I confessed and stroked his smooth abdomen and adjacent furry areas.

Mack squirmed happily. "You didn't deface me. Now I'm adorned."

“And adored,” I involuntarily added, nuzzling into his throat and wanting to bite.

“Know what, Rich? I think you should get your day-name tattoo too.”

“I’ll think about it,” I lied while looking at the back of my left hand. “Wouldn’t it get lost in all my wrinkles?”

“Now you’re being silly.” He arose from the floor in one graceful flowing motion. “I need to get a drink of water.”

“Me too.” Awkwardly I managed to sit up. “Think you could help me up, darlin’?”

###

## CHAPTER 9. POSTPARTUM

### .i.

The wedding was in the late-afternoon to avoid the worst heat of the day and came off perfectly, all greenery and flowers. The lovely bride Lynn wore a long green gown and a daisy diadem with gold lace and carried a fragrant bouquet of orange blossoms. George’s short-skirted version flattered his muscular chest and thighs. Deirdre, Jason, Jammes, little Jet, and I were in flower-hued tuxedos, respectively gold, crimson, pink, lavender, and periwinkle. Jammes liked the thought of being a pink penguin, albeit a tall, thin one. Our shaman wore diaphanous white with glittering rainbow sequins and a headdress of bright feathers.

Under an arch of dark green vines with red-orange trumpet flowers, the tableau must’ve been surreally colorful, like early Technicolor. The wedding photographer, a handsome young man not immune to an appreciative cruise by an elderly gentleman, was obviously thrilled by the photogenics of the setting and celebrants. For atmosphere, there was an ethereal harpist also in a green frock, and the guests all held a white lily, a long frond of fern, and a rattle that looked suspiciously like a maraca.

The ceremony was blessedly simple and pragmatically sweet. For the wedding march there was a recording of a lovely song I’ve never heard before, naturally about loving and staying true. I paid most attention to my solemn pace escorting the bride down the walkway. The rainbow lady naturally spoke on the meaning and specialness of marriage, and then they did the rituals with rings, whereupon at the shaman’s signal everyone waved their ferns and shook their rattles. I appreciated the primordial cultural display, great community involvement.

I was also proud of pink Jammes for the reverent way he presented the ring on its cushion to gold Deirdre. To be on more of a level with lavender Jet, who was presenting at the same time to green Lynn, he went down on one knee in a knightly gesture. Fortunately it’s okay to weep at weddings because an old man in a blue tuxedo was obviously overcome with emotion.

#

The newlyweds paraded up the walkway to the accompaniment of rattles, leading us in a noisy procession across the lawn to the white-tented pavilion and wedding feast. Deirdre’s mother’s side of the family is Greek, and her mother and aunts cooked and served an awesome array of Hellenic dishes for what she called her “slightly obese Greek wedding.” The ouzo and retsina flowed freely. It was an unexpected treat for Aimée and Rich, who always go to the annual Greek Festival. When one of the aunts heard Jammes call me “Papou,” she mistakenly figured I’m Greek and gave me an extra heap of moussaka, which was out of this world.

Now I’m going to tell you mostly about some significant conversations that took place over this wedding weekend. Relying on my good memory from recording many meetings, I’ll try for something close to Johnny’s earlier recording. Sorry if I can’t reproduce all the nuances. The gist is the point. The first took place at the wedding dinner.

Mack and I sat at a table with my family, Carol, Janet, and Jet for a lively meal. Right off Aimée announced that Jammes was chosen in the lottery for the international baccalaureate charter school they'd hoped for, we all congratulated him. Then the parents compared notes on boy-children and got to know each other. The subjects of the notes meanwhile reveled in the scrumptious food and goofed around like the boys they are.

In a private moment, Mack leaned close and whispered, "I saw you making eyes at that photographer guy, Rich old man."

"Can I help it if you got my juices flowing, darlin'?"

"Thank goodness." In a flood of affectionate juices, I watched him attack a dolma. He swallowed and asked, "Why you looking at me like that?"

"Just wondering what on earth's wrong with you." Mack stared in dismay. "I mean, why in the world are you interested in an old geezer like me?"

"Can I help it if you ring my bell?" His smile rang mine.

Before we'd finished our baklava, the band started playing, a Greek one with bouzoukis that stirred up sentimental Gin Mill memories. Jammes and Jet ran off to play with some other kids who were dancing about. I could've happily joined them but didn't. We adults had more retsina and baklava, chatting about this and that, and then the next interesting conversation happened. Janet asked Aimée, "Do you think your son will be straight or gay?"

I'd never raised that question with them but naturally was curious. Aimée didn't bat an eye in her reply. "I don't even want to guess."

"She asked me that too," Carol said with a pat on her hand. "How would we know?"

Mack laughed. "Mothers always know. Mine knew long before I did."

Rich sagely remarked, "Well, at least Jammes knows the options. He can work it out."

Pleased with my son-in-law's sagacity, I said, "That's right. I certainly wish I'd known what the options were when I was his age."

"Good thing you didn't," Carol said. "Not there and then. Dick could've wound up a dead duck, like poor Matthew Shepard on that fence."

"You're probably right, Carol. It is what it was."

"Who's Dick?" Aimée wondered.

"That's what they called me as a teenager," I explained. "I grew out of it."

Mack returned to his topic. "Don't you think your mother knew?"

"She didn't have a clue—not until I told her many years later."

Janet asked, "What did she say?"

"All she said was, 'Oh.' And we never said anything more about it."

Rich remarked, "Well, I sure hope Jammes will tell us when he decides."

"And whichever he decides," Carol said, "I think all you should say is, 'Oh.'"

That was when the band struck up the theme from Zorba, and I had no choice but get out there and dance. The party went on till after dark and fairly well wore me out.

#

Mack drove me home, where we shared an athletic evening delight by candlelight, this time on my bed, and lay about afterwards in luxurious languor. The third conversation came about because I caught him looking at me seriously and asked, "What's on your mind?"

He shrugged. "Just you."

"You looked like you were about to say something."

"What's there to say? Except maybe I love you."

"Same to you, darlin'. Sure you don't want to talk about something?"

“Like what?”  
“Oh, maybe us—our relationship?”  
“We have a relationship?” Mack asked coyly. “What would you call it?”  
He had me up against the wall. “Well, uh... Intimate friends?”  
“That just sounds like a nice way to say ‘fuck buddies.’”  
“Oh, no! I didn’t mean it’s only sex. Mack, darlin’, I really am in love with you.”  
“Same here, Rich. So what does that make us?”  
“Boyfriends?” He shook his head. I was cornered. “Lovers?”  
“Lucky guess,” he laughed. “So now what?”  
I knew what but asked anyway, “What do you mean?”  
“Oh, that’s right. We don’t want to rush things, do we?”  
“You know, there really is something seriously wrong with you, darlin’.”  
“No refunds or returns. I’m yours.” He displayed his branded hand.

#

Having left you hanging with Richie’s flight back to Seattle, Saturday afternoon I’d planned to get on with the story, but instead Mack and I went hiking in the mountains. In the evening we ventured out of our love-nest and went as usual to the Titsling for some socializing.

Per their agreement, Jason and Johnny were “working” opposite sides of the nightclub, pirates cruising for booty. Kevin was lounging on a barstool looking quite available, and we joined him for a beer and another curious conversation. Though alone, he was in high spirits. “Liam’s off on a date with some chick named Peggy,” he said dismissively.

“And you’re okay with that?” Mack asked.  
“Sure,” Kevin shrugged and then laughed. “Bisexuals need to keep in practice.”  
“So Liam’s a bisexual now?” I asked, impressed by our friend’s rapid progress.  
“He says I’m his best buddy, but he wants women too. Don’t ask me why.”  
“Well, dude, if that works for you...”  
“Not to worry. He’ll get his macho on and then come home to daddy.”  
“You sound awfully sure of yourself, darlin’.”  
“We talked it through and agreed to be fuck buddies.”  
Casting me a meaningful look, Mack said, “Oh, like intimate friends?”  
“That’s right. And I’m going to make another one tonight.”  
Raising my beer in salute, I said, “Spoken like a true pirate.”

Mack and I proceeded jubilantly to dance around for several good numbers courtesy of the Kissing DJ Lars. Meanwhile, Johnny disappeared, and Jason started dancing affectionately with a striking punk boy who seemed equally intent on him. My energies held up longer than I expected, having hiked all afternoon and missed my disco nap. But it was still early when we lovebirds left the young pirates to their adventures.

#

*.ii.*

Now it’s Monday morning after a blissful Sunday with my new lover. We spent the afternoon in my canyon basking on boulders and splashing in the stream and both caught a tad too many rays. Today we’re back to the grind with Mack at work and me at the computer. So it’s time get back to Richie’s tale of imminent fatherhood. This time, come hell or high water, I’ll try and push through the chapter without commercial break or even station identification.

Richie got back from San Antonio by mid-afternoon and found little Barbara bigger than ever. She was very excited and relieved to see him and then asked if he was okay. I still clearly remember the cocky way he replied, "Never better." He was in great spirits realizing that all this would soon pass. Heeding the sad lesson of his father, Richie was excited by the prospect of being a free faerie again, a gay divorcé. Soon he'd simply be a gay man, who's oddly also a father. Stranger things have been known to happen.

The next several days raced by with Barbara's belly getting more and more enormous, and she lay on the sofa or bed to keep the weight off her feet. They didn't talk about the rapidly approaching due date, but with a cheer, Richie's inner faerie ticked each day off his calendar.

Come the last day of February, his excitement was almost unmanageable.

Dear Me,

...After my Russian class, I ran in spurts back to the house. Barbara hadn't felt any contractions yet. After lunch, and Morphology class, I took my time returning, suddenly struck with fear of this future soon to crash upon me. I stopped walking and leaning against a dark evergreen's trunk, tried to calm my pounding heart. The tree seemed to help.

It also helped to repeat a quote from a new Sci-Fi novel that Gene loaned me the other day called "Dune:" "Fear is the mind-killer." That sounds like something my beloved Desai would say. Once he read my palm and said that for some period I'll live a double life and have two children. Now the double life doesn't seem so far-fetched, but no way two kids.

Richie's new-found courage held out for the next couple days while Barbara lay about, as she said, feeling like a beached whale. They wondered aloud if the baby was ever going to decide to be born. On Thursday afternoon contractions started, and after some hours of labor, just before midnight on March 3, 1966, she gave birth to a girl.

#

Before returning to Richie's journal, you should know that what follows is exactly what he wrote on the momentous occasion. Whether a truly psychotic episode or merely his attempt at a Kafkaesque literary device, he describes what he felt like, and it's what I vividly recall.

Dear Me,

...We waited for hours, and shortly after midnight, the doctor came out and told us it's a girl. He said Barbara was doing great and we could see her tomorrow morning. Instead, they took Gene, Martha, and me up to the window in the nursery where a nurse showed us the tiny black-haired creature that's my daughter. The others made enough appreciative noises for the three of us, because no word or sound could express the instinctive, primordial connection I felt with this new being. The family graciously escorted the stunned new father back to the old house on the knoll. With more congratulations, they left him alone to go to pieces on the living room floor.

Now I've suffered some major emotional collapses in the past, fits of uncontrollable weeping for various romantic woes, but nothing even remotely this monumental. Writhing on the carpet, I wailed and moaned over this profound shift, this sea-change in my very self. I'm no longer an innocent boy, but an initiated man, a progenitor. There's a new generation of me.

I felt the new identity burst out of my body, burst out of my old self, like shedding my old skin. In the sobbing anguish of new fatherhood, I begged my lost lovers to save me, but no one came. Finally, after much snorting and sniffing, I looked up from the rug, and my heart stopped.

There beside me sat a beamish boy, nude, cross-legged, smiling sweetly. He said, "Dear me! Aren't we being a bit melodramatic?"

This was insane. I hid my face on the rug. A crazy dream. That guy sitting there was simply a hallucination of me from that last summer in New Orleans. His long hair, blond from sun and lemon-

juice and his sun-tanned nakedness—back then when I'd felt sexier than God. For a long moment there was silence, and hoping I was sane again, I dared to look up.

Stretched out on the carpet beside me, he said, "What's all this bawling about anyway?"

Feeling like in a dream, I reached out to touch him—nothing there. I knew that. I shook my crazy head to clear it, but he was still there. Okay, I thought rationally, so it's a gorgeous hallucination. Since I clearly must be anyway, I played crazy and asked, "Where did you come from?"

"Why, I do believe a stork just dropped me off." He laughed liltingly. My head started swimming, and the room seemed to spin. Suddenly he leapt up, and stood over me, his cock perky, and said. "Come on, Richie, time's a-wasting. We got stuff to do, places to go."

Hiding my eyes again in my sleeve, I begged, "Please go away now." I peeked out again, and he was still standing there with a long-suffering look.

While I clambered up from the floor feeling dizzy and utterly disoriented, he said, "Don't be rude, darlin'. It's time to start packing. You promised soon as the kid's born..."

"No, we're not going yet." Remembering my new baby daughter, I knew that much at least. "In a few more months—when they're both doing okay. At the end of the term?"

"Well, if that's how it's going to be..." the phantom sighed again and sulked. I collapsed on the bed, exhausted, and he lay down beside me, untouchably unreal but oddly comforting.

#

Dear Me

Waking up yesterday morning alone in bed was certainly odd, the first time in many months. Then I recalled the hallucination of last night, that phantom faerie, and laughed into my pillow at the schizoid episode. Suddenly I remembered that I have a daughter now and sat bolt upright.

Energized, I leapt out of bed, ran past cereal, toothbrush, and closet and raced out the door into a bright, blessedly dry morning. On the short walk to the hospital, I stopped at a florist shop for a deep red rose for Barbara, the new mother. A very butch, well-built guy put the flower into a slender milk-glass vase for me.

*[I will crassly interrupt the narrative with a sentimental note. Now nearly fifty years later, I still have that single red rose safe on tissue in a baby-food jar. It's brownish gold and a perfect blossom.]*

Leaving the shop, I thought how the guy sure looked like a cowboy. At that, the phantom appeared at my elbow, nude as before and remarked, "I bet he's hung like a horse, darlin'."

To collect my wits, I stopped walking and shut my eyes. "Go put some clothes on, you... you..."

"Forget that Tinker Bo shit and call me Ricky." When I opened my eyes, he was gone.

Before going into Barbara's hospital room, I paused in the hallway, struck by the philosophical significance of this moment. Here I was, the new father about to see the new mother for the first time after... This was the first moment of a new chapter in our lives. Oddly, I felt as unreal as Ricky, like a character in a dramatic novel or film.

Barbara was lying in bed holding the baby and beaming with motherly triumph. I truly felt a fatherly pride, another instinctive emotion, as I made over the sleeping infant with the fat ruddy face and swatch of fine dark hair. She let me hold it, and strolling around the room with the tiny creature in my arms was a mind-boggling experience. Weighing almost nothing, it was a whole new human being. In total awe of this creation, I couldn't say a word.

Barbara said, "What will we name her, Richie?" I stared blankly, amazed not by the question but by the pronoun. Suddenly the "it" in my arms was a "she," my daughter. In my silence, Barbara explained, "We need a name for the birth certificate, sweetie." Not knowing what the baby would be, we had never really discussed a name for it—her.

My first impulse was Jacqueline, a lovely name I've always appreciated. *[Forgive another aside, but that was the name of an aunt, and of course it might have been suggested by Jacqueline Kennedy. But Richie appreciated it mostly as the name an enormous lesbian barmaid who was Tricky Rick's guardian angel in the Gin Mill.]* It goes well with our surname, a good poetic rhythm—dactylic. Barbara happily

agreed. Fortunately, Martha and Gene arrived shortly and took over holding and admiring baby Jacqueline so I could run off to teach my Russian class.

#

...All day Ricky hung around, sometimes as that sexy hallucination, at others invisible but making sly comments in my head. In my afternoon Syntax class, he made a frivolous remark about the gray professor and the desiccated subject matter and left me in peace. His absence was a chance for me to concentrate on my treasured study, albeit of a desiccated subject.

On my way home, he showed up again, radiating enthusiastic energy and wanting to go swimming. Of course that was impossible because I had to go to the hospital and get Barbara—and Jacqueline. Ricky sulked and complained that I'm no fun at all. Then to my relief, he disappeared.

Late in the afternoon Gene brought us back home, and I helped Barbara up the front steps while Aunt Martha carried the baby. She and Gene stayed to fuss over little Jacqueline, and she made dinner for us all. The fuss was actually by all four of us in tag-teams, oohing and aahing over the baby.

What must a new-born infant with no concept of the world, much less of other beings or such things as faces, think of our smiling, leering grimaces, close-up visions of inexplicable things making mysterious sounds? Even if we actually were disturbing, confusing apparitions for Jacqueline, her pudgy face registered no reaction. I hoped maybe she still couldn't really see anything. If she could hear yet, I hope our noises were comforting and lulling.

Over our spaghetti-and-meatballs, Gene asked what her nickname will be. Averse to the usual diminutives, to be unique and/or perverse, I suggested Jake, and looked to Barbara, who was holding her. Still beaming in the bliss of new motherhood, she probably wasn't thinking straight when she said, "That's a cute nickname, Richie." All the naming of folks today gave me an odd sense of power, like a patriarchal glow.

Just in time for apple pie and ice cream, Betsy and the Twooth arrived like two wise-guys to pay homage to the newborn. Dessert was delayed while they made more faces at baby Jake and cooed at her. Waiting for it, the Twooth and I left the adoration scene and went out onto the front porch. When we sat on the bench, he asked, "How's it feel to be a daddy now, Richie?"

"Well..." I hesitated, considering. "Maybe... existentially distressed?" The Twooth just chuckled, and I improvised, "I'm feeling swept along by some force, like in a river, Barbara and me. This whole thing—I mean baby Jake... All I can do is go with it wherever... Actually, Richard, I feel like I'm losing my marbles."

The Twooth patted my arm and said, "I'm sure it's a shock, but you'll be okay. I know you will." I appreciated his confidence but didn't share it. "I have hallucinations."

"Sounds like fun," Twooth laughed. When I didn't, he got serious. "Be strong. It'll be fine."

Suddenly Ricky appeared beside me, nude again, and said, "He's right. It's gonna be okay." I nudged the Twooth and pointed at my former self. "There's one." Of course, he saw nothing. The Twooth hesitantly, cautiously asked, "What do you see, Richie?"

"Oh, nothing," I lied. "Just joking." I stood up and said, "Come on. Let's go get some pie."

Ricky giggled and said, "I guess I better go look for our marbles."

"Shoo," I said, pretending to brush a bug off my sleeve. He obligingly disappeared.

#

### *.iii.*

From that first evening with their new baby, Barbara and Richie might as well have been hypnotized. Jake instantly became the focus of their entire world. In a trance, they held and coddled her, watched her sleeping in the crib, leapt in concern to any sound she made, got excited by any movement of her unbelievably small hands and feet, tried to entertain her with bright colored things, and generally acted like fools.



After a consuming weekend of baby madness, Richie returned to classes, wandering around in a total daze. Evidently parenthood causes acute obsessive behavior. For a couple days, he even forgot to work on the thesis but then got a grip and buckled down again.

Immediately the parental routines got fixed, of course. There were the bottle rituals of heating and testing on wrists and then the riveting spectacle of Jake actually drinking from it, her tiny mouth indescribable. The rites of sleep-time were just as detailed and enthralling as they'd sit by her crib watching over. There was no resisting the protective compulsion. The other ceremonies of baby-care were much less enthralling. Barbara did the first couple changes but insisted that he enjoy the privilege as well. Diapers were an exercise in scientific detachment.

Dear Me,

...Barbara and I are fortunate, we've heard, because Jake has been sleeping well for a few hours between feedings and for long parts of the night, so we've been able to sleep reasonably well ourselves. But late last night, her fourth, she woke us with little cries and seemed hungry already. While I walked with her, shuffling around the dark living room and rocking her in my arms, Barbara warmed a bottle and went back to bed. To feed Jake, I sat in my big chair, and her wide dark eyes gleamed in the dim glow of the streetlight.

Looking up, I was disgusted to find Ricky standing in the shaft of pale light. For three days I'd thought he was gone for good. He tossed his long hair and said, "I've been waiting and waiting to meet our little Jake-girl." He bent over and grinned down at her. "Hello, honey. As your faerie odd-father, little princess, I grant that at least three of your wishes will come true."

Unimpressed, I whispered, "Please go, Ricky. Jake needs to sleep too. I need to sleep."

"I don't think so," he chuckled. "She looks awake to me."

He was right. Her dark eyes moved around as though she could see him. I knew that was impossible, but accepting Ricky's presence, I said, "Where have you been?"

"Dancing in the Gin Mill," he answered off-handedly.

"That's no fair," I snapped and irrationally asked, "How can you go places without me?"

"Easily," he laughed and stepping back, began a slow Zorba-dance in the streetlight. The pseudo-reality of his dance made me feel faint, and when I came to, he was gone. Jake was sound asleep in my arms.

#

The following Friday was Barbara's birthday, her twenty-second. Martha arranged that they'd all go in together on one terribly expensive present for her, a cream-colored cashmere sweater that she'd long wished for. They gave it to her at a dinner for the whole bunch in the good old Red Robin.

Dear Me,

...I dreaded going there and seeing Lane again, but what could I do? We sat at the usual big table near the windows and took turns holding baby Jake. When a different waiter showed up, Gene asked him where Lane was. The guy told us he had a hot date and winked suggestively. I suppressed a jealous groan.

We did the gift first thing, and Barbara was so surprised and pleased that she burst into tears. There were toasts all around to the great mother, and the Twooth observed that if Jake had just hung on for another week, they could've had the same birthday.

My toast was simple: "Here's to my first wife!"

We all drank to Barbara as she looked at me, puzzled. "First wife?"

"Sure," I said seriously. "You'll always be my first wife."

"He's right," Gene remarked helpfully. "Strictly speaking..."

In the same spirit, I joked, "And you'll always be Number One Wife in my harem."

Betsy chimed in, "Now he's into polygamy."

"Perish the thought!" I exclaimed with honest horror. We all laughed, and Barbara was placated by the explanation and humor. The truth was that I feel enormous respect for her after all she's been through without complaint. And enormous gratitude for the way she now manages our lives to care for little Jake. I offered another toast: "And here's to the newest member of the tribe!" As we drank to her, Jake emitted a small obstreperous noise, and Barbara and Martha rushed her off to check out the diaper situation. So now I owe her one—it was supposed to be my turn.

#

Barbara and Richie shared most of the repetitive routines of parenthood evenly, switch-hitting on every task. It made him feel alive again, an utterly new feeling of being half of a close team with a mission, quite unlike his emotional coma during the pregnancy. In the next few days, Ricky popped up occasionally and mocked him for being such a straight daddy, but he pointedly ignored the annoying pixie.

Not so enchanting was the one task Barbara and Richie didn't share. Daily he'd go into the grungy basement with a hamper of soiled diapers. After rinsing them out in the dented utility sink, he'd wash them in an ancient hand-wringer machine that growled and wiggled like a copulating animal. With the still mostly rainy weather outside, he'd hang up the wet white flags up to dry on ropes between plumbing pipes.

The day after Barbara's birthday, Saturday, turned quite bright, the sky nearly blue, and so he used the clothesline in the back yard, a small fenced area of scattered bushes and greening grass. Jake went through several a day, and he'd missed yesterday's load. So there were a lot of diapers to hang up.

Dear Me,

...Before I'd pinned up the first diaper, Ricky showed up, briefly prancing around like a naked goat, and said, "Thank goodness you're finally out of that drab dungeon."

I simply said, "Go away. I'm busy. And for Chrissake put some clothes on!"

"Busy," Ricky giggled and was suddenly wearing my familiar clothes, tight green corduroys, madras shirt, and leather sandals. "I suppose a harem does keep one busy." I ignored him and kept on pinning up diapers. He danced around again and returned to confront me. "Listen, sourpuss. Losing our mind doesn't have to be boring. It should be fun. Here's a joke: What do you get when you cross a burro with an onion?"

This was beyond my endurance. "I don't give a damn! Get serious, will you?"

"Okay, darlin'. Let's get serious about plans for moving on." Flapping out another wet diaper, I froze. "It's only a couple months more. We'll need a place to live—and there's all the stuff to move."

"Not now," I whined and pinned up the diaper. "Leave me be, please, Ricky. I can't—"

"—Sure you can," he interrupted. "Listen, hot stuff, you need to get cracking."

"Later." I couldn't stand it. "Now just go away! Get!"

"A little ass that'll bring tears to your eyes," he said, guffawed, and disappeared.

Hanging up another white flag on the line, I couldn't help but laugh at his dirty joke.

#

Though Richie had given them no thought for a couple months, during the next week, like little Bo Peep's sheep, some of his cows came home. Four response letters arrived to his four applications for doctoral study next year. The two offers were from Yale and the University of Michigan. He'd figured on being a shoo-in for the latter because of Papa's position, but academically had long harbored dreams of ivy-smothered Yale. All that weekend, the choice between equally generous fellowships, one at a great university he'd already seen and one only dreamed of, was an agony.

Naturally, Barbara was thrilled about possibly going home to Ann Arbor and her folks. As well, both Martha and Gene had been accepted to Michigan, no doubt for similar reasons.

Richie was terribly leery about anything like last summer's contingent at Lake Tahoe. With no idea of what criteria to use, he chewed on the quandary like a dog on a bone.

Dear Me,

...This afternoon was partly sunny, and I interrupted my grocery store run with a short walk to Ravenna. On the walk Ricky showed up, properly dressed, with a tentative hi and silently ambled along beside me. When we got to the park, he rolled hooting down the hillside to my dancing green. When I walked down the slope to join him, he urged, "Brighten up, sunshine." Then he led me into a dance. We gamboled about for a while and then flopped on the grass. For some reason, Ricky seemed like a real buddy. When he smiled at me, I felt irrationally happy. Then I was again seized by my quandary.

Soon Ricky remarked, "You know what, Richie?" Of course I didn't. He stated with conviction, "We've got to decide for our self. Remember, we're leaving at the end of May. Where we go next year is entirely our own business."

His reminder shocked me. I hadn't actually thought of it in those terms and argued, "But I've got to think about what Barbara and Jake will do next year."

"Why? That's their business," Ricky said gently. "That's divorce, sugar. They don't call it splitting up for nothing." While I sulked, he continued, businesslike. "Of course I don't have to point out how illustrious Yale will be for our academic career, Richie. And just think about those secret Yale-boy societies and their kinky rituals. I bet we can score some major nookie."

"I'll think about it," I said and closed my eyes. If I left Barbara at the end of May, I could move somewhere temporarily till going to Yale—or they could go back to Michigan right away. That way I could stay in the house and in the summer teach and wrap up the thesis. But why not split up with Barbara at the end of the summer term? Then we can just go our separate ways.

When I expressed this thought, Ricky howled a long, drawn-out no. "We are not," he stressed, "not waiting three more months. What am I supposed to do with myself? I will hibernate no longer." I was adamant. "You've got to, Ricky. After all, you can't do anything without me."

"Says who? We're free spirits, darlin', liberated sprites. You can keep on playing your straight act, but myself, I'm going hunting for a nookie bird."

"That's just plain crazy. Listen, buster, you only exist in my mind."

"Says you. Besides, there's a bunch here in your head. Really scrumptious nookie birdies."

"Those are bats." I got up and left him lying there on the sunny grass. I had groceries to buy.

#

.iv.

Dear Me,

At the breakfast table this morning I sat with baby Jake in my arms, watching an array of vague expressions pass across her tiny face. Barbara brought me cereal and coffee and sat with her own breakfast across from me. I figured her smile was in appreciation of the paternal scene. "Richie, dear," she said tentatively, "when are you going to decide?"

I couldn't find the courage to commit yet and answered, "Soon."

"Well," she said, pleading, "We've got to answer in the next few days, honey. You have to make up your mind." She gave me a stern look, adding, "I want a decision by dinner this evening."

With that ultimatum, I went off to my Russian class in the same cowardly state. An hour's moping on the quadrangle, Polish class, and then I came home for lunch. Barbara was sweet and cheery over our sandwiches, as though there were nothing important hanging over our heads. I still didn't have the guts to say what I really want to do. It would mean talking about divorce—now!—not at the end of the summer, but right now. No way was I ready to do that.

Afterwards I sat with Jake while Martha took Barbara shopping. The time alone with her was an opportunity to play my music. I put on the Mozart clarinet concerto and sat in my chair holding her.

Fascinated, I watched the flow of expressions on her face in response to the splendid sounds, her very first experience of real music. How glorious that it was Mozart.

Well into the concerto, Ricky suddenly perched on the overstuffed arm of the chair and whispered, "Guess where I've been."

"I don't care. Just go away."

"You don't have to be so mean," he pouted and moved over onto the sofa.

I had nothing more to say to him, but he stayed right there, slouching almost lewdly and looking terribly bored. Shortly, when the Mozart put Jake to sleep, I got up and gently put her down in her little crib. Ricky was still there glowering. Before attacking thesis again, I went out onto the front porch to think, and he followed me, plopping down on the bench in the same provocative attitude.

"Will you please just go away?" I begged.

Ricky sat up straight and said, "Okay—since you said please. But remember, your old lady wants an answer by dinnertime."

At last alone, I sat on the bench and thought about Barbara and Jake after the divorce. We won't be married anymore, and I'll be single again. I can't really imagine them being out of my life entirely. How could they be, my Number One Wife and daughter? The thought of alimony and child support is sobering though. I'll definitely have to get a job to help pay it. And after the divorce I want to be able to see them, to share a different kind of relationship, just not be married. That can't happen if I'm at Yale, and they're in Ann Arbor.

Just then, Ricky flashed into being again. He grinned broadly. "Decide yet, darlin'?"

I bit the bullet. "Michigan. I'll take them to her folks and then go find a place for me."

"For us." Ricky glared at me. "Well, if that's your choice... I'm out of here, my dear."

"Don't be crazy," I said, thinking how crazy that sounds. "Ricky, you're a hallucination!"

"I prefer the term apparition. But that doesn't make me the crazy one," he laughed. "It's you who's gone bonkers, baby."

Calmly accepting that fact, I asked, "So where are you going?"

"Oh, maybe down Mexico way. I'm in the mood for brown boys. I'll let you know when I get back." With that he faded into thin air. Immediately a hole seemed to open up in my head, like from a tooth pulled. I went back inside and disconsolately tackled thesis work while Jake was still sleeping.

#

The parent-trance swept Richie up and away. Without the annoying apparition, he thought and felt only about Barbara and baby Jake. Except for classes and thesis, of course. Parenthood gave him an external focus, a purpose for living larger than his own needs, and daily his affection and care for Barbara and Jake grew.

After the long winter cooped up in the house, parenthood was also an excuse to go on walks again, weather occasionally permitting. They'd put Jake in the long-handled stroller, pick up Oná from Martha's, and amble all over the place, campus, shopping streets, and quiet neighborhoods. Of course, the variety meant nothing to baby Jake, who probably still couldn't see any distance. Sometimes they even made it all the way to lovely Ravenna.

Toward the end of March, as Richie was leaving his Russian class one morning, he ran into the prof from last quarter's Russian poetry class, a nice man named Willis, maybe about thirty. Willis said he'd heard that Richie was now a father, and he invited the new family for dinner with his own on Saturday next. After the weeks of baby obsession, Barbara was thrilled at the prospect of socializing.

Dear Me,

...Willis very kindly picked us up for the short ride to their house on Queen Anne Hill. He and his wife, whose name I forget, have two little daughters, two and four. Cherubs with squeaky, excited voices, they made noises over the baby in Barbara's arms. Jake's eyes moved in apparent consternation

at her first time seeing miniature faces, and she gave a crooked smile, her very first. Our dinner conversation naturally revolved around the Baby experience, their own as well as ours, so I contributed almost as much as anyone else. It was all so very pleasantly sociable, and before too long Willis drove us home again.

While giving Jake her bedtime bottle, Barbara remarked that Willis' family reminded her of her own, the professor father and two little girls. I reminded her that Willis thinks little girls are a lot easier to raise than little boys. Barbara ran on and on about the cute kids.

When Jake was done with her bottle, I paced around the living room with her on my shoulder, patting her tiny back for a burp and thinking about Willis and his family. Actually thinking, there, but for the grace of the god... Willis seems perfectly happily ensconced among all those females, but of course I have no intention of winding up that way myself. Come September... Whenever I think of the coming divorce, I mentally look away from that bridge. It will have to be crossed soon enough.

#

Dear Me,

So today is April 3, Jake's one-month day. While she had a celebratory bottle, our whole bunch sang happy month-day to her and laughed at how silly it felt. The month-iversary impressed me with how fast so much time has passed since that fateful day. Looking back, it seems scarcely a week, maybe two at most. Yet there have been so many days, countless hours spent with baby Jake.

The only thing that truly proves the passing of time is how much bigger she's grown already. Now she makes uncoordinated moves with her arms and legs and lifts those miniature fists to touch her bottle. The progression is fascinating. That first time she lifted her head off the bed, Barbara and I cheered, and now she regularly lifts her head from your shoulder to look off somewhere. Each day brings a glorious new achievement.

Well, Jake's growth isn't quite the only thing that marks time. The month's progress on my thesis may be a tad disappointing, but it's still a measure. My hope is to complete it in a month or so to get the degree at the end of May. I've gotten a leg up on the typing the first two chapters and am working on the poems themselves. The third chapter and long glossary have to wait for final words. The horror is having to type it in triplicate. How I loathe and despise carbon paper! It's a good thing Barbara and Jake apparently don't mind the insane clicking of the Smith Corona.

#

In the week before Easter, another prodigal cow that Richie had totally forgotten about came home wagging its tail behind it.

Dear Me,

...In the afternoon Barbara had her checkup with the doctor. At dinner, she said she was doing perfectly well, all recovered from giving birth. Whatever that meant, I congratulated her. She added what sounded like, "And Dr. Jenson gave me an I-you-see-dee."

Not well versed in medical jargon, I said, "That's nice. What for?"

"Richie, honey," she said carefully, "It's a contraceptive device." Her explanation of the "coil" gave me a queasy feeling, and then I realized the significance of the news. During the past months of pregnancy reprieve I'd managed to forget completely about sex and that someday my connubial duties would resume.

A few hours later, when Jake was peacefully asleep in her crib, Barbara significantly came to bed without her nightie. I tried the close naked embrace and kissing, but even with the confidence of her new coil thing, my body didn't respond. Even fantasizing a boy's body didn't help. Eventually I apologized that I'd "gotten out of the habit," and Barbara was sweetly understanding. The reprieve, albeit at the price of my supposed manly honor, let me fall comfortably asleep.

Rarely do I ever remember dreams, and then only particularly vivid ones. The one last night was vivid indeed. I was embracing a beautiful brown boy among flowers and greenery and feasting deliriously on his body. Then I seemed to draw back, away, above and saw that it was Ricky ravishing

the dusky angel in that jungle setting. He waved to me. The scene went still, turning into a photograph, or a post card, and on the lower right, splashed across leaves and blossoms appeared in my own flowing script, "Wish you were here."

I think Barbara may have been more pleased to be surprised in the early morning than she'd have been last night. Over breakfast she uncharacteristically asked if I liked our love-making, and I diplomatically lied. She glowed with satisfaction and asked gently, "So, honey, are you still a flit?" I emphatically answered with the eternal truth. Barbara smiled sadly and said, "Okay... I just worry about you, Richie, sweetie. You look so preoccupied." That's a pretty good word for it, I guess.

#

On Easter Sunday Richard the Twooth's parents had the traditional cookout at their place on the Sound, and Richie took his almost ritual walk on the familiar stony beach. This time all he could think about was his sanity or lack thereof, about his hallucinatory alter-ego and former self, Ricky. Whatever the figment was doing in Mexico, Richie half-way wished he'd come back soon. At least the cheeky phantom would be companionship of a sort.

In the next weeks, between renewed sexual chores and caring for Jake, Richie struggled to fit in thesis work. Their family and friends chipped in on a diaper service, liberating him from at least the daily laundry duty. But they wound up spending much of the time saved on longer walks with Jake in the stroller and Oná on her leash. The exercise was good for them both.



On Jake's Christening Day

birthday had been like, and this year, all he can do is wonder how he ever came to this. How could a single year hold so many changes? Then he'd shudder to think of all the changes coming in this next year. All he could do was hope that it would all be for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

In his journal Richie was fascinated by his adorable baby's growth and made many notes on her behavior. He learned that Jake cried in different tones for different things, even a peculiar little whine for when she really needed changing. The first time he heard her make a gurgle noise, he laughed out loud.

In spite of the obsession with Jake, he still managed to progress on the thesis. The work was even more pressured because his advisor decided he should reorganize the second chapter and add a fourth about Khlebnikov's neo-syntactical constructions. In a word, this meant vastly more typing. He wrote it as fast as he could and plowed through the glossary.

Barbara was very understanding and sweetly urged him on. After another blur of parental and scholarly days, it was suddenly the Monday before Richie's birthday. Besides being frantic about the thesis, the prospect of turning 24 made him sick to his stomach. (You'll notice that he's now the same age as my darlin' Mack—one-third of my own.)

Richie couldn't even remember what his last

Dear Me,

...To give me some quiet work time after dinner, Barbara took Jake up the block to visit with Auntie Martha, "Unka" Gene, and "Cousin" Oná. For a break before climbing back onto the Smith Corona, I put on Beethoven's Third, the Eroica, which I've always thought more erotic than heroic, and curled up in my chair vigorously conducting the building rhythms through the first heroic passage and into that peaceful interlude.

In a small flash, Ricky appeared on the sofa. "Bravo, maestro," he mocked. I was glad to see him but frowned in embarrassment. While the orchestra forged grandly on, he laughed, "Hey, tomorrow's our birthday! Just think, I'll be 21 again." His gloating pissed me off, but Ricky ignored my irritation and sighed, "You look perfectly wretched, darlin'. That haircut! What have you done to yourself?"

Truth was Barbara had asked me to keep my hair on the shorter side, though still full, like a half-hearted Beatle. "You think so? I don't like it either."

"Oh, well, it'll grow out. So did you get my postcard, Richie?" I nodded remembering that jungle dream. Ricky smirked. "That was Manuelito—as good as it gets, let me tell you."

I couldn't stand it anymore. "This is insane, plain crazy. You don't exist!"

"No matter... I know what's ailing you—acute visual vitamin deficiency anemia."

"So what do you prescribe, doctor?"

Ricky leapt up, did a pirouette, and shouted, "Flesh!" More calmly he explained, "You need to see some man flesh, sugar. When's the last time you saw a nice thigh, a pretty butt...?"

"I guess last May—Lane at the swimming pool."

"That's pitiful. Let's go to the pool tomorrow for a dose of Vitamin V in the old eyeballs."

Unconvinced, I said, "I'll think about it. But now I've got lots of typing to do. Excuse me..."

He smiled at me with more pity. "I'd really love to help, Richie, but I'm sure glad I can't."

#

.v.

Dear Me,

...When I woke up this morning, Barbara wished me a bright Happy Birthday and told me to stay right there for breakfast in bed. I lay beside baby Jake, enjoying her funny sounds and the new squirming motions with her legs. When Barbara brought in the tray with cheese omelet, bacon, toast, and coffee, she told me about the party for me this evening up at Martha's. It crossed my mind that I might even get a present, which reminded me to tell Barbara about wanting to go swimming this afternoon. She thought it was a wonderful idea, and Ricky, who'd been watching from over in the corner, gave me a thumb up and grinned wickedly.

After a light lunch, I set off for the pool. On the sunny walk across the campus, I mentioned to Ricky my nervousness about maybe seeing Lane. He shrugged off my worry remarking, "Life doesn't happen that way, baby. It's never that simple."

At the natatorium, he was disappointed that there were only a few women and some older men in the lanes. For my part, I was relieved. The locker room was quite empty while I changed into my Speedo, and seizing the first opportunity in a long time, I checked out my body in the long mirror. A bit flippantly Ricky said, "You're still pretty hot for an old man, darlin'." [*He should see me now.*]

My first time swim since last fall was thrilling, slipping and gliding through the water again. I was proud of my form, streaking along with scarcely a splash. Being so out of shape though, I had to stop after each length to catch my breath. Meanwhile, the old guy in the lane beside me swam slower than seemed humanly possible, his arms and legs moving in slow motion, so slow you'd think he'd sink like a rock. I'd pass him like a torpedo and then hang on the end of the pool gasping.

Still, after a few laps I got into the zone, and my body seemed to come alive. Ricky lounged on the pool's edge looking quite bored but beautiful. On one of my breath breaks, he said I swim like a

seal, which I took as a supreme compliment. When I asked him to come swim with me, he claimed that being a spirit of the air and not a water sprite, he'd dissolve.

Laughing at his insane absurdity, I pushed off from the edge and managed ten laps before admitting that was enough for this time. I climbed out of the pool, and Ricky remarked, "Richie, darlin', you really should suck in that tummy."

#

In the still-deserted locker room as I was drying off after the shower, I heard a shuffle behind me at the entrance and turned to see a good-looking young guy with his swim-bag. "Hunk alert!" Ricky whispered. I smiled a greeting to the boy, and he smiled back. He walked past us and took the locker just down from mine.

I dawdled around about getting dressed, trying to watch secretly as the fellow unpacked his bag. The thought that he was going to take his clothes off made my heart pound. To waste time, I used my towel again on my hair and peeked around it. The guy stripped out of his tee-shirt, baring a shapely chest with prominent dark nipples. Ricky moaned.

There was another sound at the entrance and a happy voice, "Hey, guy." The newcomer walked past behind me and over to the other with, "Sorry I'm late." To my dismay, it was Lane. Then he saw me. "Richie Rich," he exclaimed with his megawatt smile, "great to see you."

"Hi," I said stupidly and shook hands. He held mine firmly, affectionately, and turned to the other fellow. "Guy, this is my old friend Rich I told you about—who just had a little baby daughter."

Guy shook my hand with a "Nice to meet you." He appreciatively inspected my hairy nudity.

Lane noticed my confusion and said, "Your friend Gene told me a while ago—you know, at the Robin." He stroked his friend's shoulder and told me, "Guy and I met last month—in line at a movie."

Guy grinned mischievously and added, "We both had other dates—but went home together." They shared an intimate glance remembering their first moments together.

Lane started unbuttoning his shirt, a signal for me to look for my pants. "I'm glad to see you back swimming, Rich," he remarked. "How was it?" His shirt was off, and Guy's pants were dropping.

"Great," I choked and looked away trying to get my foot into my pant leg. "Ten laps with lapses," I joked honestly and didn't dare look up from my task.

"Not bad," Lane said. "Don't want to overdo it."

When I sat down on the bench for my shoes, they were both splendidly naked. Like Lane, Guy was sleek and smooth as a silkie. At the thought of them making love, Ricky silently wailed in anguish behind me. Guy bent over to pick up his swimsuit, his perfect ivory bottom not two feet away, exquisitely rounded, with a velvety fuzz on unspeakable curves. Ricky collapsed on the floor in a paroxysm of lust. To keep up a rational conversation, I said, hoping it didn't sound too pathetic, "Today's my birthday."

I was transfixed as the two naked boys started singing the old dirge, but the most glorious version anyone could ever want. Then, pulling up his swimsuit, Lane said, "You need a birthday present, Rich." Rummaging in his locker, he said, "We got this at a concert the other night." It was a blue pin-on button reading LIVE LOVE. The profundity of that message struck me stupid, but I managed to thank him.

Suited up, the boyfriends made for the exit to the pool. In passing, Lane stroked my bare shoulder and said, "We meet here most days around 2:30. You should come too, Rich."

"I'll try. See you later." They disappeared, and I stood there in a stupor, stunned by his caress, the heat of his hand on my body, my first time to be touched by a male in more than a year. Finally I pulled it together, put the wonderful pin on my shirt, and roused Ricky from his stupor. He fanned himself dramatically, but said nothing. We staggered out of the locker room past the pool where the tantalizing two were gliding along side by side in synchronous rhythms of curving arms.

#

...When I got home, it felt wonderful being able to blithely say I saw Lane at the pool and to show off his gift. I wore the button to my birthday party at Auntie Martha's with the usual crowd.



Barbara gave me a blue sport coat, and I also got a shirt, a tie, and a belt. More items of straight costume. I offered profuse thanks, had an extra gin and tonic after dinner to celebrate, and begged off home to get back to typing. After all, I had to make up for the afternoon's swim.

Not much later, the Twooth and Betsy walked Barbara and Jake home to our apartment. The stack of handwritten pages left to type showed them why I was getting frantic. It was only two weeks now till the deadline for submission. After they took off to get Betsy back to Little Sweden, Barbara put Jake in her crib, and I told her I'd come to bed later. Just another page or two tonight if the clacking didn't bother her.

After I stopped typing, I stayed up even later to write this for you, Old Me, about my eventful birthday. Actually, it's yours too. Here's hoping you've had and will yet have many, many more.

#

*.vi.*

The next week seemed to evaporate, the days rushing by in the tasks of caring for Jake and the hours of classes a blur. Richie typed late into the nights. Then a week before the deadline, his advisor casually recommended rewriting the new fourth chapter on neo-syntactical constructions. He brushed off Richie's concern about getting the degree right now and suggested he just take thesis hours during the summer to finish it by late July for August graduation. Richie was tremendously irritated, but as a lowly grad student, he could only acquiesce.

With the pressure of the deadline off his shoulders, Richie went on working at a more leisurely pace, going with the comfortable flow of family life and on more long walks with wife, baby, and dog. In a few days, however, Gene suddenly changed the game.

He bought a sailboat, a sleek little thing. Though he'd never sailed anything but a barstool, Richie happily agreed to spend some of his new leisure time crewing. In the shining May afternoons, they took the boat out onto the windy, billowy Sound for hours of bliss.

Gene taught Richie to hike out like a real sailor—and to duck the boom when they came about. In their hours together, they spoke no more than usual, Gene sitting blissfully at the tiller and Richie hanging far out over the edge to counter-balance to the wind in the sail. Our metaphorical mariner became a genuine sailor on the bounding main.

Sailing was an ecstatic escape from the land and from normal life. It was the joy of sunshine, the jubilation of hiking out over the wind-blown spray, the thrill of living between the wind and the water. Meanwhile, he quickly got a great tan and started feeling beautiful again.

#

Probably as a reward for being such an outstanding grad student, at the end of May the department sent Richie to San Francisco for a two-day Slavic conference at San Francisco State. He arranged to stay with an old friend from New Orleans, a blue- and wild-eyed girl with frizzy hair named (Mad) Martha. They'd been frequent dance partners in La Casa de los Marineros and shared a long history of Quarter debauchery.

Dear Me,

...Arriving on an evening flight Thursday, I took a cab to Martha's place on Haight Street near Ashbury, a third-storey walk-up. She met me at the door, all excited smiles, wearing a colorful dress with scarves and necklaces that reminded me of Seattle's "fringeys," the young neo-beatniks.

Martha had set me up with sheets and pillow to sleep on her sofa, and we sat on it with glasses of wine to catch up on the past two years. While describing how she'd come to San Francisco last year and was still trying to find a job, she opened a decorative box, took out a small twisted cigarette, and asked if I wanted a "hit" on an herbal cigarette.

I declined and relaxed on the sofa conversing with Martha while she smoked the odd-smelling herb. I told her in brief and truthfully about how my marriage happened, and she was understanding

and sympathetic listening to my frustrations in Seattle, the strange drama of Lake Tahoe, the long winter confinement, and the birth of baby Jake.

Martha remarked, "Wow, Rick, you're the last fag I'd ever have thought would go straight."

"I'm just acting." I explained the plan to get a divorce at the end of the summer, and Martha nodded knowingly. When I described my insane phantom Ricky, she didn't seem at all surprised and hoped I hadn't left him at home. In fact, I hadn't seen him for a couple days.

Her own two years had been less dramatic with two quite nice affairs, one with a woman, which just sort of ended after a while. At the moment, she's seeing a bass guitarist guy who's playing a pickup gig with a great local rock group. Tomorrow evening she figured we'd go out to hear them. But it was getting late, and I had to be up quite early in the morning.

#

The morning session of the conference was the most stultifying display of irrelevant scholarship I've ever suffered. Remember, this is coming from someone writing his thesis on Khlebnikov's neologisms. The discussions of obscure literary failures, idiotic essays on semantic clusters, and a pointless comparison of the mystical symbolism in the poetry of Lomonosov and Mayakovsky were enough to curl your hair.

The afternoon session presented even more of the worse. Honestly, I felt I could do better just talking extemporaneously about my absurd thesis. At least my ridiculous neologisms are fun. By the time I left for Martha's, I was terminally bored, but on the cab ride to her place I was revived by the Victorian houses, dramatic skyline, and views of the Golden Gate Bridge. I laughed to imagine a St. Charles streetcar from New Orleans struggling up these steep hills like the perky trolleys.

#

Over gins and tonic to unwind, Mad Martha and I chatted more about San Francisco and its exciting people. When she told me there are gay guys all around, especially in the bars along Castro Street, Ricky popped up all excited, and I casually introduced my apparition.

Martha smiled in his general direction and said, "Hi there, Ricky. Long time, darlin'."

Ricky giggled and said, "Remember that great dance we invented? The President Kennedy?" Of course, she couldn't hear him, but I vividly remembered the leaping fandango we'd done to a *pachanga* beat.

Then Martha gently suggested we should do something about my clothes. "You look so straight," she said, shaking her head. "And your hair's so short."

She rejected the two shirts I'd packed and decided I should wear her embroidered denim vest to show off my hairy chest. We added a necklace of big wooden beads and a thin red sash around my forehead, ends draping down my left shoulder. To top it off, I pinned my LIVE LOVE button on the vest. Ricky said I looked like a sex-starved Apache.

Walking down Ashbury with Martha, my unusual costume wasn't at all out of place. Many other people on the evening street were just as casually and unusually dressed. What really impressed me was that people actually looked at me, some twice. It was such a surprise after Seattle where no one ever looks at anybody else. And these were friendly looks, often with smiles. Martha said it was because the Age of Aquarius is coming soon, and though I had no idea what she was talking about, it sure felt like a good thing.

We walked a few blocks to a Cuban restaurant, and I stretched my gastronomic boundaries with some spicy meat mixture and strange black beans. Over dinner we chatted about old friends. Neither of us know what ever became of little Linda. She mentioned that my old roommate Rolfe had been back in New Orleans for a while last year—before taking off to Europe with some handsome Italian prince.

From there we walked another few blocks to a coffee shop and had Italian espresso. (I thought it tasted really bad. For me, really good coffee has chicory.) The place was full of happy people chattering loudly. We checked out the guys and decided at least three were worth keeping. On the way out, I told her about my compulsive dancing last year, and for old times' sake, right there on the

sidewalk amongst the passers-by, we danced a brief silent merengue. I felt like myself for the first time in ages, totally like Ricky, who looked on with a fond smile.

#

The place to hear the band was on Fillmore Street, a small lounge called the Matrix, which Martha said until recently was a pizza parlor. It was fairly small inside with maybe a dozen tables round about, most of them occupied, and a low stage at the far end of the room for the band. We went to a table near the stage where two guys and a girl were already sitting. Friends of Martha's, the one guy and the girl were a couple, Mark and Annabelle, and the other guy was Terry, Martha's guitarist boyfriend.

Terry had stringy dark hair and wore an expression of vague confusion. He explained that he'd be playing with the band all weekend as fill-in for somebody, and that the girl who'd be singing had just had a baby. In only a few moments, the band started gathering on the stage for the "set," and Terry left us to take up his post. Mark explained that the band was called the Jefferson Airplane, and they'd recently cut a record album, though it wasn't out yet.

During the warm up strumming and testing, two guys came in and took seats with the folks at the next table. One sat directly across from me, and his radiant smile took my breath away. His brown hair was sun-bleached to the shoulder, a virginal fuzz of beard lined his chin, a tan rippled midriff showed through a black velvet bolero jacket, necklaces of seashells, flowers, and gold chains adorned him, and what stole my heart, a Greek fisherman's hat covered with pins and buttons.

My fascination must have been obvious because Annabelle commented that the guy's name was Lily. I was amused, and Martha told me he's one of the Flower Children. Mark added that Lily's from Hawaii and claims to be the reincarnation of Queen Liliuokalani. Ricky whispered, "And you thought we're nuts."

When the band started playing, it wasn't just his pedigree that made me keep my eye on Lily. There was a subliminal glow about his person that flashed and sparkled when he laughed or spoke with his friends. Then our eyes would meet and hold for long, inarticulate moments. Registering nothing of the band's performance or of the new mother's vocals, all I saw was the angel named Lily. I tried to be coherent with my companions, but Lily kept bestowing lightning-bolt smiles on me like blessings.

The band's set lasted about an hour, and even in my overcharged state, I did actually listen to a couple numbers of rather good popular rock and roll. And the new mother sang quite well, even if I couldn't understand that many of the words. Terry came back to our table, and we congratulated him on a great job. Though I couldn't tear my eyes away from Lily, I also couldn't forget that I had to get up early again for the last part of the conference. So I suggested that we maybe ought to go home now.

As we walked past their table, I gave Lily a farewell look. He saluted, pointing to his hatband and his own LIVE LOVE button, red. And he said, "Aloha oe, brother." Even his voice was angelic. I grinned a stupid "Bye" and followed Martha out. She explained that what he said is Hawaiian for peace and love, the themes for this new age.

#

Magically, it seemed, I was back home by Saturday evening, all fired up to sail through these next three months and... To celebrate, the family went out for beers and burgers as usual at the Red Robin. Lane took our table and made sweet faces at baby Jake. I remarked on just getting back from San Francisco—and seeing a guy there with a LIVE LOVE button like mine (which I still was wearing). He said, "Oh, yeh. I think those come from some brothel in Nevada." We all laughed, but I was shocked at that reading of the otherwise profound sentiment.

I'd saved my traveler's tale till we were all together and then regaled them with my exciting Friday night out in Frisco, including my hip outfit, the Cuban food, the cool coffee shop, and of course the Matrix. For Barbara's benefit, I very unromantically described old friend Martha and her weirdness about the coming new Age of Aquarius, which this Martha and Gene thought quite funny. About the guy named Lily who had the same pin, I simply said he's a "Flower Child" who claims to be the

reincarnation of Queen Liliuokalani. That brought more laughter, but I didn't really think it was funny. I mean, maybe he is.

#

*.vii.*

I hope you're still with me, guys. It was a long haul, I know. Thank goodness, Richie got so verbose in his journal during this dramatic time, but let me tell you, many of the yellow pages were nothing by ramblings about daily comings and goings, mundane minutiae, class concerns, thesis problems, and meaningless thoughts. The volume of scribbling probably reflects his spirit coming alive again, albeit in a deranged state. I remember that Richie kept the stack of pages in a folder among his books, innocently trusting that no one would read them. There was never any indication that Barbara might have. As far as I know, I'm the only person ever to bother. Of course, they're addressed to me so it's my duty, I guess.

The several days it took me to transcribe this chapter have also been full of comings and goings and mundane minutiae in my wonderful relationship with Mack and socializing with my new young friends and family. Nothing really to bore you with, unless you count the progress Mario's making on the day-name project.

A couple of these past days went to laying out the whole suite of day-signs for him. FYI, the Aztecs named the days of the month (20) and numbered the days of the week (13). Go figure. Mario has signed up me, Deirdre, Jason, George, Carol, and Janet as partners in the business, which we've agreed to call Five Flower. That's the name of the god of games and music and what I called my old publishing company long ago. It makes a great logo.

Mack is also making great progress on his graphics. He's done fabulous work for the stanza on the heroes' journey and begun sketching for the next one on their battle with the monster machine. He's still playing with the animation program to set up the prototype images, a technical job that boggles my mind. I try to reward him appropriately for his labors.

Now that I've completed this chapter, I'm going to switch gears and spend some time on the next (alphabetically) of my Aztec icons. This one is Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird of the South, their principle deity. My concept is still coalescing, but I know it will involve a lot of detailed vignettes. Lord knows how long it's going to take to complete, but when my drawing energy flags, I'll jump back on the Faerie Prince for another leg of its voyage.

#

Ah, but I bet you're wondering what has happened with our new pirates, Johnny and Jason. They both captured prizes that night at the Titsling, though no real swag. Jason reported little difficulty in boarding the punk's boat. The kid still lives with his parents, so they went to Jason's and did it in the shower. He says it was nowhere near as hot as he'd hoped, but I bet he's lying for Johnny's sake.

Meanwhile, you may recall that Jolly Johnny had disappeared? He says he took off after a tempting frigate who had cruised him brazenly in the passing crowd. The pursuit led out into the parking lot, where the hunky guy stopped beside a car and asked Johnny if he wanted a ride. They sailed off to the guy's place, a room over a garage, and did it under a mirror on the ceiling. Fantastic pectorals, but apparently not particularly talented otherwise. Again, Johnny may well be down-playing the encounter for his boyfriend's benefit.

After these initial forays, our buccaneers made a compact to go a-pirating only once a month, both at the same time, and to keep logs of their voyages. I look forward to their next adventures but hope their ship logs will be more truthful and detailed than these.

Sitting with me on the sofa the other evening, Mack worried that they're playing with fire, and I asked if he's ever played with it. He answered, incredulously, with a question, "What do you think I'm doing right now?" Slipping his hand into my shirt and gently pulling my chest hair, he said, "I'm playing with you, Rich." At that point, our behavior deteriorated deplorably.

I certainly appreciate the compliment, but Mack's metaphorical point may well apply to the both of us. I can't say as how I've ever felt it get this hot in the kitchen. Something's cooking alright, and I've got a hunch that it's my goose.

###

## CHAPTER 10. SAILING ON

.i.

I've taken a couple weeks off from writing to focus on the rest of life, in particular my drawing, Mack and his art, friends and family, and my personal routines—not necessarily always in that order. As a matter of fact, for simplicity, I'll comment on those things in reverse order. My personal routines you know already, an old man's comfortable rut, but they were interrupted by several days away with family to Phoenix where we visited as many museums and basked in the balmy days (110°) and nights (103°).

It was a great getaway for me with Aimée and Rich, but for too much (most) of the time Jammes had his head stuck in games on his iPad. I find the whole video game phenomenon a horrifying perversion of both technology and child psychology—don't get me started. Some months ago I made my feelings known on the subject but haven't seen any particular change in his behavior. Now Papou can only bite his tongue and regret the revolting development.

My young friends have been hard at work organizing the Five Flower enterprise. We've been planning the product lines and strategizing marketing and distribution. I must admit that I've been of little use in those discussions, working mostly with George on the layouts and Janet on creating the individual horoscopic statements. When Deirdre and Lynn got back from their honeymoon hiking in Denali, she got to work on the PR package, and Jason is designing our publicity campaign. I know what this old man would've done without them—exactly nothing.

When I mentioned to Mario about the two decks of cards I'd long ago worked up around the Aztec calendar, he got quite excited. One with 54 cards is a curious numerical thing that could be useful for teaching basic math, and the other is a twist on the standard 52-card deck that has eight suits instead of four. Go figure. Meanwhile, George came up with the idea of creating a deck of Aztec tarot cards. More meetings put all of these ideas into our plan too. These "kids" have given me a whole new understanding of boon companions.

Meanwhile, of course, my biggest boon is wonderful Mack. We're still not rushing things, just enjoying being together when we can. His work on what we're now seeing as the video serial is continually surprising and pleasing. Since writing the scenario several years ago, I've picked up some more ideas, and after the monster battle, I suggested changing things around and adding another challenge for even more of a parody of the traditional quest. Fortunately, Mack shares my taste for the absurd.

Saturday last a whole bunch of us went to a supposed Renaissance Faire out at the ranching museum. It was actually a Mother-Goosed medieval fair (a term we used to use in the historic preservation world for prettifying and sanitizing a piece of history). There were all manner of glamorous knightly paraphernalia, including jousting demonstrations, and hordes of picturesque, contented peasants doing primitive things like spinning and black-smithing.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, but I'd hoped for some real Renaissance stuff to match my mood. Nowadays, with my new lover and young friends, my Middle Ages are brightening into a new Renaissance. The Dark Ages are finally over, and I've lived to see it.

In the midst of all this activity, I also dived into drawing on my new icon. (As a life-long swimmer and linguist, I will maintain to my dying breath that 'dived' is the proper past tense of that verb.) The figure of Huitzilopochtli from my old book needs a lot of work, but I think I'm now in emotional shape to wrap up this voyage of the Faerie Prince.

#

By the way, another reason for the delay was that I was waiting on Johnny to post that last chapter and for my friends' reactions. In particular, I was curious what they'd think of the hallucination, which I still remember vividly, though maybe I'm just recalling what Richie wrote. Whatever. In any case Ricky makes a certain sense as an interior dialog.

They all thought that the sprite was credible, but Mack wondered if hallucinations really crack dirty jokes or grant wishes. Of course, they do much weirder things than that. The women of the group were impressed with Richie's growing emotional involvement with Barbara and Jake and were distressed by his divorce plans, maybe a girl thing because it didn't seem to bother the guys at all.

#

We left the new father safely back in Seattle after a relatively wild experience in San Francisco and looking forward to sailing smoothly on through the coming summer. Richie figured he could easily go on being the helpful husband and doting father for the next few months, knowing that come September...

With that light at the end of the tunnel and the lighter schedule, he was happy to go sailing with Gene and maybe even really get back to swimming. Though Richie stole moments to dance on campus or at Ravenna, he needed those other outlets for all his excited energy. He felt alive again, like a new person, like re-born after the long, hard year.

Of course, there was still the sexual frustration, but he'd long ago gotten used to putting that out of mind. Besides, he now had Ricky to be frustrated for him. The apparition was quite vocal about the problem, but Richie pointedly ignored his complaints as frivolous. He had sex with Barbara less reluctantly now, simply as a kindly physical habit. Like the rest of their relationship, his 'love-making' was always gentle and affectionate.

Back in the swing of fatherhood, Richie found that he truly enjoyed being with his wife and baby. It gave him a strange thrill of pride to walk with them (and little Oná) along the sidewalks or in the park, a beautiful little family. Overall, he felt reasonably content, especially knowing that come September...

#

*.ii.*

The next week being the term break, Richie went sailing on the Sound with Gene almost every day, and his tan soon got every bit as dark as Ricky's. He reveled in feeling beautiful again, and Barbara even remarked on his good spirits. Then on Thursday morning they got a call from their professor friend Willis inviting them to dinner again on Friday evening to meet a couple who'd just moved back to town from UCLA.

While Barbara and Richie were fairly excited at finally having the chance to meet someone socially, Ricky was even more so, almost wild-eyed foreseeing an opportunity for romance. Richie told his tormentor to shut his trap and get lost.

Dear Me,

...Again Willis was kind enough to pick us up for dinner. When we walked into his living room, his wife Rachel (Barbara having reminded me of her name), introduced this new couple, a tall husband Roger and his short wife Muriel, basically the same height as Barbara. Roger was vaguely Nordic, rather handsome with very light brown hair and blue eyes (quite like mine).

Muriel was pretty plain with round features, hair dark and curly, and tortoise-shell glasses. In conversation she was very quiet and attentive to everything Roger had to say. Involuntarily, I felt a perverse pride in having a pretty wife. Ricky called me a disgusting straight pig.

Their two daughters, two and four, were happily and loudly playing with Willis' girls, three and five. Baby Jake immediately became the sensation. Barbara held her up to stand on her tiny feet for a moment, and she squealed and babbled at the children's frenetic attentions.

We three husbands sat on the other side of the room with traditional Russian vodka, mine with tonic, and chatted. I was struck by how very butch Roger was, genuinely masculine. When our eyes met, his were blank, and he'd break contact first. No matter what Ricky hoped, I figured there was no chance Roger liked boys. A Seattle native and undergrad at U-Dub, he'd gone off for a Master's at UCLA and now was moving back home for his doctorate. Their moving van would get here tomorrow. He explained that as an undergrad he'd taken all Willis' courses in Russian literature.

Roger listened to my own resume without much expression. While he and Willis reminisced about those earlier classes, I found his face, even unsmiling, quite attractive. For the fun of it, I imagined kissing him. Now I've never had a mango, but I bet that's how Roger's mouth would taste.

At dinner we were seated in strict alternation, I between Muriel and Rachel and across from Roger, who was beside Barbara, and so on. This led to a number of simultaneous conversations alternating between neighbors. At one point Rachel asked about my meeting Barbara and got a carefully outlined history of our dog-based relationship. Later, Muriel asked how I felt about being a father now, which was an excuse to carry on over the joys of watching Jake grow. Instructed by Rachel's example, I then asked Muriel how she and Roger met and heard about a high school romance resumed two years later at U-Dub.

Over dessert, Roger asked about my thesis on Khlebnikov, whose wacky poetry he recalled from Willis' class. Not to bore them, I gave him a thumbnail sketch with only one brief quote and was gratified by the excitement in his eye. He said he'd like to read it if I didn't mind. Ricky commented privately that Roger was more than welcome to see anything we've got, and I certainly agreed.

What with the many children's bedtimes, we parted company soon after dinner. Muriel said goodbye to us with hugs. After shaking my hand firmly with an open smile that made him even more attractive, Roger suddenly hugged me too. I was too shocked to fully appreciate the firmness of his body or the strength of his hands on my shoulder blades. He hugged Barbara too, and she and I shared surprised looks.

When Willis dropped us off at home, Barbara went in to put Jake to bed, and I sat out on the porch bench thinking about the evening. Ricky was convinced that Roger's a live one, but I argued that the guy's married for years, two kids... The only thing that turned him on was my thesis. Ricky insisted that Roger's hug was far from platonic, but I figured the hugging was probably some California custom, maybe an Age of Aquarius thing, peace, love, and all that.

Shortly, Barbara came out and sat down beside me. I put my arm around her, and she said, "I hope we can get to be good friends with them. Don't you, Richie, honey?"

#

Though Ricky kept carrying on about Roger, Richie gave little thought to their new friends over the weekend. Sunday night at dinner, however, Barbara remarked that they ought to invite Roger and Muriel over for dinner some evening soon, and he suggested maybe Thursday? She figured on having Martha and Gene over to meet the nice couple too.

The next morning was the start of summer quarter. Richie had enrolled for more thesis hours and for variety, a class in the history of the English language. In his new Russian class, he noted some cute fellows and looked forward to a summer of visual vitamins. Running through the usual opening stuff about the alphabet scared the bejesus out of some of them, and he spent the whole hour, as always, spelling out their names.

Dear Me,

...Leaving the classroom, I was surprised to find Roger waiting in the hall. He laughed at my surprise and said, "I checked your class schedule."

I said, "Hi! What are you up to?"

"That depends," he said walking with me down the hall. "What are you up for?"

Ricky went wild, but I doubted Roger meant anything suggestive. I explained that I was planning on calling him today to invite them over for dinner on Thursday evening.

"Love to," Roger quickly accepted and added, "I was hoping you'd invite me over this morning... to take a look at your thesis." I certainly wasn't about to disappoint his hopes.

On the walk across campus, Roger said they moved this past weekend into a place some blocks up 12<sup>th</sup> near Ravenna Park, so now we're close neighbors. It turns out he'd been running there in that park for many years. He'd done track back in high school. All I could contribute sports-wise was being good at swimming, and now at sailing with Gene.

Ricky suggested I also tell Roger that I'm good in bed too, but I ignored him. Instead, I mentioned also being a dancer. Roger was most impressed, and I performed a brief Greek sailor dance under the shady trees. He called it neat and then started talking about the two courses he's taking this summer in Soviet and Old Russian literature.

Barbara was pleased to see Roger and insisted on making him a cup of tea. I leafed through the thesis papers to show him the parts. He skimmed the chapters with nods of understanding and jumped to the poem and translations, which he read closely. It was enthralling to watch someone experience my esoteric work.

Browsing through the glossary of neologisms, he often smiled broadly, and then he said, "I think I've got something you really need." I shared Ricky's enthusiastic agreement. Roger went on, "A dictionary of Old Russian."

Barbara gladly joined us with Jake in her stroller for the walk up to see Roger and Muriel's new place. While she and Roger chatted about kid things, I quietly stole looks at his fine-nosed profile and enjoyed his long-legged stride. It was easy to imagine him running like a deer.

Nearing their new home, Roger remarked that Muriel was off right now with the kids. She was leaving them with her parents for the day and going shopping with her sister. Ricky muttered, "Damn! He was trying to get us off alone." I again doubted Roger had any such carnal intention.

The tour of their two-bedroom apartment went quickly. Big windows made it quite bright. Basic furniture sat haphazardly in rooms with boxes stacked everywhere. Barbara complimented the place, particularly admiring the kitchen, much bigger and more modern than ours, I have to admit.

While Barbara was changing Jake in their bathroom, Roger dug around in a box and pulled out the promised dictionary. A random glance into its columnar pages proved that I did indeed need it. Ricky whispered that this was our opportunity, and I dared a meaningful smile, saying, "Thanks, Roger. I certainly do need your thing." Apparently missing my innuendo, he simply nodded.

When Barbara and I were leaving to take Jake into Ravenna, Roger again hugged us both goodbye. His tight hug was a bit awkward for me with the Old Russian dictionary under my arm, but I still didn't feel anything sexual in it. Again Ricky disagreed, noting that it lasted at least two beats longer than appropriate. Who does he think he is to judge what's appropriate?

As we continued our walk behind the stroller, Barbara remarked, "Richie, you know, next year we'll be needing two bedrooms too." I didn't respond to her moot point.

#



Since getting back from San Francisco, Richie had done reasonable work on the thesis between parental duties and sailing. He'd scribbled a fair amount on the rewrite of Chapter Four and gotten in a few licks on the remaining typing. This new dictionary fortunately fit into the bibliography quite near the end on a partial page, which he re-typed that very afternoon. The next day he checked connections between the neologisms and archaic words, adding several to the glossary and refusing to think about the extra typing that entailed.

Dear Me,

...In the afternoon I happily escaped in Gene's boat. A light breeze took us out onto the Sound and then died away. Since he has only one, Gene and I took stoic, exhausting turns with the paddle, moving the boat imperceptibly toward the distant shore. Laboring in my turn with it, I challenged Ricky as an airy faerie to summon the wind.

While I paddled, he muttered some mumbo-jumbo, to no avail. Then he asked when I plan on telling Barbara about splitting in September. I figured it would be cruel to say anything yet and make her live with that dread. Far better if it simply happened out of the blue when we got to Michigan.

Ricky didn't buy that. "You're full of shit! It's just as cruel whenever you tell her."

"Well, I worry about her and Jake. I have to take care—"

"—You piss me off," Ricky broke in. "You're not just acting straight. You really are a breeder."

"I'm a good actor," I argued. "I'm still just as gay as I ever was, really."

"If you are, you'd grab this Roger hunk. He's got his eye on us, I'm telling you, darlin'."

"You're crazy, Ricky. Roger's a happily married father." I paddled extra hard.

"Just like you, eh?" He ignored my silence. "Now you listen to me, you silly queen—you're going to jump on this gorgeous guy with both feet, or else."

"Try and be patient, won't you? Come September, we'll be free."

"That's too long. You're just wasting our time."

We didn't talk about it anymore. Finally, in my third stint at paddle, a breeze came up, but no thanks to Ricky's airiness. Only when we'd loaded the boat on its trailer did Gene express irritation with getting becalmed. He simply grunted, "Well, that wasn't nearly as much fun as a stick in the eye."

#

*.iii.*

Dear Me,

...After this morning's Russian class, I certainly didn't expect Roger to be waiting for me again. I gratefully raved, not without innuendo, about how wonderful and helpful his thing was. Again he only registered my comment with a nod. Then he asked me to do him a favor and help him move their furniture around. Chatting about this and that, we walked by the house to tell Barbara what we were up to and ambled up 12<sup>th</sup>. Ricky was speechless with anticipation. On the way Roger mentioned that Muriel and the kids went to an aunt's house today—because she can't let the girls run loose in the apartment till it's all organized.

First thing was to move a bunch of large boxes out of the way, which led to shuffling chairs around in order to position their huge sofa on the long side of the living room. Lifting the sofa, a load almost beyond my strength, we shuffled with it over to the wall, and then I proudly showed off my biceps. At last I was pleased to get an openly appreciative smile.

In the bedroom it was the same process of organizing boxes and rearranging smaller furniture. Then we struggled to get their enormous bed across from the window. Afterwards, when Roger went to use the john, Ricky leapt onto the bed and writhing shamelessly, said, "Get those pants off, darlin'—right this minute!"

Disgusted with his immodest proposal, I turned away to the window and for long moments admired a view of the pleasant, tree-lined street. Not waiting but wishing. Then Roger walked up behind and wrapped me in his big arms, his hands pressing my chest and cheek hot against my ear.

#

Please forgive me for turning all authorial on you at this delicate point in our story, but editorially speaking, Richie's descriptions of what followed are way too (porno)graphic. Suffice it to say that Jolly Roger was an accomplished pirate and swiftly boarded the Faerie Prince, an easy prize for having grown a bit slow and rusty since that long ago Mardi Gras with Jim. At last, no more *carne vale*! With scarcely a word, Richie and Roger did the lascivious and wanton things that pirates do. Afterwards, they simply knew they'd seize the next opportunity to rape and pillage each other. Richie was delighted to learn what a mango tastes like.

After staggering home, barely able to see straight, Richie struggled to give Barbara no indication of anything happening other than arranging furniture. He spoke about their heavy sofa but didn't dare mention the huge bed. Going to their own bed that night, he prayed that Barbara wouldn't signal for sex, and luck was with him.

Dear Me,

...When Roger, Muriel, and the girls arrived for dinner, he and I guarded closely against unwarranted glances and didn't dare get too engaged in conversation. Some of our glances, however, were highly charged. Fortunately, as I'd expected, with all the people, kids, and dog in the apartment, there was ample chaos to keep everyone occupied with otherwise than watching us.

The couple seemed to strike it off well with Martha and Gene, too. Muriel, an English major, and Gene had a number of literary conversations which went way beyond my background in Russian lit. Roger was charming to everyone, an entertaining raconteur and attentive listener. He remarked something about traveling that set Martha and Barbara to remembering their own childhood trips to France. I was not uncharacteristically quiet in the conversations. It was all I could do not to break character and stare at Roger's now intimately familiar attributes.

Suddenly Gene invited Roger to come sailing with us tomorrow afternoon, and he leapt on it enthusiastically, never having been sailing and always wanting to. I stared at my plate envisioning him in a bathing suit. They arranged for Roger to pick me up, and we'd meet at the boat landing. There was no missing the sweet fragrance of opportunity on the air.

For a short while we sat around in the living room in post-prandial conversation, Roger and I on the carpet playing with Jake and his girls and casually smiling at each other. When they got up to go, he and Muriel proceeded to hug us all goodbye. We'd warned Martha and Gene about this apparently California custom. I told them it probably had something to do with the Age of Aquarius. Embracing me tightly, Roger made a tiny, almost inaudible moan in my ear.

While the sisters cleaned up in the dining room and kitchen, Gene and I sat on the sofa with baby Jake wiggling around on the cushion between us. He said, "I bet Roger will be good at hiking out. He's bigger, you know, longer and heavier than you are." Noncommittally, I agreed that he's indeed all those things and savored my secret knowledge of those measurements.

I expect Barbara was surprised when we went to bed. Of my own accord, unbidden, I initiated sex. My body still felt alive and electric after the hours of being close to Roger. In the midst of it, I suddenly wondered if my kiss was any different now and tried to be no more aggressive than usual. She probably didn't notice anything, but I'll certainly have to watch out.

#

To meet Gene at the boat ramp at two, Roger picked Richie up at one o'clock:

Dear Me,

...When we got into his big blue car, he grabbed my thigh and said, "You are so hot."

"You should talk," I replied. "What're we going to do about it?"

Driving off down the street, he answered, "You'll see." That vague prediction was good enough for me. Curious as always with a new paramour, I asked when he found out he was gay. He

quickly said he's not queer, just bisexual, and I asked which he prefers. "Depends on my mood," he laughed. "How about you?"

"Men," I replied without hesitation and briefed him on my sordid history as a faerie in the French Quarter with a predilection for Greek sailors. Roger found that titillating.

Recalling that he'd gone with Muriel even in high school, I asked about his early experiences with boys. He had a three-year affair in high school with his best friend Harold while seeing Muriel at the same time. They'd double-date and then go off somewhere secret and fuck each other. And at U-Dub, he and his jock roommate Terry used to get their rocks off together all the time.

Roger drove us to Fort Lawton, where I went last year with Gene and the Cub Scouts, and turned into an empty parking area. Then he led me into the woods to a secret place where he and Harold often came for privacy. In a shady ravine with bushes and big boulders, we removed our much smaller rocks. I've never done it outdoors in the woods before, and it was almost like fucking Mother Earth. Definitely a new experience in my slutty life, somehow spiritual and real at the same time.

We were only a few minutes late to the boat ramp, and Gene already had the boat in the water. Because it's so small, he could only take one of us out at a time. For Roger to see my technique for hiking out, I went first for a sweet, short run on the wind nearby and tacking back. Then we switched places, and I sat on the dock to watch. Being longer and heavier than I, Roger definitely is more effective in hiking out. There were good winds, and Cap'n Gene was blissfully occupied with his navigating, even if it was in recurring loops back to the ramp to switch crew. After several exhilarating crew rotations, we called it quits.

While helping load the boat onto the trailer, Roger thanked Gene for the wonderful experience on the water and then talked about a new exercise thing he'd recently found about in California called jogging, a slow kind of running. It was supposed to be easy and really good for you. Gene helpfully suggested that for exercise maybe I could go jogging with Roger. I immediately agreed that I could do just that, as did Roger.

#

Since he hadn't been swimming anymore, Barbara quickly sanctioned her husband's new opportunity for healthy exercise by going jogging with Roger. They agreed that he'd jog with their new friend a few afternoons a week, and go out sailing with Gene on others. So Richie and Roger were all set for a summer pleasurable physical activities, athletics not the least of them.

However, Richie's most urgent activity was typing because the thesis had to be done in the next couple weeks. It was looking good to finish in spite of all the rewriting and new info from Roger, who came by Saturday afternoon to see the revised fourth chapter. While Barbara played with Jake in the living room, they sat close at the dining table poring over the yellow pages of scribbles. The scholarly activity allowed for surreptitious pressures of knees and casual, secret caresses. After the helpful suggestions from his new buddy, Richie set to typing the chapter in maddening triplicate.

That Sunday evening they put Jake into her stroller and walked with Martha, Gene, and Oná up to Roger's for a cookout in the back yard. Their handsome host was impressively in command of the grill. With the little girls playing happily with the dog, they must have looked like perfectly normal (i.e., straight) young families clustered around the picnic table. Savoring the sweet irony of their secret, Roger and Richie spoke but little to each other and were careful of glances. For social grace, they paid most attention to each other's spouses. On the walk home, Richie felt he'd given an academy award performance of acting straight.

#

Dear Me,

...With my first 'jog' with Roger looming this afternoon, I couldn't keep focused in my Russian class. Then at home I clattered distractedly on the typewriter the rest of the morning, taking frequent

joyful breaks to play with Jake, who now seizes her rattle with both hands, shakes it, and laughs in a way that reaches straight into my heart.

Over lunch, Barbara and I talked about the jogging. I'd wear some old tennis shoes (or as she calls them in her Midwestern dialect, tenny-runners) and cut-off shorts. She thinks we should shop soon for proper gear. I've never cared for shopping, even for myself, but I agreed to the inevitable ordeal, someday soon. *[It never occurred to Richie that Barbara may have been glad to get him out of the house and out of her hair. We old guys try to see other folks' points of view.]*

Afterwards, to earn brownie points, I took the laundry down to the basement and did a load. In the solitude of the dungeon with the grunting washing machine, I wondered about the coming afternoon with Roger, (no pun intended), and imagined various tender opportunities. While I was hanging out the wash in the sunny back yard, Ricky popped up and told me not to fantasize because that eliminates real possibilities. "Just go with the flow, darlin'," he advised. "But prepare for the unexpected." We guffawed at the oxymoron.

Strolling with Jake and me up to Roger's, Barbara remarked again how nice it is that I'll get to exercise more. After last winter's diet, I figured I look in pretty good shape. She laughed and said, "Your shape's fine, Richie. You've just gotten soft is all I'm saying, sweetie."

Wicked Ricky made me promise, "I'll get hard again real soon." Fortunately, Barbara apparently missed the innuendo.

Muriel was in the yard with the girls poking in a flower bed and greeted us merrily. In a moment Roger came out in jogging shorts. Barbara remarked that she had to stop by the grocery store on the way home, and since Muriel had to go there too, she offered them a ride.

Bidding our spouses and progeny goodbye, Roger and I took off up the sidewalk at a very slow pace to warm up. He explained that I'll have to take it real easy at first not to overdo things. I remarked that the only thing I plan to overdo is his. Roger blushed and commented graphically on my sexy cut-offs. By the end of the block I was feeling the exertion in my calves, and we stopped for Roger to show me how to stretch them out with my foot pushed up against a tree trunk.

When we started to jog again, to my surprise Roger led us down the street to left, not toward Ravenna as planned, and then turned left again. Stopping at the next corner, he showed me how to stretch my legs by propping my foot on a fire hydrant and reaching for it, not as easy as it sounds.

Then down the block to our left, a big blue car came out of the alley, turned, and disappeared around the next corner. It was our wives leaving for the store! Roger took off at a fair clip. For novice me, it felt like a serious sprint. We raced up the alley and in their back door, which he locked behind us, and then he roughly pushed me up against it for a devouring kiss.

Roger yanked my cut-offs down to find me fully prepared for the unexpected. When he started kissing and fondling me, I burst out laughing. He looked up in consternation, and I apologized that back in my faerie years I'd dubbed my cock Sir Roger Wrighte-Rowndleigh. Then I pulled down Roger's blue shorts, bent him over the table, and rogered him right roundly. We also took a moment for me to return the favor on their living room carpet.

Then we scrambled into our shorts, raced out the front door, and sprinted up the block, stopping again at the first corner. I hung on his arm, gasping, and asked what had just happened. Roger laughed, "I try to grab every opportunity, Richie, ol' buddy." ...

#

.iv.

...We jogged at a pleasant, leisurely pace for a couple blocks toward Ravenna, and I began to get into it almost like dancing. A few times I pranced about or skipped along and made Roger laugh. With more stretches and a spate of walking, we made it to the park and my dancing green. He lay back on the grass while I danced a jubilant jig. Floating on a cloud of happiness. When I got done, I lay down beside him, and he growled, "Damn, Richie! I sure wish you weren't going away."

"I know, darlin'," I sighed, unable to say me too because I'm so glad to be leaving Seattle. Feeling so close to Roger, I confided that when we get to Michigan, we'll get a divorce. That confidence provoked a quite unexpected conversation.

"Why?" he almost shouted. "You've got it made, a beautiful wife and family... Why?"

"I want to be free again," I stated with feeling. "Single."

Roger touched my arm tenderly. "Richie, babe, you need to have a wife and family."

"What for? I told you, I'm gay, and being married is making me crazy."

"But a guy needs a woman to cook and take care of the kids. All that."

"Well, I can cook for myself, and I want a man for all that."

"You've got me—for now. Do you want to wind up one of those eccentric old bachelors?"

"Well, I..." That looked like about my only other option. Queer boy, queer old man.

"It's the only way for a guy to live, I tell you—a wife at home for the work, and then it's easy to find guys to have fun."

"Easy? Roger, darlin', you're the first fun guy I've met in almost two years!"

Roger laughed self-consciously. "And in two years in LA, I had three affairs. Richie, there are lots of us out there, family guys like you and me, guys who like cock."

"I don't know... There aren't even that many single guys who do."

"Richie, it's the best way, the only way. Don't worry, you'll meet someone in Michigan, I know."

...When I got home, Barbara was glad to hear I'd had fun jogging and wondered if maybe she should try it too. I said nothing. She added, "Muriel says Roger really likes you."

All I managed was, "Oh?"

"She says it's real important for husbands to have male friends."

"Yeah, I do like having male friends."

Barbara kissed my cheek and said, "We'll make some new ones for you in Michigan."

"I guess so," I said, trying not to sound eager. Maybe it really might be as easy as Roger says.

#

On Wednesday, Muriel was again away with the girls, and the secret lovers messed up the huge bed, which was almost big enough for their amorous wrestling match. On Thursday afternoon, which was Roger's turn to sail with Gene, Richie typed frantically on his thesis. On Friday afternoon, Muriel was at home and brightly saw the athletic friends off on their jog.

At Ravenna they stopped to stretch calves. Then Roger led them around the eastern edge of the park to where a thick forest descended into the ravine. They wove through bushes and trees to a bower of saplings and vines, another love nest recalled from his affair with Harold, where these two engaged in absolutely feral fellatio. Such sylvan passions naturally put more spirit into Richie's sex with Barbara, but after Roger's wild embraces, he had to be careful not to be suspiciously energetic or innovative.

Careful mainly in order to spare Barbara's feelings, Richie felt no guilt about this extramarital affair. It seemed in no way to diminish his feelings for Barbara and actually may have enhanced them. As a matter of fact, Richie almost wished she'd have an affair with somebody too—he certainly wouldn't feel "cheated" out of anything. Barbara deserved to fall in love too. But fifty years ago such an open marriage with a husband and wife each finding romance(s) elsewhere was unthinkable.

In the meantime, Richie reveled in his times with baby Jake, utterly fascinated by the way she played now with her tiny toes and babbled joyously. He really began to feel strangely content playing it straight—while having his hot guy on the side, of course. Oddly, Richie hadn't seen Ricky once or even heard a snide comment from the apparition ever since Roger made his move. Glad for the silence, he figured the phantom was probably just sitting back and enjoying the ride.

Roger's affections also spurred our scholar to even more furious work on his thesis. Nose to the Smith Corona, he finished typing by the end of the next week and duly submitted it to the department by the deadline. Walking out of Smith Hall, the whole thing now out of his hands, he swooped out into the sunshine on the quadrangle in a dance of gratitude for this new life with a lover. Now marriage and fatherhood was starting to feel like a halfway reasonable situation. Again, with his hot guy on the side.

#

To celebrate the submission, they went out with Roger and Muriel to see a much-advertised new movie. They shared a baby-sitter, a grandmotherly woman named Helen.

Dear Me,

...At first Barbara was fine about leaving Jake with the sitter, but by the time we sat down in the theater, she got awfully fidgety. Fortunately, the movie distracted her immediately. It was called "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

Unfortunately, the theater was quite full, and we had to sit way down front in the second row off to the far right side. From that abstract, almost expressionistic angle, we viewed with up-turned heads the riveting performances by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, many shots in close-up on their expressive, stretched-out faces. Besides the miserable perspective giving me a sore neck, the aggressive mood of the film shocked my system seriously. I've never imagined such animosity and viciousness between people, much less a husband and wife, and felt thankful for my peaceful, humane relationship with Barbara.

Leaving the theater, Muriel asked if we thought they loved each other, and we all had different answers, mine yes. In the car Roger remarked how nice it feels to be relatively sane in comparison to those characters, and we again disagreed as to whether they were insane.

Then Barbara started to worry about Jake again, and as an experienced mother, Muriel calmed her fears. Of course, we found our darling daughter asleep, and she stayed that way on the ride home. Roger and I agreed to jog an hour later on Monday because he's got a dentist appointment.

With Jake snug in her crib, Barbara and I sat out on the porch talking about the movie. Then she remarked, "You know, Richie, I feel so lucky that you're always so sweet to me." I was taken aback. "Even when you're distant," she said, "you're nice and polite. Never raise your voice—or get angry."

"You're just as nice and polite to me, Barbara. Don't you ever get angry at me?"

"Sometimes," she admitted. "You can be aggravating. But nothing serious, sweetie. I'm glad that you seem so happy now."

"I'm so glad to be done with that thesis," I exulted, hoping that sounded like a good enough reason. "And all the exercise makes me feel alive again."

"I can tell."

We sat in silence enjoying the fresh night air, and then I said, "But I'm still gay." She was silent. "I think I'm doing a good job of acting straight, don't you?"

Barbara took my hand and agreed that I was indeed a good actor. She added confidently, "I'm sure Roger doesn't suspect a thing."

#

Thus began the halcyon summer of '66, long days and sweetly slow hours of happiness like Richie had never before experienced, both with his lover and with his family. The two families, often expanded with Martha and Gene, Betsy and the Twooth, or Willis and family, had fun together on frequent outings for picnics and holiday events around the city.

Soon the athletic regimen got Richie into fine physical shape with much better endurance. He and Roger would jog around exploring other parts of the city at greater distances, sometimes over to Fort Lawton for a relaxing wrestling match in their rocky retreat. Sometimes all the way

to the arboretum on the point into Lake Washington, a beautiful forest full of secret places to indulge passionate urges. Theirs was a splendidly natural idyll.

#

.v.

By unspoken agreement, Barbara and Richie didn't mention or make any plans for their first anniversary in late July. That Jake was almost five months old made any celebration a bit out of place. But the Twooth had been there in Tahoe too, and he knew the date. With no overt pretext, that weekend his folks again invited everybody, including Roger's and Willis's families, out to their big house on the shore that weekend for one of their famous cookouts.

Now as well as dogs, there were flocks of children running around the broad lawns. Briefly to get away from the hubbub, Roger and Richie walked on the stony beach of the Sound.

Dear Me,

...Roger remarked suggestively that Muriel thinks I'm really attractive, and I flatly declined the implied proposition. "Too bad," he sighed. "Muriel's a sweet woman, and I want her to be happy. Not even once?"

"No." I couldn't believe my lover would even think of such a thing.

Roger wheedled, "But you're leaving so soon, Richie. Just once—to make her happy?"

"No," I repeated, starting to get angry. "And it's not 'so soon.' We've still got six weeks." To make amends, Roger pulled me into the bushes under the bank and molested me briefly. The surprise restored our bliss, and we returned to the party acting like perfectly straight male friends.

Back at home in the evening, while Barbara was giving Jake a bath, I sat out on the porch bench regretting what Roger had said about so soon. Suddenly, after being gone for weeks, Ricky appeared at my elbow and remarked, "You know, darlin', your Jolly Roger's full of straight bullshit!"

"Maybe not. Actually, I've been thinking..."

"Not about screwing Muriel, I hope!"

"Of course not, Ricky. I was just thinking..."

"Well, you better not be thinking about that dumb olden rule of yours. That's what got us in this wretched mess in the first place."

"Wrong—you're what got us into this, you horny little bastard. And it's not a wretched mess." I had it up to here with my hallucination and turned on him. "Just go the fuck away, Ricky. I don't need your bitching and moaning about my lover—or my marriage."

"I'm just trying to help, darlin'. To get us through the divorce."

"That's none of your business. I'll do it myself. Now scat! Get lost!" I swatted at him, and with a hurt look, he faded away, whether to Mexico or the moon, I don't care.

#

All through those incomparable, shining weeks of August, Roger and Richie enjoyed their illicit liaison with days full of jogging and sailing. They had wonderful social dinners and evenings out, contented wives, thriving offspring, and frequent occasions for furious fornication. In the joyous flow of days, each today was more fantastic than its yesterday, only to be eclipsed by the glory of its tomorrow.

As soon as their love affair took off in June, Richie's journal writing started noticeably slowing down, superseded by passionate reality. After that anniversary cookout in late July, it settled into simple notes on itineraries of jogs without mentioning where or how they dallied. Consequently, terribly few miraculous moments of the affair with Roger were recorded. Even fewer survive as memories for this Old Me. It's really a shame the way we tend to remember in gory detail only the disturbing events in our lives, but our beautiful, peaceful experiences only live on, if at all, as blurry recollections of contentment, even ecstasy.

Our happy lovers' idyll sailed serenely on, though Richie tried desperately to deny the passage of time. Then came the Friday when those six weeks had undeniably shrunk to one. It was the last day of the summer term with the finality of his last Russian class and an emotional farewell to the students. Finishing with History of English was nice but hardly emotional. On their jog by Ravenna that afternoon, Roger and Richie hid in their secret bower for a private exchange of passionate bodily fluids. Since there still was a whole week yet to make love, at least that joy didn't taste of finality.

On Sunday the two couples left their children with Willis and Rachel for the day and took a getaway drive up the coast. For a scenic adventure, they rode the ferry to San Juan Island and back again with long vistas of the Sound and wooded islands. Richie couldn't find his mountain, even low on the horizon, but maybe he was looking in the wrong place.

After an early dinner at a fancy waterfront restaurant, they retrieved their progeny, thanking Willis and Rachel profusely for dealing with the whole passel of kids. Back at home, Barbara said she'd had a fantastic day and was so glad to get to see those beautiful islands before we left for Michigan. Richie agreed but cringed. It wasn't time to think about that yet.

#

In the midst of Richie's towering passion, as I noted before, he wrote excruciatingly boring notes to Old Me, but once he let slip some prurient details. That was in comments about the next Monday's rendezvous, delayed slightly by Roger's dentist appointment. Describing their horny shenanigans in the big bed, he again personified their amorous apparati, referring to his own impudent Sir Roger Wrighte-Rowndleigh and praising Roger's impressive Prince Peter the Perpendicular. Fun silliness, but disappointingly (porno)graphic.

Tuesday afternoon Richie went sailing with Gene:

The winds were strong and erratic, making for quick course changes, and Gene clearly enjoyed himself at the rudder. For me there was lots of coming about and ducking of the boom, and the hiking out was thrilling as ever, like flying over the water. When eventually Gene took us in at the boat ramp, I helped him load the boat on the trailer as usual and saw tears in his eyes. When I asked the matter, he told me he'd sold the sailboat this morning, and this had been our last sail. He didn't tell me before because he says it's best if folks don't know when they're doing something they love for the last time. I hugged my old friend and thanked him for some of the most wonderful experiences of my life.

In the evening, Roger and Muriel picked Barbara and Richie up for another movie. They again left the kids in the care of sweet Helen. Later Richie wrote:

The movie was an artsy French flick called "Le Bonheur" or "Happiness," a promising title. This guy François has an affair and in a very French way decides to tell his wife Therese about it in order to share his happiness. Let's just say she doesn't handle the happy news too well. At least two audience members found the plot rather pertinent. ...

#

.vi.

...Roger drove us home. At the curb, I helped Barbara and Jake out of the front seat and leaned across to shake his hand. He tickled my palm and said, "See you tomorrow, good buddy."

Taking Jake inside to put her to bed, Barbara left me out on the porch to enjoy the street-lit darkness and ponder the strange French flick. Shortly, she came back and sat beside me.

"So how'd you like the movie, honey?" she asked, leaning on my shoulder.

"François should have kept his trap shut," I said with conviction.

"No, I don't think so," Barbara said. "He just wanted to share his happiness."

Going out on an unnecessary limb, I asked, "If I had a lover, would you want to share mine?"



Barbara squeezed my hand and said, "All I want is for you to be happy, sweetie." Then she stroked my cheek and said, "I know how hard it's been for you, Richie, but you're a good husband—and father—even if I'm not what you want." She started crying, and I put my arm around her to offer what love I could. Through tears and a snuffle, she asked, "Would you want to share my happiness?"

My heart leapt. Suddenly, the fantastic possibility that she's found someone else... I answered levelly, "Yes. I want you to be happy too."

Wiping her eyes, she smiled tentatively. "Well, I am happy, Richie," she said and squeezed my hand. A few beats later, she added, "I think I'm in love with Roger."

"Oh," I grunted, reeling from the implications.

"He said he wants me too."

"I see. That's not a very good idea, Barbara, darlin'."

"Why not? He says we should seize the opportunity—at least once before we go away."

I could hear Roger saying exactly that. "Don't do it!"

"Why not?" she asked more forcefully. "Now come on, Richie, honey. We both know that if you'd had a chance with Roger, you would've jumped on it."

Barbara was right. I did jump on it, with both feet. Now here was a chance for the open kind of relationship I'd imagined, albeit with my guy. Putting aside any jealousy in either direction, I figured that dear Barbara deserved to make love with someone who wants her. "Okay, go ahead," I said and added an off-handed encouragement, "I bet he's a great roll in the hay."

She gave me a hopeful, embarrassed look, and I realized how complicated this was all getting. It was probably time to come clean—before things got any more so. Steeling myself for the inevitable discussion of divorce, I confessed as gently as possible, "I know he is because we did it."

She stared at me for a moment wide-eyed and then laughed, "Oh, Richie, I don't believe you. You're just saying that because you're jealous. You're so sweet."

I couldn't let her think that on either count. "No," I honestly insisted. "All summer long we've been screwing each other silly. That's why I've been so happy."

"Oh, sweetie, all summer?" Barbara stroked my cheek again. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to hurt you," I mumbled. "Besides, it was going to be all over in a few more days." In the past I'd never had a problem saying goodbye to lovers, so now I could just let her have Roger. Like Gene had said, it was a blessing not knowing that yesterday was our last time.

Unlike the wife in that tragic movie, Barbara cuddled up to me affectionately. "I just want you to be happy, Richie."

I was amazed at her acceptance and said, "I want you to be happy too, darlin'. You should make love with Roger if you want to. I mean, seize the opportunity..." In her silence, I mentioned, "Once he suggested wife-swapping. I'm not interested in Muriel, of course—but you and Roger..."

She smiled at me weakly, embarrassed again, and wondered, "But when? How?"

"Muriel will be away tomorrow afternoon," I suggested. "You should show up instead of me and give Roger a big surprise. I bet he'd like that."

Snuggling close, Barbara was silent for long moments and finally said, "Maybe..." I couldn't tell if that maybe was about her surprising Roger or his liking it. Either way, I urged her again to seize the opportunity and said I'd take care of Jake. She thought a bit and said, "Okay."

#

Wednesday morning Richie went with Gene to get moving boxes for both couples. Then he and Barbara concentrated on packing up their few things to ship. After their agreement the night before, Barbara and he didn't speak another word about it. Calmly, with an affectionate understanding, they went about their business, be that breakfast, feeding or playing with baby Jake, or the quick walk to the drugstore for more baby formula. Barbara didn't seem at all nervous about the approaching adventure, at times even smiling at him more brightly than usual, and Richie almost felt good about sending his wife to his former lover.

Dear Me,

...At one-thirty I loaded wiggling Jake into her stroller, and we left Barbara at home, free to go up to Roger's for my regular two o'clock arrival time. Jogging slowly down the street pushing the stroller, I watched Jake wave her little arms about, clearly enjoying the scenery passing faster than usual. We jogged east across the campus, deserted now between terms, into an area where Roger and I had never jogged.

At the vista by the Library, I stopped to pay homage to my magic mountain looming sublimely over the Cascades like a fading dream and found myself in tears. I unstrapped Jake and sat her down on her blanket in the shade of a giant oak. She's good now at sitting up but sometimes rolls sideways, which always makes her gurgle happily and drool.

Then I noticed Ricky lurking guiltily beside the tree. He came over to sit down with us without a word. I unpacked Jake's bottle, and she grabbed it hungrily. When she'd lapsed into the feeding trance, my phantom started in on me. "Well, darlin', you surely did screw that up royally." I ignored him. "Why in the fuck didn't you tell her you want a divorce?" I offered no excuse, and Ricky fumed. "You're a coward."

Stung, I struck back. "You're a slut."

We glowered at each other for some moments, and then I apologized. Ricky did too. In our truce, he remarked more calmly, "Well, you better get around to telling her pretty soon. Time's a-wastin', darlin'."

Having had enough of her bottle, Jake dropped it like a rock. She grabbed my index finger and jammed it into her mouth, not sucking on it like before, but chewing with a harder spot on her lower gum. She was teething! I laughed out loud at the discovery, an amazing miracle, though one not totally unexpected.

Packing her up in the stroller, I continued our jog, and Ricky kept up beside us. Mostly silent, a couple times he sighed dramatically, but again I ignored his melodrama. Then Jake made known by a whimper an accident in her diapers, and Ricky took that as an excuse to conveniently disappear. While I changed Jake on a nearby bench, she kicked her feet and wildly thrashed her arms around. In the stream of her baby sounds I distinctly heard her say, "Daa." My jubilation was probably excessive.

To spend yet more of this unusual afternoon away from home, I jogged north to 17<sup>th</sup> to drop in on Betsy at Little Sweden for another chance to say goodbye to Rainier from my old balcony. She was surprised to see me out jogging with the baby, and I told her perfectly truthfully that Roger had something else to do. Looking around the room where I'd spent so many anguished months, I felt acutely what a different person I am now. Actually, it was Ricky who used to live in this room. Betsy remarked, "Remember when we met, Richie? I never imagined you'd be a happily married father."

"The best laid plans..." I noted ruefully. Cuddling Jake to my shoulder, I had to admit that I was indeed all of those strange things right now, more or less.

With Jake sound asleep in the stroller, I walked us home at four o'clock. Barbara was relaxing on the couch with a magazine and greeted us with no word or sign of anything having occurred in our long absence. I certainly wasn't going to ask if she had fun. She was elated about Jake teething and her first syllable.

In the evening Barbara and Richie walked up to Martha and Gene's for dinner and after a couple forgettable television shows, took Jake home for bed. Having said not a word about the elephant in the room, at their own bedtime, they just kissed goodnight. To be frank, Richie preferred not knowing what may have happened that afternoon in Roger's vast bed.

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Thursday morning the furor of moving shifted into high gear to finish packing the boxes of clothes and personal items. Meanwhile, Barbara again said nothing about her doings yesterday afternoon. Everything between them still seemed the same, gentle and affectionate.

Shortly before ten, Richie took off to the pool for a quick valedictory swim. Under the shower afterwards, he lamented briefly that his affair with Roger was all over, finished, and done with, and calmly concluded that was alright. After all, he didn't really love Roger—they were just in passionate love. He saw now that he'd never actually loved his boyfriends, but had just been in that kind of love with them too. Only Desai, his Indian soul-mate, had he truly loved, and now oddly, in a totally different way, he loved Barbara.

With his feelings more in focus, Richie walked home across the deserted campus, stopping once to dance on the sunny lawn, a farewell to Roger's arms. Back at the house, he found Barbara relaxing on the living room floor with Jake, who was happily rolling over this way and that, laughing and shaking her little clown-head rattle. Yes, everything was alright.

That afternoon Gene and Richie made several trips in the VW to the shipping office with a few boxes at a time to send to Papa and Nana in Michigan. Gene was excited about the impending trip and actually asked Richie how he felt about moving to Michigan. He replied easily, "Fine." Gene didn't pursue that, so Richie didn't have to qualify the feeling.

At their last supper in the apartment (dinners out planned for the next two evenings), Richie mentioned not hearing from Roger that day. He was angling for a conversation about the "swap," hoping to elicit something from Barbara about the experience. Instead, she said, "Oh, I forgot, honey. Muriel called this morning right after you left for the pool. Roger's grandmother in Spokane is real sick in the hospital, and they left this morning. They both said goodbye."

It took a moment for Richie to process this new information and realize that it didn't make any difference. The affair was over, finito. The certainty was comforting. Now he could turn his attention to that other pressing piece of business. Once they got to Michigan, he'd have to arrange the divorce.

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Suddenly unencumbered by the family's boxes as well as his summer lover, Richie spent that transitional Friday comfortably with the larger family group. Gene drove them all over town on a farewell tour, and they had lunch at the Space Needle again. Only once while they were walking around downtown, did Richie think that right now he and Roger would have been making love. He forgot all about that when they came to the old-book store.

Richie walked out with the two Doré volumes of Dante's "Divine Comedy." The hellish images and spectacular bodies in "The Inferno" and eventual empyrean visions in "Paradise" sold him on adding them to his collection. Of course, Richie saw them as symbolic for his own life, knowing that in just two days he'd escape from this year's inferno and again be a free faerie, free to fly around heaven like Doré's ecstatic angels. He figured the prophetic old books would fit into his suitcase with no trouble.

To celebrate Martha and Gene's departure the next day, dinner was with the entire cohort of Seattle friends, including Betsy's new man-friend Irving, a short guy with big glasses, at a fancy seafood restaurant at the Pike Place Market. They sat at a table overlooking the harbor and Sound with the Olympic Mountains iconically silhouetted against an igniting sunset. Richie wrote later in his journal about the sentimental event.

Dear Me,

...Our bon voyage toasts for the couple were flowery with heartfelt wishes. Gene's farewell toast was even flowerier, full of thanks to Seattle, bidding adieu to its natural beauties and futuristic architecture. Knowing that underneath he was missing our glorious summer of sailing, I teared up. My toast to the illustrious Cap'n Gene was for smooth sailing with hopes that he'll find another fine ship

someday. Thinking of my own faerie ship about to set sail once again, I cried some more and made a fool of myself.

In the middle of our splendid meal, the Twooth made a startling announcement to the table: "I'm moving to Chicago." With his master's in English, we'd all assumed our second Richard would go for his doctorate at U-Dub—like Betsy was going to do in Poli Sci. He said he decided to go there to look for a job instead and added with tears of his own, "I'll miss you guys, you know." I offered the dubious comfort of Chicago and Ann Arbor being not all that far from each other.

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Departure of the valiant beige beetle was set for early in the morning with a simple farewell at the curb. After many hugs and repeated proclamations of love, not to mention cautions about driving, Barbara leaned in the little window to give Martha a last kiss. Golden little Oná leapt up to the window for her last ear-scratch, and the trusty VW rolled away up the street. Awkwardly what with holding baby Jake in one arm, Richie put the other around Barbara, who wept on his shoulder.

The morning of that last day in Seattle, now almost alone together, they spent in long walks with baby Jake around campus and the neighborhood saying goodbye to the familiar places. After a last lunch at the Olympia restaurant, they took Jake on a last stroll to Ravenna, where the leaves were only faintly tinged with fall.

Dear Me,

...I bade farewell to all my special spots. That stream down in the ravine where the equisetum grows... That hillside where the faerie so often danced... Off in the woods over there to the north where Roger and I... Momentarily, I wondered again about Barbara's Wednesday afternoon with him, but dismissed the thought. If she didn't want to talk about it, that was fine with me. Now we'd both shown that we were open to and accepting of outside romances. It was thrilling to see my wishful thinking becoming a real possibility.

Leaving wife and daughter playing on the grass in the shade, I took off on a last jog around the park. As soon as I was alone, Ricky showed up with an accusatory look and jogged effortlessly along beside me. Knowing full well what was on his mind, I ignored him for a block. Then I sternly told him he'd just have to wait till we get to Michigan.

"Okay, darlin'," he grunted dubiously, "I'll do that, and when they're all safe with her folks, you'll get us a cab to a motel, right? C'est finit! Minimal anguish and all that?" I merely nodded. "Just checking," Ricky said with a playful flick of my chin and faded away.

Finishing my last Ravenna jog, I found Jake napping in Barbara's lap under a tree faintly red with autumn. I sat down beside them on the grass and rested peacefully. It was a strange, wonderful sensation of closeness for me, the three of us lovingly clustered under the tree, all alone in this special park, in this city that we're leaving tomorrow. It hurts to think about tomorrow, and I can only hope and trust that it will be for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

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Later that last afternoon, Richie took a while by himself and brought his journal up to date for the past couple days, right up to the above exchange. It was some days after he and his family landed in Ann Arbor that he managed to write about that dire last night in Seattle.

Dear Me,

...For our last dinner in Seattle, we took a cab and met Betsy and the Twooth at the Red Robin and were happy to get another table by the windows. I was really sad to see that Lane wasn't there and asked our new (also quite handsome) waiter where he was. He moved to Puyallup last week.

Over our burgers, the four of us reminisced about these past two years that have changed us so much. We recalled adventures, like Betsy's and my midnight invasion of the fraternity house next door

to Little Sweden, and those crazy summer nights of Keno in the casino. Somehow, it felt like a final summary, like ceremonially closing up one of my Doré folios.

Barbara started to talk about her hopes for Michigan, and I quickly got up with baby Jake in my arms to walk around and not listen. I couldn't bear to think about the future yet. Instead, I thought about Betsy and the Twooth and felt a surge of affection for them. They'd been such great friends. I truly wished them happiness here and in Chicago.

When the cab dropped us off at home, there were warm hugs with these two dear friends. In his hug, Twooth told me to be strong, and in hers Betsy whispered, "I'm so proud of you, Richie." I cringed inside and jokingly thanked her yet again for finding Oná a new home.

Since we needed to be up and out for our flight real early in the morning, Barbara and I went to bed almost immediately. Both of us were too excited to feel sleepy. After lying there restlessly for a while, we had sex. For me it was unusually sensual and pleasurable. Afterwards, it dawned on me that this had been our last time, and I knew it. It was terribly painful to think about.

Not knowing what I knew, Barbara fell peacefully and soundly asleep, but I was still wide awake. I stealthily got up out of bed, pulled on my pants, tiptoed around Jake's crib, and went out onto the dark porch. Sitting on the bench, head in hands, I agonized about doing what had to be done. When I looked up, Ricky was sitting beside me.

*[The following comments in the journal are what makes me think, as mentioned before, that the phantom Ricky wasn't a hallucination but a literary device for expressing Richie's mental processes.]*

When he started beating on his same old drum, I came to a decision and then in the face of his angry complaints and arguments spelled out why. In the first place, per the Golden Rule, I cannot just walk out on dear Barbara and the baby—I must not do such a heartless thing unto them.

In the second, I will not do it simply because Ricky selfishly wants me to. I'm not a silly faerie anymore, and he's no longer important to my grown-up life. I told him he's just the memory of the me I used to be, like a ghost.

And thirdly, I'd realized that for my own well-being, I don't have to leave them, indeed should not do it. Roger was right that the best way for me to make it as a gay man in this straight world is to be married and take lovers on the side. I told Ricky to get his pretty little butt back inside my head where he belonged. He threw me a sad kiss and disappeared.

Dizzy with relief, I felt suddenly full of hope, awash in a glow of well-being—but bone-tired. Back in bed, I slept peacefully, a gay man blest with a loving and beloved wife and daughter.

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### .viii.

Hallelujah! I made it. So ends the voyage of the Faerie Prince. Obviously, it's not a coming out story, but a tale of how and why a wild young faerie climbed into the closet. A going in story. Back then that was his only real option.

For extra time to fight my way through the later sections of this chapter, Mack and I have both stayed separately at our homes for the past two days. He was happy for more time to obsess over his video production. Yesterday, I even skipped gym, a sign that I was really busy.

Soon this afternoon I'll go meet my darlin' there for a workout, and we'll do dinner here. For me this evening's entertainment will be watching Mack's animation clip of part of book one of the epic. Meanwhile, he'll read this final chapter. (He already knows about Sir Roger Wrighte-Rowndleigh.) Then we'll think of something fun to do afterwards.

Before I go, I should explain that I was rushing to finish up Richie's story before Barbara gets here. Still a petite redhead, she's coming to visit for our grandson Jammes' thirteenth birthday, arriving the day after tomorrow. We're still the warmest (and now oldest) of friends, and I love us being the wise and loving grandparents Nonnie and Papou. I still call her my first

and Number One wife. My guy is very excited about meeting her, and I bet she'll like him. By the way, we've yet to speak about what happened on that long ago Wednesday afternoon.

Coming along with her is none other than Auntie Martha, also still a glamorous blond. Though living in different places, the bread-and-butter sisters have been thick as thieves all these years, and that magic charm has obviously worked on me too. They travel all over the place together and this summer took our eldest grandson Ike (14), Jake's son, with them to Spain.

To make this a real epilogue, I'm sad to add that we lost dear Cap'n Gene a few years ago. He and I got to sail together one more time on his catamaran on a Florida lake. But Richard the Twooth is still kicking after a brilliant career in journalism back in Seattle. So is Betsy out in Sacramento, and fairly high, I gather. I can't keep track of her marital status, but I believe that once she actually married clueless Bob. At least for a while. Maybe twice.

This weekend George and Mario—wait! News flash! They're adopting Syrian orphans, twin sisters three years old. My only advice to them is don't panic. Oh, Kevin's curls are now entirely platinum, making him look devilishly like Harpo Marx or maybe Marilyn Monroe.

So, as I was about to say, George and Mario will throw a party at their beautiful home for Barbara and me, a belated Golden Anniversary party, since our would-be 50<sup>th</sup> was just a couple weeks ago. She and Martha will get to meet my whole fascinating circle of young friends—who of course have already met them long ago in Seattle.

Maybe I'm just a sentimental old queen, but to bring my life poetically full circle, I can well imagine that this party might be the perfect romantic occasion for a certain someone to ask a special somebody to be his first husband.

**#END#**