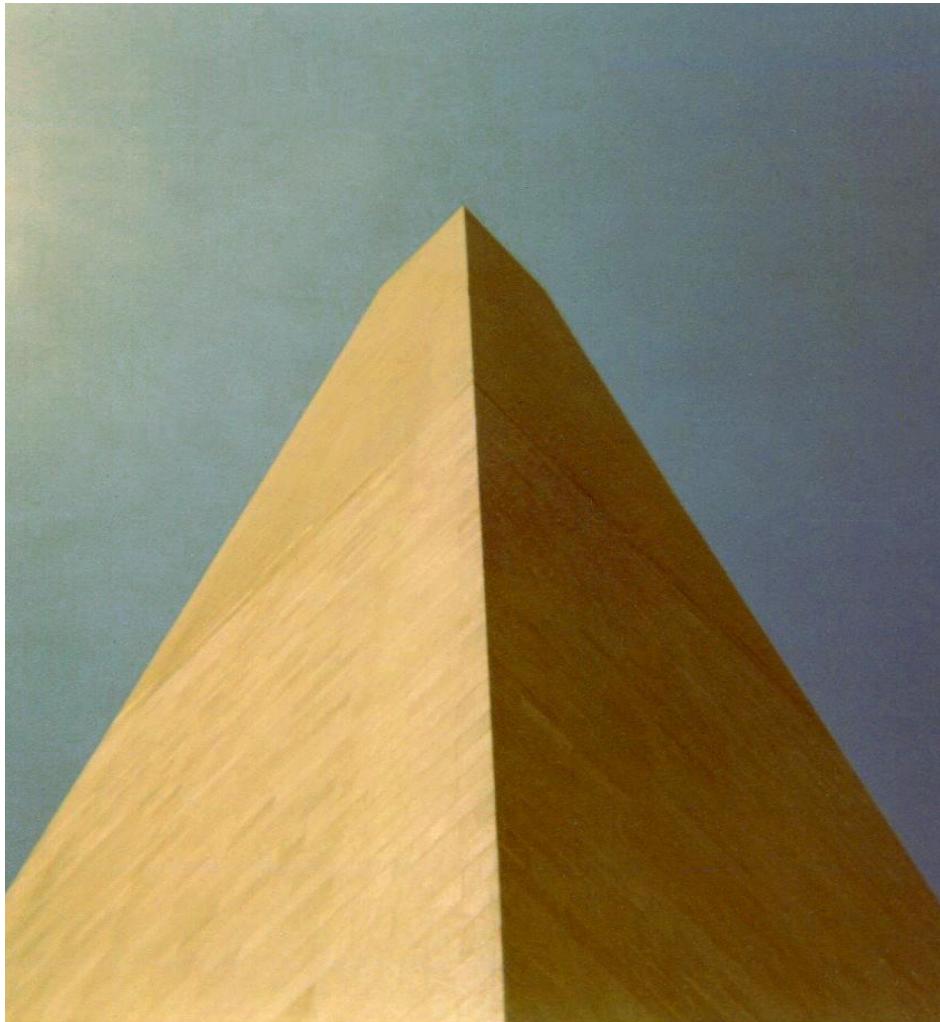


LORD WIND

A Memoir of My Second Coming Out
by Richard Balthazar

CHAPTER 6: MOVING ON

—in which I finally take charge of my life



Washington Monument—photo 5/15/69

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6.1 ROAD TRIP

—in which I travel with Lee to see family and Kenny

My rainy walk to the St. Claude bus was full of self-recriminations. I yelled at myself for doing exactly what had gotten me into such terrible trouble six years before. In the first place, I shouldn't have even opened the door to Shirley going out with me. I should have stood my ground about going straight home, and instead I let her abduct me. I should have admired her apartment, kept her at arm's length and my pants on. I mean, why on earth would I want a blow job from a girl? And for me just to lie there while she used me like a dildo! Was it my fault she didn't come? Hell, I felt like I was raped! I kicked myself for being so stupid. By the time the bus came, I'd solemnly sworn at least six times never, ever to fuck a female again. I can proudly and truthfully state that in the almost fifty years since I have not.

When I got home, soaked and furious, it was crystal clear to me what I had to do. I went in to work in the morning and told the manager I couldn't work there anymore after that day, and when he asked why, I explained that I'd had a bad experience with a co-worker and didn't want to ever see her again. Maybe putting one and one together, he said he understood, and that was that. He promised me a paycheck on Monday evening (after the co-worker in question got off), and I put in a busy last Sunday of authorizing.

Mother and Bill picked me up from work for a farewell supper at her house. It felt funny to have her going off overseas, and I could tell she was pretty nervous about the trip. Suddenly she'd be my mother, the world-traveler. It was cute how excited the two of them were. We all shared goodbye hugs, and since they were taking a cab to the airport in the morning, I drove the Camaro home, feeling like a new man with a set of wheels again.

Actually, I drove straight to the Tempest rehearsal that evening, which was rather heavy duty since the performance was only six days away. Afterwards we went out as usual to the UpStairs. I told Lee all about my horrific experience with Shirley and my firm resolve. Lee had gotten many anguished letters from me during the early years of my marriage and so understood well the context of my distress now. He commiserated and hoped maybe I'd learned my lesson. Twice bitten, and all that.

#

Monday was to have been my day off anyway, and now as a jobless bachelor with a car, I could have gone to Baton Rouge to see Ken. However, when I called him from the phone booth, he said he had a bunch of stuff to do. Instead, I drove over to Audubon Park and spent a solitary afternoon in healing nature. A wander through the zoo was restorative. After dinner I drove over to the credit card office and got my check as well as a big surprise.

Laughing, the manager said the co-worker in question had come in to work and also quit—for the same reason. Next thing, he asked me if I'd reconsider quitting, and I said sure. Thus Shirley utterly disappeared from my life. I couldn't have been more relieved. Of course, there was no way to forget my revolting encounter with her, but I quickly put her out of my mind. Recalling her in much later years, I fervently hoped that awful fuck hadn't possibly produced some misbegotten offspring. A by-blow... Perish the thought!

Now that I was a bachelor with both a job and a car, it didn't seem to make all that much difference in my life. There was job in the daytime, sans Shirley, and rehearsal evenings. Those got pretty intense with tech rehearsal on Wednesday and dress on Thursday. The excitement of

production was exhilarating, even more so than with “Coppelia”—this time I was almost a star, trading lines with Prospero and acting glamorously. No more just playing stage furniture.

Lee shone as the lanky fairy Ariel and was impressively ambiguous in his passage about “Where the bee sucks, there suck I.” As one of my schizophrenic characters, I got to deliver the all-too-true line, “Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.” A short guy named Fred, who admirably feigned deformity, played Caliban, and a cute lesbian named Joyce did a quite seductive Miranda. On our free Friday night, she went out to dinner with us and then came along to the UpStairs, where Marshall, our imposing Prospero, got pretty drunk.

Our performance of “The Tempest” on Saturday night, to a nearly full house, went smoothly and got resounding applause. When the curtain came down for the last time, tears welled up in my eyes. The theatrical wonder was suddenly over like a storm passing and leaving everything clean and wet, with barely a memory left of its sound and fury. I’ve experienced that same transience of theater several times since, sometimes with productions of my own plays, and many times when attending others’. They fade away like dreams.

#

The next couple weeks did seem to fade into a dream: long days of credit authorizing that ran together, relieved by one day a week off. Both times Ken was unavailable, off doing things with a new boyfriend, which I well understood. My consolation was the steady income that now covered rent and caught up on what I owed Barbara for child support. She’d been sweetly understanding about the shortages in past weeks. After that there wasn’t enough to splurge on anything, but at least I had enough cash to keep the Camaro in gas.

My bookish evenings were relieved a few times by going out dancing at Pete’s, mostly in Lee’s company. One evening I met a cute hunky white kid who wanted to come home with me, but I gently declined. Of course, there were also occasional black guys in the crowd, nice-looking and hunky as well, and on another evening I danced real funky with one of them to James Brown’s “Sex Machine.” The black beauty clearly was inclined to operate his machinery on me, but I took a rain check. Once you’ve seen Tyrone, you’ve seen the best.

Lee worried about my sanity, and I told him I just wasn’t in the mood. After that traumatic bout with Shirley, the thought of sex, even with a cute hunk, white or black, still didn’t excite me. Had I maybe overdosed on Donnie and Scott? Having now found a decent job, I apparently had different priorities, but I wondered what they might be. Beyond going to work in the mornings, I wasn’t motivated to do much of anything. Without Lord Wind or the Old Flow to move me around, and without any obvious purpose, I felt fairly dead in the water.

However, with the holidays approaching—and having Mother’s car—I decided to go visit Barbara and the girls for Christmas. When I mentioned this to Lee, he urged me to make it a real road trip and also go to New York to visit Kenny. He asked to come along and volunteered to pay for gas and help with the driving. Not a bad deal. Now Lee only worked part-time at a bookstore and had no trouble getting off for a couple weeks. It was a different story for me at the credit card office—busy holiday shopping and all that—so I wound up quitting again. I’d just worry about a new job when I got back.

#

As noted earlier, Lee and I had been friends for a long time. We’d met one night in 1962 in my Greek sailor bar on Decatur, the Gin Mill, when the barmaid Jackie (incidentally, a 350-lb. lesbian prostitute popular with the sailors—who preferred fat women and skinny boys), brought

me a Dixie beer with his compliments. At that point Lee was in college at LSU and often came down to the Quarter to carouse. A flighty faerie and no-cost slut to Greek sailors in my own right, I wasn't available to Lee's obvious interest, but we nevertheless became chums, or as we used to call the relationship back then, sisters.

When I'd left for Seattle to graduate school and during the early years of my marriage, we corresponded frequently and then reconnected on that trip to New Orleans with Ken. Lee had become a social mainstay for Ken in his past year teaching at St. Paul's and had been the same for me, as you'll recall, in my newly single fall. Actually, it was unfortunate that we'd never found romance together. As amenable friends and companions, an affair might have been just the ticket, but sisterhood had set in early, and thoughts of sex flew out the window, if only on my part. We would remain close for many decades, and it never once reared its ugly head.

In Gainesville, since Martha, Gene, and their kids were staying longer in Washington DC, Barbara had room to put us up in a spare bedroom. For a festive few days, I felt back in the bosom of family, a doting father to my beautiful daughters who had grown enormously in our several months apart. At nearly six, Jake was an energetic, talkative charmer, and at recently turned four, Aimée was still a roly-poly sweetie. They both hung on me every chance they got, and I cuddled them whenever they couldn't find one.

Shortly after Christmas when we left for New York, Lee remarked on how affectionate I'd been with them, including Barbara. I explained divorce didn't mean we had to stop loving each other. Prophetically, I told him Barbara was my first wife, and there'd be no second. (At that long-ago time, I'd had no idea it would someday become possible for guys to marry, but even now, fifty years later, I can't conceive of having a second spouse.)

Lee was impressed by my most unusual attitude and that I felt the same about all my former lovers. Witness Kenny and Ken who'd always be close to my heart. And now after losing so many, I know that dear friends like Lee also remain beloved—long after they depart.

#

Speaking of Kenny, it took many hours of our switch-off driving to get to New York, necessarily without stopping at any motel and therefore switching off on naps. Kenny's address was in the west 70s, in a huge city such as I'd never imagined. All I'd ever seen in the way of big cities were New Orleans, Seattle, Detroit, and Milwaukee. New York made them all seem mere villages. Its buildings were monumental ziggurats and spired temples. Some taller even than the Space Needle. The city was certainly beyond my imagining.

Kenny was delighted (and gorgeous!) when he met us that night at the imposingly metal security door of his building. Inside, we stopped a moment at the foot of the industrial steel staircase and kissed hello. His apartment was on the sixth floor, not quite a walk-up because there was an elevator, though an old rickety and untrustworthy one. His place was small, two rooms and bath much like mine back on Canal Street. It was heavily decorated all over the place with a confusion of ornaments and unidentifiable things on the walls.

On the long hike up the stairs, Kenny had revealed to Lee and me that he was now living with a guy named Steve, a scene designer with an opera company, at the moment away. So we weren't all that surprised by the extravagance. Said Steve came home shortly after carrying an odd fabric decoration, almost macramé, a good-looking taller guy with a vaguely insane smile. The tenant in the apartment above, the penthouse, came down to meet us—another Lee!—also a dancer and like my Lee, a few years older than I. Suffice it to say, the Lees hit it off nicely, and mine was cordially invited upstairs to lodge in the penthouse.

Using his influence as a cast member, Kenny had gotten my Lee and me comp tickets to see "Fiddler" that night. I'd been to a Broadway show before ("Hair"), but this one was an even more moving experience. I doted on Kenny in his role as Motel and almost cried when he sang that "Even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness." It was thrilling that my beloved faun was making a career for himself and finding happiness in New York at last.

When we got back from the theater, the Lees retired to the penthouse, and I conveniently shared a big bed with Kenny and Steve. We three also hit it off nicely, one might even say splendidly, all three nights that we stayed. It was quite different from my earlier three-ways in not feeling lust-driven. As long as I was kissing my Kenny again, anybody could be doing whatever to whomever, and I didn't care.

Meanwhile, according to plan, the middle night of our stay was New Year's Eve, and there was this enormous party somewhere out in that urban jungle. I was quite simply overawed by the magnitude of everything and by the crowds around and at the party, denser than any I'd ever seen even at Mardi Gras. I know, overawe is a terrible excuse for forgetting pertinent details of that New York's Eve party of 1972, but that's what I've done. Completely.

Besides walking in Central Park past that jagged cliff of lower Manhattan towers and seeing a real Egyptian obelisk, for me the most memorable thing in New York was standing on upstairs Lee's sunny penthouse terrace with its view of the forest of sky-scrappers. Meanwhile I stood in a veritable forest of rather large leafless trees wintering over in the most enormous planters. This Lee joked that the landlord of his (rent-controlled) apartment would never dare evict him. Nobody'd ever be able get the trees down from way up there on the roof.

On the third day, we said goodbye on the street outside the secretly forest-crowned building in loving ways of which Leonard Cohen himself would have approved.

#

On our way north out of the city, Lee and I traded impressions. His were much less surreal than mine, more centered on the three nights spent in his host's bed. He was very pleased by this notable relief in a long dry spell. Actually, I could say the same for myself. I mean three months was a fairly long time to go without nookie. Though the sex had been very low key, being with Kenny again seemed to have flipped my switch back to on. Gone was my Buddha-like denial of desire. My well was full again, its pump primed. However, right at that moment we drove straight into a gathering snowstorm—squatting grumpily between us and my sister Judy's place near Rochester.

In both Ann Arbor and Milwaukee, I'd driven in snow before, but not in anything like this swirling storm with terribly limited visibility. The heroic Camaro just kept on rolling, but my knuckles got as white as the piles of snow on the road. Thank goodness the snowfall was fairly localized, and we got through it well before Rochester. The streets there were still snowy but mostly plowed already when we arrived at Judy's in the late afternoon.

She looked a bit heavier than I remembered last seeing her—at her wedding in 1969, when her drunken bridesmaid tried to put the moves on me. She surprised me with the news that her brand new daughter Jennifer, born on December 16, was asleep in the bedroom. Though Mother had mentioned Judy was expecting, I'd quite forgotten. Her husband, another Richard, was still at work but would be home soon.

Waiting for him, we huddled with cups of coffee around the warm stove in her kitchen and caught up as family. Judy was as impressed as I about Mother's travels and thought Bill was really a nice guy. She told Lee and me about her earlier work at a dairy farm right up till she had

Jennifer, and now she was a full-time mother. Lee asked to peek in on my sleeping niece, and we tiptoed in to admire the dark-haired newborn. She looked just like I (as a five year-old brother), remembered Judy looking at that tender age.

Brother-in-law Richard looked even more like my friend Henri in New Orleans than he did at the wedding, something about his wide, bright brown eyes. He got me talking about my split with Barbara, and I was frank and told them, to no reaction at all, that it was because I was gay. Lee then told them about the Shakespeare play we were in. For all the response that got, Lee might as well have been talking about the other planet we lived on.

It made me wonder about all these family relations from so long ago built on mere genetic ties, something basically biological but still with a personal emotional connection. And that connection never ended ever in our lives. My mother, even if off gallivanting around the world, would always be my mother. To my daughters I would forever be their father, and vice versa. For about ten years I hadn't had much to do with either mother or sister, just around my father's funeral in 1966 and at Judy's wedding, yet in the past year we'd come together again and found each other just as psychically related as before.

My little niece Jennifer just waking up with a small cry in the other room was a brand-new voting member of our exclusive group, a voting member of the clan. There was some truth in blood being thicker than water. (Baby Jennifer is now a grandmother several times over, and we're still as close as widely separated uncles and nieces usually are.)

Lee and I stayed over that night, sleeping on the two big sofas in Judy's living room, where a little wood stove didn't keep it very warm. Back in the kitchen in the morning, we warmed up again around the big stove while Judy cooked breakfast. Her Richard ate first to leave early for work. Our breakfasts were more leisurely with more family chatter, but Lee and I were soon off on the next leg of our road trip.

#

Bound for Toronto, we headed through light snow to Buffalo and the border crossing into Canada. Maybe it was my long hair, but the border guards made us get out of the car while they searched it thoroughly. Nothing to worry about since we had no grass with us, and we hadn't smoked any since the New Year's Eve party two nights before. But one guard found something in the glove compartment and asked me what it was. I had no idea, and he officially informed me that it was a hash pipe. I believe my exact, sincere response was, "Oh, for God's sake!"

Believe it or not, they put through a call for me to the number I had for Mother and Bill in Spain. After identifying himself and confirming that he was speaking to Bill Tapp, the guard handed me the phone. My first words were, "What the fuck was a hash pipe doing in the glove compartment?!" Bill explained to the guard that he'd found it some months before at a rest stop in Texas—and then forgotten all about it. The guard asked if I was okay with them confiscating it, and I said, "Please do." With that, they let Lee and me across the border.

We drove around Toronto wondering what was noteworthy besides all the fancy new bank buildings. In comparison with New York, it was of course little more than a nice-sized town, though rather more impressive than Milwaukee. Uninterested, we found some lunch and took off for Detroit where we found a big parking lot in a suburb to sleep part of the night.

Pushing on in the dark, we got to Chicago by mid-day and visited my old Seattle friend, yet another Richard, the one I'd called Richard the Twooth in that letter my Kenny read with great "appreciation." He lived in an old apartment building along North Lake Shore Drive, and

since there was very little snow, took us on a walk along the lake. We took him out to dinner and then comfortably slept the night through on his floor.

On leaving Chicago, Lee and I pulled another switch-off routine down the now familiar roads south to New Orleans. By Wednesday morning, January 5, 1972, we were back home and truly thankful. The road trip had been a fantastic getaway, and just imagine, I'd even gotten to kiss my Kenny again! It felt great taking charge of my life, not relying on Lord Wind for direction, but just going wherever I wanted. And now all I had to do was figure out how to earn a living henceforth.

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6.2 ANOTHER MARDI GRAS

—in which Steve and I share carnival

It was great being back again on my little island, enjoying the warm winter sun and that sweet, faintly rotten fragrance of New Orleans. After lunch of a muffaleta sandwich from the Central Grocery, I called Ken from a phone booth on Royal to let him know I was back and ask if he had any job ideas for me. He didn't. Instead, he asked if I was ready to move to Baton Rouge yet. I wasn't. Ken was understandably disappointed but currently had two boyfriends to keep him satisfied. I was oddly satisfied without even one.

After a fun and chaste carouse in Pete's, I slept like a baby and woke up with an inspiration: to see if I could find some job at Tulane, my dear old alma mater. Thursday, January 6 was of course, Three Kings Day, the 12th day of Christmas, and first day of Mardi Gras, so my inspiration was wonderfully timely. I took the bus we'd used to call the Freret Jet and from the Tulane employment office got sent over to the familiar University Center to see my old food service boss, Joyce. She well remembered her best cashier ever, if I do say so myself.

For four fabulous years, I'd been an icon, the "queer cashier," in the Snack Bar and Cafeteria, and consequently got to know and be known by the whole (delectable) student body. My privileged position in the all-boy's school—(at that time, though it later turned coed)—also put me in touch with a few fellows favorably inclined to intercourse, such as the aforementioned Tony of the 18th green on the Audubon Park Golf Course.

But those are tales of other wilder times, and this time I found myself posted in the brand-new Rathskellar down in the basement with fake German décor and ambiance. Since my wilder times, they'd actually started selling beer on campus! Working in a bar, even if a German one, and especially one full of (delectable) student bodies, was just what the doctor ordered. My afternoon/evening shift meant I'd get dinner in the cafeteria upstairs.

A stroke of luck incredible, situation solved! And great timing to go out to Pete's afterwards to dance! Even the schedule was like when I'd cashiered seven years before. Here was my way back to the carousing and debauchery that I so cruelly missed in my Seattle and Michigan years. Sadly, I'd have to do it without La Casa or the Gin Mill, but where there's a will, there's a way. Nevertheless, I knew that one can never really go back—it will always be a new story, another Mardi Gras. This would be my seventh—seven years later—and seven was supposed to be a lucky number.

#

The first days at work were fun for seeing the bright new faces and admiring some. But it was startling that all the clientele of the Rathskellar looked so terribly young—and here I was so terribly old, almost thirty. The realization hit me like a truck: At that very moment, I was living out the last of my twenties. Only a few more months of youth left! Soon I'd be "over the hill," the kind of mature guy I'd never found attractive. Soon I'd be one of the older generation, forever leaving these nubile youths behind.

The bright new faces were usually atop admirable torsos. There was a lot more beefcake than I recalled back in my Snack Bar days, and this new generation looked more like hippies than my old classmates. While making change, I often chatted with my young customers, some learning my name was Rich, but for most I was just that older guy at the cash register.

Such anonymity was fine with me. While I admired the various torsos, strangely I found little carnal attraction to any of them. Part of approaching thirty maybe? It wasn't that I was

opposed to sex. Who can knock the bliss of ejaculating? Sex just wasn't the first thing I thought about anymore. I'm not sure now what I did think about between customers. I was so busy ignoring the unpromising future decade of my thirties that I probably thought about very little.

A few times I let myself be abducted from Pete's by some ardent admirer of my dance, but each time, while I did my carnal duty, I was put off by one thing or another about the guy. Not so much anything physical, it was usually something lewd about his talk or behavior that would turn me off. I certainly didn't want to be a prude, but I had to wonder if this new attitude might be another symptom of getting old. Actually, I'd always had a very hard time imagining old people having sex. Not a pretty thought, that.

The "kids" ordered their steins of draft beer at the counter from the black bartender George, who clearly wasn't interested in socializing with me. There were now a few black kids in the crowd, but George wasn't any friendlier with them. Of course, I soon got to know the guys who drank serious beer, joking with them about thirst, but a good many only indulged in one, and that almost ashamedly.

One of those was a guy with black curls and painfully shy demeanor. On his early passes by my register, he'd always be looking down or somewhere else and not at me. I thought he was rather cute, with a delicate narrow jaw and tender chin, like a frightened little bunny needing a cuddle. On a later pass, he did look me in the eye for a tiny moment and said, "Hi, Rich," in a soft, tentative voice. I asked his name, and then Steve scurried away to his friends.

My long experience (in the parlance known as "gay-dar") said this cuddly Steve was most likely gay, but that was merely a fact to file. He looked like a freshman or sophomore, very much an *ephebe* with nothing remarkable in the way of a torso, and besides, a dirty old man like me shouldn't mess around with such an obviously innocent youth, sexy or not. I was getting more casual sex post-dancing, such as it was, than I needed or wanted. What I wanted was a mind-connection and an engagement on an emotional level, i.e., romance.

After a couple weeks of brief greetings at my cash register, Steve suddenly asked if I liked theater, and when I said sure, he announced that he was an English and Theater major. Naturally, I remarked on my acting in "The Tempest," and he'd seen it—even recognized me now as the composite minor nobleman—and complimented my performance. I savored Steve's appreciation of my art. Nobody else had ever said boo about my Shakespearean debut.

Next time he was buying, I told Steve about my long ago being a (faceless) member of the chorus in Tulane's production of "Oedipus Rex." The next evening he confided that he was a playwright working on a play in the theater department. He blushed and stated proudly, "My play is on a gay theme." I said in that case, I'd love to see it. When next at my cash register, Steve advised that he was a senior, soon to graduate, and was checking out graduate schools. In turn, I remarked on the ongoing horror of my dissertation. He looked at me with compassionate dark eyes and then scampered away like a spooked rabbit.

When I saw him next, Steve said he was horribly anxious about writing his play. From my now almost mature viewpoint, I explained that most anxiety comes from expectations. Have no expectations, and there's no reason to get anxious—or be disappointed. Of course, writing a gay play was a pretty good reason to feel anxious, but then "Boys in the Band" had neatly broken the ice on that avant garde genre. While on the gay topic, I gave Steve a brutally abridged synopsis of my amorous history, just enough to sound interesting, but not enough to sound like the total slut I'd actually been.

#

My concocted wisdom maybe helped because cute Steve soon showed up with a second stein, virtually bubbling with exuberance. He wanted me to come to a staged reading of two scenes from his play and hear the dramatic dialogues he'd written. I assured him I'd be there (taking part of that evening off), and affectionately patted his excited hand. In return he gave me a look of abject adoration that almost knocked me off my high cashier stool. I was stunned, humbled, unworthy of such esteem. Not even Kenny had ever looked at me like that.

When he'd finished his second beer, Steve came to me again, obviously a tad tipsy, and confided that he felt like we were in a play ourselves, our momentary scenes building to some beautiful, dramatic denouement. I hadn't really been thinking about denouements, which I generally found anticlimactic. I was more concerned with the dramatic conflict between his apparent passion and my evident lack of such. Don't get me wrong, Steve was cute enough to get one going, but to me he felt like a dear little bunny rabbit.

Out dancing that night afterwards, I agonized about what to do about Steve's infatuation. I enjoyed our talks and certainly wanted to support and encourage him, but all I felt was an affectionate friendship. Before I got so old, I'd have jumped him just because he was there and willing... Now, if I did bang him, things would probably get complicated, and I'd have to deal with the aftermath, most likely another affair, and I certainly wasn't ready for that.

In Steve's next visit in the Rathskellar, I tried to be distant, but his loving smile lured me into more chat—to ask about his own gay history—he'd only had two boyfriends so far, one sophomore year and one last year, and they'd been frustratingly low key. I didn't ask what that meant but figured it meant little or no sex. That took me a bit aback, realizing that I was dealing with a near-virgin here, which earlier would have lit my fuse but now was a red flag. When I gently asked how on so little experience he was writing a gay play, Steve claimed he knew enough about gay guys to write about them. I stroked his shoulder and said he probably did. He looked at me again with big, dark calf's eyes, and against my better judgment, I tweaked the dear boy's little chin, distance be damned. In turn, Steve touched my hand. Before things got out of hand, he took his stein over to the far corner of the barroom to watch me work.

I guess you could say it was just a flirtation—neither of us made any moves to closer intimacy. For some days we made do with friendly chatter and occasional touches, and finally on that last Friday of January came his staged reading in the theater building on the Newcomb campus. Steve fetched me from my cash register, and walking together the short way in the dark to the building, he surreptitiously took my hand.

Holding hands out in public, even in the dark, was quite new for me even, the old French Quarter faerie, and I fondly noted his gesture of liberation. Suffering another attack of nerves, Steve stopped us in the deep shadow of a live oak to breathe, and while I comforted him with a hug, he stole a kiss, tentative and hurried, pure and frightened, but brave—his pursed lips pressed momentarily to mine. He apologized, not at all sincerely, and we walked on. I much appreciated his almost militant gay activism. On the sly albeit, but another endearing trait.

There were maybe a dozen theater students in attendance at Steve's staged reading who paid close attention to the three readers' lines in the two scenes. So did I, hoping very much to be impressed by his "dramatic dialogues," but ultimately I wasn't. Saving me from making my stern critique, the kids in the audience voiced my reservations well.

They correctly noted many of the lines sounding unnatural, didactic—and the scenes didn't create dramatic tension, just chat. In their lines, Steve's characters simply described rather than displayed their emotions in the course of their conversations. I silently agreed that the setting (group encounters of roommates in an apartment) was awfully reminiscent of "Boys in

the Band.” Though I could imagine several fixes for that, I kept my friendly mouth firmly shut. Without showing the distress I knew he felt, Steve calmly wrote down the criticisms.

On our dark walk after, he said, “Well, they hated it!” I threw my friendly arm over his shoulder, saying it was all stuff he could easily make better. Then he asked, “What did you think, Rich?” I danced around, remarking on the truth of his lines and the characters’ sensitive feelings for each other. As an escape from the topic, and since it was a weekend night, I invited Steve out with me to Pete’s to celebrate his playwriting debut with some dancing. Sheepishly, he said he’d never been out to a gay bar, and then bravely said he’d come with me.

#

That early in the evening the crowd in Pete’s was thin, which for me only meant lots of dancing room. For Steve it meant being conspicuous, and at the bar ordering me a Coke and him a beer, he kept close and facing me, like hiding. When a favorite number of mine started on the juke box, “Brown Sugar” by the Rolling Stones, it amused me to put his gay activism to the test: I tried to lead him out to dance. He held back, protesting that he didn’t know how to dance. I pulled his arm with, “What kind of a gay guy are you that can’t dance? Shame on you!” That convinced him to prove both his gayness and the fact that he indeed couldn’t dance. His limbs didn’t move at all in time to the Stones’ rhythm, but he kept on trying.

To work on his coordination, I sat Steve down on a stool facing me on another and showed him the method of *sitz-tanz*, my German word for dancing while sitting—not exactly a lap dance but good training for such, if you also wiggle your butt. We started with tuning his shoulders up and down to the beat, which he thought tremendously funny and really got into, then moving them back and forth in time. Then we loosened up his spine with some side to side stuff, and it looked like he was really discovering a sense of rhythm.

Before we got to the butt-wiggling, friend Lee showed up with an older, heavier chum from Baton Rouge named Maurice. They’d just been to a late dinner at Galatoire’s, a restaurant way out of my league. Steve beamed when I introduced him as a promising gay playwright, though Lee already knew about him, and answering Maurice’s question, Steve got to crow about the staged reading of “The Believer” a little while earlier. (I again had diplomatically reserved judgment on that title.) Lee told us about his new plans for yet another musical, the gist of which was rather nebulous but intriguing, a satire on the Old South. And Maurice was a painter of mainly swamp scenes. Steve was enchanted by all the art in the air.

They soon took off for a quiet drink at the Napoleon House, leaving me and Steve to work on wiggling our butts on the stools. I interrupted our suggestive practice with a chaste suggestion that since Steve had now been in one, maybe he could set his second scene in a gay bar, really be avant garde. He pulled me over to him and kissed me, this time resolutely, the tip of his tongue slipping between my lips, and I touched it with my own, cautiously. Steve didn’t apologize this time but gave me a naughty smile and resumed his wiggling on the stool. He was so cute that I again tweaked his delicate chin and in return got another adoring look.

Push having come thus to shove, I asked if this meant I should take him home with me. Steve looked away, shy again, and said he didn’t think so. He wasn’t ready yet... That came as an enormous relief because I didn’t feel at all ready or willing to despoil his innocence. Able, yes, but somehow I preferred our intellectual and aesthetic friendship.

#

Saturday night in the Rathskellar Steve stopped by my register and with an embarrassed smile informed me that he was ready now. Before I could say anything, he invited me to come to see his neat place on Constantinople Street tomorrow afternoon. I calmly said that would be nice and not quite jokingly wondered what he saw in an old guy like me. Ignoring my question, Steve gave me his address and proposed one o'clock. All very business-like. I said sure and spent the rest of the evening wondering how to weasel out of it. I really didn't want to get into Steve's pants, truly, but he wanted me so terribly much... Why not make the sweet kid happy?

In that charitable frame of mind, I drove down Constantinople the next day. I'd let Steve enjoy my body however he fantasized making love, let him take the lead. He greeted me at the door with a hungry kiss and to my surprise offered me a cup of mint tea. Okay. I sat primly on his sofa with my cup and saucer while Steve pranced about nervously, describing what he'd done that morning on the dialogue in the second scene of his play.

I could tell the sweet kid was scared stiff and decided to use my secret weapon: I pulled out a joint and proposed that we get high. Steve said he'd smoked grass a couple times before but hadn't felt much of anything. He'd really like to get high with me. Two hits later, he was much more relaxed and playing with my hand. One more, and I proposed we take a shower. I figured that this would be the easiest, most comfortable way for us to get naked and give him free rein to molest my hairy body. I was right.

Steve explored my contours with stoned fascination, sucking avidly on my nipples, and sticking his fingers into orifices. Three hits were also enough for me to feel euphorically thrilled by his caresses. We embraced and kissed wildly under the shower spray, and then he smoothed my dripping hair back off my face. The next second he burst out laughing, and when I asked what was funny, he laughed even harder.

Between bursts of belly-laughs, Steve choked out that I looked just like his Aunt Lillian and then collapsed in gasping hilarity on the bottom of the tub. Naturally, I was astounded by the outburst and soon horrified to realize he was literally getting hysterical. His face was flushed, and he was having a hard time breathing between laughs. I shook him hard to no effect and hauled him out onto the floor. Shouting at him to stop, I actually slapped his face twice and calmed him down a bit, but his convulsed laughing was mixed with sobs and tears.

Somehow I got Steve dried off, dragged him into his bedroom, still laughing and sobbing, and stretched him out on his bed. As the fit subsided, he wouldn't even look at me, his eyes darting fearfully around the room. When they landed on his typewriter (with a sheet of play script still in it), he recoiled, moaned that it hated him, and started crying frantically. I held him close and assured him the machine didn't hate him. It loved him—and so did the whole world. Everybody—everything—loved him. Soon he fell sound asleep in my arms.

#

Come Monday evening at my register in the Rathskellar, Steve was very subdued with embarrassed smiles. After an hour's cuddle the day before, I'd left him still sleeping with a note that his typewriter (a Smith Corona) was waiting with open arms and that I'd see him tomorrow. Signed it love, Aunt Lillian. He didn't remark on our aborted dalliance, but I knew full well what was behind his request to come visit me sometime. We arranged for after my shift on Wednesday, Groundhog Day, and I playfully hoped he wouldn't be afraid of his shadow.

For our assignation, I decided on a different strategy. No more grass, but a nice bottle of Lancer's rosé wine and romantic candles. This time I'd take the lead to do unto the lad as he likely fantasized being done unto. After all, dear Steve was (almost?) a virgin, and he needed a

good, gentle teacher. After work I drove us to my apartment where I lit the gas fire in my fireplace and placed the candles around for maximum romantic shadows.

Sipping our wine, we lounged on the rug in front of the merry little fire, and first thing Steve said was he sure wished I'd finish my dissertation. That was a total kick in the head. I quickly replied so did I, and to forestall other such mundane thoughts, I kissed him with vigor. Events proceeded naturally from awkward embraces on the rug to the ritual disrobing of the possible virgin, onto the soft cushions and into the flickering shadows of my bed. Steve didn't laugh even once, not even when I kissed his heart, as the French call a splendidly deep fuck.

In the weeks following, we spent several nights in each other's beds. Little Steve was needy, or better greedy, for my affection and insisted on further lessons in conjugation. I still wasn't much attracted to his slight body, but his baby-animal eyes—like a fawn of the deer sort—always convinced me to pet, tickle and molest his private parts. Having accepted Steve as my boyfriend, I felt it my duty to give him satisfactory service, a duty not unlike but definitely more pleasing than what I'd felt for my wife Barbara when copulating with her. The proper way to care for a beloved pet, gently and affectionately.

#

It was rather disconcerting for me that Steve often punctuated our love-making with urgings and encouragement to finish the damned dissertation. I'd say yeah, yeah and put that mess out of my mind, but he'd keep coming back to it. In wise hindsight, I can see now that sweet Steve was a disguise, a secret agent. He was none other than Lord Wind come covertly back to me after His months of loafing in Baton Rouge. And now He was proposing to blow me away to a place I knew full well I should go. Ann Arbor. A place I'd hoped never to see again. This time around I decided to graciously accept Wind's metaphorical assistance.

Eventually I told Steve I'd go soon after Mardi Gras, which was just a week away. He acted not the least bothered by the prospect of a separation—apparently convinced that we were pledged to each other, though I'd never said anything even vaguely to that effect. He was content to wait the few months for me to work with my advisor and write the damned thing. So I got in touch with Dr. what's-his-face and with old friend Charles from Tulane who was now living in Ann Arbor with a lover and doing grad work in Art History at the U of Michigan. Just like that I had a place to stay and no way around doing my academic duty.

For Mardi Gras, Steve and I worked up costumes. He got some medieval duds from the theater department to masque as an adorable Geoffrey Chaucer, all very literary. Through Lee I got some fancy Renaissance clothing with a Florentine sort of floppy hat with plume and made myself a splendid white cape with gold and silver brocade, intending some princely figure like Cesare Borgia. By the way, Lee was going as a harlequin—shades of me in last year's Carnival with Ken and Kenny. On Fat Tuesday we wandered around the festive streets of the Quarter with great gaiety among the drunken crowds and glorious parades.

On Ash Wednesday, I arranged to leave my job in the Rathskellar with regret but for good academic purpose, quickly sublet my apartment to an overweight young man named Herbert, and moved in with Steve on Constantinople for my last couple days in town. By Friday I'd kissed him bye and pointed Mother's Camaro toward Florida.

###

6.3 HARD LABOR

—in which I write my fourth dissertation

Though it was a couple weeks too early, I visited the family in Florida. After all, I'd missed seeing Barbara and the girls over the holidays, and soon it would be Jake's birthday, her sixth—six years since that sea-change in my life when I suddenly became a father. I haven't the foggiest what presents I brought them this time but do recall that little Aimée was still sleeping with the gray plush Mousie I'd given her two Christmases before. Now she was six, Jake had grown into a darling little-girl Christopher Robin. Another Alice in Wonderland?

Since Martha, Gene, little blond Bobbie, and baby Bea were back from DC, I sacked out on the living room sofa, but that was perfectly fine for the few nights I stayed before heading off to Michigan. Those two splendid days of family closeness were reminiscent of our earlier years all together in Ann Arbor, maybe even closer now, and helped me get ready for another trip back in time. Naturally they were all thrilled that I was going back to finish up my dissertation. I'm afraid the thrill was all theirs. I was simply resigned to an ordeal.

Still, I really looked forward to getting rid of the stupid ABD, that anal onus of a degree. I was willing to do the hard labor to get the disgusting doctorate, if only to finish off the odious job. Even then I knew, or at least correctly suspected, that for the rest of my wonderful life, a PhD wouldn't mean diddle. My real job, I also knew subconsciously, was to tie up academic loose ends so I could move on to a beautiful future in the real world. There's the real reason I'd decided to serve the three-month sentence of breaking up big rocks into little gravel.

#

Charles, my dear old friend from Tulane days, more recently met again in an elevator in Chicago, was living in a big apartment on the second floor at 418 N. Main Street in downtown Ann Arbor. His lover Ric, a hefty Black Irish fellow, was the handsome day manager of a fancy restaurant called the Gandy Dancer in the old train station down by the Huron River. Ric was also a fabulous cook and whipped up tasty gourmet dinners for us every day. They had a spare bedroom for me with two bright windows looking south, a small desk between already equipped with Charles' own Select Trick and a stack of fresh typing paper. At least they didn't expect me to start work that first night. It was like a five-star hotel with a private chef no less.

After a stupefying dinner of Beef Wellington made especially in honor of my arrival, we sat around the rest of the evening talking about the courses of our lives over the past several years. Ric, a few years older, said he hadn't done anything but food service ever since high school—cooked and waited table at big restaurants in Louisville, Memphis and Detroit. They'd met in Detroit at the Cadillac Hotel when Charles dined there and asked to compliment the chef. The rest was history. Ric's vast experience definitely showed in his kitchen wizardry.

At Tulane, Charles and I had hung out a lot in the Snack Bar with two other "sisters," Ralph and Rolfe. I'd called us the Four Miceketeers. Like Ralph, Charles was a high-class queen who went out to Dixie's and Lafitte's, while I was a low-class Decatur Street faerie/slut. Rolfe sometimes joined me in the sailor bars, like slumming.

We hadn't had a chance to catch up in those few moments in that Chicago elevator, and I was fascinated to hear about Charles' grad work for a Master's in History at Ohio, one in philosophy at Boston, and now finishing another in Art History here in Michigan. He was all busy looking around the country for a job. Even better looking now, a bit more mature, than eight years before, Charles had a more regal jawline, his carefully groomed hair still waved

smoothly, and his eyes almost glittered with intelligence and good will. I felt our ancient mind and soul connection arc like lightning between our two halves.

#

The next day I dutifully reported to my advisor's office, and we drew up a schedule to get the several chapters rewritten (now my fourth dissertation) based on his suggestions by the end of the term (the three months of my sentence). We'd have biweekly meetings to review each piece of work (i.e. check the size of the gravel I was making). What threw me for a loop was his asking me to add to the bibliography—an already exhaustive reference of the subject compiled in my research trip to the Library of Congress and the Widener Library at Harvard in 1969. So then I got out there and started the tedious work of smashing rocks to bits.

The sweet little desk and magic Select Trick—we loved each other—provided a cozy workplace, bright from snowy views out the windows. The snow in Milwaukee would have been deeper... And I set resignedly to work. The first few days quickly set the rhythmic routine of feeding my face (exquisitely) and forcing myself to concentrate on gravel in other waking times. Be grateful that I spare you the gory details of my servitude.

Besides eating like a king, I needed another distraction from the gravel business. There being no place to go dancing, I went back to the familiar intramural pool on campus. Lap-swimming had been my favorite sports activity for many years at Tulane, U of Wash, here at U of Mich before, and occasionally at U of Wisc-Milwaukee. Admittedly, I enjoyed not only the physical exertion (having been a seal in an earlier life), but also the sight of other wet bodies.

Swimming worked neatly into my late afternoon right before dinner, gave me a great appetite for it, and at the same time worked off the excess calories I gobbled down. Well fed, I could usually grind out another four hours of gravel before bed. The bi-weekly advisor sessions were what got in the way of my scholarly work. They were generally frustrating and densely dumb, but I tried to work with whatever nonsense he dealt out this time. Smash this rock!

#

Fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, my neat new routine was disturbed by the return of my poetic muse. During the Mardi Gras madness, my simple affection for Steve had somehow morphed into a love. No comparison, though, with Ken or Kenny. Maybe it was a sympathetic reaction to Steve's often exclaimed enormous passion for me, or maybe because affection is like an infection that leads to a disease—love as an emotional disorder.

Whichever, I started writing poems again. The Thursday before leaving New Orleans while waiting at the laundromat on Basin Street, I wrote about the existential and sartorial aspects of leaving Steve. Oddly, I don't remember any of the clothing mentioned—like red-velvet bellbottoms! I swear I've never owned such stylish duds! When I got to Ann Arbor on Wednesday, I sat in my new room and wrote an atmospheric piece about leaving him:

*When I was leaving him
In the dark street among oleanders,
I started the car slowly
While he waved a last caress
And kissed my fingers to him.*

*When I was leaving him
Standing by his wooden gate*

*I let the Camaro roll faster
Away from his sweet house
And turn the corner bravely.*

*When I was leaving him
To sleep alone in our bed,
I slept alone in the back seat
And saw the Milky Way
And dead stone Moon,
That some guy once stood upon.*

2/22/72

No sooner had I left him than Steve started a barrage of letters, the first advising me of his infinite love and of rehearsals starting for his play, from which he'd been barred so as to give the director and actors free rein. I replied to each one but didn't even try to match his passionate rhetoric. The second went on for two pages about us being together, and the third was virtually a chant on together forever. Their adolescent, hormonal tone really bothered me—I could no longer believe in such blessed, loving togetherness or in blissful days without end.

Five days later I wrote another that addressed my disbelief:

Mardi Gras 1972

*Perhaps it's only natural to wonder
If that moment of Cesare and Geoffrey
In stockings, doublets, capes and caps
Resting beside an old brick wall
At the corner of the carnival street,
My arm round his velvet shoulders,
Was true.
Lo, the high priest of Amon-Ra
Approached in fans of feathers,
Stood in the gutter and greeted me,
"Man, you're beautiful!"
His holy face beamed on us.
And lo, a gaudy bawd seized my arm,
Gazed long on my face and curls,
Ignoring my brocade and pearls,
And said, "I know you, darling—
You're Prince Charming!"
In the flickering lights of Comus
I took my young poet's hand
And behind his draping sleeve
He passed a secret to my ear,
"I love you! I do!"
Why must I wonder if his shout
Was true?*

2/27/72

In that third letter came the news that Steve's Spring Break would be March 28 to April 9, two whole weeks, and he'd come up to Michigan. The next day he wrote he'd been accepted for grad school at Stony Brook. This letter waxed lyrical about how we would always be one. On my own inspiration, I wrote a few more incoherent poems about the future, the awareness of self and God, and the nature of love. None is worth even quoting from.

#



Chinese Cork Carving

Meanwhile, on my third weekend in Michigan, Charles and I drove over to Toronto on Saturday to wander around the city that had failed to impress me on my earlier pass through with Lee. With Charles I found it much more interesting to visit to the Chinese area. Never having been in a Chinatown, I was fascinated by the ethnic art and decorated wares. A tiny cork carving, a landscape with temple, struck me as a most stupendously beautiful object, and I had to buy it. I still have it a half-century after. It's only about four inches high, exquisite.

The exquisite cork carving is a reminder of Toronto of course—where years later I'd have my first artistic triumph—but also a souvenir of remarkable Charles, eventually to become my closest friend and staunch ally in my next memoir (God willing and the creek don't rise). That Canadian afternoon with Charles was unique in my experience both before and after, a close companionship that transcended our long sisterhood. Some would call us soul-mates, but I'd say

mind-mates—we were of a like mind on everything. Our conversations were aesthetically and intellectually even more beautiful than that tiny cork temple.

Equally unique in my experience, both before and after, was spending Saturday night at a wild bath-house. We each rented a small room with curtains instead of doors and a thin mattress on boards—minimal but functional. In the central room outside three steam rooms, I sat for a few minutes wrapped in a towel while the several other guys sitting around only looked at me sidelong. Then a young fellow with curly red hair locked eyes with me from across the room. As I walked over toward my curtained portal, he rose and followed.

Behind the curtain, Red hugged me like a bear, kissed me like one too, and stripped away our towels. The thin mattress proved supremely functional all night long for us to fuck each other blind. I think I came three times and Red four, or maybe I lost count. In between fucks, I learned he was a miner from way up in north Quebec who only came into town every three months—which certainly explained his appetite. His name was something French that I've forgotten. Ever prodigious, Charles said he'd had a guy for dinner and another for breakfast.

I also didn't write to Steve about the next weekend, specifically Saturday night, March 18, when I walked the few blocks down to my old stomping ground, a little bar called the Flame, still the only gay bar in town. Walking in there was just like four years back when I'd often come in secret after a shift as security cop. Only now I wasn't a cop—and wasn't married. It was a nicely busy night with a friendly crowd but unfortunately no place to dance.

New friends in the crowd soon organized a group exodus to a newly proclaimed party at somebody's apartment which gradually evolved into an orgy. It didn't feel *comme il faut* to walk out, so when the lights went out, I latched onto an attractive blond fellow and disported with him on a great leather sofa. The experience raised some moral issues:

*All this short winter day, I'm less satisfied
Than amazed that last night I made love
To a boy who didn't want me.
True, he looked on with steady eyes
As I stroked his cheeks and beard,
But most likely he saw me his savior
From the hands and mouths of others.
I felt it in the pressure of his arms
As I shielded his body with mine.
Was I cruel to take what he freely gave?
Cruel to lie on his motionless back
For the brilliant instant of having him?
Wicked for stealing a taste of his flesh?*

3/19/72

#

Steve's play ran March 23, 24 & 25, and at 2 am after the first performance he wrote me a letter comprised solely of "I love you" written out 63 times. It came with a copy of the review in the Hullabaloo that remarked on anticlimactic progressions reminiscent of Boys in the Band. The review's faint praise of "redeemable moments" helped me understand my boyfriend's litany, but his compulsive repetitions again made me wonder... They seemed to be desperate attempts to convince himself of his emotional fantasy. I wasn't convinced.

When Steve showed up early that Wednesday afternoon with his suitcase, all smiles and happy, hungry kisses, I introduced him to Charles and Ric, who insisted he have a hospitable beer. Steve spoke brightly about his play, but I saw how he was hiding the pain of the flop. We retired to my room for a consolatory welcoming ceremony, and then I drove him around to see the break-empty campus and town with its unremarkable points of interest.

Even with Steve's visit, I couldn't ignore my dissertation duty and had to leave him to his own resources for some hours each of the next couple days. With the pool closed for break, I had extra hours to make up for the evenings with Steve. He wandered the campus, checking out the big library and theater building, and on the third day, Saturday, April Fool's, after lunch he led me up a tower on campus into a room with a grand piano and gave handed me a *Programme*:

1. <i>Prelude & Fugue in Asia Minor</i>	<i>J.S. Bach</i>
2. <i>Impromptoodle, Op. 90, #2</i>	<i>Schubert</i>
3. <i>Praeludium</i>	<i>MacDowell</i>
4. <i>Piece of Something</i>	<i>Brahms</i>
<i>INTERMISSION</i>	
5. <i>Pathetic Sonata</i>	<i>Beethoven</i>
1. <i>Fast with Mistakes</i>	
2. <i>Slowly with Love</i>	
3. <i>Speedy with Confusion.</i>	

Imitating Victor Borge, Steve flipped up non-existent tails to sit on the bench and launched into the Bach. I hadn't known he was a pianist... His loving concert melted my dubious heart, especially the Pathetic Sonata. How could I not love the brilliant funny kid? So what if he was a bit shaky emotionally? Still, I had no illusions about together forever.

Both of us lapsed Judeo-Christians, on Easter Sunday morning we took off in the Camaro for New York. The whole day in the car Steve was bursting with excited energy, which was obviously a smoke screen to hide his anxiety about the play's flop and the grad school choice. In mid-Pennsylvania, as a ruse, I asked him to read to me, and naturally the only book he had was "Canterbury Tales." They passed the driving time hilariously, especially The Miller's Tale. We got to Stony Brook by late afternoon and marveled at how far along spring was there.

After dining at our motel's café, we retired to our room for a long, languorous evening of reading more tales and playing nicely with each other's. On Monday, we drove leisurely around the largely rural environs of the university enjoying spots and splashes of yellow daffodils in yards and greening fields, the lovely landscapes of woods and low hills. Steve exclaimed about how nice it was, but I hid my dismay that it was so truly, emphatically rural.

So was the campus of SUNY-Stony Brook, its modest buildings scattered throughout a veritable forest. Since we'd come on their Easter break, no one was about, making for an eerie feeling. Over dinner again, Steve was noncommittal about his impressions, and I didn't influence him with any misgivings of my own. In another long, languorous evening we just played nicely, winning and losing graciously, several games of naughty hide and seek.

On the way back Tuesday, we drove north of Lake Erie through Toronto to show Steve Canada. Since he'd be leaving on Friday, we had only two more days together and still didn't speak about the grad school issue. He gave his whole attention to saying and displaying how tremendously much he loved me. Charles and Ric were amused by Steve's constant cuddling, nuzzling and sighing, which I bore with good humor and affection. After the several days of amorous distraction, when Steve left, I was relieved to put my nose back to the grindstone.

#



My father Ray at 24

sweet, inquisitive guy quickly accepted being gay and all it entailed, and I suddenly had a regular gentleman caller to fit into my busy schedule.

Aware that I still needed occasional distraction from my hard labor, one evening Charles brought a tall handsome guy to dinner and introduced Don, a fundraiser with the university. On the sly, he told me Don was "wondering" about being gay, and maybe I could convince him—one way or the other. I turned on the charm, and soon Don was enthralled. After demolishing Ric's terrific leg of lamb, I led innocent Don into my private chamber, duly prepared to make a persuasive case, and managed to maneuver him into an awkward embrace.

About to deliver my opening argument, I was suddenly struck by Don's uncanny resemblance to my father as a young man—the same full mouth, slightly hooded blue eyes, and wavy dark hair. Now I'd never felt attracted to my late father, more like repulsed, and while screwing the questioning virgin, I made no big deal of any symbolic incest. Truth to tell, his weird likeness didn't influence my friendly feelings for Don. The

Meanwhile, Steve's next letter arrived and annoyed me. He ranted about now being my spouse and how we'd have to bear with each other's idiosyncrasies—like his jealousy. I replied affectionately, commenting sadly that gay guys mustn't ever dream about straight things like marriage. A few days later he wrote that he'd also been accepted at Chapel Hill, and that felt to him like a better bet. I replied that UNC would probably be great and congratulated him.

All that while I was running around with Don and giving him, an avid learner, advanced lessons in being gay. An outing to a nature preserve on Lake Erie prompted a poem:

*Our time is beginning full
Of waves droning in the distance,
Blackbirds piping on the reeds,
Our steps in rhythm on the walkway.
Our days are growing heavy
With ducks quacking on the shore,
Wind humming along the rails,
And our breath in harmony
While you hold me warm.
Here we stand in chill morning
And by force of will agree
Not to think ahead.*

4/24/72

Two days later was my supposedly but not at all momentous 30th birthday, and in response to Steve's card (a jokey "Mail-A-Hickey"), I wrote the next day with the sad truth that I didn't want to go to Chapel Hill. As a matter of fact, I didn't know where I wanted to live once I'd leave Ann Arbor, but I'd be in touch from wherever I wound up. I gave the letter three days in the mail and then called Steve, who'd gotten it that morning and claimed to have been crying all day. He asked if it meant we were through, and all I could say was that my love would go with him. I was sorry we couldn't be together forever. And goodbye till later.

#

The clock was running down on my sentence, and through my hard work I'd managed to keep on the schedule with the writing, even a couple days ahead. Unfortunately, with the ongoing child support, I was running out of money and had to get a job. Ric had heard of an opening for a cook in a nearby old folks' home, which I jumped right on, citing my experience as a short-order cook. I enjoyed having two (homely) scullery boys to wash all my dirty pots and pans. But it put pressure on my time for frantic typing and final advisor meetings.

On Monday, May 8 was my next-to-last session with Dr. So-and-so to discuss a few changes in the final pages, which I would type post-haste. Then I'd deliver the final document to him as scheduled on Thursday, May 11. While I noted down the niggling instructions, he gazed on me with a benign, blank expression that made me wonder if he was stoned—not that I cared. Then I had lunch with Don, a bout with the Select Trick, and cooked dinner for 60 old jokes.

Feeling euphoric about finishing my hard labor, on Thursday as agreed I hauled the document and two (carbon) copies to the office, and the secretary advised me that Dr. S had left two days ago for the summer in Vienna. The very next day after our meeting! Fuck!

###

6.4 GOING FOR IT

in which I actually decide to do something

When I started this account of my second coming out, I knew it would be a string of love affairs (like a string of pearls?), and intended to keep the academic noise to a minimum. That strategy worked fairly well right up to Thursday morning's debacle. I didn't intend to complain about my scholarly tortures, but being betrayed by Dr. S was the last straw. For some reason I seemed to have been designated as a scapegoat for incompetence and idiocy.

How rude and crude! How inconsiderate of other human beings! All these gripes I repeated to Don at lunch, and he suggested that maybe the professor had just forgotten to tell me he was leaving. I was livid: "Forgot, my ass! He sat there the whole time giving me the fisheye and enjoying how he was fucking me over!" No excuse or explanation would work.

Don was a dear to let me vent and walked me home, where I spewed again. Of course Charles was outraged and ready to march right over to the Dean's office, but I waved that away. I'd just mail the piece of shit to Vienna—forget about getting the degree this summer. Next winter was soon enough. I'd served out my sentence, and now I'd get on with my life. Charles asked what I'd do, and I had no idea. "Great!" he exclaimed, "Now everything's possible!"

Feeling enormously excited about infinite possibilities, Friday morning I took the fat package of dissertation to the Post Office with a frigid cover letter advising that for further correspondence I'd keep the Slavic office up on my whereabouts and expect a communication from him in the fall. I washed my hands of the affair and staggered home fraught with options. First thing, Charles told me I'd just had an urgent call from my mother.

The phone number I recognized as Lee's in New Orleans. Mother answered with, I'm here at Lee's—Bill disappeared!" Three days before, they'd gotten back to New Orleans from Cartagena, Colombia (!?), and the next day Bill took a taxi for some business in Arabee—and just disappeared. Mother was sleeping on Lee's couch and didn't know what to do now. Lee came on the line and assured me she was welcome to stay there, but he was getting ready to move on the 19th. I told Mother I'd be down there as quick as I could. Just hang on.

#

I enjoyed a last desperate swim (30 laps), cooked a nourishing dinner for the 60 inmates, quickly resigned from that brief job, and in the evening packed my minimal kit in the Camaro. Don stayed the night with me, tender and sad to be losing me. I felt mostly numb. Saying goodbye to Charles and Ric in the early morning was wrenching. Standing beside me at the car door, right there on Main Street in public, Don threw his arms around me with a goodbye kiss.

Being in such an urgent frame of mind, I paid scant attention to sights as I pushed the Camaro south across Indiana, Kentucky, etc. Instead, I mulled over my suddenly almost free-floating situation. Again, as Charles had so aptly remarked, after I'd get Mother's plight taken care of, everything was possible. Before getting to the Ohio River, however, I tired of nebulous daydreams about fabulous jobs, exciting adventures in exotic places, and fantastic new loves and soon started recalling how I'd crashed sweet Steve's dreams of together forever. Hopefully, he understood that I still loved him. He'd now joined my stable of still beloved former lovers.

Thinking of which, I recalled that other Steve from three years before in DC (while I was still married), the guy I noted in the Prelude with whom there was a profound soul-connection. Treasured images of that Steve held my attention all the way across Kentucky, that one-night stand tremendously sharp in my memory—I'd written about it in great detail in my journal.

Here's a lengthy quote about that night in Lou's Hideaway, where for some evenings I'd been carousing and fooling around with the gay young folk.

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(In a blue velour shirt with white turtle-neck dickie, I went out to Lou's...) "...and found a place at a middle table along the wall. (One always had to wait in line to get into bars because by law you had to have a place to sit!) A tall slender blond came in. I'd seen him in passing on the street the other noon. He alighted at a table nearby, and when a good one came on, I marched over to ask for a dance. He was quite sexy with tiny buns, long legs and an almost sad, narrow face. After dancing a few times, especially to "Aquarius," I got quite warm and went to the john to take off my dickie.

"Back at my table, I laughed with the guy sitting behind me about the heat. I recognized him, a cute, blondish, straight-looking guy who'd sat at a nearby table the night I talked so long with Bill. In a moment he asked me to dance to a slow one. Soon as we got out onto the floor, the problem of leading came up. Since I understood the basics of following, I tried, but as he said, it really didn't matter in that kind of dance. I recall the way he held my right hand up close to his chest.

"At our tables I turned around to him, and we spoke more, about languages mainly and Greek in particular. He was an English lit major and originally from New York. We got up to dance again and did so twice. The second time, both his arms were around me, and he nuzzled my ear. I didn't really believe such a guy could be serious about me. On the way back to sit, I found Bolo, high again and just as affectionate, and we danced. Then I went back to Steve (*having now learned his name*), and he asked me to dance again. (It was a real chore to remember who danced fast and who slow.)

"On the dance floor Steve held me very tight, and I rested my cheek on his shoulder, still not convinced until he said he'd like to invite me up for a drink, except that he lived in Virginia and had to get up at 8:00 for work, a land-developer. I said just as sadly that I also had to get up early—to leave town. I thought that would be that and went over to ask Bolo for another dance, but he declined. So I went back and found Steve moving from his table to mine. I told him about my research vacation and about my literary love for Jean Genet and the rock show "Hair." He'd never read Genet.

"Then we danced, or should I say, stood in an embrace a moved just a little. His arms very tight and real, it dawned on me that this lovely man was really interested in me. We gathered up our things and nonchalantly left. Crossing the street to his car (*parked in front of the Archives—Lou's was also across the other street from the FBI!*), Steve said he was glad we got away. Once in his gray Volkswagen we headed up Pennsylvania Avenue. I told him how I was on holiday from being married, and he said the girl he was going with was also married. Seemed we were two of a kind.

"On the way past the White House when I apologized beforehand for my cheap hotel room, Steve said it was no matter and mentioned an earlier trick in a bathtub. It wasn't off-color, just matter of fact, and seemed to have no bearing on us. And now I recall a snatch of an earlier conversation with him. When I expressed concern about people who will be open before and then when love is made, retreat into themselves, I claimed that I was different. For me, I said, making love was an opening of doors, not a closing. And Steve smiled.

“We found a park-platz right across the street from my hotel, and I warned we should try to avoid the desk-man since it was shortly after midnight. Steve laughed and said I should pay no attention. It was my room, after all. When I’d let us into 609, while Steve went to the john, I lowered the bedspread. Then we shut the door and were alone. The glory lasted for nearly five hours. *Un moment.*

“I look back on it now with incredulity, joy, despair. Slowly, slowly we held each other, and like a flower blooming, something burgeoned between us in those five hours. Nor was Steve one to close up again. We kept opening each other, growing into each other, exchanging selves with caresses. The beauty of Steve there in the semi-darkness. He abandoned tomorrow to stay in my arms, to keep me in his. We couldn’t stop or control the embraces or the kisses—or the intimate words spoken.

“We knew without saying what was happening. It showed in his glistening eyes, and I breathed it into his ears, onto his lips, among the crisp hairs on his chest. We couldn’t draw apart except to fall back into the deepest of kisses. The splendor of his wild hurry to hold me and of mine to hold him. More facts about one another and little jokes. Endless hours together...

“Steve: It will be getting light soon. I: Romeo, Romeo, ‘tis the lark... Steve roughed my hair and called me screwy. But it was time. We were up at long last and began dressing among caresses. A last embrace. I can see his blond head crushed against my cheek in the mirror over the sink. The kiss. And we must go—I too. There will be no sleep without him. On the stairs he turned to me, and I rubbed his nape.

“Slowly across the street. A voice came from me saying, “Five o’clock morning.” Steve intoned, “May 16, 1969.” We stood by his car door, Steve so beautiful. We couldn’t remember the poet with the bullfight and five o’clock afternoon, Madrid. What could we say? Steve. He was pulling away. I stood in the drive half-turned and watched him roll away down the street, his red taillights going slowly down to Pennsylvania. And the song crept onto my tongue: “*Plaisir d’amour...* And now he’s gone, like a dream that drifts into dawn...” Total shock.

“Slowly walking, still warm from Steve’s arms, full of him. And a dim glow in the sky. And the Volkswagen again. It wobbles up to me, and I lean in the window to Steve. He whispers, “I had to come back, but I have to go.” My mute lips shape “I know” and “Goodbye,” and he is away again. I turn. The light in the sky has grown. Turn again and see his taillights drifting away. Steve. And the walk begins.

“Listless in the fading darkness, the song filling me. Down 17th slowly. There’s no pain. And the light grows. I turn off into the parkland and sit on a fresh stump watching it brighten. The same words among silhouetted trees: And now he’s gone. Up and out onto the Ellipse. Off center, legs askew on the damp grass. Venus is dimming. Ripples of light roll into the sky as Steve drifts off into Virginia. He’s gone. But his looks... My love loves me...

“Slowly lighter. Farther away, street lights blink off. The Washington Monument is still lit, standing spectral against the pale sky. I remember how I praised Steve’s penis in the darkness: It’s lovelier than any symbol, than any cannon, than the Washington Monument—and his laugh. In the day’s daze, the star melts away. It’s time to go back. He’s gone. It’s dawn.”

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Washington Monument—photo 5/15/69

I used this abstract photo for the title image of this chapter, but I want to inflict it on you once again, here in its proper context. The photo was taken on my sight-seeing walk along the National Mall on the very day I met Steve. So this was exactly what I had in mind behind my compliment on his penis. Ever since, for me this obelisk has been a monument of Steve.

You wouldn't be interested in my departure and the bitter tears shed as my plane took off for Boston. While weeping I heard John Denver singing, "...I'm leaving on a jet plane—don't know when I'll be back again." Likely, the journal explains well why, as I crossed from Tennessee into Mississippi, I realized I wanted to go to Washington DC. Not to find Steve again—one can't go back to a dream—but to be in that beautiful city, to dance on the Ellipse.

For the first time in my life, I knew where I wanted to go—not somewhere I had to go for school, marriage, job, or even lover, but where I wanted to go for my life. The clarity was wonderful, and I drove on feeling exhilarated. The future was right around the corner! I didn't think in these terms then, but all I had to do now was persuade Lord Wind to blow me toward the northeast. If He didn't deign to help me, I'd just have to row my boat there without Him. Or catch a current flowing in my direction... I was now the captain of my fate!

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By late evening—driving the Camaro at only slightly illegal speeds—I pulled up to Lee's place on Oak Street, took a deep breath, and knocked on his door. Mother actually broke into tears seeing me, not surprising because she'd had a real rough time of it. Bill not only had disappeared, leaving her there with just a suitcase, but had emptied her checking account. A total scoundrel. I'd never imagined such a thing happening to my own mother... Whatever I said may have been of some comfort for her, I hoped, and then I disturbed her and Lee with the latest episode in the saga of my accursed dissertation.

All the bad news conveyed, Lee made us stiff gins and tonics. Not usually much of a drinker, Mother drank hers like a trooper. Mine quickly relaxed my road-trip tight shoulders. That was when Lee explained that his planned move was to Washington DC. He wondered if I'd like to go along with him... Ask and ye shall receive! Lord Wind certainly could move fast when He felt like it. I'd only just decided maybe four hours before where to go! To celebrate I had another drink and soon passed out on the floor under Lee's grand piano.

First thing Sunday morning, I called Ken to tell him I was so suddenly back, and he was relieved to hear from me because he was leaving tomorrow for Milwaukee to visit his folks. Not that I had any time today anyway to drive up to Baton Rouge for a visit. He too was outraged to hear about Mother's abandonment and about the dissertation. I told him I didn't give a fuck about the debacle, and Mother would move into my apartment. I'd move to Washington DC with Lee. Ken thought that was a really great idea. We signed off with love and promises to write. With his encouragement, I felt even more excited about the future.

#

Next task after breakfast was to call Steve and surprise him with the news that I was suddenly back in town. He too was glad to hear from me because he was leaving tomorrow to visit his folks in Memphis—then back to New Orleans for the summer and off to Chapel Hill. I was pleased that he sounded okay about his romantic dreams for us getting shot down. Then I broke the news about Mother's catastrophe and my debacle, and Steve literally exploded about both of them, cursing the arrogance and stupidity. It was helpful for me to hear someone else voice those strong feelings. We arranged for me to come by in the afternoon to see him, and there were no sexual overtones.

My former lovers thus accommodated, I drove with Mother over to the apartment on Canal Street and politely but firmly evicted my fat sub letter. Herbert now had a beard that didn't help his looks at all. With Mother standing there looking forlorn, he chose not to argue and agreed to be out by Monday night. On the way out I stopped for a lingering hug with my royal palm and admired the roses blooming crazy. Mother seemed light-hearted now and said she looked forward to living in the sweet place. She'd take good care of the roses.

When we got back to Lee's, we found him in the process of selling his MG to a young Cajun woman and didn't intrude. The past weekend he'd had a yard sale to get rid of his extra stuff, and this week we'd pack up the U-Haul truck with his piano, bed and couch. I was more than happy to lend a hand—since I'd have to stay with him the few days till we'd leave.

With everything working out so neatly, we took Lee out to lunch at the nearby diner at the foot of Carrollton. That was when Mother loosened up and told us about their strange stay in Spain and even stranger move to Colombia. She never really knew what kind of work Bill was doing and wound up her furious story with, "Everything he said was lies!" My own curious experience with my stepfather had shown him at least to be untrustworthy and undependable, and my verdict on his disappearance was, "Good riddance!"

The visit with Steve went smoothly. Over mint tea, we talked again about our separate plans, and Steve took comfort in the fact that DC wasn't all that far from Chapel Hill. He told me he was starting on another play, mentioning nonchalantly that it would be about the ending of a love affair. I said it was good to turn our lives into art—that's what I tried to do with poetry.

Touching on the ending of our affair, I recited that great Leonard Cohen song for Steve, emphasizing the lines: *It's just the way it changes / Like the shoreline and the sea.* He'd heard the song before in the old version by Judy Collins and appreciated the sentiment that our steps would always rhyme. Sharing the poetry made our parting the proper way to say goodbye.

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Lee and I moved Mother into the apartment, gave her back the Camaro, packed the truck snugly, and also went out for valedictory dances in Pete's. Come Friday morning we climbed into the truck with Pucket, his pet Siamese, on the seat between us and took off for a new world.

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FINIS