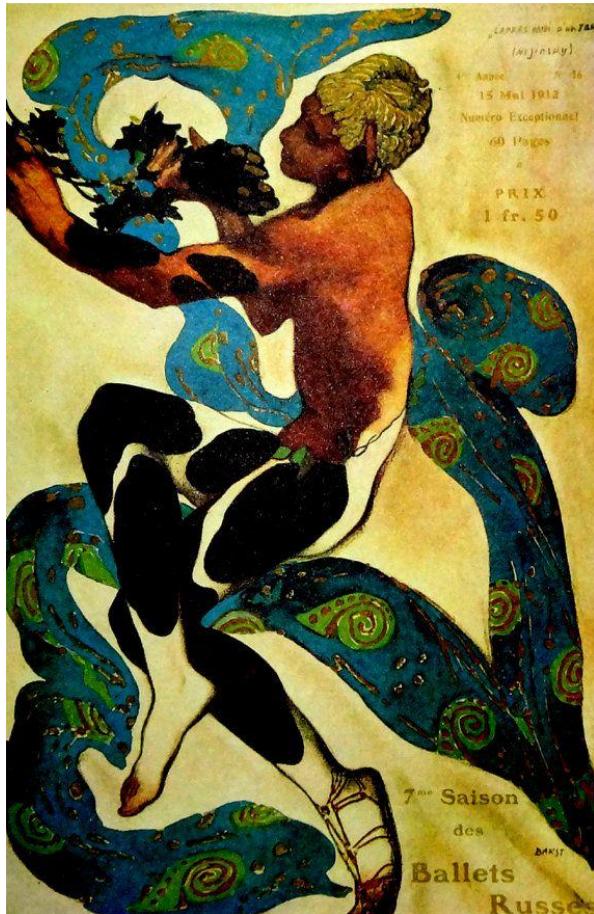


LORD WIND

A Memoir of My Second Coming Out
by Richard Balthazar

CHAPTER TWO: THE FAUN

—in which I enjoy an idyllic romance with a ballet dancer



Nijinsky in "Afternoon of a Faun" by Leon Bakst

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2.1 SINGLE AGAIN

—in which I'm set permanently free by divorce

Over the next weeks Barbara and I amicably negotiated our split. Just like when I'd left Ken in Covington, she and I weren't really saying goodbye but simply parting ways. Our love would also continue. A few trips to Ann Arbor got her the stuff she wanted right away like clothes and personal effects. Each time I stayed the night in a motel, but we got together for dinners out, and I enjoyed the warm feeling of family again. Though understandably reserved, Barbara was bright and positive as always, and the girls were enthusiastic about being with Daddy again, if only for the evening.

When I'd show up at the folks' house to deliver things and pick up her and the girls, Nana and Papa always closed themselves away in their room. Barbara explained that they were quite angry with me, even though she'd asked them not to be. I well understood their reaction to my leaving their darling daughter and grandkids. Considering the agreeable way Barbara was taking our split, I had to wonder if she'd decided already in Italy that the marriage was over, and I was merely doing the dirty work for her. Taking the fall, so to speak. Who knows?

On my first delivery trip, Barbara asked if we were just going to separate for a while or really divorce. I hadn't even considered a separation, and with the decision left up to me, I promptly chose divorce. I explained that I could never go back to living a double life with my real one always in hiding. Though I didn't refer to my philandering, Barbara surely recognized this implicit confession, and her wistful smile seemed to say she forgave me. At least that's what I hoped it meant.

With no emotional scenes, shouting, or imprecations, all our conversations were just as civil and loving as throughout our five years together. We'd never been "in love," or even "in lust"—just inappropriately intimate. Though Barbara didn't resist, today what I did might be called sexual abuse—or even worse. Our marriage was essentially "arranged" by the social mores of the time: Get a girl pregnant and you marry her. With much anguish, I had accepted my culpability and very reluctantly agreed to marry Barbara. Oddly, the familiarity and security of wedlock had bred deep love, but understandably, given my gay nature, not a shred of passion. When we met with the lawyer, he was surprised by our unusually congenial relations.

Of course, as discussed in the Prelude, divorce didn't end our relationship by any means. Ever since then, I've been her first husband, and she's been my first (and only) wife. Now that it's a real legal possibility, I don't even wish to find a first husband. It's fairly clear that now Barbara also doesn't need (or plan on) a third.



The Bellevue Apartments

Between the trips back to Ann Arbor, I managed to move out of the Brown Deer townhouse in Milwaukee and into an elegant third-floor apartment (#34) in a big old brick place with wings along the bushy walk up to its front door. 2508 E. Bellevue, right off Downer Avenue, was only a few blocks from my office on the UWM campus. Not needing the car anymore, on my third trip to Michigan, I gave Barbara the infamously purple and cream Dodge Dart and hopped a Greyhound back to Milwaukee.

By the time the fall term started, I was comfortably installed in the apartment with the rest of our furniture and feeling perfectly thrilled. The exhilaration was much the same as that of moving into the boarding house in Seattle, my first place of all my own. And now this Bellevue place was way better than that with big living, dining, and bed rooms, a perfect bachelor pad.

After all those years of being a husband, I settled comfortably into the blessed solitude of my new apartment and reveled shamelessly in being single again. Artistically, I hung up my various pictures on the walls and by the dining room window put a dieffenbachia, a tall stalked plant with broad green and white leaves, for a stylish touch of nature. I recall dancing wildly around the rooms celebrating my new freedom.



Nu Couché, by Auguste Renoir

As an impulsive housewarming gift to myself, I bought a lovely engraving by Renoir, an early restrike (unsigned) entitled "*Nu couché*," my first piece of "original" art. Over the decades, my art collection grew widely, including some of my own graphics and sculpture. I'd always loved Renoir's brilliant colors, but his simple engraving, though of a female, pleased my aesthetic eye. (In my undergrad art class I'd learned that art and beauty transcend gender.) Framed in fancy gilt, I hung it prominently on my new bedroom wall.

On the romantic front, my peripheral affair with lovable Len didn't long survive my return to Milwaukee. We saw each other a few times. Some months later, he off-handedly gave me a packet of letters written for me while I was away. By then I wasn't even interested in reading them and simply filed them away. Recently reading his faded-pencil letters at last, I have a hard time imagining what I as a 28 year-old intellectual would've thought about Len's adolescent effusions of passion and hope. Now my heart aches for the romantic kid.

But we only saw each other a few times, and then sweet Len must have figured I simply didn't have time for him and disappeared with no noise. Either that, or he may have found someone else. (A while later I heard that he actually did.) I wish I could remember something about those last days and nights with Len, especially one of our quite fine fucks, but there's nothing. Zilch. Since my journal writing had stopped back before Ken's and my trip to New Orleans, the end-game of the liaison with Len got lost in the mists of the past.

Meanwhile, in the loving letter from Ken in Covington, written on September 20, he wrote, "I miss you so much. I could never express how wonderful I felt when you were close. How can I say what it is to be without you? Just being where I could touch you made me feel better than sex ever did with someone else." In my new single-hood, his words exactly echoed my tender feelings for him.

Ken also wrote that he really hadn't wanted to break up my marriage and then closed with a promise to call as soon as he got a phone. In my reply I assured him that he wasn't the cause and explained that ending the marriage was something I had to do for myself, for my sanity. Ken had just shown me the way out. Though we continued to write notes to each other, all fall we talked by phone as much as we could afford. Our love endured. However, this is a good example how new technology has destroyed the important custom of letter-writing. Just as the new digital technology has changed photography. No more "hard copies."

#

In the new term I was teaching first and second-year Russian classes, another Intro Serbo-Croatian class, and a new one in Russian poetry (Symbolism, Acmeism, and Futurism). The latter, in translation for Comparative Literature, I called Russian Decadence as a marketing ploy and got about fifteen students.

As a lot of the poems for that course weren't available in English, I had to translate them, which proved a fun chore and titillated my own personal poetic muse. (You will soon see some of the results of that stimulation.) A few of my Futurist translations I lifted from my Master's thesis on an obscure mad genius named Velemir Khlebnikov. I can't resist giving you a short neologistic taste from a longer verse called "They" (1922):

*They're an azure eyefall,
They're a flighgration into never,
Their wings flap out of rhyme.
Fleegitives across the blue sky,
Nillusive 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.*

Considering myself an innovative pedagogue, in that class I gave tests in which the students wrote their own poems to illustrate their understanding of the various schools of poetry. Simplistically put, the Symbolists wrote vaguely about mystical matters; the Acmeists wrote simply in plain language about realistic things; and the Futurists took poetry beyond language and rational thought (as above). My student's tests were often wonderful poems and would have made a great chapbook, which I now wish I'd had the vision to compile.

Romana, the gypsy girl from last summer's Intro Russian and the hippie party, was taking both my poetry class and Advanced Russian. By now, especially after my gift of Ken's zucchini, she'd become a good friend. I was impressed by her quick facility with the Russian language and shared some of the "decadent" poems with her in the originals. I found Romana's artful excitement about writing her own poetry very fulfilling.

Amongst my Advanced students was also the beautiful blond Bulgarian Bogdan. He'd been my secret heart-throb in last year's Intro class and had inspired that (Symbolist) poem in the Prelude, "Message from Alpha Centauri." I hadn't seen him all summer and what with my romance with Ken (and Len), fickle admirer that I was, I hadn't given him a thought. Now I did.

Seeing Bogdan again that first fall morning raised a storm of emotion that soon subsided to simply an immense fondness. The desperate passion was gone. In our greetings before the class, Bogdan said he'd spent the summer on retreat in an Orthodox monastery in New York but was glad to be back to school—and to see his girlfriend Peggy after so long away. When I told him about my divorce, he just gave me a hard look that said many things or nothing.

The society of my students in the several classes gave me much satisfaction. It was a joy to feed their eager minds the fascinating details of communicating in other languages and especially to stimulate them to think in poetry. And I must admit that I personally found their appreciative attention and admiration tremendously flattering.

Apart from with Romana, I had very little to do with any of my students outside of our classes. I did miss last year's heartfelt walks and talks with Bogdan but made do with seeing his beauty only three mornings a week. A couple of the girls and one delicate Polish boy often visited me in my office, ostensibly to discuss lessons but fairly obviously with romantic, or at least affectionate, inclinations. I kept our consultations purely professorial.

Looking back on it now, I feel that fall term of 1970 at UWM was the epitome in my teaching career, the culmination of a decade of esoteric studies at three great universities, Tulane, Washington, and Michigan. Back in 1965-66 in Seattle, my Russian Lit prof, the late great Willis Konick (a significant character in my first memoir), had inspired me to become a professor. Now, though I didn't have my doctorate yet (more on that below), I had indeed achieved my career goal. It had been a long road, or as we used to say back in Arkansas, a long row to hoe, and getting there made me happy as a hog in hot mud.

#

In the first week of the term, Dr. N, Chairman of the Slavic Department, called me into her office. All the past year I'd rarely seen her except in faculty meetings or a couple times to discuss my course assignments. To my surprise, the middle-aged, attractive Russian woman graciously invited me to go on an outing with her in a nearby park.



Wisconsin Fall Colors

In casual conversation, we walked along a wandering path around a small lake. The Chairman was an elegant woman with the sophisticated air of former nobility common amongst Russian emigres, and she spoke with the genteel sweetness of older Russian women, almost flirtatious. As a handsome young man conversing intellectually with an older woman who was apparently not immune to my charms, I found it empowering to be secretly immune to hers.

Farther along the path, in the gilded shade of a golden ash tree we rested on a bench looking out at the brilliant conflagration on the other shore that shone upside down on the lake's mirror surface. We contemplated nature's orgasm for a moment, and then the Chairman sighed, "Our Russian word *yasen'* is a perfect name for the ash tree, don't you think?"

Recognizing her allusion to a scene in Turgenev's novel "Fathers and Sons," I replied appropriately (in Russian) that the ash was indeed very bright (*yasno*) and to complete the quote, added especially so in the autumn. From Dr. N's appreciative smile, I figured I'd proven my aesthetic sensitivity and academic worthiness and went on to remark on my plans for the decadent poetry class. She seemed pleased and impressed with my innovative approach.

As though in passing, Dr. N inquired how my dissertation work was going. (I'll explain that complicated mess for you later on.) As off-handedly as possible, I remarked that I expected soon to hear from my new committee chairman. Then, rather delicately, she inquired about how I was managing in my newly divorced state. Figuring this was the real point of our outing, I was positive about the life-change and my excited hopes for a splendid term of teaching. With a modicum of political sensitivity, I of course didn't remark on the real reason for the divorce, commenting carefully about looking forward to new romance.

As we continued our stroll along the lakeside, Dr. N complimented me on being a level-headed young man, a fine teacher, and dedicated scholar. Though she was sadly mistaken about the first matter, her other compliments and affectionate understanding made me feel great about this semi-official performance review.

#

After the past summer of such incomparable passion, I now went out to the bars simply, as we so graphically say nowadays, to dance my ass off. There was no shortage of dance partners. But as partners went, romance was the farthest thing from my mind as I rode the bus downtown to the Castaways. I relished the bliss of independence and the opportunity to be with my faerie self. Leaving Seattle four years before, I'd consigned sweet Ricky (that jaguar) to a cage. Now having been on the loose for several weeks, the wild thing needed to be tamed.

After my early years of going out in the French Quarter, whenever I ambled into the Castaways, I found the reek of beer and cigarettes welcoming, the necessary ambiance of night life. Not to mention the too-loud music and roaring undertone of shouted conversations. Nowadays, of course, the absence of tobacco smoke is even more welcoming, but there's no escaping the fumes of alcohol or sonic assaults. Though a non-drinker then as now, the sour odor of hops and spilled booze didn't and doesn't bother me. My carouse has other priorities.

In my exuberant new freedom, untroubled by carnal urges, I danced with great abandon with many guys, often with sweet Doug. His affair with Herman had amicably fizzled, and he was out carousing in much the same frame of mind as I, though he didn't decline the gratuitous trick. Living near the Bellevue, Doug gave me rides home, even if he'd found a guy. I'm sure he reported to his roommate (Len) on my wild and chaste dances. He informed me that Len was now seeing a blond guy named Bill, with whom I'd once dirty-danced.

So coming home to Bellevue alone was perfectly fine with me. My feline self quite enjoyed being alone with me. And we both rested confident that at one time or another in the near future love would once again take me by storm. I could feel it in my bones.

###

2.2 OUT OF THE BLUE

—in which I'm smitten by Kenny

After Friday's decadent poetry class, Romana, the vivacious black-eyed and -haired girl of apparently gypsy descent, invited me to dinner on the Columbus Day holiday, Monday, October 12, with a bunch of her friends. Remembering the intriguing group of artistic folks I'd met at her place during the summer, I was pleased to accept the invitation. She lived in a house only a couple blocks from my apartment.

In spite of her interest in and talent for things Russian, Romana's academic major was dance, and she was involved in an incipient ballet company. The dinner was attended by several members of that company, some of whom I remembered from her summer party. New was a beautiful young fellow who did a lot of leg extensions and stretches—obviously also a dancer. Introduced to Romana's Russian professor, Kenny gave me a captivating smile and quickly went back to his conversation with the other dancers.

I sat across the room chatting nicely with someone but fairly well stunned by the boy. It was all I could do to tear my eyes away from him. Kenny lounged laughing on a blue chair at a blue table beneath a blue-framed and —curtained window, on the sill of which stood a gleaming cobalt-blue vase with a clutch of periwinkle-blue flowers. At his elbow were plates and goblets of other blues, his shirt was a pale blue, and his jeans were the dark blue of new denim. Only his glittering eyes and hair were brown. That blue epiphany is still vivid for me to this very day.

Dinner was probably quite tasty, and the conversations over it very sociable, but Kenny and I had no other exchanges. As an experienced gay man, I accepted the sad fact that not all attractions must come to consummation. Understandably a bit discouraged, soon after dinner I took my leave to do some prep for tomorrow's classes. With a hug, Romana suggested I drop by the studio to see their dance class tomorrow afternoon.

Next, when I pitifully shook hands with Kenny, his smiling eyes glistened, and he said, "Please do come tomorrow. I'd really like that." Then he hugged me too, a second's strong, firm clasp that banished my discouragement and instilled sudden insane hopes of joy. My class prep and the next day's teaching were seriously distracted by memories of the blue boy and his arms around me. After the Russian class, Romana renewed the invitation, and I've no idea how I endured the afternoon till time for their dance class.

Right before the dance class was to start, I took a seat near the door along a blank wall. Across the narrow room was a mirrored wall with what Romana called a dancer's barre. The dozen or so dance students stood along the barre with Kenny as fifth down the row. When I'd walked in, he'd given me a little wave and pleased smile.

Fortunately, Kenny was far enough away that I could pretend to be interested in the others and the class in general, but my eye lingered on him most often and longest. Again, he was mostly in blue, the shirt outlining shapely shoulders and chest, and over black tights equally as descriptive, he wore thickly knitted blue leg-warmers. With most of the other students wearing shirts and leg-warmers of other colors, it was a Technicolor scene.

I was entranced by Kenny's slow plié, the curve of his arm and wrist, and the arabesque grace of his extended leg, but mostly by his constant joyful expression. His beautiful elegance reminded me of a poster I'd once seen of Nijinsky dancing "Afternoon of a Faun." I understood that his radiant smile was just part of the performance but let myself pretend he was performing especially for me. In a word, I found him transfixing.

In the break, Kenny came over to Romana and me with a greeting hug that took my breath away. Still a bit breathless himself, he asked, "Are you coming to my birthday party?" Romana saved me from surprised and confused speechlessness by adding, "Friday, the sixteenth, dinner again at my place." I quickly accepted the invitation and after another warm smile, watched Kenny turn merrily away to other friends on break. Of course I wondered how old he might be but couldn't very well ask Romana. My best guess was twenty-one or -two. When the students went back to their barre, I didn't have the strength to be transfixed again and left.

#

On one of our summer road trips, probably the one to visit Whitewater, Ken and I had stopped off at a quaint little antique shop, and I walked out with a curiously beautiful gold pin, something like a ceremonial order or medal. It bore a classically beautiful woman's profile on a field of red within a golden sunburst with silver rays, as well as a Greek inscription beyond my limited vocabulary. I'd pinned it on my shirt in celebration of being with my Ken.

By Wednesday morning I'd decided to give Kenny that special medal for his birthday. It just seemed like the right kind of gift instead of some silly piece of clothing or whatnot. I went to great lengths to box and wrap it magnificently and find a good card that I simply signed with best wishes as Rich.

There followed three more afternoons of not letting myself go to the dance studio, not even for a look-in. I think maybe I was afraid to see Kenny again, afraid that our next meeting wouldn't be as magical as before, that rude reality might rear its ugly head. Though physically elsewhere, each late afternoon I visited the rainbow class in my fancy, relishing memories of his beautiful movements and joyful smile.

At Romana's party she was serving the birthday cake and champagne first. We put our gifts for the birthday boy on a small table in the hall and mingled in the living room. I located Kenny immediately standing with someone in the doorway to the kitchen in deep conversation, and the instant I saw him he looked up, straight at me, with a quick smile of recognition.

Thus encouraged, I worked my way through the crowd into his vicinity and stood there dumbly looking for a way to join in the conversation. Kenny was fielding all kinds of comments and questions from guests, invariably vivacious and mind-shatteringly beautiful. The intense attentions some of the guys were paying him caused me pangs of unjustified jealousy.

As though sensing my emotion, Kenny turned to me and said, "I missed seeing you at the studio." I took his hand, wished him a happy birthday, and promised to come by again soon to watch them dance. He squeezed my hand, winked, and turned to another well-wisher. Fortunately, in just a moment Romana called us to the cutting of the candle-crowned cake.

I couldn't count how many candles he had to blow out, but he did it very theatrically. As we indulged in the chocolate cake, Kenny opened his presents, mostly clothes, some new leg-warmers, green, a book or two, and so on. At last getting to mine, he admired the wrapping but still tore it to shreds. He carefully lifted the medal from its cotton bed, looked at it closely, and then up at me with tender gratitude.

Pinning the red and gold piece on Kenny's shirt (once again blue), I lied that it was the Greek Order of Helen of Troy, awarded only to the fairest of the fair. He blushed at the flowery compliment. When a wag in the crowd asked if Paris was planning an abduction, I'm sure I also blushed. Kenny winked at me again, and I confidently left him to the adulators.

#

After five years of husbandly domestic helpfulness, I quickly realized that Romana was patiently harried in the dinner production and asked if I could help in any way. She said I could take out the compost and dump it in the pit in the back yard, and then she had to explain about the new age concept of composting. Pleased to learn something new, I luggered the pot of vegetable scraps across the yard to its back corner under a golden tree and scattered it on the pile. Per Romana's instructions, I shoveled it under and saw one of the worms she'd boasted about.

Looking up from the worm, I froze to see Kenny striding purposefully across the yard toward me. He marched up to me with that disarming smile, took my hand, and said, "I want to thank you again for the beautiful pin." Before I could even think to say, "You're welcome," he kissed me. Right beside the magical compost pit under the enchanted golden tree. It went on for a good long while, during which I tossed the shovel aside, and his arms wrapped around me. In a way it was a kiss that never ended—at least I can't remember it ever ending.

That kiss was like lightning and thunder announcing a storm of passion. Nor can I remember anything about the rest of Kenny's birthday party, who went where or when, nor what happened to whom. Perhaps fortunately, details are missing on the following weeks when Kenny and I were newly, mindlessly in love. It was the same old story, but newer than new.

I'm terribly grateful to recall as many specifics as I did about meeting Kenny. Oddly, all these preparatory details are powerful memories. Right up to that kiss. Though I'd love to be able to wallow in recalled touches and passionate scenes, I can't and will have to approach this love story in another way. Being a pack rat, I still have a packet of poems from the fall of 1970, a cycle I called "Autumn Dances." Mostly well dated, they're my best clues to the chronology of our love, the dramatic romance of an esoteric professor and a beautiful ballet dancer.

###

2.3 AUTUMN DANCES

—in which Kenny and I have an affair

Besides by Nijinsky, I'd always been fascinated by ballet dancers in general. As a matter of fact, all through my marriage I was futilely infatuated with the magnificent Rudolf Nureyev—and not just because he was a romantic Russian defector. Such tights! (It was poignant to learn later that he was gay and devastating even later when the plague took him.) So the mere fact that Kenny was a dancer—an exquisite faun—was half the battle for my heart. The fact that he was also star quality in the tights department cinched the deal.

Kenny's sudden kiss in Romana's back yard finished the job. With that kiss, he took my castle by storm and awoke my faerie prince from his enchanted sleep, sweeping us into an idyll of passion the likes of which I've never experienced since. Of course, I've enjoyed romantic affairs of surpassing happiness and fulfillment, but this romance with Kenny was incomparable.

The last half of October, 1970 passed in a blissful dream. I try to recall those glorious autumn days with Kenny, but like most dreams, they disappear with the dawn. I do know that he and I walked in beauty, beauty all around and within us. Our love was so exhilarating that on our walks there was often a jubilant skip in my step. My most emblematic memory is of us walking down a quiet autumn afternoon street as fresh-fallen golden leaves skitter along in a breeze, scattering like gilded spiders at our glorious approach.

That first weekend Kenny and I spent half our time in my splendid bachelor pad in the Bellevue and the other half in walks in the autumnal parks along the lakeshore. Our first physical intimacy happened naturally on my bed, but I trust your imagination is better than my faulty memory when it comes to amorous activity with a romantic, innocent, eager lad. Between fits of exploratory, inventive and exhausting lovemaking, our lakeshore walks were great sanity breaks, moments to breathe and figure out which way was up.

In our intimacies, we were pleased to find that our bodies were very much alike, though Kenny was a bit more solidly built and less hairy. Back in my French Quarter days, I'd flaunted my beautifully rounded bottom, but since he was a dancer, Kenny's butt was far rounder—right up there with the monumental nether cheeks on Michelangelo's David.

Maybe also because Kenny was a dancer, our love-making was graceful, energetic, and sometimes gymnastic. The only thing even vaguely like it was back in 1963 with my Chinese painter/dancer boyfriend who did a lot of writhing and sinuous slithering all over my body. Kenny didn't writhe or slither—just fornicated like an inspired rabbit.

It was a pleasant surprise was to find that our cocks (circumcised, of course, since he was Jewish, though as a Catholic, I had no real reason to be cut), were identical, both quiescent and erect. We were neither too small nor too large, but just right, like Goldilocks. That made 69-ing an especially feasible and profound intimacy. I'd never enjoyed sucking a big cock—a big one usually made it hard to breathe and even worse, harder to do it with any finesse.

#

Come Monday back to classes, I somehow managed to lecture coherently and then sit at Kenny's class adoring my dancer. Now, since it was apparently common knowledge that we were together, I wasn't shy about doting on my beautiful lover in his new green leg-warmers. We existed in our own little world of love, making calf's eyes and smiling stupidly at each other.

At the time I didn't think about it, but now I see our closeness on the walks and at his classes was the first time I'd ever been so openly gay out in public. Being "out" in a gay bar or

at a gay party was different, of course. Now Kenny and I were out in the straight world, albeit a sympathetic community. Romana and the dance crowd didn't even bat an eye at our mooning over each other or the occasional caresses we dared. It was a heady experience, that new freedom to be gay, as beautifully dreamlike as Encolpio with Gitone in the "Satyricon."

On that Tuesday morning, Kenny and I took a long walk along the lake beneath the cliffs of cascading colors. It inspired my first poem about our love.

BENEATH THE CLIFF WALK

*Scattered glitter of gilded leaves
On the beach where we incline
The whorled conchs of our ears
To warm-breathed mouths – and hear waves.*

*We sway like seaweed in the breeze,
Drifting fro and swirling back,
Weightless streamers of green,
Eddying in the lapping of that sea.*

10/20/70

In those first days, as I suspect all lovers are wont to do, Kenny and I shared life stories. He was from Milwaukee, living nearby with his mother Estelle and oldest brother Roger, a guitarist, who was straight. Their middle brother Dennis, a composer, lived in New York with his male opera singer lover. When we met, Estelle seemed well-adjusted to having two gay sons and was warm and gracious with me.

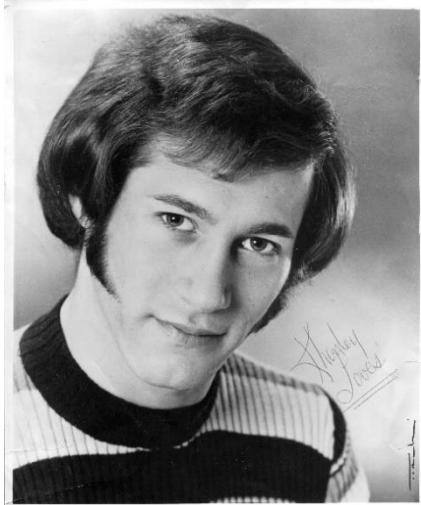
To my brief jealousy, I also learned that Kenny was currently involved in a long-distance love affair with a guy he'd met while visiting Dennis in New York. Respecting a great flautist who has now become a moderately famous conductor, I will diplomatically omit even his first name. My jealousy was brief, knowing that as possession is nine points of the law, Kenny was mine. We were birds in each other's hands.

Also, having my own long-distance affair with Ken down in Louisiana, I was starting to get serious doubts regarding that old saw about absence making the heart grow fonder. It wasn't that I felt any less for dear Ken. I simply didn't feel more. Now that we weren't birds in each other's hands anymore, our romantic relationship seemed to be held in suspended animation.

The news that kicked me in the head, however, was that Kenny was all set up to start taking classes in January at the impressive American Ballet Theater School in New York. From seeing him in his classes at UWM, I knew he was really a very promising dancer, but it had never dawned on me that he might be on a career path that would tear us apart.

Rather than make us feel desperate, this implacable limit freed us to love jubilantly and with abandon. From the very start we seemed in unspoken agreement not to speak of our amazing love for each other. It was a given, something that could never be said in mere words. We asked nothing of each other except to be together and never thought about the future when we wouldn't be. Somehow by never giving voice to them, our (or at least my) feelings became even more intense and exalted.

The next day, Wednesday, when we were both exhausted by passion, I wrote about our doomed affair:



Kenny's publicity shot

JOYRIDE

*My love mistakes this sudden weary
Weakness in our mad careen
For creeping farewells.
He dreads the race of streaking manes,
The wild pace of hooves pawing air.
He fears the slant, the lurch and pitch,
The canted slide of our fiery car
As our wheels cleave stars and whirl.
My love mistakes the roaring rush
Of wind round his glorious ears
For goodbyes.*

10/21/70

I saw our love as a chariot recklessly careening through the glorious days of autumn. I let myself think only of the blessed present with my lover, much as I'd done before with Ken. With him, I'd learned well that one shouldn't anticipate the end of joy. After much dreading it, the end of the affair with Ken came suddenly, almost by surprise, but knowing from the beginning exactly when and how it would be over with Kenny was a perverse comfort. It freed us to revel in our passion with impunity.

In a couple days, I was definitely feeling the weariness of rampant passion. On a rainy Friday evening in my campus office waiting for Kenny to show up, I took advantage of the lull to contemplate that moment a full week into our temporary affair.

WINDOW PAIN I

*Green fleur de Lys on blue, my drapes blur into folds.
On the pane a pool of waterlilies blooms in rainy darkness.
Watery ivy creeps in the window, red, sneaky on the sill.
My ruffled head rests its nose on the wooden window frame.
Out there is the night where you and I will pass together
When you've done your dancing, we'll walk in the rain.
But right now I must lie on the shore and catch my breath,
Just a moment before again.
I must hang limply on the ropes, gasping for air...
But the rain's breath is soothing.
It's nearly time for again.*

10/23/70

I had a print of Monet's Waterlilies hanging on my office wall.

#

As mentioned above, my jealousy about Kenny's flautist was tempered by my own affair with dear Ken. In our letters and phone conversations, I tried to be as passionate and devoted to him as ever, but in his early October letters he apparently sensed something. He wrote: "Your call really meant so much to me. Your letter made me wonder how long you would still have

any feeling for me. I've met a couple guys here, but I just can't get my mind off you. I really don't feel like making the effort to meet someone, especially when I have so little to offer. What I did have is yours. You don't have any competition for my affection."

His worry moved me to reply with more passionate assurances. In his letter of a few days later, Ken wrote: "I think that if it weren't for Lee [*my old friend*] I'd go nuts. I just can't seem to meet anyone. I had the same problem in Milwaukee my first year. ... I keep trying to imagine that you're just a little ways away and that you'll be back late, and/or left before I got up, but it's not working so good anymore. Seeing you will seem like a dream."

Ken's missing me so made me terribly sad and was a large part of why I hadn't even thought of romance while settling into the apartment and starting the new term's classes. He sent me a little pearl he'd found in an oyster, but it got smashed in the mails, which made me even sadder. He referred to seeing me because he planned to come to Milwaukee for Thanksgiving.

In the next week's letter, Ken remarked on having a shrimp boil that Saturday with Lee and some other friends and doing some mechanical work on their cars. He closed with: "Oh, why aren't you in my room where you belong?"

He got my next letter that Friday and wrote: "Some parts of your letter were so foreboding to me that I almost cried. I know you still love me but I know much of what you thought was love was loneliness, and as that leaves, so will any serious desire for ever moving somewhere with me." Perhaps he was more perceptive than I about the loneliness, but I think it was more of a matter of the effects of absence. Again as mentioned before, rather than making the heart grow fonder, for me absence seems to put love on hold. I felt for Ken exactly the same as before, but I figured while I had this important job in Milwaukee, there was no way I could think about moving away anywhere with anyone.

I was anguished by Ken's fears for our future but somewhat comforted when he added about going into New Orleans that evening: "...the short muscle-bound kid... cruised me, and I took advantage. Somebody finally got me excited. Leon has a lover, and I'll probably not see him again unless it's in his blue Corvette buzzing around town." He closed touchingly with: "I miss your tenderness, I miss your smile, I miss your hair, I miss knowing you're mine by looking in your eyes." Without Kenny, I'm sure I'd have been missing Ken's smile, hair, and eyes.

In accord with Ken's and my "open" relationship, I was immediately open with him about meeting Kenny, though I downplayed the drama involved and stressed the temporary nature of it all. I insisted it made no difference to my feelings for him. Ken's only comment about my new boyfriend was: "I guess I'm glad he's there for you." He countered with remarks about his continuing friendly affairs with two more Richards, one from Chicago and one from New York. The constellation of Kens and Richards was a curious phenomenon.

By late October when I was gasping for air, it was terribly hard to talk and write to Ken without getting effusive about Kenny. Or let on that I was so wildly in love. In my time with Barbara, I'd sharply felt the vast difference between loving and being in love, the difference between deeply caring for and desperately desiring someone. Now I still loved Ken deeply and tenderly, but the passionate desire I felt for Kenny was of a horse of a totally different color.

#

Saturday after my writing of "Window Pain," Kenny flew off to New York for a couple days to take care of some ABT business, and of course to see the flautist. I didn't worry much about that, except for Kenny's feelings for the guy, which I couldn't impugn but still regretted.

These days apart I accepted rather easily as moments to lie on the shore and catch my breath. Besides, as a teacher I had the academic duty to translate Russian poetry for my class.

I wrote another poem in the morning shortly before Kenny got back from New York.

SOON SNOW

*Something Indian in the autumn
Shuffles among the near-bare birches
Striped white like the bark of a canoe.
It's more October without you here.
My moccasins rustle in the litter of fall
While the golden leaves of our love
Drift gently to the ground.
The sky is the throat of a dove,
Gray, dreaming of soon snow.
The smell of wood smoke on the still air
Makes me balk at sharing you.*

10/26/70

Kenny returned quite excited about the ABT arrangements but less so about his visit with the famous flautist. Perhaps to spare me, he simply said the guy hadn't acted very romantic, which I took to mean they didn't have much sex. That was a comfort, and I gladly offered my lover extra affection to make up for my rival's shortcoming.

Meanwhile, walking alone to my office in a suddenly rainy morning and rejoicing that Kenny was back, I briefly confronted temporal nature of our love. In the few moments before my Russian class I wrote a poem about that glimpse of reality.



Kenny and I in a photo booth

FLASH OF RAIN

*By the mere and very fact that here,
Among the morning's faces,
Beneath my lop-ribbed umbrella,
While soppy clouds dribble
And pock misshapen puddles,
While bulge-veined brown leaves
Lie flat and turn up their stems like toes –
By the plain and simple fact that here
Wet-feathered houses scratch in yards –
By the senseless fact that here
I'm squishing along alone –
It's absolutely clear that you and I
Have only found the other for a time.*

10/28/70

Otherwise, we walked together in intimate companionship all over campus. I was a constant audience of one at his dance classes, and Kenny often dropped by my office and left me little affectionate and incriminating notes, which I blush to admit that I've saved all these years. I also blush at some of his language in those *billets doux*. Of course, we were both insane with

love, intoxicated by the freedom to love each other, and couldn't give a hoot about what anyone thought of us. I thought our love made us impregnable, invulnerable—unassailable.

We didn't spend every night together because Kenny couldn't leave Estelle all by herself too much. His brother Roger was often away or out late playing his guitar in various clubs. So it was more like every other night I had Kenny in my bed, which was probably a good way to avoid total sexual prostration. This reminds me: To go to sleep, he needed to rock his head back and forth on the pillow. I don't know why or how long he had to do it because then (as now) I usually fell asleep about thirty seconds after my head hits the pillow.

In between our classes, enchanted walks along the lakeshore, and huddled lunches together, Kenny and I hid away in my Bellevue apartment. Being a dancer, he'd been well exposed to classical music but knew little about chamber or symphonic. I self-consciously showed him how I'd used to dance to things like Tchaikovsky's Capriccio Italienne, and he laughingly called me his Isadora. We even did a sensuous *pas de deux* to Ravel's Bolero. While making love, we often listened to Vivaldi's Concerto for Two Horns and Strings.

I believe it was that Thursday when Kenny decided to decorate the upper window panes in my living room with a plastic film of colors, turning them into stained-glass patterns. It gave the room a church-ish feeling, and so we reverently made love on the sofa.

Friday evening we went to the Theatre Arts' production of "The Boys in the Band" and were duly impressed by the avant-garde gay theme of the play. It was my first experience with such liberated theater and probably Kenny's as well. Seeing the gay characters on stage seemed to validate our love. Afterwards, we'd barely made it inside the apartment door when I yanked Kenny's jeans down. For the first time in my life (and actually the only time), I knelt fully clothed before a fully clothed man and gave him a blowjob. Till then (and since), sex had always meant naked for me, and it felt bizarre and surreal to do it in clothes. He let me undress before returning the favor.

Lunching on Saturday at the drug store on Downer (across from campus), we talked about the Halloween party that night at Herman's place (just up the block a ways). Spoiled by earlier Mardi Gras masques, I wasn't hot for getting into some spooky getup, but Kenny said he wanted to go as the Wicked Witch of the West. He made a witchy expression with face and hands at me, suddenly lamented, "I'm melting!" and slumped in an almost liquid flow down off the booth seat onto the floor under the table. In my earlier debauched and later straight years, I'd had little exposure to classical gay culture and had never seen "The Wizard of Oz," but I laughed myself silly at Kenny's impromptu performance on general principle.

Understandably, we didn't even get it together to go to Herman's party. Far more pressing and much less spooky matters took us all night to attend to. I was thrilled that the next morning, apparently infected by my poetic bug, over his breakfast Kenny wrote a poem:

*Strawberries and flowers, cookies and love,
This is me this morning knowing you are near.
Gray, cold skies and wind-swept streets
Fill my mind while you're in the next room.
My mind is boggled with everything, everyone,
But with you I am now, and with you it's
Strawberries, flowers, and cookies filled with love.*

###

2.4 DOING IT AGAIN

—in which I try to juggle Kenny and Ken

November began with the momentous news that the new Milwaukee Ballet Company would produce Leo Delibes’ “Coppelia” in December. It would be at Uihlein Hall, the city’s main performance center. Kenny’s best news, however, was that he, as well as Romana and others of our dancer friends had been chosen for the company. I was inordinately proud of him.

In the late afternoon, we went to the jewelry store to pick up the rings we’d ordered, simple silver bands with raised letters of our names, each to be worn by the other. Poetically, I’d introduced another narrative into the fantasy of our love, so to speak. I was a medieval Russian prince named Ruslan and Kenny a Mongol Khan named Khenley. (Note how he signed that

earlier publicity shot to me.) Those were the names on our rings. In the narrative, Khan Khenley was my personal conqueror, of course. It inspired some silly mock epic poems in Old Russian with sexual under- and over-tones that only I (or an Old Russian) could appreciate.

Afterwards, in an antique store, I bought a small blue bottle with an attractive round apple on two sides, reminiscent of that first blue epiphany at Romana’s table. I showed my lover how the apples looked just like his beautiful behind. (His buttocks were as firm as apples.) Then, to celebrate the loving rings and Kenny’s success, we went to a nearby restaurant for a splendid candlelit dinner. For the appetizer, we had oysters on the half shell, my forever favorite thing, and I found a pearl. Just a tiny thing, we both marveled at its perfect whiteness. To save it, I corked the treasure up in the little blue bottle. Remembering the crushed pearl that Ken had sent me, love came somehow full circle. The bottle still lies in my box of keepsakes, the pearl glowing pale blue, and the apples still there.

The Pearl

#

Rehearsals for “Coppelia” took up a lot of Kenny’s time, but we spent every moment we could together. I sat in on many of the rehearsals, as well as his classes, and basically became a ballet groupie. On that inside track, I managed to worm my way into the company as a non-dancing extra, a village fellow to appear in Acts I and III and an attendant in Act II. It was perfectly entralling to watch Kenny rehearse for the czardas. Whenever I hear anything from “Coppelia” nowadays, I’m transported back to that blissful time.

For a few such blessed weeks, we loved through rehearsals, classes, many company dinners at Romana’s, special meals together in the little place on Downer, and even food Kenny cooked for me in my kitchen. One of the notes he left in my office read: “I’ll be cooking for you, feed your belly and make you nice and fat!” He didn’t succeed in making me fat, but he did make me prodigiously happy, too happy (and busy) even to write any poetry.

The others in the company were great fun as well. One of the girls named Janine was a wonderful, dramatic conversationalist over our dinners. The fellow I’d already met the past summer, Robin, was quite a queenly type, and we hit it off well. I loved to sit cuddling with my

Kenny on the sofa, accepted by all the other folks. My first experience of acting demonstrably gay in “mixed” society outside of a gay bar was perfectly thrilling.

As a matter of fact, Kenny and I never went out to the bars even once. It had never been a part of his young life because of the openness of the dance/artistic world, I guess, and I didn’t miss it at all. Okay, sometimes I missed dancing wildly in the Castaways, but right then living and loving took up all our time. Many times in my mind I danced the czardas with my love, leaping and stamping by his side, and the imaginary motion would leave me breathing hard.

#

Meanwhile, I took the Greyhound to Ann Arbor for Aimée’s third birthday. It was easy being a loving daddy now that roles were re-defined. Barbara had written about how they missed me, but I figured that at four and three maybe they weren’t all that focused. Apparently Jake had been rather moody, but it mostly had to do with the strange new environment in Michigan, having no friends, and being around adults all the time.

Barbara was warm and friendly with me, and we met with the lawyer to work out more details. I’d been sending her what money I could for child support, but she wasn’t seeking alimony so was depending heavily on her folks. That was becoming an increasingly difficult situation for an adult with children of her own. Back home in Milwaukee, I made sure to write Barbara and the girls frequent letters with my love and news of the dance production.

As mentioned before, my beloved Ken and I talked weekly on the phone for a precious few minutes of each other’s voice and wrote brief letters in between. In recent weeks, our conversations had gotten fairly low-key romantically speaking. He told me about things happening around St. Paul’s (including his new friendship with Brother George mentioned earlier), and especially enjoyed the school’s sports activities and the swim team.

Of course, Ken told me all about his weekend trips to New Orleans and remarked on nice guys he met. All I had to talk about was the great fun of the ballet production and the various dancers and say how much I looked forward to seeing him at Thanksgiving. Truth be told, I felt a bit anxious about his visit wondering what it was going to be like making love with Ken again after almost three months. And after so completely giving my heart to Kenny.

For Thanksgiving, Kenny’s middle brother Dennis, the composer, arrived on Wednesday, and that evening I went out with them and their mother Estelle to a local tavern, where the oldest brother Roger performed on his guitar. All three brothers were quite good looking, resembling Estelle strongly. With his family’s Thanksgiving blessings, my beautiful dancer came home with me. Since it was totally irrelevant to our grateful fornication, we didn’t mention Ken’s arrival tomorrow. Kenny left too early to go back to Estelle’s, and we kissed goodbye with bright plans for Sunday, three whole days away.

#

Thanksgiving afternoon, I took off my tell-tale silver ring and splurged on a taxi to Ken’s folks’ place on the south side. Gary had picked Ken up at the airport in Chicago, and they got home just as I was getting out of my cab. He got out of the car, and we stared dumbly at each other. Seeing Ken again in the beautiful flesh made me weak in the knees. Right there in his parents’ yard in broad daylight, he pulled me up in a kiss. It made me weak all over.

Inside, in addition to father Erwin, mother Marie, and Joanne, I met oldest brother Erwin Jr. and sister-in-law Margie, with their three well-behaved pre-pubescent kids. We ate the holiday meal in sociable conversation, meanwhile rubbing legs under the table, after three

months the touch still electric. As soon as we'd eaten, Ken simply announced that he and I were going out. In the yard he kissed me again, moaning about wanting me so much.

I asked why then were we going out, and we didn't. Instead, we hopped into his red Mustang, which Gary, the loving brother, had gotten all fixed up for Ken, and drove straight to the Bellevue. Once inside, we took several minutes for more welcome-back intimacies. Then I gave him a ten-second tour of the dining room with its elegant dieffenbachia and the living room, where Kenny's touch wasn't obvious on the dark windows.

Next on the grand tour was my bedroom with its gilt-framed Renoir, and it ended ten seconds later (well, maybe thirty seconds later) on the bed with the two of us reclining nude. I caressed his lean body, so strangely softer than Kenny's muscular chest, and another of the past summer's miraculous nights began. Unmistakably, Ken's desire was even greater than before. With a first-ever triumphant grunt, he thrust his cock up my butt, as the French so graphically say, kissing my heart. When I'd kissed his heart just as graphically, we slept. Ken cuddled up again spoon-fashion, arm thrown round me, so much closer than sleeping with Kenny, who always sprawled, arms and legs akimbo.

In more ways than one, it was hard to get out of bed in the morning, but we finally needed coffee. Out in the living room, Ken remarked on liking the stained-glass effect, but I didn't elaborate. Over our coffee and jelly-toast, he asked if he'd meet my dancer. I asked if he really wanted to, and Ken said no. I assured him that then he wouldn't. Those were our only comments on the matter of my other lover.

#

Back at Ken's folks' house, we found a huge breakfast waiting. Afterwards, his mother Marie asked Ken to take a bunch of turkey leftovers over to his Aunt Alice. Rolling his eyes, he took the packages, and we drove to another south-side neighborhood. On the way Ken warned me to get ready for something weird. We stopped at a square two-story house with the porch across its front piled high with cardboard boxes. I guessed maybe his aunt was moving, but Ken just laughed and said to wait and see.

He rang the doorbell and immediately knocked loudly on the door. For a couple minutes there was no sound from inside. Ken waited patiently, occasionally blowing me a kiss but saying nothing more. Then there was a shuffling behind the door, the sound of two locks turning, and it opened a crack for a white-haired old lady to peer out at us.

"Oh, it's you, Kenneth!" she exclaimed and unchained the door. "I was so afraid..." She mumbled something else and opened the door for us. I followed Ken inside and stopped, staring in amazement at sacks and boxes full of what looked like trash stacked in veritable cliffs to the ceiling, vast piles of papers and magazines, mountains of mixed items. Wending its way between them was a narrow canyon leading into the depths of the house, which probably was the dining room, equally stuffed with things.

We followed Aunt Alice along the path into her kitchen, where there was actually a modicum of space to turn around, as well as a corner of the table and one small section of counter unencumbered. While the old lady somehow jammed the leftovers into her crammed refrigerator, Ken looked at me and rolled his eyes. I was beyond amazement.

Alice told us to wait a minute because she had something to give Ken. When she scurried off along the path and turned into a side-canyon, Ken pulled me close for a kiss. I was still stunned and even more so when Alice came back with a piece of extension cord, minus the plug. Handing it to Ken, she said, "You're so scientific, Kenneth. I know you can use it."

Thanking her kindly, he gave her a big hug and me a wink over her white head. After a few inquiries about how she was doing and answers that didn't make much sense, we followed the canyon back to the front door and took our leave.

Aunt Alice quickly double-locked the door behind us. Only then did Ken explain that she was his dad's older sister and going senile. I said the house was a fire-trap, but Ken worried mostly that a pile of her junk would fall on her. Either way, it was pure madness. In recent years the phenomenon of hoarding has become more widely known, but back then I'd never imagined such a thing. The memory of Alice's mad-house still gives me the heebie-jeebies.

#

After delivering the left-overs, Ken and I went to the Conservatory domes and walked happily through jungles and deserts talking about everything under the sun except Kenny. In an especially bushy, almost private section of the tropical jungle, we stole a quick kiss. Now that I was with Ken again, the past several weeks with Kenny, splendid though they'd been, were forgotten. Obviously, I had a great talent for loving the one I was with. When we left, a cold drizzle had started, and we resorted to the Bellevue for the rainy afternoon in my dry bed.

Having eaten the obligatory reprise of the turkey dinner with Ken's family, we made the round of gay bars that evening from the Ten Hundred to the Castaways. Ken's friends were happy to see him back and heard his praises of New Orleans and the hot numbers in the bars there. Doug showed up and was surprised to see Ken in town. He scolded me for disappearing so many weeks ago. When I told him about Kenny and rehearsals for "Coppelia," he nodded toward Ken and said, "So you're doing it again." No doubt his roommate Len would be fully informed of my new double play. We danced a few numbers while Ken caught up with other friends, and then Doug set off in pursuit of a young man he'd been on the lookout for.

After his gangly fashion, Ken danced with me a couple times, and then we went across the street to the Rooster, where he greeted more friends. While we hung affectionately on each other, he proudly told these guys about his wild life in New Orleans, a more enthusiastic tale than he'd ever told me. When he was asked how long he'd be in town, I was amazed to hear Ken say that he'd be leaving tomorrow.

I grabbed him by the throat with an out-raged "What?!" He sheepishly explained that he'd be driving the Mustang home now that it was all fixed and had to get back by Sunday afternoon. On the way back to the Bellevue, he apologized for not telling me about his changed plans but didn't want to upset me. I'm sure I would've been even more upset the next morning to learn about this early departure.

Learning about it that night was painful enough. Our love-making was especially poignant with the fore-knowledge. Every kiss and caress was even more intimate and not just a little bit desperate. When our mouths weren't otherwise occupied, we moaned about how much we love and would miss each other. I carefully hoarded the memory of Ken cuddling up to my back in his tender spoon-fashion. Though by morning we'd inseminated each other at least twice, this second separation already hurt far more than the first.

Our late breakfast cereal was eaten in silent contemplation of faces and loving eyes, etching them in our memories and hearts. With a pang, I realized that this certainly was great practice for that inevitable morning when Kenny... Ken reminded me that he'd be back for Christmas too, and we grasped at that straw for solace. When he absolutely had to go, we held each other at my door, again knowing our love would endure.

###

2.5 SHOW TIME

—in which I portray furniture in a ballet with Kenny

Left there so unexpectedly alone in my living room, I figured I was getting pretty good now at saying goodbye. That was a good skill to have in the gay life where everything was so impermanent, all affairs so temporary, no matter how long they lasted. The colored windows over the sofa reminded me that when Kenny too had to go, our love would also endure.

In my amorous experience, I'd never had a love affair truly end. Our times together might end, but our loves always survived, at least in my mind and heart. At that point in my young life, any affection I'd ever felt for someone was still quite alive and dear. Though he was no longer a boyfriend, I still felt that great tenderness for sweet Len of last summer, and even after our separation, I still felt that amazing love for Barbara and the family. Our times together were simply over, but not our feelings for each other.

It being Thanksgiving, I couldn't help but think about a special love still burning bright in my heart, even then nine years later, my very first true love Peter. That's a story well worth telling, but suffice it that every Thanksgiving since I've lived that unrequited first passion once more—with feeling, as they say... And that brought me full-circle back to beloved Kenny.

Suddenly with an unplanned Saturday, I naturally called Estelle's to see if my sweet dancer was home. She regretted that he wasn't—gone shopping with Dennis—but he'd call me soon as he got back. When I'd thanked her, Estelle invited me for dinner and promised it wouldn't be leftovers. So I still had no Saturday plans until Kenny would call me back, which essentially meant sitting by the phone. Since Ken and I hadn't slept all that much last night, I believe I took a nap.

Kenny called in mid-afternoon to say he had a rehearsal in just a few minutes. Dennis was coming and I should too. Retrieving my Khenley ring, I obediently hightailed it over to the dance studio, where he greeted me with a happy hug, and Dennis and I took seats along the wall. They were rehearsing the czardas, and several times I almost swooned over my lover's leaps and kicks. Once Dennis leaned close and whispered that Kenny was really in love with me. To that wonderful news, I replied nonchalantly that I'd thought maybe so.

Outside after the rehearsal, we found a light snow falling. On the cold walk to their house, as Kenny and I huddled close under his umbrella, I said a little bird told me he was in love with somebody, and he simply blew me a kiss. Laughing, Dennis remarked that we were just too cute. I again reveled in how easy it is to love the one you're with.

While waiting for Estelle to finish cooking dinner, the three brothers and I sat in their living room and paged through old photo albums. All of the boys were also perfectly adorable children, and Estelle was stunning as a young mother. However, there was no picture or word of a father. In all our talks, Kenny had never mentioned one, and I politely didn't ask.

As eldest brother, Roger sat at the head of the table and carved the pot roast. He took the opportunity to quiz me further on who I was and was surprised to hear about my family and the divorce in process. Dennis remarked that it was the right thing to do, and Estelle's rueful expression made me wonder if maybe something of that sort may have happened to them.

Besides being their Jewish Sabbath dinner, it turned out to be a fond farewell dinner for Dennis, who was leaving in the morning to go home to New York and his lover Jim. He entertained us with the story of his current composing project, an operetta for children, scheduled for performance in the coming spring, and invited me to see it when I'd come to visit Kenny. I

gladly accepted his invitation but choked on the ominous pretext. After all, Kenny and I still had two months left together, and we were making no plans for afterwards.

#

After dinner, as it had meanwhile gotten very cold outside, he and I bundled up to walk back to my place. Kenny made me put on his thick cardigan sweater under my coat, deep blue with a shawl-color that he often wore as part of his iconic blue image, and donned his luxurious rabbit-fur coat. The snow was already piling up on the sidewalks.

Our evening at Bellevue was full of music, cookies, kisses, and much more. Kenny told me how terribly lonely he'd been for me in our two nights apart, but we never referred to the reason for our separation. My two splendid days and nights with Ken receded into memory, and the dream of Kenny awoke in its full glory. While we lay deliciously tangled up on the living room rug amongst discarded clothes and cookie crumbs, I again mentioned the tattle-tale bird. Coyly, Kenny showed me the naughty things he planned to do to his unnamed beloved.

To see Dennis off in the morning, Kenny went home, and I walked with him a way through the still-falling snow. Back at the apartment, I ate the last cookie and settled in for my first good night's sleep in three days. In the brilliant Sunday morning, I sat at the breakfast table looking out at the whiteness and for the first time in a month, ground out a new poem. Then I put on Kenny's blue sweater again and went for a walk in the fresh snow with my camera.



Milwaukee Snow, 1970

NOW SNOW

*Days have blown through my arms
Like the bare limbs of elms,
And I have groaned with laughing
Like the creaking of the wind.
Now snow curls round my fingers,
And the trees grow hoary leaves.
We walk in the scrunching night
Of a close, soundless street,
Secret as rabbits nuzzled up,
Huddled under a cottony bush,
And even with a spray of flakes
Speckling your back a block away,
The warm smell of your fur stays.*

11/29/70

#

That cold week, looking so stylish in his fur coat, Kenny and I trudged through the snow to our classes and rehearsals bundled up like Arctic explorers. Breaking out my long navy pea coat, scarf, galoshes, and peaked stocking cap, I walked beside my furry friend feeling like a fireplug. But even with double socks, my toes nearly froze. When I'd tried to give Kenny back his blue sweater, he gave it to me for a present. (Call me an old fool, but I still have it.)

Though it was poetic and picturesque, having grown up in the South, I really didn't like frozen precipitation. The big snowstorms I'd suffered through before in Michigan had usually left me helplessly angry, and while not terribly snowy, Milwaukee's last winter with its weeks of

forty and fifty below had made me furious. But this snow wasn't so bad what with Kenny to keep me warm—until he stuffed that snowball down the back of my neck. That was different.

Rehearsals ruled our afternoons and evenings with only short breaks to grab a bite somewhere. Monday they were still on campus, and on Tuesday we moved downtown to the new Performing Arts Center's Uihlein Hall. On that huge stage, the troupe got serious. Even I felt the artistic tension climb several notches among the dancers and their lovely teacher Lupe Serrano, apparently a famous dancer herself. I'd never before experienced the incredible excitement of an actual production coming together, and I watched Kenny's eyes glaze over with the happiness and hope.

The past weeks I'd simply hung around like a ghostly presence on the sidelines doting over my lover, but now I had to play a role—basically as furniture. The Artistic Director Jury Gotshalks patiently explained the positions I should assume and how and when I should shift from one to another. It required a lot of concentration and got in the way of my doting on one of the dancers in particular. I had to pay attention to other dancers as well.

Artistically, I considered my role to be stationary dancing, occasionally moving from one pose to another, and in between freezing like a statue. Hardest of all for me were the pretenses of interacting with the other extras because that involved making conversational expressions and gestures—what I think is called acting. At any rate, it was terribly exciting to be furniture in a real ballet production. I quickly learned when and where to stand along the village scenery, which I also learned was called "blocking."



—Journal Photo

Ted Kivitt and Cynthia Gregory star in the Milwaukee Ballet Company's 'Coppelia' at the Performing Arts Center.

On Tuesday the stars, Cynthia Gregory and Ted Kivitt from American Ballet Theater, showed up for the stage rehearsals, and I watched in surprise as they mostly just walked through their moves, maybe half-heartedly practicing certain fancy sections. Meanwhile the *corps de ballet* as I'd learned to call them, danced their pieces at full tilt. I also did my statuesque best.

At dress rehearsal the next day, our costumes made it feel almost real, at least as real as a dancing doll could be. Kenny was romantically dashing in a soldier outfit with flouncy pants and tall black boots. I felt authentically peasant-like in my baggy pants and blousy, embroidered shirt. And meanwhile, in her gauzy tutu and elegantly *en pointe*, Cynthia was fairy-like as Swanilda, the doll magically come to life.

She and Ted, appropriately heroic and hunky in his tights and tiny tunic, were dancing now for real, beautifully, and this peasant didn't have to act like he was paying attention. I couldn't help but think that someday my Kenny would dance such roles (and be even hunkier), but I had to suppress that ominous thought. From the admiring look in my lover's eyes, I suspected he was thinking the same thing.

"Coppelia" opened on Thursday and played on Friday as well (12/3-4). When we saw the program, I didn't know whether to be amused or upset: They'd

named me David, but of course, it was a credit I wouldn't be putting on my resume. Backstage as we were wishing each other to "break a leg," Kenny called me David instead of his usual affectionate Ruslan.

In our stage and dress rehearsals, I'd gotten used to that great dark blankness beyond the edge of the stage as a constant point of reference for the scenes and my expressive poses. Now when the curtain drew back, it was just as dark out there, but you could sense the myriad eyes of an audience watching us from that darkness.

In my scenes on stage, I followed direction to watch the stars and other dancers, as riveted as anyone in the audience, and when I could watch Kenny dance, it was hypnotic. He performed in the mazurka and czardas in the first act, in the Arabian dance in the second, and in the Dance of the Hour in the third. Though I'd so often seen him rehearsing, now in this real live performance, I selfishly felt that his dance was for me alone. Backstage during our first intermission, Kenny whispered that it was. Nowadays I can only lament that I have no pictures of that splendid performance, only these sweet memories.

In the distraction of watching him, as well as the other dancers, it was all I could do to remember my blocking for the scenes. Once on opening night I stupidly moved at the wrong time, almost walking into another extra. Friday night I got confused and turned in the wrong direction for a scheduled "chat" pantomime, and the poor peasant girl had to improvise. Those being my only gaffs, I considered my debut performance a success. No ships were sunk.

What totally blew me away—it had never happened in any of the rehearsals and so came as a total surprise—was that first burst of applause. Sure, it was really for the dancers, but I made sure to snatch part of the amazing roar out of the darkness for myself. That thunderous approval and appreciation from our invisible audience was honey to my ear and fire in my heart. Each time it erupted, I was transported and soon got hooked on the feeling. Like the dancers themselves, my every motion was made in delicious anticipation of applause to follow.

On Friday night at the last curtain call, I stood inconspicuously bowing in the back row and exulting in the acclaim. As we filed off-stage and the last clapping stopped, the silence was deafening. Backstage several of the girls, including Romana and Janine burst into tears, and most of the guys just stared off into space, dumbly stunned. Cynthia and Ted wandered among the corps very professionally congratulating everyone on great performances, even me!

The stars also came to the cast party at Romana's. She put out a great spread of food that we all gobbled down like starving goats. After the feeding frenzy, Kenny and I sat close on the sofa, and I listened to his talk with Ted about the ABT School. Ted assured Kenny that it would be the greatest experience in his life and that he looked forward to them seeing each other frequently. I jealously hoped not too frequently but remarked only that it would be good for my lover to have a friend there in the big city. Besides that consarned flautist.

The party went on till the wee hours when Kenny and I finally staggered the few blocks back to my place and collapsed, too exhausted even to make love. When we woke up late on Saturday morning, the cruel reality hit us in the face: The magical production was over and done with. Kenny moped over his coffee, and in my first post-production depression, I moaned about there being nothing to get excited about anymore.

Apparently taking my moan as a challenge, Kenny hauled me back into bed and created some uniquely memorable excitement. For our only coitus that I can recall explicitly, he spread his powerful dancer legs wide in the splits for me to enter right up to the hilt. I penetrated his beautiful body all the way up to the eyebrows, both Kenny's and mine.

###

2.6 THE REPRISAL

—in which homophobia shoots me down professionally

Miraculous sex notwithstanding, the next week of December after the performance still felt anticlimactic, and there was still that day looming in January, that *Dies Irae, dies Illa* to ignore as best we could. Studiously oblivious of it, Kenny and I savored every moment of loving left for us, every delectable red apple at lunch, every caressing touch or word on close walks by the lake or strolling arm in arm on campus.

No matter that there was snow and the two of us were bundled up in fur and pea coat. I usually wore the blue sweater underneath my long dark coat so whenever I wanted to, I could feel the warmth of Kenny's arms around me. (That sweater's magic would be desperately needed come February and an evocation of his embrace for many years after.)

Before the end of that week, Thursday the 10th to be exact, I was called after my class to the departmental Chairman's office. With none of last fall's friendliness, no small talk, and no explanation, Dr. N. coldly advised me that my teaching contract for next year wouldn't be renewed. She added that I could teach the spring and summer sessions, but that was all.

This dire news was so stunning that I couldn't even respond, much less argue or ask why. Without a word, I got up and marched out of her office back to my own, where Kenny was waiting for me before his class. We embraced and mourned but shed no tears. He kept asking why, and I had no answer. I'd taught successful classes, some like the Comp Lit course with record enrolments. My students were doing very well, and I'd never heard any complaints. But then Kenny and I'd been blithely oblivious to the world. How would I have known of any?

The revolting development meant that I should go down to Chicago that Saturday for the Modern Language Association conference, which as an employed language teacher, I'd previously intended to skip. To find a ride, I first called Doug, but he couldn't. Then I thought to call Ken's brother Gary, and he was happy to drive me down. He said while I convention-ed, he'd prowl around the city, but as usual didn't mention the point of his prowling.

MLA was then (and probably still is) the main slave market for university teachers of languages. Though I hadn't made any preliminary contacts about openings, I wandered the halls of the hotel looking for job opportunities in Russian, but they were few and far between. Most of those recruiters advised that their interview schedules were already full, but a couple gave me a courtesy chat. Both told me frankly that when last year's student movement got schools to drop the foreign language requirement, many language departments were phasing down or out. The job market for foreign language teachers was fairly well defunct.

Nevertheless, I noted that our cold-blooded UWM Chairman was interviewing candidates for my position hand over fist, clearly taking advantage of the tight market. Her announcement of my firing had just as obviously been planned well in advance and timed to cut me out of any chance of finding another job. (Afterwards I heard that she'd bagged a new PhD candidate from Harvard, a prestigious bird who had to take what he could find.)

Still stunned by the train-wreck of my long-planned teaching career, I called an elevator to the hotel lobby. When the doors slid open, I found myself face to face with a dear old friend from Tulane, a "sister" named Charles, also on his way down. He was there with a friend who was interviewing for a job teaching French. We had a few minutes in the lobby to remark on the six years since we'd seen each other and exchange addresses. His sympathies for my plight were warm and appreciated, but I still left Chicago disconsolate.

#

On that black Thursday, I'd immediately called Barbara with the news of my misfortune. In her letter of that Sunday the 13th, received on the 15th, she wrote that she felt sick about it. Then she broke some surprising news of her own. On Friday she'd gotten a call from my mother saying she and her boyfriend Bill would arrive in Milwaukee to see me next Wednesday afternoon the 16th, i.e., the next afternoon, and then would drive to Ann Arbor that weekend to see her and the girls.

(I'd last seen Mother two years before at my sister's wedding, and we'd rarely written or telephoned each other. In her latest note some weeks before she simply wrote that she'd try and come visit around the holidays with her new boyfriend and would let me know when. So now I at least had almost a whole day's notice.)

News flash number two was that Barbara had just been accepted into grad school at the University of Florida, where brother-in-law Gene was teaching English. For a master's in Early Childhood Education. She and the girls would move there on January 2nd for school to start on the 5th and live with Gene and her sister Martha. Barbara had written me before about her discomfort living in Ann Arbor under parental controls and wanting to find a way out. She was very excited about moving on.

Flash number three was equally surprising—that she'd be driving to Milwaukee with the girls on the following Wednesday, the 22nd, for a quick visit and to pick up some furniture and household items. It was a wonderful prospect to see them again. In our separation, I'd agreed she could have whatever she wanted so that was no problem.

Before closing, Barbara returned to the subject of my losing the job and (well aware of academic politics), wondered if maybe some other faculty person had stabbed me in the back. She was sure that someone had done this to me. Otherwise they'd have notified me sooner or given me another year. Aware of the special circumstances in my case, she added, "Please try to be discreet, for yourself if for no one else."

Way back then I didn't register Barbara's gentle, loving admonition, but I now see clearly that she hit the nail squarely on the head—not even knowing about my scandalous affairs with the two Kens. Back-stabber or no, my misfortune was definitely caused by blatant indiscretion. In the exhilaration of new freedom and exuberance of passion for Kenny, I'd seriously misjudged and overstepped 1970's newly loosened limits on gay liberation.

After all, I wasn't in a French Quarter fairyland anymore. We'd ignored still not being quite legal and "frowned on" by straight society. Or worse. Being openly gay in the dancer circle and bar world was one thing, but flaunting our love in public was entirely another. Those times were nothing like nowadays half a century later when it's rather chic for folks to come out as gay. Nowadays any publicity seems to be good publicity.

I was terribly naïve not to think there'd be a reprisal, and when I got fired, I had no option but to meekly accept the punishment. (Nowadays maybe I could've filed a civil rights suit.) Blaming homophobic society for the debacle, I couldn't see that it was my own stupid, naïve fault and defiantly felt no guilt for my behavior. After the requisite spanking of my career, Kenny and I gaily kept right on behaving just as indiscreetly as before. Nothing left to lose.

#

While I'm playing at such retrospective analysis, I should mention another factor in losing my teaching position. The story of my dissertation should be told somewhere, and this is as good a place as any. I'd been hired in 1969 at UWM as a mere instructor in the new Slavic Department because I hadn't completed my doctorate yet, i.e., my dissertation for the University

of Michigan on the esoteric subject of Russian word order. Twice before, I didn't finish because as soon as I'd write one, my doctoral committee would change, and the new members would then tell me to write something entirely different, from some other perspective or with a new focus. Already it was feeling like the pointless task of Sisyphus.

This third time around I had clear directives, and that first fall during my teaching at UWM I'd worked with a native informant, a sweet Russian woman on the faculty. By mid-December, I'd finished the document and submitted it to my committee members. Over the holidays I went back to Ann Arbor for final discussions. I first met with a friendly Ukrainian émigré woman, Dr. H, who remarked that she strongly agreed with one of my main conclusions. For simplicity, let's call it ABC.

The next day I met with my chairman, a Czech refugee scholar, Dr. M, who protested that my ABC conclusion should be XYZ. When I advised him that Dr. H had agreed with ABC, Dr. M exploded and shouted that I was a liar. Then he leapt up from his chair and started beating me with his walking stick. Aghast and smarting from the blows, I grabbed up my papers and raced out, leaving him there still screaming about liars.

From there I went straight to the Academic Dean, advised of the outrageous caning, and demanded to be assigned a new dissertation chairman. (Nowadays I'd have gone to the Police and filed charges for assault and battery.) With no comment on the academic barbarism, the Dean agreed to find me a new chairman, and I went home with my degree still incomplete.

My new chairman, a British Dr. S, was appointed at the end of the spring term, but he was about to leave for the summer in London. So I had to wait till fall for any direction on a fourth dissertation. Meanwhile, Barbara left for Italy with the girls, and we all know what occupied my mind after that. Then all fall I'd heard no word from Dr. S, and engrossed by my love affair with Kenny, I hadn't even thought to contact him. After the "Coppelia" production, I finally wrote to him in desperation wondering why I hadn't yet received any instructions or comments on the third draft.

Besides blaming homophobia for getting me fired, it was convenient (and maybe honest) for me to think that failing to complete my doctorate was another reason. Of course, that was again my own fault, but I didn't feel any guilt about that either. Instead, I simply waited to hear something from Dr. S. In fact, the gruesome saga of my dissertation was far from over. It would only resume in 1972 and then stagger and stumble through 1974. But that story can wait its chronological turn in another memoir.

#

Also on that dreadful Thursday, I'd called Ken in Covington with the dire news. On the following Wednesday, the 16th (the day Mother was to arrive), I got his long newsy letter. It opened with a touchingly poetic piece: "All the kids have gone to bed. The room seems so quiet. All I can hear is the croaking of frogs and the chirping of crickets mixed with the hum of the Coke machine across the old tennis courts. The sounds remind me of summer and you."

Some of his other New Orleans news horrified me: Our historic gay bar, Dixie's Bar of Music, was turning into a Vegas-style supper club. Like the loss of La Casa de los Marinos and the destruction of the docks along Decatur, this was yet another symptom of the terribly crass commercial changes sweeping my beloved old city away. (Not all that many years later most of the riverfront turned into a monster shopping mall.)

Then Ken wrote about coming back to Milwaukee for the holidays, and asked me to get us tickets to "The Messiah" they'd be doing at the Music Center. Turning to the business at

hand, he hopefully wrote: “I’m almost glad you’re looking for a new job because it could be closer (Hammond, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, Jackson, etc.).” As I read that now, I marvel at how blind I was to the marvelous opportunities open to me at that point in time. Realistically, I could in good conscience have walked out on UWM at the end of that term on the 22nd (the very day Barbara was to arrive). But I was just too responsible...

Blindly, I couldn’t conceive of just quitting the precious job I’d struggled for (more or mostly less) through several years of graduate school. Stubbornly, I saw no option but to keep on teaching right up to the summer’s bitter end. In spite of the MLA convention’s poor auguries, I blithely assumed that I’d find a position somewhere later in the spring. Just as blindly, I paid no attention to Ken’s hopeful and perfectly viable suggestions. It pains me now to admit that my academic aspirations were much more pompous than just some small school in the South.

#

In the first chapter, I know I sounded like a snippy old codger, and I could easily be a scold in this second one. But I’ll merely lament that at this special moment in our life, my younger self was deaf to the knocking of so many marvelous opportunities. Off the top of my head, I can list at least three options that would’ve created whole new worlds for the two us. (Now don’t get me wrong—I wouldn’t exchange my present trove of blessings for any other.)

My first supposedly wise suggestion is that I could easily go back to Barbara, join her and the girls in Florida. But no, thank you. I knew for sure that there was no way we would ever “work things out.” Our lives would have to run separately, but I was sure our loving relationship would endure, whatever the future might bring.

The second suggestion is the opportunity that was knocking frantically on my wooden forehead. The blockhead I was didn’t even notice. As Ken had also suggested, right then and there was the perfect chance to move down to Louisiana and be with him again. Being with him again was what I’d wanted ever since our magical summer together, but again I couldn’t imagine prematurely leaving my job at UWM.

The third opportunity was even more immediate and insistent in its knocking on my noggin—and heart. With no more ado, I could simply move with Kenny to New York in January. Miraculously, our romance was no longer doomed. But besotted, bewildered, and bedazzled by our passion, I couldn’t see those bright new possibilities for Kenny and me. Talk about being unmindful! Apparently I was not only deaf but lobotomized.

#

There is perhaps a metaphorical explanation for my lack of vision and will. Please bear with another introspective contemplation. Those who have read my first memoir, “There Was a Ship,” will know that it was couched in the perhaps fatuous metaphor of my life as a boat. Given my predilection for Greek sailors, that was quite appropriate for the flaming gay boy who sailed his pirate ship out of fairyland intent on sacking unsuspecting Seattle.

As the memoirist, I’ve just realized how apt that nautical metaphor is for my whole life, even before Seattle and after Milwaukee. In that first memoir, I came close to realizing its aptness. As the old mariner telling his tale, I wrote: *“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.”*

Never mind what the first horrid, irreparable mistake was. I’m referring to that insulted phrase “decision to simply go with the flow.” I now know that deciding to go with the flow is no

decision at all, but an abject surrender to random chance. We're all responsible to ourselves to make proactive decisions for our lives, not just take what cards fickle Lady Luck deals us.

In nautical terms, going with the flow obviously means riding the currents wherever. But those natural forces are notoriously fickle. You have to steer the frigging ship by using rudder tame the waves (and sails to harness the wind if you've got any), to get you where you want to go—which coincidentally requires knowing where you want to go. As a vagrant faerie in 1965 and again as a gay man in 1970, I had myriad reasonable options to choose among, but in my mindlessness I was incapable of deciding and simply abandoned myself in both cases to the insidious flow. I had absolutely no notion of where I wanted to go.

As far as life being like riding on a boat, after putting my faerie ship in dry-dock to marry Barbara, I boarded the lumbering barge of wedlock and fatherhood and got towed off to Michigan and thence to Wisconsin. Then in July 1970, seizing the chance for escape, presumably only temporary, I jumped off that boring barge and back onto my faerie ship.

On that unfortunate Thursday in December, the love-drunk skipper let his gay caravel sail right up onto a ship-eating reef. Captain and First Mate made it to shore on the pleasant isle of Milwaukee, true castaways. Of course, Kenny was only stranded till the departure of his New York-bound ship. But why didn't I even consider becoming a stowaway? I literally missed the metaphorical boat. Instead, I only vaguely planned at one time or another to rig up a raft and see where it might take me. So much for proactive decisions.

#

A few days later, on Saturday the 19th, Ken also wrote me a shorter letter about his frustrations at the school. The section I found most touching was when he uncharacteristically got rather graphic. "After giving special help to one of the tall, dark, well-built, handsome football players for an hour and a half, I went home and dreamed of having sex with him. I'm sure the school is quite gay and that some students want to make me, but... Went to see Bro. George to borrow a vacuum cleaner—he had to talk to me about a student so he closed the door on his office. The kids snickered and he turned a little red."

That passage makes another introspective point. Back in the first chapter, I remarked that being married to Barbara had helped me be more sensitive to others. Balderdash. Perhaps more sensitive than a boulder, but not much more. Maybe I understood, but I never truly felt for Barbara's troubles as a now-single mom or for our girls' confused loneliness for their daddy. Besides an altruistic love for them, all I truly felt was for my own freedom and fulfillment.

In fact I felt a great deal *about* people, but very little *for* them. Though I deeply loved Ken, I'd never truly felt for his agony over finding a teaching job, or for his desperation in taking the one at St. Paul's. While touched and sincerely sympathetic to Ken's loneliness down there alone in Covington, I don't think I was at all empathetic. I felt only a generalized sympathy for his ordeals, none of his pain.

Same goes for my feeling any of Kenny's pains, fears, or hopes. I expect he must've been terribly distressed about his affair with that distant flautist, yet all I'd felt was selfish satisfaction that my rival wasn't earning any points. I didn't think about how awful he probably felt when I was with my other lover, which must have been very hurtful. You'd think I'd have noticed some sign of distress and have offered at least some sympathy. But none.

Over the course of my then 28 years of life, I'd definitely learned how to love folks madly and obsessively, but (like most males, I gather), not how to empathize. Nowadays, looking back over the intervening decades, I don't think I actually learned that humane art until

quite recently, and in hindsight I now feel immense empathy for all the beautiful people in my past who suffered so terribly from life, too many of them unto death.

Rather than chastise my young self for being unmindful and taking no responsibility for our life, I really should try to feel some of that new-found empathy for the foolish kid I was. After all, he was experiencing the major trauma of divorce, the anguish of parting too soon with a lover, the desperation of another doomed love-affair (if only doomed in his own mind), and the devastation of losing his perfect job. The only way to deal with the pain was to ignore it—and ride his rickety raft down the great river of denial. Nowadays I'd weep for him—but it wouldn't do one bit of good.

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