

**CHAPTER 13: REALITY THEATER**

When the Bicentennial Fireworks had finally shot their mind-boggling wad, our Logan Circle contingent could only wait the half-hour or so it took for the multitudes to start thinning out enough to try and go anywhere. The hordes, which I figured at a couple million strong, dispersed as slowly as a melting glacier. With the impunity and immunity of the vast crowds doing the same, most of us sat on our blankets in the dark, drinking, smoking, and talking. Ricardo and Giovanni struck out early, struggling through the crush toward their home in Foggy Bottom. Lewis, Charles and I chatted about the stupendous mass of humanity around us.

I remarked that my earlier experiences with wild crowds at Mardi Gras hadn't at all prepared me for this incredibly many people in one place and described my terrible feeling of being just a cell in the body of our species. Charles protested that I wasn't any such thing. He said we were all discrete entities, each with our own subjective awareness of reality.

Lewis asked if objective reality was therefore just an amalgam of subjective realities, and Charles explained that only the concrete was objectively real. Anything conceptual was merely subjective opinion, and what mattered was how many people shared that opinion—like the notion of one god or another, or the concept of human rights. He said that the awareness of this eternal truth was what made people like us conscious, humane entities—a special breed of humanity—the majority of our species being simply human animals. We humanes, he proposed, were deities who create our own worlds, not like mortal humans who simply inhabit theirs.

Lewis and I argued against the divine issue but accepted his philosophical argument. I thought Charles was referring us gay and friendly beings and asked him how many of tonight's millions of people might be humanes. He calculated, "At very most, a third—in any sense of the word. All the rest are hateful." Lewis and I half-heartedly opposed the hate issue.

Charles gestured at the still dense crowd around us, insisting, "At least two-thirds of these lovely people hate us humanes. They'd just as soon burn us at the stake as look at us! Don't ever forget how they firebombed the Up Stairs Lounge three years ago! They'll do even worse, even more horrible things, somewhere else some day!" (Tragically, his dire prophecy would prove true forty years later at a Florida nightclub called the Pulse.)

Pausing mournfully, he asked, "Why do humans always want to kill their gods?" Lewis didn't venture to address that loaded question, but I found the answer in my subjective reality: to wreak revenge for their own imperfection. Oddly for a Jew, dear Lewis thought it a matter of sacrificing to redeem themselves, and I logically wondered how sacrificing a deity who didn't objectively exist could or should redeem anyone from anything, which necessarily would also be some subjective fiction. But revenge was a perfectly objective, concrete motive for deicide.

At that Charles started crying, and I stopped my rant in surprise. I'd never before seen him get teary drunk. Sniffling, he said, "That's why I'm creating my own divine world here in DC, in this sacred bubble of safety and freedom for humane beings like us." Again gesturing around the grandiose expanse of the dark Mall, he said, "Look at our beautiful Luxor! This fantastic obelisk way up there—our glorious temples all around! We're the new pharaohs!"

I much appreciated being included in my mind-mate's delusions of divinity but decided that while we were all still mobile, it was high time we hie ourselves home. Packing up our blankets and coolers, we humanes made our slow way around lingering clusters of humans into the ebb and flow of bodies. At Lafayette Square we rested in lighter crowds and made it the six blocks back to the Four Bells on my last legs. Rob kindly helped Charles up the front steps, but I managed alone—and thanked heaven for the banisters on our glorious staircase.

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After the late night of fireworks and other stimulants, Monday was a sorely needed extra holiday (though I had to work that evening to make up for the holiday before). Over pots of coffee and piles of pastries, we remaining three geishas recuperated with other veterans of the extravaganza, including Lewis, Carolyn, and Lou, along with a sweet twink named Frankie he'd caught in the Mall crowd. The kid was overawed by the grandeur of the Four Bells.

When Rob left with friends to go sailing at Annapolis, our other guests also took off for holiday fun, leaving Charles and me in our lassitude to talk about the fiery celebration last night. I remarked about feeling inspired by our philosophical talk, how it had given me new confidence in my subjective gay geisha identity and made me proud to be a humane being.

Charles chuckled and admitted he'd gotten quite intoxicated, blaming not the red wine but Giovanni's grass. He added, "But I really was serious about us being deities, my dear. Of course, everybody is, but only we humans know we're gods. Everybody is the only true god in their personal world, but humans always look for some objective god outside of themselves."

That was the great thing about having Charles as a mind-mate—he articulated my own thoughts and beliefs so eloquently. I responded with my customary levity, wondering how as the god creating my personal world, I might now whip up a great job for myself. Charles said I just had to divinely decree it, like "Let there be light." I wasn't sure it was quite that simple but as directed, decreed myself a great job opportunity. My mate said, "Now it will happen soon."

In the afternoon Charles took Lavenia and me to a tour of the Episcopal National Cathedral on Massachusetts Avenue. Begun in 1907 and still under construction, it was being considered for the National Register. A church official led us around the enormous neo-Gothic edifice, complete in its vast nave and altar area under a stupendously high vaulted transept, being built in the medieval manner by generations of stone-cutters. The entrance with its two towers yet to come, the arched columns and vaults simply stopped with canvas draping down to the aisle to keep out the weather. The cathedral impressed even my heathen aesthetic. Charles observed that when enough people shared the same subjective reality, however improbable, they could create remarkable objective realities—like Mayan temples and Egyptian pyramids.

We got home in time for me to bike off to work, where lovely Tweedle and I got adjacent front stations in the Garden. It was frantically busy from the word go, but we found moments to chat. When I told her about the amazing millions on the Mall for the Fireworks, she pointed down Connecticut and said, "Yes, I see down street over houses *les feux*. Very pretty..." I hadn't thought she might speak French better than English, and in our next moment to chat, I bravely said, "*Aujourd'hui, nous sommes allés à la cathédrale nationale*." Without batting a beautiful dark eye, Thuy responded in her brave English, "I go church *cathédrale* too in Saigon." I also hadn't thought before that exotic Oriental Tweedle might be a Christian.

Ignoring my distaste for that sect, I suddenly recognized a startling attraction to her, my first ever heterosexual impulse! (Ten years before with dear Barbara it had only been a biological drive—and later just an affectionate caring.) Well, maybe not all that heterosexual. Thuy was boyish, a lean and lithe creature with slight breasts, her golden face as androgynous as a Buddha.

I fondly recalled my Cambodian Liang and issued another divine decree—that I'd find a Vietnamese man as exquisite and alluring as Tweedle—soon—and preferably not a Christian. What the hell! He could even be Thai, Indonesian... This sudden taste for Asiatic was not to disparage my wild Panamaniac in any way. Beautiful Giovanni's less frequent visits (now that Ricardo was making an effort), were as shameless, satisfying, and exhausting as ever. Ricardo had an engagement that very night, and Giovanni would come over after I'd get off work.

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Giovanni had an early class for his hotel management course and didn't stay late, not that he had to for our satisfying assignation. Though it was typically exhausting, I was also up early and sat at breakfast in deep thought. Now I saw that like the National Cathedral, our splendid DC with its obelisk and temples and historic United States of America were simply objective realities created by our country's 218 million people sharing a belief in the improbable and unprovable subjective concept of democracy. I felt enlightened politically and spiritually.

To accomplish something concrete before my lunch shift, I walked over to O Street to work in the garden, which sorely needed weeding. Soon neighbor Ann, my lovely brunette friend from Wolfrap and the Bolshoi, left her house across the street, apparently heading off to work, and came over to see how my garden grew. I remarked on the spectacular fireworks Sunday night and learned that she and Robert had been in the crush down at the Lincoln Memorial. Ann then congratulated me on the wonderful LCCA newsletter I'd written last week, and I told her writing newsletters was great fun compared to slinging pizzas.

She knelt down beside me in the dirt and asked, "Richard, would you like a job?" I almost asked if a bear... but then if it was a desk job. She needed an administrative assistant at her new job, and I claimed I could certainly handle anything official she might need. Ann asked me to come her office on Vermont Avenue just below Thomas Circle tomorrow morning.

Ann left me there in the garden, dirty, sweaty, and flabbergasted, thrilled to take whatever pig this was in the poke. After all, I'd divinely decreed it. Besides, I was getting a planter's wart on the ball of my left foot which made waiting tables uncomfortable. A sit-down job would be a relief, and her office was even closer than Gusti's, only three blocks from the Four Bells! I finished with the weeds and took some early squashes home for the Supper Club that night.

At work I went first thing to tell Mr. Vince my potential news, arranging for Wednesday lunch off, and promising to announce my final decision at the dinner shift. When I told folks my great news, Sister Steve got jokingly jealous, and Tweedle cried, calling me her "good friendly guy." The Persians took my news quietly, either shaken or relieved at possibly losing their Grand Poosti. Afterwards, I slung pizzas with much vigor, all the while trying not to get too excited.

Wednesday morning I dressed up in my old Research Analyst khakis, business shirt with tie, and blue sport coat, danced down 14<sup>th</sup> to Thomas Circle and bore right down Vermont. Ann's office was on the fourth floor, and my future desk had a big window with a view of the façade across the street. I'd have an office all my own—with lots of space and light for plants.

Ann was now the director of OPERA America, a national service organization for opera companies, and I'd handle membership lists, files, and mailings; write monthly newsletters; organize meetings; manage accounts; and type her letters. When she wasn't looking, I kissed the brand-new IBM Selectric hello. The salary Ann offered was as good as when I'd been a spy. My co-worker was a young woman Project Assistant named Bobbe, a bubbly, bright-eyed wench. Ann also told me I could ditch the sport coat and tie, which I thought a great job benefit.

My first task was to update the membership address list and get to know the Director and Company names. That and filing piles of their materials took all morning, and then I trotted home for a quick lunch. In the afternoon Ann showed me their ledgers for keeping accounts, and I recorded a backlog of revenues and expenses, knocking off early to get to Gusti's.

My last shift in the Garden was unexpectedly emotional, looking for the last times down Connecticut Avenue, trotting for the last times up the steps to the kitchen and for the last times joking with the cooks... After closing they threw me a party in the Garden with cannoli and spumoni to say real goodbyes, and Thuy's tears precipitated my own.

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At my new job on Thursday morning, I called Giovanni first thing with the big news, and cancelled our plan to be shameless that afternoon. Instead, I invited him and Ricardo to dinner. Ann gave me handwritten pages to type as letters and set me to organizing a newsletter from notes on company events and the many meetings she'd attended at the National Endowment for the Arts. I had to type the letters in triplicate, original, copy for the company file, and one for the chronological file. (I've instinctively kept chron files for my life since 1970, which has let me write these memoirs without relying entirely on treacherous memory.)

When I brought the letters in to Ann for her signature, she was pleased with my work and said she'd had a good idea. Since I'd be taking minutes at lots of meetings, maybe I should take a class she'd heard of and learn shorthand. That esoteric aspect of linguistics had never crossed my mind before, but I was truly intrigued. A new class was starting next Monday on nearby K Street, and I could pop over in the middle of my mornings. (Shorthand was something also to stick with me the rest of my life—and earn me an anachronistic living for many elder years!)

Getting home from work when I was used to leaving was passing weird but gratifying. While Carolyn and Lewis cooked, Charles, Rob, and I had cocktails, toasting my change of life. Also toasted by other arriving guests, by dinnertime, I was fairly well toasted, feeling like a pharaoh in my subjective reality, but I deigned to wash dishes with Rob's help. Ricardo and Giovanni stayed afterwards to enjoy, respectively, Charles's and my familiar hospitality.

Lying in post-coital contentment in my sweltering jungle, Giovanni told me Ricardo had said he could only come see me once a week now and chivalrously worried about his *Mariposita* getting lonely. I figured once a week with my Panamaniac was almost enough, and besides, little butterflies rarely got lonely. Giovanni whispered hotly in my ear how he'd met a guy in his hotel course and fucked him. When I asked for details, he described the fellow's sweet mouth like a rosebud. As a geisha, I had no grounds to be jealous of his conquests, but when he added that the guy was a tall, cute Vietnamese, I suppressed a terrible fit of envy.

On my third day at work, Friday, Ann expanded on what her administrative assistant had to do. I'd be handling logistics for some major events. On Monday, July 26, we would all fly to Santa Fe, New Mexico, host two days of workshops on fundraising for the staffs of our opera companies at St. John's College, and then do two days of meetings with all the arts service organization directors and NEA officials and another day of board meeting in a rehearsal hall at the Santa Fe Opera. On top of all that, I would arrange for everyone's transportation, food, and attendance at evening performances in the beautiful opera house in the desert.

Undaunted, I first met with excited Bobbe about the fundraising workshops she organized and euphemistically called "development." The cute young woman, who'd recently come from an arts organization in Minneapolis, impressed and inspired me with her go-getter attitude, as well as her nonchalant acceptance, like Ann's, of me as a gay man. She loved my mustache. (That easy acceptance of gay people, even encouragement, I came to learn was almost universal in the arts world. It wasn't a matter of who one was but what one could accomplish.)

Having gotten a fix on what was needed at St. John's College and necessary contacts, I proceeded to sit on the telephone for the rest of the day securing details of everyone's travel plans and lodging needs (either at the College or the Hilton Inn), finalizing the schedules for facilities, and arranging for rental cars. The nice guy I dealt with at the Santa Fe Opera was named Tom, and he and I wound up working together hand-in-glove for many years. (We're still well-acquainted even as I write this in 2021, having only last month run into each other in the grocery store and commiserated about our viral isolation.)

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After Friday's dinner, prepared by old-time Club folks Connie and husband Doug—kudos for the sumptuous seafood spread—with no gentleman caller inclined to post-prandial pranks with me, I strolled over to the P Street bar to shop around for nocturnal companionship. After my day at the office and too much crab and shrimp, so not really in shape for exercise, I thought about going over to the alluring youth leaning beside another window—long curls and cherubic lips—but then waiter-sister Steve showed up from work, redolent of pepperoni pizza. We chatted about old and new jobs, until he caught sight of cherub lips and was smitten dumb. I told Steve to go for broke and ambled on home. After all, the kid didn't have rosebud lips.

Up early Saturday morning for my first real weekend in two years, earlier than my fellow geishas with or without overnight visitor, I perfunctorily ate cereal and took my coffee back upstairs to dawdle around amongst my begonias. They were growing great guns in this almost tropic heat, but since the humidity wasn't quite that of the real tropics, I ran a humidifier an hour each morning to goose it up, which I sensed they much appreciated. When the others got up, neither had had a stay-over, though maybe an early departure—a quiet night at the Four Bells.

Around eleven, when Giovanni was surely up, I called him hoping to hear something about Vietnam and found that he wasn't out of bed. His words mumbled about being asleep, but his voice implied he wasn't alone and insinuated who he was with. Again I refrained from the deadly sin of envy and agreed to meet at five at Cassandra's new antique store for her grand opening champagne reception. Giovanni's dear voice also implied someone else I'd meet.

That afternoon Chas held another of his Little Chambers of Music programs. He was ecstatic about my new job in opera—and about his own recent application to become the Opera Reference Librarian, likely to be approved very soon. My Ken and his Richard were there, also congratulatory, and told me they were looking to buy a house in Alexandria! I was distraught that my lover-brother would move away from Logan Circle and doubly so when Chas regretted having to move too, hopefully to somewhere around Dupont Circle. Ken's silence suggested maybe my two old friends were on the outs again. I could do nothing but offer best wishes.

Cassandra's champagne reception was well attended, nicely dressed tipplers crowding the shop's aisles. Giovanni's fiancée's style of antiques wasn't mine, lumpy crude things I could only call (generously) medieval. I found him and Ricardo in back sitting on a splintery bench alone. The Oriental person had already left, reportedly too shy to meet me, which flattened and flattered me at the same time. Ricardo offered to take the four of us out tomorrow night to the Nanking. I congratulated Cassandra on her grand new shop, drank one glass of quite good champagne, and headed home alone. I'd planned to bring a special guest to dinner.

The Sunday half of my first weekend wasn't as social or frustrating. Ignoring Sabbath, I spent the later morning on 6<sup>th</sup> Street rescuing decorative tiles from around doomed fireplaces—to give to new Logan Circle neighbors for their house on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. In the afternoon Charles and I drove to the shop in Laurel where we'd gotten the blue velvet couch and chair and came home with a round, red velvet settee. It had gold tassels and a central stand for a vase or some such Victorian gewgaw and was stunning in our entrance hall like in a grand hotel lobby.

I arrived at the Nanking to find Giovanni and Ricardo again alone, the special guest unable to appear. While we ate *à trois* and plotted, Giovanni revealed that the mystery man went by the name of Chi. I'd learned that in yoga *chi* was the life force flowing through our bodies, like in *tai chi*, and now this unseen fellow took on exciting new dimensions in my imagination. Our Plan C was to lure shy Chi out to dinner and a movie tomorrow night, and I proposed they bring him by the Four Bells for cocktails in my castle first, *chez moi*.

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My first shorthand class was as eye-opening as when I discovered Velikovsky and Venus. The eight other students, six girls and two boys, looked right out of high school. Like in a first grade classroom, over the blackboard ran a row of cue cards, but these were covered with mysterious squiggles. The older woman teacher handed us books on the arcane subject and started describing it as drawing pictures of words. I quickly flipped to the back of the book to tables of the squiggles, and my eyes were opened wide.

Several years of linguistic study, in particular of phonetics, immediately told me the name of this game--an elegant new script much easier than Latin, Cyrillic, or Greek alphabets. The squiggles were neatly paired as labials, dentals, stops, liquids, fricatives, and so on, and symmetrically reversed or lengthened for voiced and voiceless—a piece of cake! Now I just had to learn how to connect them in a cursive script and collect any abbreviated versions of common expressions that she was now drawing on the board. I first drew the short downward stroke with tiny loop at the bottom that spelled “Chi.” This was actually going to be a piece of cheesecake!

Back at the office, I told Ann about the cheesecake, and she chortled, “Super-doooper! We’ve got two weeks yet till Santa Fe, and you’ll be a whiz by then!” I hugely appreciated her Canadian (from Vancouver) enthusiasm and short-handed her name, a medium loop with a short horizontal stroke to the right. Back at my desk, I dived into the list of calls to make all over the country and stacks of company audits to compile for statistics of the opera industry, totally overjoyed to have found meaningful employment.

I’d just gotten home when my guests showed up. Chi came up the front steps, tall as Giovanni had described, and we shook hands in the vestibule. I had no time to study his golden face but noted that Chi’s lips truly were a rosebud. Leading them through the foyer into the entrance hall, I saw he was about an inch taller than I. Giovanni and Ricardo loved the red settee, which Chi sat on, admiring the splendor around. His smile made his mouth a full-blown rose.

With gins and tonic in hand, I gave them the tour of the Four Bells and for our honored guest added all the bells and whistles about the parlor, dining room, and monumental staircase. The tour wound up as planned in my jungle where all four of us dramatically ignored my fancy iron bed, concentrating instead on my glorious floral tapestry\* over the mantle.

Shown my equally glorious Rex begonias, Chi admired some individually and turning to me with a wondrous smile, exclaimed, “So beauty!” He well knew this kind of flower-leaf plant from home in Vietnam. I wondered at his own beauty—and at how Chi’s exotic allure, while powerful and appealing, strangely didn’t awaken desire. I felt no pain of need, only joy for being in his beautiful presence (a feeling I now see as a quasi-Buddhistic breakthrough for me).

For simplicity’s sake, we dined at Gusti’s, and I requested a table with Thuy, who was thrilled to see me, very polite to the Panamanians, and enormously shy to meet Chi. The two exchanged several comments in Vietnamese, and then she graciously took our orders. Chi told us Thuy lived in their refugee community in Virginia where everyone knew everyone’s business, which I sensed to be a polite comment on her former profession.

Over basket-jugs of Chianti and two large combo pizzas, I learned that Chi was a soldier who’d fought in battles with names that were inscrutable Vietnamese to me. He was living with a refugee brother and sister, and their other siblings were still in the SRV (Socialist Republic of Vietnam). He said nothing about his life here in the United States now, except that he was really enjoying the course in hotel management. I wanted to ask if he’d escaped from Saigon in a helicopter off the embassy roof but decided not to pry. Sitting side by side with him it was hard to look at each other, but all through our conversation, our bodies seemed to touch.

\* Concerning this heirloom tapestry, see *LORD WIND*, Chapter 2, *THE FAUN*.

The movie we went to see was called “The Ritz,” starring Rita Moreno, a comedy about mobsters in a gay bathhouse, another sterling example of gay liberation working its way into the dominant culture. We sat in the dark theater laughing loud at the outrageous characters and gender confusion. Like shy teenagers, Chi and I held hands, at times squeezing each other’s fingers. I wondered what his jungle-soldier mind made of the mad, off-color farce and if our strict categories of gay or straight even meant anything to his Oriental mind.

After the movie, we agreed to go out again tomorrow night later to dance at a new place called The Pier, and then Chi went home to his brother and sister. I returned to the Four Bells in a meditative state that carried me contemplatively through the next day’s work and a fine dinner courtesy of geisha Rob. At the witching hour of eleven I found them at the Pier. Ricardo soon departed, leaving Giovanni free to prowl and Chi and me alone together for the first time. We danced a few songs, conversing visually. Then we leaned close by a window over the Anacostia and reflected lights and spoke of cabbages and kings. Hovering over the river like a spaceship, a faceted globe rotated, radiating red and green lights, the reflection of the disco-ball behind us.

Without agreeing in mere words, Chi came home with me. In the hall we stopped by the settee for no apparent reason, looked at each other expressively, and fell into a gentle embrace and ferocious kiss. According to a note in my file, it was near daylight before we slept, though we didn’t consummate our passion, just consecrated it with insatiable affection. I caressed and kissed a long, rough scar on his shoulder left by a hunk of shrapnel. Chi left in the morning promising to see me next weekend, and I sincerely promised to try and wait patiently.

Patience was made easy by my fun shorthand classes and excitement at my new job—and by Giovanni coming over on Thursday for our now-weekly assignation. Demanding details of Tuesday night, he was scandalized that Chi and I hadn’t yet done the deed and rehearsed it with me twice before dinner. That dinner was courtesy of Ken and his Richard to celebrate their real estate dealings on Q Street and in Alexandria. Chas was scheduled to cook for the Supper Club on Saturday to celebrate finding himself a new apartment on 18<sup>th</sup> Street.

Saturday morning, I kissed Chi in the vestibule and introduced him to Charles and Rob in the dining room. He shook their hands shyly, and I immediately spirited him away for an outing in Lavenia. We drove to the Arboretum to see the famous new Bonsai pavilion, a Bicentennial gift to the US from Japan. The display of miniature trees and whole forests in low dishes took hours to appreciate. Wandering around in almost wordless wonder, we as usual held hands, Chi at times exclaiming, “So beauty!” The most amazing wonder was a Japanese white pine about four feet tall, which started training in 1625, with a nest of baby birds on an upper branch.

Heading home in the van, we quietly marveled over the tiny trees. Chi thanked me again and again for taking him to the beautiful pavilion, probably saying so little else from not being confident in his English. I asked him how one said “beautiful” in Vietnamese and called him so. He laughed, either embarrassed or amused at my pronunciation. Back in the bright afternoon in my jungle, we consummated what I now recognized as our love. Chi took my face in his delicate hands and again sighed, “So beauty!” He stayed for dinner, Chas’s double-barreled Cajun feast of crawfish gumbo and red beans with rice, and charmed the Club, filling me with pride. Charles winked at me to signal his approval of my military gentleman.

Inspired by the Japanese bonsais, I wanted to train one of my own. Down along Rock Creek below the P Street Beach, I found a craggy hunk of granite weighing maybe forty pounds, a perfect perch for a tiny tree, and walked it home balanced on my bike. On it I planted a lace aralia with delicate splays of leaves and named her Aurora. (Aurora passed long ago, but my Rock of Ages sits now in a fountain watering my almond tree. Strange things we queers keep.)

My tender soldier met me Tuesday night at the P Street bar. Chi and I sat close by a park window talking of many things, though he again said virtually nothing about his current refugee life. All he'd refer to was his hotel course, leaving me to wonder about his other time—some of it maybe with Giovanni? I was booked with the Panamaniac for Thursday... By the time Chi went home to his siblings, we'd agreed on Friday evening *chez moi* with *moi* as chef and dancing at the Pier. We planned out the whole weekend together, walking in Rock Creek Park, seeing the National Gallery and/or Natural History, driving out to Great Falls...

Meanwhile, back at the office, logistics for the Santa Fe trip were locked in tight, and shorthand was nearly second nature. Already I was using it in notes to myself, and in class I happily practiced by writing what the students or instructor said, boring vocabulary but effective exercise. All week the energy of us three in the office mounted palpably, like that bubbling excitement before a performance. Next week in Santa Fe would be our artistic production, Reality Theater if you will, and I was pumped to perform administratively.

Friday evening after work, I threw together a simple ragout of lamb braised in red wine. Having chopped many vegetables in the morning, I now left it to stew, whipped up a huge salad with tomatoes fresh from the garden, and for dessert made my favorite orange tapioca spiked with Cointreau. Charles set the table with the silver, and Lou brought flowers for centerpieces. This too was Reality Theater, a show to open at seven-thirty. The star showed up only five minutes before curtain. Probably looking a mess and unable to remember my lines, I greeted Chi with a hurried hug and raced upstairs to at least comb my hair and mustache.

Our weekend was one Reality Theater production after another, a great example of how we humane deities create our own worlds. Dancing at the Pier was a celebration, gallery-hopping a series of aesthetic thrills, our evening forest stroll along Rock Creek a blessed moment out of time, and Great Falls a welcome escape into the natural world. Our love scenes between these action sequences weren't scripted but played splendidly ad lib and improv with enough drama, nudity, and dastardly deeds to satisfy most Reality Theater-goers. These intimate nocturnes required only minimal dialogue but loads of emotional intensity.

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The flight from National Airport was an enormous thrill for me, my first flight since leaving Seattle ten years before. We changed planes in Dallas, flying over a vast mountain and down into Albuquerque along the Rio Grande by early afternoon. Ann drove us north up the river through desolate brown desert past flat-topped buttes. The little town of Santa Fe sat at the foot of a monstrous mountain chain Ann called the Sangre de Cristos (Blood of Christ), and St. John's College perched above among the foothills. Ann said the architecture of its brown buildings with white woodwork and columns and brick lintels was "Spanish Colonial."

We were to stay in dormitories, and the food service manager had meals planned for our workshop folks in their dining hall. My afternoon was spent installing arriving faculty and attendees in rooms, and it being two hours earlier than at home, dinner came later than I wanted. The tamales smothered in a spicy red sauce were unappetizing. Ann explained that New Mexican food was always came with either red or green chili. The green tasted better but only marginally. After supper the sunset knocked my eyes out, splashes of color across the western sky casting a red glow on the eastern mountains, whence their bloody name. Jet-lagged, I retired to my dorm room feeling very much at home on the summer-empty campus and soon passed out.

By morning I was back in sync and after confirming the day's arrangements, turned the workshop show over to Bobbe. While they worked, I climbed the small mountain behind the college, Monte Sol (Sun Mountain), and sat on its summit looking out over the vast valley with a



70-mile view south to Albuquerque and far off west to another mountain range. I'd never seen such a glorious landscape in my life, several separate piles of cumulus clouds floating across the sunny immensity like sheep, spitting down lightning bolts and trailing veils of rain. I climbed back down the mountain for lunch, cheeseburgers with green chili, and shortly afterwards had to drive an older woman attendee from the Chicago Lyric Opera to the hospital. She was certain she'd been poisoned by the chili, but the doctor prescribed Pepto-Bismol, which did the trick.

They went easy on the chili for dinner, civilized roast chicken with a suspiciously spicy squash dish called "calabasitas," and then we piled into vans for the opera. Topping a high ridge, we got another staggering view north up the river valley between mountain ranges, the opera house perched on a promontory like a white bird with its roofs for wings. Ann had told us it was a special place, an awful understatement. Before the opera, the sunset wasn't as wild but made the shadows in the river valley almost violet. We saw Cavalli's "L'Egisto," which I thought tedious and silly, but I dared not say that to the raving crowd. Later, Bobbe agreed with me.

The second day of workshops ran quite like the first with a morning meditation for me on Monte Sol. The view north was along undulating slopes of the forested Sangres past the rocky summit of Santa Fe Baldy, over 12,000 feet high, and other peaks beyond. Regarding forests, on that first day in New Mexico I'd noticed the trees seemed terribly short in comparison to the expansive horizons—few over 10 or 12 feet tall. Around me on my mountaintop, two kinds of evergreens grew as midget trees, each with the elegant form and magical beauty of a bonsai. With that and the strange, liquid light glowing everywhere, this seemed on some other planet.

That afternoon I drove an old guy from the San Francisco Opera through a downpour to see a dentist for his toothache, and the sunset before the opera was darkened by dense clouds. That night's show, "Mother of Us All," had a libretto by Gertrude Stein about Susan B. Anthony. The suffragist theme I appreciated, but Virgil Thomson's music not so much. Meanwhile, the production was engaging, if not memorable. Again, Bobbe and I were of a mind about it.

Early Monday morning, we left the attendees to their own resources to get to the airport or wherever, moved our operations to rooms at the Hilton Inn in downtown Santa Fe, and drove back out to the Santa Fe Opera for the arts organization meeting in their elegant, spacious rehearsal hall. It was a new addition to the "ranch" complex huddled down the hill from the futuristic opera house. Bobbe told me that it had once been a pig farm.

My liaison Tom on top of everything, I ensconced myself with pens and pads as Ann directed at the empty head table. She would sit at the left of the President of OPERA America, John Crosby—coincidentally General Director of the Santa Fe Opera and our host—and I on her left, and Bobbe on mine. On the President's right would sit The Hon. Nancy Hanks, the new Chair of the National Council of the Arts, which ruled the National Endowment for the Arts, and beside her The Hon. Livingston Biddle, previous Chair of the NCA.

Ranged around the wide circle of tables were name cards for the various organizational honchos. I trotted around checking my seating chart to make sure I knew who'd be speaking. This being a memoir and not an expose, I need not identify, much less describe them. This piece of Reality Theater intended to discuss the needs of the many arts disciplines in our country and find ways to cooperate and collaborate, a noble goal. On cue, the honchos started arriving, and while Ann and Bobbe worked the crowd, I worked at attaching names to their respective faces.

The President arrived to a full room, walking through the honchos greeting and shaking hands. A white-haired, older fellow with wire-framed glasses, he greeted The Hon. Guests, met me off-handedly, and turned to Ann's advice before calling the meeting to order. My short hand kicked into gear, and for hours I happily turned the honchos' verbiage into exotic squiggles.

Around one o'clock Tom and his crew brought in beautiful lunches of huge turkey sandwiches—without any chili—and the meeting continued while we ate. That afternoon another downpour pounded on the rehearsal hall roof. My new friend Tom called it their monsoons.

When I could finally stop being a squiggle machine, I turned to Tom and reviewed the honcho dinner, set for six-thirty, made sure Ann and Bobbe were doing okay, and slipped away for a walk across the hill in the late afternoon sun. Following no path through the widely spaced short evergreens, I saw no sign of the recent rain but down into a big gully I found the freshly spread sand from a runoff flow. Tom told me the gully was called an arroyo.

Dinner, lovely steaks with fixings, came with chili on the side, and both were rather tasty. I tried not to listen to the honchos' political chatter, promoting or denigrating various presidential hopefuls, mostly the oligarch and the smarmy movie actor. I'd long known the candidate to vote for, albeit a peanut farmer, and held my tongue. After another boggling sunset, the night's show was Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro," a bit long, but beautifully sung and staged gorgeously, and it was an easy drive back late to the Hilton and a good bed.

For the second day of squiggly verbiage, we arrived early enough for a leisurely coffee. Bobbe was excited about the subject but felt useless in the meeting, but Ann said getting to know the big issues was key to smaller affairs. I complimented them on their positive attitude, their can-do-titude, which I was learning to share. Mr. Crosby again arrived just before show time and greeted me with a smiling good morning, remarking that Ann had told him I was a treasure. I replied that so was she. He called the meeting to order, and my short hand went back to work.

The palaver ebbed and flowed all day as honchos variously demanded, compromised, or simply ran off at the mouth. Taking down their words verbatim gave me insight into confused reasoning and illogical propositions, and inarticulate circumlocutions frustrated me. But in the end of ends, the meeting concluded with a recommendation to create an Opera-Musical Theater Program at the NEA (after lengthy argument about combining the two, which I personally considered merely two styles of the same genre). The other decision was to create a brand new organization to be called the American Arts Alliance composed of the self-same arts discipline honchos and other cultural big wigs. The organizational orgy gave birth to a baby org.

Some honchos departed while OPERA America board members arrived, booked into the Hilton and trucked out to the Opera for another feast laid by efficient Tom, now an improbable number of lamb chops with mint jelly and new potatoes... For me it was another exercise in nailing names to foreheads, and I tried to keep a low profile, but a garrulous, obese opera director named Bob cornered me, having heard I was a treasure. Understanding his intimation, I replied modestly that I was indeed. His smile said he thought so too.

The opera that night was to my dismay Strauss' "Salome." The Strauss operas were Mr. Crosby's trademark. I was okay with his music, but that composer's hysterically shrieked arias made me wish for ear-plugs. Mr. Crosby was conducting, and from my VIP seat in the fourth row I had a great view of his white hair as he waved his arms around. The shrieks at least kept me awake, and the Dance of the Seven Veils and the John-the-Baptist-head scenes were of dramatic interest. Afterwards we went to a reception down at the ranch, where I easily lied that it had been superb, exceptional even. I could scarcely tell Mr. Crosby it had been excruciating.

For the Board meeting on Saturday I was able to scale back my verbatim squiggles. Ann had prepared a formal agenda with various reports, the salient points of which I summarized to write minutes later. President Crosby's was terse comments on the preceding two days, Ann's about what I already knew from the office and workshops at St. John's, and that of the Treasurer (Director of the Metropolitan Opera) was just the figures she and I had pulled together for him.

We took a short break for a backstage tour of the opera house. Below the stage, there were impressive facilities for constructing and storing sets, virtual garment factory for costumes with warehouse for same, and huge dressing rooms for singers and orchestra. Most impressive was the monster platform elevator for moving sets up to the open rear of the stage.

Back at the rehearsal hall, Tom had set us a New Mexican lunch of chicken enchiladas with choice of chili, and shortly after that came another loud monsoon deluge. Over the noise, Crosby drily reminded the board that this was the high desert and introduced Ms. Hanks of the NCA. She tentatively suggested that NEA might institute an Opera/Musical Theater Program, which instigated excited chatter among the opera directors—all of it irrelevant to my minutes.

The meeting wrapped up by 3:30 so board members might go shopping in town before dining at whatever famous restaurant they chose. I left Ann and Bobbe to hobnob, went back to the Hilton for a nap, and ate a healthy salad at a not at all famous hippie place nearby called the Jefferson Street Soup Company. Back out to the Opera early, I sat on the hillside for the other-worldly sunset and then rushed to my same VIP seat for “La Traviata.”

From my radio, I recognized the music and some arias in this Verdi opera I’d never seen but didn’t know its plot or that *traviata* meant ‘fallen woman.’ I instantly identified with Violetta and got integrally involved in the famous courtesan’s love affair with Alfredo—a dramatic reflection of mine with Chi, though I wasn’t sick. Between acts, I retreated to the far terrace to play the famous gay geisha in love with a Vietnamese soldier. Act II got all mixed up with parties and partings, and not speaking Italian, I couldn’t tell why he and she did whatever. Giovanni was my Baron, I figured, but he’d never duel with Chi. Act III was a tearjerker with Violetta’s drawn-out death but no longer any part of my own operatic love story.

It was late when I drove Ann and Bobbe back to the Hilton, but I was going to stay up even later. Tom told me about a gay bar off Water Street down from the Greyhound Bus station. The Senate Lounge was bright and loud with good dance music, and the crowd of light and dark guys reminded me of my long ago Latin sailor bar. I danced with a cute Indian kid with really long raven hair, who turned out to be drunker than he looked and even hotter than that. This copper-skinned Arturo from some neighboring pueblo climbed all over me and with absolutely no encouragement followed me back to the Hilton for a going-away party.

Sunday morning we packed it out quite early, not all that long after Arturo left, with Ann driving. Bobbe sat up front to let me stretch out in the backseat. On the long road across the desert back to Albuquerque we were quiet, each happy with our successful Reality Theater production and exhausted in their own way. Our early flight, again changing in Dallas, got us back to National two hours later suddenly in mid-afternoon. Waiting for our luggage, Ann revived our flagging energies by announcing that we’d take tomorrow and Tuesday off.

I waited contentedly for my bag, and suddenly out of nowhere Chi appeared, said hi, and hugged me for a fierce greeting kiss. Let Ann and Bobbe think whatever, I was a *traviata* coming home to my soldier lover. They were happy to meet Chi, who carried some of their bags to a taxi. In one of our own, while I described desert landscapes, sunsets, and bonsai trees, we held hands.

Dropping my bags in the hall, we tore upstairs intent on a hearty welcome-home party. Stepping into my jungle, I heard the huffing humidifier and found my banks of Rex Begonias a ghastly ruin, eaten alive by mold. A few flowery leaves were still hanging on. I squatted to turn off the humidifier, almost empty, and sat down on the floor in tears. Chi gently helped me up onto the bed and assuaged my grief as best he knew how. His kisses helped me accept the tragic objective reality of dead begonias and the subjective reality of our living love.

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