

CHAPTER 7. HONEYMOON

.i.

Funny how young folks need so much more sleep than us oldsters. As usual I was awake this Saturday morning not long past dawn and leaving Mack to snuggle his pillows, I hit the quiet keyboard, in short shrift wrapping up *Double or Nothing*. I'll send it to Johnny on Monday when he's back from his family visit. Checking in on my snoozing Viking, I stood a moment in the doorway admiring his long limbs wrapped in the serpentine coils of white sheet.

The latest treatment was splendidly successful, and I'm now pretty sure I love this darling boy. It's almost the way I felt so long ago for my wonderful lovers like Kenny or Chi—but they've got stories of their own. Comparing Young Rich's lack of amorous inspiration a half-century ago with Old Rich's happiness today is poignant but serves no purpose.

Happily, I left the coffee pot on warm, the computer up on the last chapter, and a note on the table for Mack: Off to the Farmers Market. Will bring us yummy stuff for breakfast.

In no more than an hour I got back with my shopping bag full of salad greens and buckwheat sprouts and found my lovely paramour with his coffee, nude at the computer and already reading the last page of *Double or Nothing*. While Mack finished, I set out our pastries and waited. He looked at me, blushing, and said, "Good grief, reading about us is like instant replay." He jumped up, grabbed me in a naked embrace, and asked, "Do you love me yet?"

"Guess," I teased and kissed him. Our breakfast was only briefly delayed.

Munching his chocolate croissant, Mack remarked that the chapter certainly drags Young Rich through the mill. "And spits him out a married man," he sighed.

"Now comes the hard work," I said around my own croissant, dreading to have to write about it. "Having a wife was a whole new ball game for the pirate prince."

"At least I know he survived," Mack said with a wink, "and isn't married again—yet."

I let the loaded reference pass without reaction and took our plates to the sink.

Mack needed to put in some overtime at his office, and we planned to meet at the gym in the later afternoon. In the meantime, I'm going to tackle the next chapter. Since it's mostly journal entries to transcribe from his minuscule hand, I can probably make some hay.

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As the newlyweds were occupied with nocturnal Keno matters in the casino, the formal wedding night was necessarily, to the groom's enormous relief, briefly postponed. The cohort had all gotten the next two nights off from work and everyone was going on the honeymoon to San Francisco. After their shifts and a wedding breakfast at Heidi's, they went back to apartments to grab some quick shuteye before the trip. Perhaps too dismissively, the exhausted Rich gave his equally exhausted new wife a good morning kiss and retired on his usual couch cushions to snuggle with Oná.

It was only a couple days later that he managed to journal about the honeymoon trip:

Dear Me,

Awake earliest after fitful napping, Oná and I put coffee on and went for her call of nature into the sunny field across the Rubicon. Answering my own call behind a bush, I prayed to the universe for strength. The others got up in about an hour, my new wife greeting me with a cheerful, "Good morning, sweetie."

"Good morning," I said brightly and added, "Barbara... dear." I poured her coffee and handing her the cup, saw the surprise in her eye. "I like the name Barbara," I explained.

"But it sounds like you're mad at me, Richie."

"Oh, no, Barbara—I respect you. I just don't want my wife to be some

silly doll, and I'm certainly no plastic Ken."

She giggled and asked, "Should I call you Richard then?"

"Just Rich would be great—if you can." As I expected though, within moments Barbara was calling me Richie again.

We piled like clowns with suitcases and fluffy little Oná into the VW and at the Pine Cone rearranged to squeeze the Twooth in too. Barbara sat on my lap in the back seat, her arm now intimately draped around my shoulders, and snuggled. Numbing my legs, her body again felt alien, too warm and too soft. For the long hours of the trip through Sacramento and across California to the bay, my brain shut down due to matrimonial overload. Out of order. Sorry for any inconvenience. Nobody home, but there's a bunch of bats up in the belfry. Luckily, long silences probably hid my new-husband horrors fairly well.

Arriving in the evening, we checked into a motel, left our stuff in rooms on the second floor, and went to dinner at a French place Martha had heard of. *Très chic*, I ordered something with a fancy name that turned out to be chicken breast in the strangest barbecue-ish sauce I've ever tasted. Imbibing on wine as much as seemly, I emboldened myself for the motel room awaiting us. Even a faerie knows the carnal traditions of a wedding night, whether or not maidenheads are involved, and there weren't in this case.

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...Our motel room's dim lamps softened its charm-free interior, providing just a hint of romantic glow. While Barbara was in the bathroom, I put on my sweat pants for pajamas and prayed for some way to get out of this mess. I knew that would take a miracle, but there was always hope. When Barbara came out of the bathroom in her white nightgown, she looked at my hairy chest with a frightened smile. My own smile was surely just as fearful.

In the bathroom I washed and brushed long and carefully, all the while trying not to look in the mirror where a strange married man kept staring back at me. When I went back out into the bedroom, Barbara lay under the white sheet, sensuously posing her draped body with one bare breast almost showing. And I was supposed to act like this was a turn-on?

Now her smile was different, brighter, and lifting the sheet, she displayed her nude body, rather like a red-headed Renoir nymph, soft and curvaceous, attractive only if you're into that kind of thing. Not being in the slightest, I cringed and stupidly asked, "Do we really have to?"

Her inviting smile collapsed into distress. "But we're married now, Richie. It's our wedding night." When I simply stood there gaping like an idiot, she dropped the sheet and started to cry. I suddenly realized what a terrible hurt I'd done her by my brutal question, by not desiring her. After all, I promised to act straight, and now Barbara has conjugal rights that are conversely my conjugal duty. So I dropped the sweat pants and got under the sheet beside her.

Barbara stopped crying and looked at me hopefully. Feeling awful for her distress, I moved closer and dutifully kissed her for the first time for real. She was slow to open her lips and when she did, it did nothing whatsoever to charge my battery. What finally got me going was recalling a boggling fantasy kiss with Lane and touching this strange body beside me, more as scientific exploration than sensual caress.

She lay there silently, possibly enjoying my touches, and when I climbed on top of her, she spread her legs just enough to carefully insert Tab A into Slot B. Underneath me, her body was soft, passive and impassive, utterly different than a strong, enthusiastic male body. With me desperately fantasizing Lane's sleek thighs, our copulation lasted too long, but Barbara bore with it as energetically as a pillow. With a man in me, it always felt like fireworks, Roman candles, sparklers, and I couldn't have held still for love nor money.

The hard-won climax was in a trite word anticlimactic, likely for both of us. Though I'd ceremonially consummated the marriage, there was no sense of consummation or fulfillment—just a huge sadness at somehow having been diminished, even worse than those other two times. Barbara said it was great, which seriously made me wonder about her frame of reference. If this ranked as great, she mustn't have ever made much whoopee before, poor thing.

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The next day for our honeymoon tour of San Francisco, Cap'n Gene took us around to many of the city's landmarks, Fisherman's Wharf, Golden Gate Bridge, Chinatown, streetcars, and a bewildering assortment of neighborhoods of fancy old-fashioned houses. There was a galvanizing view from a high bluff of the Pacific, across the sea to the edge of the world. It sang like a siren to the sailor in me, but the other sights only registered on my reeling mind as mere concepts, forget details.

Well, forget all but one detail. In Golden Gate Park I sighted a pair of lovely young faeries sitting close on a shady bench, each talking to the only other person in the world. I dared not stare lest I betray their presence to my cohort, who were discussing dinner plans and totally oblivious to this wonder of nature. In passing by, I saw the silken cords of passion tying the two lovebirds together. How horribly ironic that here I was now in the fabled faggot city on the bay, another faerie-land like the French Quarter—but with a woman. Wife on arm, I found it horribly easy to act like a straight tourist gawking dumbly at stuff. Dumb being the operative word.

Our second dinner was in a very ethnic Chinatown restaurant, tasty new stuff for me like black seaweed and funny mushrooms. Back in the motel, I went into the bathroom to get ready for bed first and then sat in the easy chair reading brochures of the places we'd seen and praying hopelessly that last night's sex would suffice for maybe the next week. Barbara lingered in the bathroom long enough for me to get sick to my stomach with distress.

Eventually Barbara came out of the bathroom in a lacey nightgown and posed coyly in the doorway, opening the gown to show off that silly, supposedly sexy lingerie from the wedding shower. Involuntarily, I started to laugh, which turned into a sob, and then into a fit of choking. She thumped me on the back till I calmed down and explained that her get-up reminded me of the strippers on Bourbon Street.

Crestfallen, she closed her gown. "Don't I look seductive, honey?"

"No," I said as gently as I could and honestly added, "I'm sorry, Barbara, but I can't act that straight. Remember, I'm a faerie."

She giggled uncomfortably. "No, you're not, Richie. Last night..."

"Last night we had sex," I agreed. "That's the one part of acting straight that's relatively easy."

Barbara sadly went back into the bathroom to change into her other nightgown. Then we formally kissed goodnight and stayed on our own sides of the bed. Going to sleep, I figured another call to marital duty would come soon enough anyway. In the morning, I gave my new wife a friendly good morning kiss, and we packed for the drive back to Tahoe.

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.ii.

My young Mack showed up as agreed at the gym and greeted me in the locker room with a kiss, my first ever in 35 years at the gym. Working out with him was a daze of contentment, a peaceful, dreamlike delight. Afterwards we went to his place for dinner with Jason, Kevin, and Mario (George being away again on a gig). While he cooked, we others sat with wine and cheese in the living room, and Jason started the conversation out with a bang by proudly announcing that last night at the Titsling he'd hooked up with a guy. We gasped.

Jason had decided to see what an open relationship feels like. He'd taken a hunky guy named Harry home from the Titsling and felt the experiment was quite enjoyable. Nothing he really cared to do again, but Harry was a sweet guy, and it made him feel attractive and alive.

I remarked that those were good feelings indeed, and Mario asked if he'd tell Johnny about this Harry. Jason chortled, "You bet! In detail. He wants an open relationship, and I'll give him one alright."

Kevin chuckled, "A pre-emptive blow, so to speak."

Always pragmatic, I asked, "So what did you learn from Harry, darlin'?"

Without hesitating, Jason answered, "That I really love Johnny."

Kevin muttered something about lucky stiff, and I innocently asked him if he'd managed to get rid of the girl that Liam was with last night. He hung his head and sighed. "No. He left with her, but he said he'd see me tonight."

Mario also offered Kevin a cheesed cracker and opined, "Liam's such a prick-tease." We were shocked. "I've seen him do this before—flirts with a guy to get him going, and then runs off and boinks a woman."

"Well, he's not getting away with it this time," Kevin proclaimed. "Liam's going to boink me or else!"

I left them discussing strategies to achieve Kevin's boinking and helped my tasty chef with setting the table with a tremendous paella and an insane salad with mango dressing. When the feeding frenzy had slacked off, Mack announced, "This Thursday's my birthday." We expressed happy surprise. "I'll be 24." I did the gruesome math.

Mario immediately volunteered to have a party at their place. "George gets back Tuesday and loves to do parties."

"That would be great," Mack and then offhandedly remarked, "I think I'll get a tattoo."

Now both Mario and Kevin have tasteful designs on their shoulders which are perfectly fine, but the thought of some image, any image, permanently marking my lovely young man's ivory... I cautiously asked, "Like what?"

Mack smiled at my discomfort and said, "You choose something, Rich. You know, brand me as yours."

"Yeh, like a Rocking R," Kevin offered.

Jason added, "On the left buttock."

Trying to hide my over-whelm, I said, "I better think about it some."

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The Titsling is of course the only place to go on a Saturday night. Our dining group adjourned to that bumptious dance-hall where Lars presided over the sound. Liam was in evidence at a table full of women, many of the lesbian persuasion, Deirdre and Lynn among them. Kevin set off on his quest with our best wishes. While we were getting drinks at the bar, Mario informed us that Liam sometimes even tries to seduce dykes—but only the fems. The group's expert opinion was that Liam desperately needs a ferocious buggering.

As we socialized and bounded about on the dance floor, I purposely tried not to notice anything happening with Kevin and Liam. It was more than enough just being with Mack and being seen with Mack. I wasn't sure which of us actually belonged to the other. We danced a lot, just the two of us, in a brilliant globe of rhythm and each other.

I'm usually good for a couple hours on the dance floor, and that's when I started to poop out. Mack hugged me, laughing that he already wore out a while ago. That's when Kevin showed up. "You about ready to go?" he asked with little expression.

We were indeed ready, and I diplomatically asked, "And Liam?"

Kevin grinned nervously. "I told him it's now or never. I said, if he doesn't come home with me tonight, he can kiss my pirate ass goodbye."

Mack looked around and seeing no Liam, asked, "So where is he?"

"Still deciding," Kevin sighed. "He's got five more minutes."

I was impressed by his firmness and congratulated him on the ultimatum. We'd no sooner gotten back to the table with Jason and several other youngsters when Liam showed up at Kevin's shoulder with a quiet "Here I am." He tousled our victorious friend's fuchsia locks, and we smiled fondly at the tender scene.

On the ride to Kevin's, Mack and I kept Liam in conversation, learning a great deal more about him. For a few things: He's a farm boy from Ohio, graduated Kent State, and now works in advertising for an outdoor recreation magazine. Besides a body builder, also an avid skier. I remarked that he's rather a hot property, and Kevin muttered a deep growl of agreement. We dropped them off with Mack's admonition: "You be good boys now."

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This splendid Fourth of July morning while my Mack slept peacefully on, I left a little love note, zipped by my place to pick up some fresh clothes, and got to the kids' house by ten. The kids are of course my daughter Aimée and son-in-law, Rich. We headed back into the mountains to fetch Jammes from his music camp. On the lovely ride I proudly announced having met a new man-friend.

Like the rest of the family, they've been aware forever that I'm gay and long ago were even good friends with my former partner. But for the past 25 years, they've also known that I've had no amorous involvements. So the news of Mack was as surprising to them as it is to me. I let them adjust to that basic surprise before mentioning his shocking youth.

Rich gave me a congratulatory grin, but Aimée was taken aback. "Daddy," she choked, "he's just a kid. I could be his mother!"

"You certainly could," I laughed and proceeded to tell them about my new boyfriend, including his working on my graphic novel idea. I also took the opportunity to talk about my other young gay friends. Since they already knew about my penchant for dancing, the Titsling was just another chapter in my mania.

We stopped for lunch in a kitschy frontier-style saloon and then drove up the canyon to the camp, just in time for the graduation ceremony and concert. All was a bustle of families come to retrieve their offspring, many with at least one dog to add to the havoc. The campers were arrayed on bleachers at the rear of the performance space, and we found Jammes back row center, notable for the star-spangled Uncle Sam top hat perched on his long-haired head.

The ceremony itself was mercifully brief, and the performances by instrumentalists of various levels in orchestral groups were impressive. Jammes played trumpet in one set and in another his familiar saxophone. I was amazed that they did a favorite piece by Shostakovich, beautifully. There was an exquisite girls' chorus, and for a finale all the campers and audience sang The Star Spangled Banner. I was moved to grandfatherly and patriotic tears.

On the ride back down the canyon, Jammes was as animated as I've ever seen him in talking about the great time he had and exciting activities like sleeping out under the stars on the mountainside. His sleeping bag kept sliding downhill.

While he happily rambled on, I admired his delicate face with those braces and stubborn nose, wondering if he resembles me in any way. My oldest, Ike in Atlanta, has always looked strikingly like I did at his age, but he's much better looking than I ever was. Then I noticed that

my grandson here actually looks like Mack might've looked at twelve. Jammes is well on his way to being as long and lean as my sweet Viking, already only an inch shorter than I.

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.iii.

Back at home late in the afternoon, I called Mack and found him in an artistic frenzy. He'd spent the day so far sketching basic models for the main characters and wanted to put in a few more hours yet. I wanted to do some more writing anyway (catching up on the above), and we agreed to dine Chinese.

Honestly, I almost feel like these contemporary comments are turning into another journal. Oh, well, it is after all the tale of telling a story. And now I've even got some time left to tell some more of it, anticlimactic though it may be.

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It's indicative that after the honeymoon, Richie Rich's journal gets rather sketchy and monotonous. The reprieve from connubial duty didn't last long. The second morning after work the call came when Barbara again presented her nude body for his ministrations. He doesn't describe the task but remarks that it's gotten somewhat easier, if no more thrilling or fulfilling.

In general Rick had husband duty every couple or three days (mornings), and Barbara always lay passively smiling up at him, accepting his practiced touches and ceremonial kiss. Even *in flagrante*, she mostly didn't embrace him but lay with arms at her side, rarely touching his body, his beauty. Playing this unsupported role quickly became mechanical.

To inspire performances, Rich tried weaving fantasies of Lane and making use of the fleeting advantage to do what had to be done. But that was horribly frustrating. When he tried to think just about Barbara while thrusting into her, it was always like tossing water on a fire. Soon he started thinking of having sex with her as generously giving her what she wanted. To that extent he felt it was a true expression of affection. That rationale made it much easier.

Everybody slipped easily back into Tahoe's topsy-turvy nocturnal schedule with mornings night and afternoons morning. August was glorious summer resplendent with sun and storm. Pleasantly unlike the dead, wet heat of summer in New Orleans, Tahoe's pristine mountain air was all piney with balmy breezes. For Rich every quiet moment in the fragrant outdoors at beach or fen redeemed an hour in the casino's cigarette smoke and clamor.

The cohort hung even more closely together now, having essentially turned into a family, that of Rich with wife, sister-in-law, and potential brother-in-law. The Twooth, probably someone's distant cousin, assumed Rich's former role as fifth wheel. Together all night as Keno crew, their breaks were often spent together, but sometimes Rich would skip out for a dance on the dark beach or a futile 6-spot at Barney's (with cautious wave to Daryl).

Besides working, they basically did everything together, eating, shopping, loafing, and playing bridge. Barbara and Rich also enjoyed rousing games of gin rummy. There being no television set at the Rubicon, sometimes the others went to the Pine Cone to watch the news on Twooth's set. Rich preferred to stay at home with Oná in welcome solitude.

He adamantly had no interest in watching television (as do I to this day), and current events weren't of any interest either. He appreciated the rarefied isolation of the casino resort, a strange sort of ivory tower. He had no idea what was going on in the outside world, who was hot, or who was not. His one serious problem was that he missed his music. Memory music for dancing on the fen was getting all jumbled up, and so he started making up his own compositions like a stew of Vivaldi and Beethoven. But they served the purpose.

Even though Gene and the Twooth weren't what you'd call close friends, their pleasant male company at home and beach helped to counter-balance the mega-overdose of female companionship. In that way, the closeness of that larger group was a tremendous comfort for the new husband. What if, like most newlyweds, Barbara and he now had to live together all alone? That scary two-person scenario far exceeded his acting ability.

The curious thing was that Barbara waited till a whole two weeks after the wedding to call her folks and break the news. Right after the honeymoon, Rich had written to his folks about the wedding at their new address in San Antonio. His mother's answer was surprised and pleased, but there was of course no word from his father. Barbara told Rich that Papa and Nana were thrilled to have him as a son-in-law, mistakenly thinking him a nice boy, and were glad of his academic career. (He'd spoken earlier with Papa about going on for a doctorate and into university teaching. What else could a Slavic scholar shoot for?)

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It was as though getting married knocked Rich into a time warp. In the journal, his days started blending into a much faster flow than before, losing detail. He worries about not thinking much anymore, about feeling mentally numb, and most of the thoughts he does think are about how to relate to this other person in his life, the struggle to see things from Barbara's alien perspective, to understand, support, and feel affection for her.

Here and there in the journal are comments of minimal biographical note:

Dear Me,

...This afternoon I sat idly on the couch scratching Oná's furry ear with one hand and while she read a magazine, twiddled a lock of Barbara's auburn hair with the other. I realized then that my passionless feelings for this wife are the same kind of affection and care that one feels for a pet. After all, people truly do love their cats or dogs. I've apparently traded my dog for a wife and have to make sure she's fed and sheltered—and petted.

I must admit that there's a darling puppy-like quality about Barbara at times. It's not as though she hangs on me or clings, but she hovers close like waiting for any attention. She avidly dogs my steps, trying to see what I'm doing, even getting a glass of water, which means I've got to write to you, Old Me, when she's busy. Her brown-eyed smiles are as opaque to interpretation as any canine's supposedly adoring gaze.

It's lucky we started off as such good friends, and so it's easy to pet Barbara. I try often to hold her hand, give her pats on the arm or shoulder, or stroke her hair. Kissing is a different matter. I hope this sincere, if manufactured, affection will keep her content. I find it's easier to call her darlin' than dear, and I try not to cringe when she calls me sweetie.

...Walking with Barbara down a Reno street [*on a Sunday off*], I saw in a shop window a big poster of Sonny and Cher for their #1 song "I Got You Babe!" I've heard it a couple times on Gene's car radio and figure it's morbidly appropriate to my predicament. I envy Sonny his long hair. Another new song I've heard on the radio is the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." It's now my theme-song.

...We went this evening [*another Sunday off*], to a show in the Sahara theater, a supposedly famous new comedian named Don Rickles. All set for a new Red Skelton, I was absolutely appalled at this new style of comedy. Call me a prig, but Rickles was vile and insulting. I'd never say such things to anyone, but when he did, I sometimes had to laugh in spite of myself.

...At a show in Harrah's theater, a musical revue of questionable taste, among the scantily clad, feather-bedecked male dancers, I recognized my beach blond. (I saw the beauty again at the beach the other day and got a subtle nod of greeting.) I was thrilled to see that he and his pretty friends are

show-boys, finely plumed nookie birds indeed. Not to disturb Barbara by a torrid piece of my mind, I gave no sign of the thrill or frustration.

...This morning on the walk home from breakfast at Heidi's, I got Barbara to sniff at one of those huge conifers, which I learned is called Ponderosa. She was unimpressed by the bark's sweet vanilla fragrance and just thought it curious. Sadly, I accepted that some of us are nature spirits and some aren't. I wonder what excites her interest but haven't got a clue.

...I've managed to perform on call for this whole month of August, but it always leaves me feeling drained. It would be misery but for the soporific, anesthetic effect of this pretense of passion. Now I'm even sleeping extra hours and feel sluggish when awake.

When we got up today and sat alone at lunch (Martha and Gene off on an errand), Barbara put her hand on mine and asked, "Are you alright, Richie?"

"Sure, I'm fine, darlin'," I lied around a bite of toast.

She stroked my cheek. "I mean, are you alright not being a flit?"

"I still am," I insisted again, choking back a howl, and didn't lie. "But it's really hard." I put the toast down and covered my eyes, although they were agonizingly dry.

Barbara whispered, "I'm so sorry, honey." Her sympathy and the sudden awareness of the baby inside her small body soothed me, my gratitude feeling even more like love.

...This morning our boss Mr. Leo yanked my leash and ordered me to get a haircut, my last disfigurement having been a month before for the wedding. Disgruntled, I sat again in Jack the Clipper's shop waiting and reading old Time magazines, a horrifying story about 50,000 new troops to Viet Nam and the first pictures of Mars taken by Mariner IV—boringly weird.

Then Daryl walked in the door, smiled, and came over to me. "Hey, Rich." He sat in the chair beside me. "What's the bad puppy up to now?"

"Nothing I want, that's for sure." I nodded in the direction of the barber, who was blithely clipping an old man's thin hair.

Darryl mussed my barely muss-able hair. "Too bad. Longer hair makes you look hot."

Thinking how I could show him hot, I said shamelessly, "You look pretty hot yourself."

"Thanks," Daryl said, embarrassed. "So what happened with the girl?"

I tossed the Time on the table and sighed, "Married her."

Daryl looked away with a sad, horrified expression. Finally he said, "I'm really sorry, Rich." Then he laughed and added, "But I guess I should congratulate you."

"Just wish me luck. I'm going to need a lot of it to stay sane."

"No, no," he chuckled, "you don't want to stay sane, my dear. One can't be sane and happy at the same time." He considered the two of us ahead of him in line for a haircut (including an older man sitting across the room with a newspaper), and said, "I think I'll bop over to Heidi's for lunch and come back later. Wanna join me?"

"Thanks, but I can't. I'm next—and gotta get home."

"To the little wife," Daryl said without sarcasm but with a sympathetic smile. "Pietro's waiting for me too." His lover's name sounded like music to my faerie ear. So if I go crazy, I can be happy? Aren't I already nuts?

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.iv.

I barely managed to write through those dog days of that long ago August in time to meet my young man for chow fun. Mack brought a sheaf of his pencil sketches from the afternoon, and I marveled over them for quite a while. The level of beefcake was right on the noodle, and the faces were like dream-angels. He explained that he has a graphics program that will move

the characters around however he wants in various settings. His embarrassed pleasure at my praise was so cute that I got up, walked around the table, and kissed him.

Of course I described the day's mountain journey and concert, as well as my grandson's enthusiasm for the experience. I remarked that they were scandalized when I told them about him—but okay with it all, and Mack excitedly asked when he was going to meet them. I figured fairly soon I'd arrange for us all to go out to dinner. He countered with, "They should come to my birthday party on Thursday." Not a half-bad idea.

Back at my place, I quickly emailed the chapter to Johnny to await his return tomorrow morning. After that, our idleness was interrupted only by a call from Lynn to talk about the wedding plans and get the various events onto my calendar. Only three weeks away. Otherwise, yesterday evening Mack and I accomplished nothing constructive and had great fun doing it.

Today being a work-day for my guy, I will dutifully plow through some more of our sad tale of a gay guy trying to act straight. I use the word plow since Rich cynically wrote at one point that having sex is like plowing a field or running a race. I'm the ox plodding along dragging the plow, the runner slogging along, one foot after the other, to the finish line.

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By September, Richie Rich's attempts to act like a straight husband were still amateurish at best. He was still rehearsing—with dropped lines, missed cues, drifting off-script, and unfocused rote deliveries. No academy awards. Barbara, on the other hand, expertly portrayed the happy, attentive and affectionate spouse.

Dear Me,

...Recently I've noticed that sometimes, when Barbara isn't aware of me looking, her face lapses into a blankness, her puppy-bright eyes dimming in a sad, worried way. Yesterday evening while I was dealing a hand of gin rummy, she did it again. Finishing the deal, I asked if something was maybe wrong. Have I done something? She crinkled her sweet smile, tears welled, and she choked out, "You've never said you love me."

"No, I haven't," I agreed and objected, "but you haven't either."

Dismayed, Barbara reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Oh, Richie, sweetie, sure I did, didn't I? You know I love you, I do!"

I gave her my oft-rehearsed satisfied smile, stroked her hand, and replied, "I do sort of love you, darlin'." Her expression told me I'd messed up, and I scrambled. "I do ... love you, Barbara, a lot. I'm just not in love with you." She sadly stared at her cards. "And I can't act like I am."

She smiled, resignedly. "I know, sweetie. But you're still a wonderful husband."

The devil made me ask her, "Are you in love with me?"

It took her a long moment to answer, "No. But I do sort of love you too, Richie."

A kiss sealed our alliance of affection, and I proceeded to beat her mercilessly at gin. As I feared, when we were next abed this morning, there were connubial dues to pay.

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I haven't mentioned them much, but Rich managed many visits to the beach and walks to the fen. Those times by himself were the mainstay of his supposed sanity. Dancing up storms or wide-winged flights over the lake, it was a splendid breakthrough when he learned to dance to the subtle silence of Tahoe's wildness, often with new, almost mystical tempos.

Meanwhile, between such effusions, Rich and Oná methodically explored the marshy maze. Using many balls of twine, like a nude Theseus, he and the dog traced their way into the

labyrinth, seeking its secret heart. For weeks he tried paths along hummocks and beside channels, string trailing behind, always keeping an eye out for the Minotaur.

For weeks Rich went through the routines of casino work and marital life automatically without much thought of anything, his fits of love-longing-loneliness becoming ever fewer and farther between. It wasn't really numbness he felt, but the absence of anything, like an amputation with only a vague sensation of a ghost life once his.

Rich never found the mythical man-bull or the secret heart of his fen. On his last walk there with Oná, they danced a farewell on the greensward for all the chirping birds. On the fifteenth everyone moved out of the Rubicon Trail apartment. Gene and the girls were driving back to Ann Arbor, and then he'd go on to his folks in Monongahela, Pennsylvania. Rich and the Twooth would stay on in Tahoe for a week's more work, and he moved to a cabin at the Pine Cone. It was really cheap this late in the season.

The next day he wrote about the parting:

Dear Me,

...After breakfast they were ready to take off by nine, and we said our farewells outside Heidi's. I hugged Barbara for some moments, consoling her that it would be only ten days apart (ten days for me to breathe again). We kissed, and I helped her into the back seat. After a goodbye cuddle, I handed frisky Oná to Martha. Loaded to the gills, Gene's trusty beige bug chugged off up the road. The Twooth and I waved and followed on foot toward the Pine Cone.

Though our conversations generally avoided the personal, I remarked how strange it was suddenly to be apart from Barbara after these months.

He chuckled, "Now you can go out and get naughty."

"Easier said than done," I sighed and teased, "Where do you go to get naughty?" He said nothing. Solely out of innocent curiosity, I asked, "Do you even know how to get naughty?"

"Afraid not," Twooth sighed, which I figure probably also means he's afraid to. But our moment long past, I didn't feel like giving him lessons in introductory naughtiness.

Late to bed after last night's work, we trudged wearily up the road to the Pine Cone. My lovely log cabin also sits up the mountainside, not far above his, full of a rough-hewn ranch-style bed where I grabbed some sleep, in heaven to be sleeping alone. How amazing to think that. For years an empty bed had been the bane of my existence.

In the afternoon I hiked up the wild mountainside and right away found a new special spot, the broad, smooth stump of a once monumental Ponderosa pine. Judging by the immense number of rings, it was a couple centuries old when felled. This splendid pedestal with a wide view out across treetops over Tahoe, bluer than lapis lazuli, became my stage for a dance to these last days of summer.

All night at work I kept an eye out for a guy to provide my first marital infidelity, naturally spotting no one. One break was on the beach for a dark dance to summon up someone, and another was at Barney's for a smile from Daryl and a loser 6-spot. On the way out, I saw the beach blond dancer coming in with his bevy of show-boy friends and stood there on the steps feeling like Charlie Brown. It gave me a new understanding of Henri's wacky church.

Back at the cabin in the bright morning light, I've been sitting here on the steps to write this entry in my pitiful journal and now will leap into my blessedly empty bed.

#

.v.

Each day the two Richards walked the road back and forth to the Sahara for work, ate whatever meal you wanted to call it at Heidi's, and otherwise left each other to their own devices. Their company was pleasant and conversation wider ranging than with the others of the cohort. The Twooth enjoyed talking about his favorite novels, and Rich was happy to listen, knowing he'd probably never read them himself. Besides, there wasn't a lot he could talk about on his part, certainly not about his anguish.

Between Keno writing and hikes up the mountain to his stump, Rich's precious week of liberty, of wife-less-ness, sped by with little of note, except on Friday.

Dear Me,

...Before hiking, I took a warm-up stroll around the Resort, appreciating its peace and wishing I could've afforded... But I've got to concede that living at Pine Cone wouldn't have changed anything. Barbara would still turn up pregnant, and the rest follows like clockwork, no matter where I'm living. Fate doesn't care what path you take to get to its chosen destination.

Circling around the north end of the place, I noticed some guys come out of a cabin way down near the road. Even at the distance I recognized Daryl and the dancer. They jumped right into a green car and drove away. Holy Charlie Brown! So he's Pietro. They're living in that little honeymoon cabin. I leaned against a big tree and imagined... What if my Tahoe summer had been as bright as theirs, as full of passion and peace? If Lane and I...

Before Barbara, I've never cohabitated with anybody. Sure, Eric stayed with me for a while in New Orleans, but he was just a guest in my bed. I'd like to believe in the utopian possibility of living happily ever after with a lover, but that doesn't happen. It can't. Many of my men could've so easily been life-mates, yet there were always good reasons for us to move on.

This wistful regret reminded me that this being married isn't a life sentence. I'll serve my debt to society and get out of the clink, convicted husband but free divorcee. It's already going on four months, and by late February or early March... Then by next summer, I'll be free again. Out of the fires of the coming ordeal, my faerie phoenix will rise again.

Bracing myself to endure the relatively short incarceration, I resolve to strive heroically for a happy enough married life with Barbara meanwhile.

#

Three more nights' work, and Rich left the Sahara-Tahoe casino for the last time, ceasing forever to be a Keno writer, and bade fond farewell to his treasure galleon, still a-glitter in the pale dawn hour. Before he got back to Pine Cone, it had faded away, dissolving in the light of autumn's first morning. A good morning's sleep, and that last Tahoe afternoon Rich tramped up the mountain for the last time to his stage to dance a fierce fandango for fall. He managed to resurrect the fallen Ponderosa.

#

.vi.

I was on such a roll with the story yesterday that I didn't stop to note interruptions in the writing about those last days at Tahoe. First I suddenly remembered to call my daughter and invite them to Mack's birthday party on Thursday. Jammes generally has lots of homework, so they'll only drop by to meet the birthday boy and have some cake.

Next came a call from Johnny, who had just read Double or Nothing. He remarked with sympathy on the rapid-fire way young Rich suddenly wound up married and then thanked me for my advice to Jason on the open relationship matter. He likes the ground rules. "Jason already

told me about Harry, and we're both cool." I appreciated their easy accord. "But you know, Rich," he added, "it feels real strange reading about myself in your story."

"It's our story too," I objected. "You're part of it, darlin'. And I hope you'll go out there and whip us some good action for me to write about." He clearly didn't know what to say to that, and we signed off till later.

Not long and it was Mack on the phone to let me know he'd talked to Kevin, who reported an athletic weekend with Liam. They apparently didn't get out of bed till Monday morning for work. It did my sentimental old heart good to think of those two...

Wrapping up that bit about Rich's last Tahoe dance, I zipped off to pick up my grandson after school and get him to his jujitsu class. Then straight to the gym where Mack and I took adjacent treadmills and dutifully trod along in splendid unison.

I asked what he'd like for his birthday, and he replied, "I already told you: all of you." "I believe we're all here. What else?"

"I want your tattoo. Thought of anything yet?"

I suggested his Aztec birth day-name, which I'd already looked up online and found to be 6 House, a temple with six dots. I explained, "Xochiquetzal, the goddess of love and artistic inspiration, is ruler of the number six. House is a lucky day, indicates nobility and intelligence—but please, please, don't put it on your butt, darlin'. Nobody gets to see your butt but me."

"And guys in the sauna." He blew me a kiss and punched up his pace, which I also adjusted accordingly for my own shorter legs. "Besides," I added, "it'll always be your ceremonial name, even when you're not mine anymore." His loving smile soothed my concerns on that tender topic. We agreed on the back of his left hand.

My concept was of an elegant Aztec temple, maybe two and a half inches high, with an ornate crest and vivid colors. And six is a great number for the rainbow of colors. Designing it took me all evening, and on emailing it to Mack, I shuddered to think what I'm wreaking.

Now having digressed about my own happy situation, with the whole day ahead I'll try to get somewhere in the story of our newly married faerie prince. Let's return now to those fabled days of yesteryear when Rich's traumatic Tahoe sojourn was coming to an end.

#

No longer employed at the glamorous Sahara-Tahoe, that Monday evening the two Richards celebrated their last night at the magic lake with a dinner in the casino's ritzy restaurant. Only several days later did he report in the journal about that last supper and in spurts about his ongoing adventures in wedlock.

Dear Me,

...On the walk to the Sahara my mouth started to taste like ashes, and by the time we ordered, I got to feeling downright crappy. My pork loin looked fabulous, but I couldn't taste anything, even the cinnamon applesauce. So our going-away dinner was pretty subdued and casual until after the chocolate cake that I could only bear to sample, when Twooth inspected his empty wine glass and remarked, "You really don't look so good, Rich."

"Well, thanks a lot," I replied with a weak laugh. "It's been a hard summer, and I've still got a long row to hoe."

"You know, Rich," he said, looking away as though for our waiter. "I'm so sorry how this all happened. I had such different hopes for our summer."

"Likewise."

"Now that you and Barbie..." Twooth began and looked at me directly, his dark eyes actually meeting mine. "...I guess it doesn't matter now."

I could only nod and rush off to the men's room for the Roman remedy. On the walk back to Pine Cone I got to feeling a bit better and made it all

the way under my own power. I climbed the path up to my cabin with several sets of steps and many moans. It was already after ten, and to ease back into a diurnal routine, I wanted to stay up only till midnight.

Still feeling yucky and vaguely nauseous, I lay down on the bed, staring at the walls of golden logs, and pondered how Twooth and I missed our golden opportunity. We both broke the good old Golden Rule by not doing unto the other what we wanted the other to do unto us. After all, one of us had to make the first move. He had the excuse of Seattlitis. I was just stupid.

#

Morning came on Tuesday quite tentatively with a queasy stomach and a nagging pain between my eyes. Twooth's bus to Seattle was leaving a bit after mine to Michigan, and so we rode together in the Pine Cone's van down the road to Heidi's. He was cheerful over his healthy breakfast, but feeling woozy, I barely managed coffee. Watching him eat, out of the blue I asked, "Does it really not matter now?"

He gave me a gentle, serious gaze, and shrugged. "Not really, Rich."

We walked quietly over to the bus station, that scene of my Independence Day fiasco, where I watched them slide my bag into the luggage compartment. Then, forgetting hygiene, I surprised dear Richard the Twooth with a diseased hug, bid him a fond goodbye, and crawled on board.

The bus ride went on for an eternity, a purgatory of crowded, stinking discomfort, while I descended into delirium. In Carson I was conscious enough to recognize the station where I'd once gotten off, but nothing else of the landscape or inhabited environs penetrated my fog of misery. Late Thursday night, the eternal two and a half plague-ridden days had only gotten me to Des Moines. Barely coherent, I called Barbara from the station.

Apparently, when one dies in Des Moines, the airline angels miraculously whisk you off to an afterlife in Detroit. Feverish, filthy, and probably foul-smelling, I caught a red-eye flight, first class no less, beside a young suit who dozed the whole way. I fixated on the fascinating folds of those expensive slacks in his lap.

Early in the morning in Detroit, Barbara and her folks rescued my insensate body at the gate and hauled it to Ann Arbor, where it was laid in a bed. In the evening I was able to greet my new mother- and father-in-law properly, raising a weak hand from the bedcovers. Little Martha made me drink plenty water, and Barbara stayed close by for my needs, of which there were few beyond sleep...

...Throughout the weekend I stayed bed-ridden, in rare lucid moments eating or drinking, staggering to the bathroom, and even managing hazy conversations with the family. One of those evenings, maybe Saturday, Gene appeared out of nowhere, back from Pennsylvania. In chats with Papa, I again appreciated his clear thinking on things academic and political. Nana, Big Martha, was motherly, feeding me salubrious soups and homemade breads...

...Sunday evening I awoke feeling good enough to get dressed and struggle upstairs with Barbara's help. Slowly, slowly she gave me a tour of the big sprawling house, much finer than anywhere I've ever lived. Nana made us a feast of a dinner, a standing rib roast. It came with the same yummy Yorkshire pudding Martha once made. The plates were big heavy blue ceramic with fishes, a set they'd bought on a trip to France.

The six of us, three couples, sat round the elegant dining table, and I got a distinct sense of being absorbed into the family unit. These people were now attaching to me, encrusting my faerie ship like coral on a sunken wreck, drawing me into their world. This new son-in-law aspect of acting straight was intimidating.

As we dug into the dessert, baked apples, Barbara cleared her throat and said brightly, "Richie and I have an announcement." For a moment she left that hanging portentously in the air and then announced, "We're having a

baby!" I was impressed with her aplomb and positive intonation. She's a much better thespian than I.

Martha squealed in delight, exactly as though she'd had no idea. "How perfect! I'm going to be an aunt!" Gene also exclaimed something about wonderful. The folks welcomed the prospect of becoming grandparents. Meanwhile I silently ran through my entire repertoire of pleased expressions and was truly pleased to hear no inquiry about due date.

In the quiet evening while the rest sat around reading magazines, I finally managed to write this all down for you, Old Me. I hope the memories aren't too painful. [Not too.] ...

...It's great to be up and mobile again. This morning Barbara, Oná, and I went outside for a walk in the sun. She was perfectly beamish that I'm finally recovering and held my arm affectionately. The folks' house sits near the top of a grassy hillside looking out over a small wooded river valley, another hillside sunny across the way. For my introduction to the Midwest, it was a pretty good view.

Barbara soon went back inside, leaving me on the grassy slope with the pooch. I did some stretches which slipped automatically into a grateful adagio for surviving the pestilence. To the family watching from the screened porch above, it must have looked like chaotic calisthenics, proof of the profound weirdness of their new son-in-law.

In my dance I understood that I'm no longer who I was before Tahoe. The disease was a transformation, my passage from flighty faerie boy into grown-up gay man, albeit a married one. Dancing the new identity was thrilling, but I still cried hot tears for the departed youth. When Barbara called to me from the porch to come up for lunch, I knew that this new gay man is now irrevocably named Richie—for family. For school and such, I'll just be Richard.

Right after that lunch of Nana's stupendous clam chowder and tearful goodbyes, Gene and Martha left with Oná on their long drive back to Seattle. A nap through most of the afternoon helped my recuperation, leaving me fit for playing bridge in the evening. Nana's a shrewd player, and we're good partners, bidding and making two small slams. Papa keeps pretending to forget what's trump. In surprising fact, it was fun...

...Today we drove into downtown Ann Arbor, locally called A-Square. I noticed nothing unusual to denote Midwest, the houses as normal as anywhere. Papa did a drive-by of the beautiful University for my academic appreciation, and we lunched in a student place as full of plants as a jungle.

After lunch, at a department store, with Barbara guiding tasteful choices, we bought me costumes more suitable for the role of her husband: stylish shirts, dressy slacks, fancy shoes, and a sport coat. The dowdy duds made me feel extremely unattractive, not at all sexy like in my usual body-hugging wardrobe. For that matter, once his commodity gets cornered by a wife, what does a straight guy have to advertise anyway? Like a helpless patient in a hospital, a malleable lump on a gurney, I stoically suffered the family's gentle surgeries to reshape my image, to mash my round faerie peg into their square straight hole.

#

The next day the still gay man and his pregnant wife flew back to Seattle, passing close by the staggering summit of Rainier's massif. Richie apologized to his magic mountain for having flirted so ficklely with other lesser peaks over the summer. He moored his bedraggled faerie ship to a glacier for safe harbor till spring when they'd be free again for a new voyage of adventure. Then our sailor resignedly rode the airplane down into the straight city of Seattle, now truly his home port.

#

.vii.

The newlyweds' return to Seattle was an easy transition. Friend Betsy had graciously found them a great place to live at 4206 12th Avenue NE, just down the street from the girls' apartment (now Martha and Gene's), the right half of the first floor in a square house with a wrap-around porch and picture window. With curving roof lines like a short pagoda, the house squatted on a slight knoll with two flights of steps up the slope.



Richie thought the place had the feel of a Shinto shrine. The one-bedroom apartment had well-worn furnishings and a grandmotherly musty smell that he enjoyed. Barbara made no comment on their future quarters, negative or otherwise.

Gene and Martha arrived in the VW that same afternoon, understandably frazzled by the long trip, though sweet Oná was as frisky as ever and excitedly licked Richie's face. Right off, Gene and he moved Betsy's stuff back to Little Sweden. Under the new circumstances, she was moving into Richie's old room. Out on the balcony, he admired the autumn gold trees down the hillside and briefly danced a salute to his mystical mountain.

For a quick, festive home-coming, they all got together with the Twooth, Betsy, and Bob for supper at the Olympia. The Twooth had gotten the Tahoe crud but didn't get really sick till he got home and not as bad as Richie.

The following day, Gene and Richie hauled furniture hither and thither, his desk from Little Sweden and rocker from the apartment. Afterwards, as Barbara and Martha were off shopping, he blithely swept all the floors to Vivaldi's mandolins, reveling in real music again, and then curled up on the old sofa with his beloved Doré folios. It was enormously comforting to settle into a new place and live with music and art again.

On Friday morning there were appointments with the Slavic Department to work out arrangements, and then Richie went to the pool. He wanted to get into shape for seeing Lane on the morrow. He hadn't let himself think much about lovely Lane since Tahoe, much less anything else, but all the while he'd been anxious to see the boy again and maybe...



His hopes for meeting up with Lane at the pool on Saturday went awry. Barbara required him to go downtown with her to shop for more household necessities. He also got her into the old bookstore to check out its cookbooks while he looked at the old stuff. For a mere twelve dollars he found another big Doré volume, "Paradise Lost," Milton's title alone compelling and symbolic for our fallen faerie. What clinched the sale, of course, were the leathery-winged angels tumbling lushly down from heaven—and beautiful Lucifer sexily brooding in exile.

When they got back from shopping, Richie borrowed Oná and headed for Ravenna. Approaching the park along the street of blazing golden trees, he ran into that girl Rory called Celia, who was dressed in colored scarves with bangles and beads. He said a happy hi.

She said, “Oh-hi-O! I didn’t recognize you, Rich. Your aura’s so different.” He asked if Rory was anywhere around, but she said that he’d moved to San Francisco back in July. “He told me if I saw you, to tell you: Keep on looking for the rainbow.” She hugged him and just like Rory said, “Peace, brother.”

In Ravenna’s riot of fall color, for maybe an hour, Richie and Oná danced on the hillside. Then he returned almost willingly to the confines of wedlock.

#

In honor of the Tahoe cohort’s return, on Sunday the Twooth’s folks threw another cookout at their place on the shore. While the others sat on the terrace with drinks, the husband and wife then took a walk down by the water. The tide was out again, the flat an easy path along the shore, its wooded bank now gilded with autumn. They walked and talked about their poor household finances. (This year his fellowship and salary as Russian instructor still wasn’t enough for two, much less the future third.) Barbara said Papa had offered to help out with a couple hundred dollars a month, and Richie did a pirouette of thanksgiving.

That night, the group of seven friends trooped to the theater for the movie “The Great Race.” From the very opening Richie was in stitches at the hysterical scenes, the noise-seeking torpedo, the rocket-propelled railcar, the hayloft and pigsty... Even now remembering them causes Old Me great belly laughs. Jack Lemmon will live forever as the villainous Professor Fate with his demonic laugh and “Push the button, Max!” Followed by the inevitable explosion. Not to mention the most grandiose pie-fight in the history of the world.

Yet again the magic of a funny movie flushed out Richie’s clogged mental plumbing, setting him up for the more sober and somber task of being a married graduate student.

#

I’ve found summarizing Richie’s rather diffuse journal entries of this time difficult. Simply noting various activities, he gave few details of these first days back in Seattle, and I had to supply many from my creaky memory. I got to this point in the story just in time to pick up Jammes, hit the gym briefly, and head over to Carol’s place. She’d called earlier to invite us to dinner this evening.

Mack met me there at six-thirty. While Carol cooked, Janet and Jet entertained us in the living room with drinks. The toddler has learned to do awkward somersaults and laughs uproariously with each.

Meanwhile Mack showed off the still tender fresh tattoo on his hand. The colors are more muted and darker than I’d envisioned, but that’s the way it usually is when dreams become reality. I explained the meaning of his name 6 House, and both women wanted to know their day-names too. Janet got on azteccalendar.com to find out. She’s 8 Rabbit, and Carol’s 3 Water. Jet turned out to be 7 Snake, which is also the day-name of the god of young corn, Chicomecoatli. Mine, 2 Reed, is also that of the god Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror.

Having already read *Double or Nothing*, Janet congratulated me for being such a moral character with all that stuff about the Golden Rule. I assured her that it’s still my guiding principle. With a smirk, Mack said, “You should see how he does unto me!”

Janet giggled. “I think I’d enjoy that.”

“Me too,” Carol called from the kitchen.

Mack snuggled up close on the sofa. “We could sell tickets.”

“If we’re putting on a show, darlin’, we’ll need some more rehearsals.”

We had lamb chops, salad, asparagus, new potatoes, and mint jelly, my kind of meal.

Afterwards Carol brought me a brown paper grocery bag. “So, Rich,” she said ceremoniously, “I’ve got a present for you.” To my utter amazement, in the bag was a record album, Annette’s Pajama Party, music from her 1964 movie of that name.

On the cover she strikes supposedly seductive poses in (quite modest) pajamas and sixties bouffant hairdos. Trying not to cringe, I thanked Carol for the thought, explaining that Rick never saw any of her movies or heard any of her later records. I only remember the curly-haired Mouseketeer with that name across her breasts, which is probably why the memory of her is still so poignant. Janet showed me the record liner advertising her other albums like Hawaiiannette, Italiannette, and the beach party scores. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear them.

Explaining that she’d found it in the collection of her recently deceased great uncle Fred, Carol put the record on her old phonograph. For the first time in half a century, I heard the bright voice that enchanted my teenage years. It was moving, but more disturbing than touching. We only played a couple of the songs because I couldn’t bear to listen to more. All the same, the record is now part of my own collection. Someday a descendant will find it and wonder, “Who in the heck is that?” (And: “What are you supposed to do with this weird disc?”) I wonder if Uncle Fred had a crush on Annette. Most boys did, but I think Dick truly was in love with her.

#

.viii.

Barely inside the door of my apartment, Mack and I staged an impromptu rehearsal on the living room carpet and tightened up our timing considerably. When all were properly done unto, we decided to spend the rest of the evening on our projects. Wanting to do one more quick scene of Richie’s return to Seattle and wrap up this chapter, I parked in my lounge with laptop, and Mack lounged beautifully on the sofa with pad and pencil. It shouldn’t take very long to transcribe what Richie wrote for that first Monday of the quarter.

Dear Me,

...My first course as a full-fledged Russian instructor is scheduled for a convenient nine o’clock on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. My own classes fit well around them. Besides good old Serbo-Croatian and linguistic stuff, I’ve also signed up to take Polish and an intriguing class in modern Russian poetry, a busy schedule.

Standing in front of my first class gave me a charge. There are fourteen boys and girls of the freshman persuasion and four sophomore girls, all those sparkly eyes fixed on me. Five boys definitely deserve further study. First came the introduction to the Cyrillic alphabet. They tried hard to print their names in the alien letters, often mixing up the b and v and the p and r. It was fun, and I was sorry for the class to be over.

With a free hour before my first Polish class, I sat by the quadrangle by Smith Hall enjoying the glorious sun on golden sycamores. Suddenly I realized that it wasn’t raining. Last year school started in rain, and I wouldn’t have been sitting out here in all this autumn glory between classes like this. Last year I was long-haired faerie Rick, St. Norman in Torment, and now I’m a short-haired expectant father called Richie.

Reflexively, I leapt up from the bench to dance. Without planning, it became a dance of thanksgiving for the blessed new being Barbara’s carrying, our miracle child, the literal seed of my loins. Thanksgiving for Barbara herself who’s always so sweet and affectionate to this husband so rudely thrust upon her. With bounding leaps, I resolved to cherish and support her in the coming months of our ‘confinement.’

I staggered out of that emotional whirl and into a lament for missing Lane on Saturday. Now he’s lost to me, and with me being married now... With

eyes closed in the pain of it, I danced out my grief that our stars have so untimely crossed. Oppressed by our love's sad fate, I slowed to a standstill and opened my eyes.

Right in front of me, Lane was standing there, his eyes radiating joy, his dark hair endearingly longer. He said, "Rich..." and laughed. "Your hair's so short! Saturday..."

"Lane... I couldn't make..."

Once again we were telepathic. I stared into his eyes feeling passion.

He stepped forward and took my hands. "Oh, thank you, thank you!" he chortled and spun me around on the lawn. "You were so right!" he exulted and hugged me. I was too surprised to speak and simply savored him in my arms. Lane spoke into my ear, "Rich, I know myself now. I am gay. I dreamed of us... together."

We let go of each other, and I mumbled, "Lane... I dreamed about you all summer." My hopes for his love revived, and I stared dumbly at his beautiful face, hardly believing.

He led me to the bench, speaking excitedly, "Oh, Rich, I'm so in love!" I was speechless with joy. Lane raced jubilantly on. "I've got a boyfriend—Tommy! We met at the Fourth of July picnic. He's so beautiful!"

It was like a bucket of cold water over the head. With much effort, I said, "That's great!" He beamed at me, and I added, "I wasn't so lucky. I got a girl pregnant and had to marry her."

Lane's lovely face paled in horror. "Oh, Rich, I'm so sorry."

"No, Lane, don't be sorry," I said, unnaturally calm. "I'll manage."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I just went crazy, I guess."

Lane took my hand. "Good luck, Rich. He squeezed it affectionately and then looked down at his watch. It broke the spell. "Oh—I've got class."

"Me too."

We stood up, and with a smile, Lane said, "Bye, Rich. See you around."

"See you," I echoed and feeling utterly desolate, watched him walk away with wings on his heels. Stunned, I staggered off to Polish.

By the time I got home for lunch, my mood was back under control, and I was able to regale Barbara with several silly-sounding Polish words. As a Russian speaker, I find Polish a very amusing language. It sounds suspiciously like tongue-tied Russian. I have a hard time not laughing at the nasalized vowels and the constant stress on penultimate syllables.

#

Indeed that transcription went quite quickly, and since my Mack is still sketching furiously over on the sofa, I'll take a moment to congratulate myself for slogging through this chapter of the Voyage of the Faerie Prince, the Honeymoon. When Lane dropped his bombshell, the honeymoon was definitely over. Now Richie will concentrate on playing the demanding role of devoted husband to gravid wife.

But let's leave all that for the next chapter. Right now I'm in the mood to draw and work on Huehuecoyotl, the Old Coyote. I still have to do his feather headdress, cloak and regalia and two more vignettes. It's just as exciting to draw something I envision as it is to write something I remember—or imagine. And for the first time, I'm experiencing the joy of companionship in my art with Mack working just as maniacally on his graphics.

Wow! Those days slipped by in an artistic frenzy for both of us. He's got a fabulous story-board together for the first 'stanza' of the novel with sex scenes that will curl your hair. I finished the final pieces of the Old Coyote icon, 5 Flower, god of music, and 5 Lizard, god of sexual excess. All the while, Mack and I have shared workouts at the gym, some meals and nights with each other and generally reveled in our creativity.

#

Then last night was Mack's birthday party. George and Mario made their lovely home quite festive with balloons drifting around all over the place and streamers draped everywhere. The table was piled with hors d'oeuvres, a three-storey chocolate cake, and a pile of presents.

My family arrived only a few minutes after Mack and me, and though they'd just had dinner, Jammes, the hollow-legged twelve year-old, made a beeline for the food table. I made the introductions and watched their various reactions. Son-in-law Rich clearly hadn't expected someone as tall as he, and daughter Aimée smiled dubiously.

When Jammes came back with a plate of food, he politely shook hands with Mack and said, "So you're Papou's boyfriend now?"

"I think you could say that—now," Mack admitted with a Cheshire grin.

"Cool. So Happy Birthday," Jammes said with his braceful grin.

Aimée exclaimed, "You two could be brothers!" It was true.

Jammes admired Mack's new tattoo, and learning that it's his Aztec day-name, 6 House, he was delighted. "I'm 3 Jaguar," he crowed. "That would make a great tattoo too!" His parents postponed that idea indefinitely.

I took them around the lovely house to meet others of my new young friends. First we greeted our hosts George and Mario, who were bustling around in the kitchen, and I introduced them as the newlyweds. Then we found the cluster of Jason, Johnny, and Kevin at the bar. The latter's crown of curls is now golden and quite striking, I assume in celebration of his conquest of Liam, who was to arrive later.

Johnny told them about working on the website for my memoir and complimented my interesting personal history. Jammes asked innocently, "What's so interesting about it?"

Mack laughed, "It's X-rated, dude. You can read it in a few more years."

Jammes frowned and quickly recovered. "When are they gonna cut the cake?"

"Soon enough," said his mother, effectively dismissing the subject.

We found the lesbian contingent out by the pool playing with Jet. Jammes, who's always great with little kids, took over so we all could meet and talk like adults. Aimée talked with Carol about her older sister Jake who used to be a lesbian and had a boy too. Janet wondered about the "used to be" and learned that Jake is now married to a man.

"These things happen," Deirdre remarked. "I did that once—when I was young and stupid. Now I'm old and wise, and in two weeks, I'm going to marry this beautiful woman."

Lynn said, "Your dad's going to give me away. You guys have to come too."

Carol added, "Jet's the ring-bearer, Jason's best man, and George will be bridesmaid."

Lynn beamed. "Wait till you see him in that flouncy green chiffon."

"Hey, Jammes," Deirdre said, "We got two rings. How about you be my ring-bearer? You know, help little Jet out."

"Keep him going in the right direction," Janet laughed.

"Yeh, I'd like that," Jammes said with a look at his parents, who didn't object.

"Besides," Carol commented, "you can come to the rehearsal dinner too." She clearly knows the way to a hungry boy's heart.

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Just then Mario appropriately announced on the PA system that it was time for cake. Everybody gathered in the huge living room, where the cake had been moved onto a vast sideboard, and Mario called Mack to come up with him for the ceremony. While he extolled my young man's great virtue (and obliquely, his prowess), Mack looked humbly at the floor.

Pausing, Mario motioned to George, who sat down at the piano in the corner. “Now, we’re going to sing,” he warned, “like it or not.” George played a flowery introduction and led us in an emotional version of the old tune, which for poetics he changed to “dear Mack-aroni.” The birthday boy was obviously touched.

With no more ado, the caterers served the cake in super-large portions. Aimée only let Jammes have a small piece, but I gave him some bites of mine. That’s what grandfathers are for. He kept eyeing the pile of presents and finally asked Mack when he was going to open them. Hesitating, Mack said, “Oh, later on I will. I expect there’s some X-rated stuff in there too.”

“Like what?” Jammes prodded.

“None of your beeswax,” I answered for my guy, not to get into such mature matters.

Right then Lars fired up his music system, and some in the crowd started dancing. To her son’s obvious disgust, Aimée said it was time for them to go so he could do his homework.

Mack and I walked them out to their car for goodbyes. He walked with Aimée and Rich up front chatting about his work, and Jammes and I lagged behind on the sidewalk. When I thanked him for agreeing to be Deirdre’s ring-bearer, he shrugged and said, “Sure.” Shortly, he asked, “Papou, can I ask you a question?”

“Forty two,” I instantly replied with our standing joke.

“Are you and Mack going to get married?”

“Whoa, kiddo! Let’s not rush things.” That’s a subject I do not wish to think about at this stage of the game. But how amazing that now that’s something one so young can so easily and freely think about!

Among Mack’s birthday presents were two outrageous dildoes and jars and tubes of designer lubricants. I anticipate exciting adventures in the near future.

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