

CHAPTER 10: PASSING GLORY

Unfortunately, decisive action is more easily envisioned, or at least imagined, than taken. Back in DC from the splendid visit with my Broadway baby, Kenny, I didn't even have time to start imagining. Charles excitedly informed me that he'd be leaving again for a few weeks, again to Mexico, though this time with his folks, to celebrate Christmas in Oaxaca and then hit Maya ruins again. To my wondering why so soon after just going there last fall, he explained that the Yucatan was his spiritual home. Happy for my friend's upcoming adventure, though a bit skeptical about his spiritual home stuff, I agreed to take over organizing our Yuletide Ball.

It turned out a festive blast with all the old and new pioneer neighbors, our accumulated geisha clientele, and miscellaneous guests like some of my waiter-chums from Gusti's, including the little Persian Rezi. He was curious to see a Christian celebration but didn't learn anything; in our holly- and tree-decked hall there wasn't a single crèche or crucifix anywhere. As an exotic Moslem in our secular holiday crowd, Rezi was often the embarrassed center of attention and spoke in beautiful English about the history and wonders of his beloved Persia.

Among the accumulated clientele of our geisha household were some of my previous begonia-fanciers. I'm not sure how they worked it out between themselves, but toward the end of the ball one of them emerged as victor and asked for another horticultural tour. I seem to recall him being a red-head, but my memory may be colored by the red ribbons draped everywhere, and maybe I'm just imagining that the guy's was Terry.

In any case, he enjoyed his second lesson so much that on my next night off, he came back to the Four Bells for dinner. After his third lesson, before dressing to leave, he reached into his briefcase and handed me a belated Christmas gift nicely wrapped and beribboned. While I opened it, he said he'd thought of it back at my party—a book with an exquisite boy on the cover, a novel called “The Persian Boy” by Mary Renault. He hoped I'd like it as much as he did. I thanked him with a kiss and hoped he'd liked my gift to him as much as I did.

That book was the second impediment to decisive action to move my life forward from Gusti's. It devoured my attention and fired my imagination for weeks in January, 1975, every moment I wasn't pushing pasta or pizza, no time for restoration or salvage. The story of the Persian dancing boy, slave first to Darius and then to Alexander, was a juggernaut of glorious love smashing my comfortably unromantic worldview. Despite all I'd been learning about gay life, when I finished that book, I'd have given my left nut to fall in love with an Alexander.

Maybe I should be ashamed to admit how seriously my life has been shaped, my mind changed, by certain books. “The Persian Boy” was the first glimpse of gay ancient history I'd ever had, a world where Alexander kissed Bagoas at the behest of his troops... For eye-opening, I place Renault right up there with Velikovsky and Tolkien. Transformational art.

Charles got home from Mexico to find me lying on the blue sofa in the parlor, and just having finished the epic, a romantic wreck. I tried to appreciate his excitement over the Mexican excursions, and when he asked how I was, I blurted out that I desperately wanted to fall in love. With his usual incisiveness, he asked, “Then what?” This led into our earlier conversation about the transience of everything and taking joy in the moment.

I said I wanted some joy in this moment, and Charles wisely replied, “We all do. Few are chosen, but you're lucky. Enjoy patience.” I could enjoy patience waiting for love—such sweet, emotional fantasies—but not the patience it took looking for business opportunities. I recalled the Buddhist lesson about not desiring and saw that wanting to fall in love was the real problem. If I didn't desire, I didn't need patience. Love would happen in its own good time.

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Not letting myself want to fall in love was relatively easy, but the next weeks became a difficult spiritual exercise in not desiring to find a new livelihood. I got a bicycle and in free afternoons rode it all over the place like Rock Creek Park and the Mall trying not to think about business schemes and inevitably fantasized futilely about becoming a writer or artist.

To sublimate my raging impatience, when winter weather permitted, I went back to salvaging doomed houses, making a “Plunder List” of woodwork and mantles in houses on 5th and 6th Streets destined for Logan Circle houses now being reclaimed by the influx of urban pioneers. Even some of the shells on our block of Desolation Row had recently been bought.

Whenever I found the energy, I also plugged away at restoring the Four Bells. We started stripping the discolored varnish off the staircase and the bilious yellow paint off its second flight, all the woodwork in the upstairs hallways the same rotten mustard color. The work was supremely tedious, often an hour to rescue one baluster, but at the same time hugely fulfilling. When clean, the ornately turned honey oak spindles had perfect “tiger-eyes” in the grain on both sides of their convexities. I only briefly fantasized about becoming a woodworker.

It was great some evenings having Charles to work with on the staircase, but I soon noticed in our conversations that he seemed subtly subdued again, less engaged with our shared handiwork, at times even distracted. Naturally, I asked what was bugging him, and he said he was missing Mexico. I remember his words: “I felt so at home in myself there.” I asked if he didn’t feel at home here in the Four Bells, and he did, but not at home in himself. Charles said he was feeling down—maybe he too needed to fall in love. I figured that should fix him right up.

What fixed me up was developments at work. In the continual turnover of wait staff at Gusti’s, several plain old American guys got hired, including two friendly black busboys whom the Persians, who ignored the Asians and Hispanics, treated miserably. We got Mr. Vince to put a stop to that right away. To my woe, none of the newbies was in the least appealing sexually or emotionally, though two of them, Tom and Marvin, seemed intelligent—and ambitious.

Over late lunches and suppers, Tom, Marvin and I talked business opportunities and soon decided to start our own restaurant. Both of us growing up in a restaurant, Tom and I weren’t as appalled as we should’ve been. Marvin’s inspiration was possible family financing. We’d just put together a proposal with a business plan, location, designs, and all that kind of shit. Marvin and Tom took on the business plan, Tom and I the location, and Marvin and I design.

Since plan and design would have to wait on location, Tom and I got busy in our afternoon breaks scouting around for a hot spot. Come mid-February, we’d found a great house on 17th, corner of N—only a couple blocks from Gusti’s—that had a huge walled-in courtyard along N with a three-story wall of ivy and two lovely trees. It was only moderately run down, now converted to offices, just one of which was occupied. The lawyer said owner, who lived somewhere out West, would probably sell... Our planning switched into high gear.

The concept that coalesced was admittedly mine, three stories of Middle Eastern cuisine in a sub-tropical setting of green and blooming plants to be called Babylon. Note the literary influence and historical connotation. We pulled together the necessary numbers, logistics, and concept drawings, all of which seemed perfectly reasonable to three professionally desperate waiters, except for the one most important number of all, the cost of the property. Tom found out the absentee owner’s contact, and Marv and I worked up an inquiry letter. We didn’t neglect to suggest that a partnership in the enterprise might be advantageous for all concerned.

With our Babylon business brewing nicely, I took Lavenia Van Dodge off on a whirlwind trip, four days total, to Florida for Jake’s ninth birthday.

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I'd have taken Amtrak again, but I had a hidden agenda to shop for more plants. Taking only two days off from Gusti's, I left early on Sunday, drove the long haul to Gainesville in silent meditation (no radio), and arrived around midnight. Jake's birthday, Monday, was a bustling family day what Martha and Gene already there with their kids, and Papa and Nana had also come to town for the event. The early morning crowd included Barbara's new boyfriend Jack, a good-looking history teacher she'd written me about.

Jack was polite with the long-haired, gay former husband and kept smiling, probably amused or perhaps nervous about his virtue. I calmed any qualms on that score by jabbering at length about my happy historic household and thrilling plans for Babylon, the Middle Eastern menu rationalized by the big trend to ethnic eateries in DC. Everyone thought it was genius and sure to be a success. Jack was soft-spoken with little to say for himself, except having been married before, having a young daughter, and loving to fish, which seemed sufficient credentials for a straight guy. Still, I was glad when he had to leave to teach his classes.

Our herd of family drifted around town all day through shops, lunch at a Cuban place, more shops, and recess at a playground for the tads. (That's Pogo-speak for "little ones.") Shops not my thing, I concentrated on my two girls, wondering the while at how beautifully they were growing up, or at least older. Both Jake's and Aimée's sweet faces were turning maidenly with more individualized features. Their bright eyes and excited chatter made me terrifically proud to be their father. My difficult five years in the strait closet had certainly been worth it.

Barbara made a tremendous birthday party dinner, and Jack joined us again, bringing Jake a present of a pretty frilly skirt. My gift of roller skates (with an extra pair for Aimée), Jake seemed to appreciate more, and she got books from the folks, a bike from Barbara, and ballet slippers from Martha and Gene. It thrilled her proud daddy that besides taking horse-back riding lessons, she was going to start a dancing class.

Tuesday morning after my comfy night in the back of my hippie van, we breakfasted, and most took off for schools and classes, leaving me with Nana, Papa, Martha and baby Bea, who at two was as cute as they come. We dropped by the Garden Gate plant store for me to pick up a new begonia with purplish brocaded leaves and a blooming bromeliad called *Aechmea fasciata* with silvery striped leaves. Then we drove to a nearby very little, very old town called Micanopy (stress on first syllable) with lovely antique shops in antebellum houses under huge Spanish moss-draped live oaks. I felt very much at home in myself there.

On the outing Martha surprised me with news that she and Gene would move to DC in June—he'd landed a job at American University. Papa said they'd all come to town then, and I offered a celebratory feast at the Four Bells. Regretting that I'd missed the past holidays with them, Nana invited me to Durham next Christmas when they'd have moved into their new house. With such long notice, I could surely get off work—but hey, by then I'd be in Babylon...

Back at work on Thursday, I found Tom looking forlorn, but no Marvin. The former told me the latter had left town. We stood there by the pizza-pickup counter holding the proverbial empty bag. Here we were expecting great news from the owner, and our financing had flown out the window. It was a bitter lesson about depending on other people. That weekend we heard from the owner that she wasn't interested in selling or even leasing the house. When I told Charles about the debacle, he advised me to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of Babylon.

That being more easily advised than done, I figured I'd better start looking for another job after all. Meanwhile, I'd just have to keep on peddling pasta and trying to cook up another scheme to make something meaningful out of my impatient life.

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My dreams of Babylon so rudely dashed, I bit the bullet and went looking for a job again. With a sharp haircut by Christian and high hopes for meaning, I hit the State Department where they must have checked old records and politely dismissed my interest without an interview. Personnel offices at my other prime targets were wastelands, and then I haunted the hotels for catering or reception. They all suggested I take a course in hotel management and come back then, but there was no way I was going back to school for anything.

Instead, I went back to fantasizing unfunded business opportunities and dealing with the burgeoning spring and my upwelling romantic juices. In early April a nocturnal admirer named Jim visited me two nights in a row, and though I didn't fall in love, before disappearing, he woke my muse to dithering poems about love-longing. It took a while to regain my former Buddhist detachment and turn my mind to more aesthetic and pragmatic matters.

To broaden my literary expertise beyond the Russian, I browsed an English lit anthology and found a poem that almost makes me believe in the un-Buddhist concept of reincarnation. Seeing just the first line of a brief verse by the 17th-century poet Robert Herrick—which and whom I'd most certainly never encountered before—I instantly knew the next archaic lines as though I'd written them myself: *"Let not the dark thee cumber, / What though the moon doth slumber. / The stars of the night / Will lend thee their light / Like tapers, clear, without number."*

That elegant good counsel has ever since summoned up starlight to brighten any dark, moonless nights of the soul and has been my heartening gift wisdom for friends and lovers. Back then in that April alone, it heartened me to soldier on at Gusti's and dream about new Babylons. I was awakened from those dreams at chum Chas's next Petit Chambre de Musique when he nicely introduced me to a fellow with the Paul Hill Chorale.

With no more ado, I was engaged to coach the Chorale to sing proper Russian in Kabalevsky's "Requiem." The famous composer was coming to conduct at the Kennedy Center, and they also wanted me to be his interpreter. Though unpaid, it was an offer I couldn't refuse—and two weeks of afternoon rehearsals wouldn't get much in the way of waiting tables.

For my first coaching session, I arrived to find the chorale rehearsing a number for next week's concert, a piece by Beethoven I'd never heard before, his Choral Fantasy. It knocked my socks off and now ranks for me right up there with his Emperor Concerto. With its terribly Russian "eternal glory" crescendos, vaguely socialist realism of tramping divisions, sentimental mother's aria, and gorgeous children's chorus, Kabalevsky's choral tribute to the victims of Great Patriotic War (World War II), proved as heroic for me as Beethoven's best.

I was in Slavic Linguist heaven teaching all those folks large and small to sing like native Russians. Some of the singers had to work hard on the words, and one of them drew a cute little platypus saying, "No wonder Richard can utter such 'soft' consonants—he strains out the harsh sounds with his mustache!" On first hearing the chorale rehearse, Mr. Kabalevsky said they sang pure Russian. The poet Robert Rozhdestvensky agreed about his lyrical lines. Though the poet spoke some English, they both happily relied on me to interlocute with their public.

We had great interviews with WETA-FM, WAMU-FM, and WGMS-FM and a very short one for NBC-TV. Some were over lunch, for which I had to take off from work, but I had to talk so much that I didn't get to eat anything. I also had to take off Friday evening for a reception for the composer at the Soviet Embassy in the glorious old Pullman mansion on 16th Street, the most magnificent event I've ever attended, especially so for being a former spy.

The triumphant performance on Saturday was a glorious present for my 33rd birthday, too soon over but making up somewhat for standing alone amidst the ruins of Babylon.

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Entering my 34th year, the next day I went back to pushing pasta with serious chagrin. Unfortunately, coaching singers didn't seem a promising opportunity for earning a livelihood, and anyway I wasn't yet ready to tackle that problem again. Ignoring the world, I rested on my laurels and relived past glory, but only four days later, that laurel-scented oblivion was blown away by the momentous news of the fall of Saigon—the end of the Viet Nam War.

Now I hadn't ever been actively concerned with Viet Nam, demonstrating or anything like that, but at the same time I'd harbored a horrid suspicion that my first love Peter had wound up a jungle soldier. If he'd survived the conflict, maybe my Peter was among those airlifted off the embassy roof. I couldn't make out any faces in the newspaper photo. The mere thought of that boy with the azure eyes knocked my emotional detachment right into next week. Soon I was writing poems again, one rather prosaically about Peter:

*Funny how I have no souvenirs of the first.
It would be good to have something
Of Peter, even an awful photograph,
Anything to touch and make memory real.
I can't even recall his voice or face,
Though I knew them well, as though
I've just turned away, and he's just spoken.
I have no shirt he wore or note he wrote,
Nor shall I anymore...
All that's left is his name
And that first longing.*

(5/15/75)

The next day being the sixth anniversary of a blissful one-night stand with a Steve, which had obliquely inspired me to move to DC, I was a bad little Buddhist and let myself actively desire to fall in love. Soon I'd tragically despaired of finding a lover but kept on imagining:

RAINED OFF

*I walked away into the wet evening,
Hoping not to get drenched before home,
Ignoring the impossibility of it all
And feeling the impalpable beauty of his shoulders.
Fat drops came faster, and I stood in an entrance,
Safe and savoring the joy warming my arms.
From awning to awning I despaired
Of staying dry for another block.
Waiting for a car and unable to dodge drops,
I found a good soaking refreshingly pleasant.
My shirt soaked, I ambled through puddles,
Distracted by lightning and falling branches
Broken off by the winds of my need.
After the rain, the light was amber over the rooftops,
Glowing yellow around the cathedral,
Making even the alley out back beautiful,
As golden as his throat, as warm.*

5/22/75

To fully appreciate my romantic anguish, my readers should understand that come the lovely, lusty month of May, Gusti's opened its sidewalk café, called the Garden, and I generally worked Station #2 with 3 six-tops and 3 deuces. It was right out front on the corner of M and Connecticut, like on a stage for passersby and the hordes standing in line along the railing. The hungry, impatient eyes of those in line spurred my customers not to dawdle over their food, and so I got stupendous turnover and spectacular tips. As a handsome mustachioed waiter, I caught many eyes of passersby and diners but had never a moment to pursue promising glances.

Well, not quite never a moment. Sometimes a passerby would pass by again after my lunch shift and come home with me for an afternoon delight. A singer named David (a name which won half the battle for my affections), stopped by again after the dinner shift and spent the night. Also a waiter in a nearby French place, he was unfortunately leaving soon for Guatemala, and we spent the rest of his days and nights in town together.

David and Charles hit it off nicely over the mysteries of the Maya, and he fell in love with Charles's new spotted puppy Viva. There I was making sweet whoopee with David and still agonizing over not falling in love. Of course, for our little while of simply loving, maybe it wouldn't have been worth the energy it took to be in true love. The morning he packed to leave, David gave me a belated birthday present, a Mexican clay pipe shaped like a little lizard (which I now know is a symbol of sex). Largely unsmoked these many years, I still have that curious souvenir of a lover who was far from my first.

When David had gone, Charles and I sat at Saturday's breakfast catching up on our personal weeks at office and Garden and comparing notes on David. Charles's spirits had risen a lot since his low mood back in March, and David's talk of the ruins of Tikal and Palenque had inspired him to go there again as soon as he could. I gently asked him to hold off on his next expedition till we could get the basement apartment together.

We were planning to put two units in the basement, which meant all new plumbing in the front half, and I worried about the cost. Charles calmed me with the exciting news that he'd just gotten the house re-financed at a nicely lower rate. It was such a relief not to have to think about such financial things and simply give my friend whatever he asked for my part after the other geishas' rents. Sometimes I suspected he gave me discounts, but now with my big tips in the Garden I figured I was holding up my end pretty well. There was still a lot of work to do.

Speaking of work, there was a chore I didn't much appreciate, walking the dogs. Dave leaned on me to walk fat Heidi three mornings a week, and now Charles had enlisted my dog-walking service for his little Viva, a vivacious sprite. It was a trick managing the two leashes that led to an impressionistic poetic moment I'll presume to quote for you:

*I stopped walking the dogs
At a thin old bush of lilacs
And leaned into its violet fragrance.
I wondered if anyone had seen me
Making a bee of myself.
The dogs were sniffing a tree,
But a boy riding by in a VW
Returned my smile three times,
And then his oval rear window
Reflected limbs of trees and sky.*

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I was very happy when, with my active encouragement, the fledgling Logan Circle Community Association arranged for a community garden plot in the open lot at the corner of O and 12th behind the Iowa. I nabbed a nice bed along O out of the building's shadow and with around a dozen other pioneers, planted vegetables. Please understand that my only real gardening had been as a kid back in Arkansas, and that just a few rows of green beans for a 4-H project.

My 8 by 10 bed was planned to be a cornucopia of veggies for the Four Bells table, but I ran into the problem of balancing variety against space. I couldn't spare the room for corn, and one squash patch was it. Watermelon was out of the question. Being a southern boy, I put in half-rows of black-eyed peas and okra, and others of Swiss chard, bell peppers, and lettuce. I didn't care for them, but since everybody else did, I allowed for a whole back row of tomatoes.

The first half of June I had to balance my brief mornings and afternoons between planting the farm and working on the basement apartments. Bless Charles for taking on the plumbing job while I built and plaster-boarded walls. Once my little garden was in, it took less work, but there was almost more work than I could handle in the big Garden at Gusti's.

One Friday, Tom, who often worked Station #1 beside mine, loaned me a pedometer, and I registered 16 miles. That included a flight of steps up to the kitchen, which we climbed every two minutes. I started getting seductively svelte and attracting even more public admiration, but I'd recovered my emotional detachment and had neither energy nor time for amorous activity.

On my Monday off, just as I finished planting the farm, my mother suddenly showed up for a visit. Of course, it meant sightseeing on Tuesday and a special private dinner at the Four Bells, the splendor of which impressed Mother deeply, and also I took Wednesday off to go to Baltimore to see her sister Marie. I'd been avoiding visiting my Aunt Sissy, my opinion of my birthplace having suffered after seeing John Waters' horrific film "Pink Flamingos."

My aunt lived in a sweet Victorian on fancy Bolton Hill, which made me regret not visiting before, at least to see the architecture. Chatting in Marie's beautiful parlor, Mother told us about Bill wanting to get back together, but she'd told the bum to get lost, which firmness made me proud of her. I stayed over and on Thursday made it home on the train in time for an afternoon hour in the little garden and six evening hours in the big one.

On Saturday, as expected, the family got to town and came to Gusti's for their favorite waiter to serve the nine them at two of his six-tops on the corner, the four kids making a mess of pizzas at one and the five adults dining at leisure at the other. My fellow waiters, including even Bahman, filed respectfully by to meet my beautiful daughters. I had some misgivings about missing my usual table turnover, but Papa left me a \$50 tip. Meanwhile, my status among the Persians as their Grand Poosti rose several notches.

Sunday I met the bunch at their nearby hotel, happily greeted by my former pupdog Oná, the cause of this whole family syndrome.* We went to see the house Gene had found them in Bethesda, a nice place built in the 20s. That evening, Lewis and Carolyn whipped up a Supper Club feast for the 18 of us with guests, while old Oná cavorted with young Viva in the hall and both harried fat Heidi dozing in the parlor. It was a raucous repast for the record books.

At their hotel Monday morning, I found Martha in tears. During the night, little Oná had dropped dead. The mournful funeral was held in my garden, where we planted our legendary Pekingese deep under the summer squash. That evening after they'd moved into the house, Gene brought his wife a pair of black and white Shih Tzu puppies that started an enduring tradition. That same day, Charles got fed up with Viva chewing on furniture and found her a new home.

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* For the early history of the pupdog, see *THERE WAS A SHIP*, Chapter 2, *LUCKY DOG*.

In later June I got more basement business done since farm work was now just water and weed management, nurturing the replanted squash shoots tenderly in memory of Oná. On its last day, my Monday off, I got up early planning to run the hose and then enjoy a summer bike ride in Rock Creek Park. Before I'd finished my cereal, the phone rang—for me, a guy who said he was with the Bolshoi Opera, and they wanted me for a stage interpreter. He said the Bolshoi was in America for the first time, performing at Lincoln Center in New York, and my acquaintance Ann (that nice company manager at Wolf Trap last fall) had recommended me for the gig.

I scrambled to let Charles know of this windfall opportunity, arrange with Gusti's for a leave of absence, and enlist geishas and friends to care for my plants and garden, and before I could say boo, I was on the train to Grand Central Station. Since he'd now left Fiddler and would be leaving town on Wednesday with a new touring show, Kenny was happy for me to stay in his apartment in his absence. By that evening I was standing backstage at the Met watching a live performance of Tchaikovsky's "Queen of Spades."

The company had opened the week before doing five operas in rotation every night of the week: Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov," Prokofiev's "War and Peace" and "The Gambler," Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" and "Queen of Spades," and a new socialist realism military opera by the Bolshoi's Director General Kiril Molchanov called "The Dawns are Quiet Here." The run at the Met was through July 19, and then the whole humongous shebang, hundreds of artists and workers and tons of costumes and scenery, would move to the Kennedy Center in DC for two more weeks through August 3. I'd have glorious Russian work for five whole weeks!

We slept two more idyllic nights up on Kenny's bed shelf (Ruby and Sapphire already lodging with a friend), and then my beautiful ballet dancer was off on his tour through the Midwest and South. I enjoyed his peaceful bower in the little while I found to sleep there. I worked from mid-morning till late at night every day, loving every minute of it.

The best part of my job was that the American and Russian stage crews already knew pretty much what they were doing, and my on-stage interpreting services were only needed in moments of confusion. Also more stage interpreters hung around other production areas if needed for such emergencies. I'd sit on a stool right behind the curtain on stage-left and when it closed, leap up to supposedly orchestrate scene changes.

When reminiscing about this gig, I always tell about the thrill of sitting there on my catbird stool and watching Boris Godunov (Yevgeni Nestorenko) die at my feet—several times! I have to mention sitting there behind Lensky (Denis Korolyov) in line with Onegin (Andrei Fedoseyev) in the duel scene that time Onegin's gun didn't fire. Denis still dropped to the floor, again at my feet, and when he walked over to us, Andrei gave me a sly wink. It was a hoot watching "War and Peace" (in Russian!) and recalling my exploding cannon at Wolftrap. The columns in the ballroom scene in "Onegin" were gargantuan, but I didn't have to move them. Meanwhile, the ennui of Molchanov's "Dawns" defied description.

Again having neither energy nor time for amorous activity, I nonetheless went out that first Thursday night late after the "The Gambler" to Kenny's neighborhood gay bar, a dismal hole in the wall on 8th Avenue, and casually let a flirty blond take me home to his place in that same block. Once inside, to my dismay, instead of offering me the intimate welcome I expected, he ran to the kitchen counter and laid out lines of cocaine. I politely declined and departed, leaving him to return to the bar, which I never did. But amorous activity found me on the job.

Among the many stage workers, I attracted a cute guy who worked in lighting, a young married man named Marty whose wife was back home in Terra Haute. I enjoyed his philandering immensely the rest of our time at Lincoln Center, but he wasn't booked for the Bolshoi's DC

run. Since he only worked performances, Marty had a lot more time off than I who also had to interpret rehearsals and administrative meetings during the days, but we managed plenty hanky-panky at night and occasional morning walks in the park. He sweetly claimed to be bisexual, fine with straight or gay sex, and he was indeed fine in the latter. When Marty went back home to his accepting wife, we wrote each other a couple times with affection, but after he couldn't get up to DC from his next lighting gig in Richmond, we forgot each other.

I got home to the Four Bells on Sunday the 20th early in the afternoon with just a few moments to greet Charles and our other geishas, race past the garden (to find it well watered but weed-infested), and bike to the Kennedy Center for work. That was no longer a breeze because the new American stage crew had to work through every little thing with the Russians, and we stage interpreters were right in the middle of it. Another interpreter named Paulette really got a workout with confused lighting crews, but my set folks managed to coordinate fairly easily.

All the kinks got worked out by Tuesday night for the opening of *Boris*, and my friends came to that, as well as to "The Gambler" and "Eugene Onegin" over the next two weeks. But the Bolshoi wasn't performing the other three in DC. Nobody missed "Dawns." Once the staging logistics were in order, I only had to work evenings and relished the free days of summer.

That next Friday, July 25, was also Charles's 33rd birthday, but I had to miss the party for "Eugene Onegin." When Charles and I talked over breakfast, he felt a certain messianic overtone to the occasion and thought maybe it was now time for him to achieve glory too—like mine with the Bolshoi. My work was indeed glorious, but I warned him that glory passed quickly, more ephemeral than an opera, too soon gone with the wind, as pleurably transient as passing gas.

In the garden Saturday morning pulling weeds and mourning over the grave of Oná, I felt the inexorable passing of time, realizing that today was the 10th anniversary of Barbara and me getting married. Looking down that well of the past at the two of us back then, I wondered what it would be like, if I was still alive 50 years in the future, to look down the well at me now, dirty and sweaty in the garden. Fortunately, I now know. It feels both wistful and wist-less.

Then I gazed deeper into the well, back 15 years to Arkansas and the last time I'd seen my beloved best friend in high school, Dennis. He, not Peter, had been my first love, though unrealized. That—and a fierce reluctance to go back to work at Gusti's—decided me to take a driving vacation first, make a loop past my childhood home to find Dennis, to New Orleans to see Mother, and through Gainesville to visit family—and buy myself some more plants.

My last week with the Bolshoi I ran around town with two of the Russian stagehands, Viktor and Volodya, helping them shop for clothes and stereo equipment, and got Lavenia ready for the long trip. Nor was amorous activity lacking. One morning after biking in the park I sat at the fountain in Dupont Circle and got picked up by a dark, thin Greek fellow named Michael who surprised me with a truly heroic wand of youth. Then a friend of geisha Dave named Paul arrived and affectionately shared my begonia-rank boudoir for a few days and nights.

In my weeks away, Charles hadn't accomplished very much on the basement plumbing. He'd been uninspired without me there working beside him, and I fully understood his excuse. Instead, he'd been hitting antique shops and had brought home two remarkable items. One was an 8-foot walnut Renaissance Revival pier mirror for the vestibule, and the other an enormous 1895 ebony Bechstein grand piano with what he called "Aunt Bessie" fat legs that we put in the swag-draped round bay of the parlor. Its key- and sound-boards were in dire need of restoration and couldn't be played, but with a candelabra and my elegant, pink-blooming *Aechmea fasciata* in a brass bowl, it looked absolutely Liberace-gorgeous.

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