

CHAPTER 17: BUSHY-TAILED

To drag out the cliff-hanger from the previous chapter, I won't yet reveal the outcome of that fire Saturday night, April 30, at 1322 Rhode Island Avenue. First I should discuss my primary focus in May of 1977 and the several months after, the opera translation. Working through that summer and fall, I finished it in mid-December, the sheer joy of creating art carrying me safely over some bumpy roads. Not to sound fatuous, but after my first diddles with the chorus of girls, it swept me up in an artistic frenzy. Somehow each day, mostly in free evenings, I'd find a chance to work on the libretto, the inspiring, tragic story of Jeanne d'Arc ruling and firing my imagination. I translated proudly, a true artist now, a poet-librettist working with the famous composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. I was profoundly grateful for the privilege.

My first diddles on that chorus of girls immediately taught me how to read the musical notation like a new language. With the words in my beloved Russian, I simply had to transform them into English poetry. The translation was complicated by Tchaikovsky's use of iambic rhymed couplets or triplets and his old-style "poetic" Russian word order, coincidentally my graduate specialty. Another trouble was the multi-syllabic Russian words with extra syllables to express gender, number, and case, but that was in fact a good thing, allowing my English more room for grammatical tricks. My first rule was to try and keep the vowel qualities similar on the important notes and word-stresses matching the iambic beat.

The village girls start singing sweetly, "Now while the sky is still alight,/ Aglow with ev'ry hue of ev'ning,/ And while there's time before midnight,/ Come play and sing with us this ev'ning..." These first lines in English hit most of the important vowels in the original Russian. I've since regretted the phrase "with ev'ry hue," an unfortunate result of my first rule reflecting the original "po-sled-ni looch" (last ray).



Joan of Arc by the French Market

This seems an appropriate place for me to switch up into the present time and reveal the far future fate of my 1977 translation of "Joan of Arc." In 2016, nearly 40 years later, I took it into my head to approach the New Orleans Opera, offering it (in a to-be-revised edition), as a gift to the City of New Orleans, my alleged home-town, in recognition of Joan's being the patron saint of La Nouvelle Orleans. After I left town, a statue was gifted the city by France and installed on Decatur Street, not far from my 1964 Governor Nicholls Home for Hapless Harlots. The opera's director, a true New Orleans gentleman, graciously accepted my offer and staged it on February 7 and 9, 2020. (Sometimes life moves in long circles.) A month later the pandemic struck.

The point of this digression is that 40 years later I broke my golden rule and translated the Russian phrase as "with gol-den hues," which to this much more mature poet sounds rather better. My other revisions to the 500-page libretto (Four Acts with 20 Scenes) were equally aesthetic. I often abandoned doggerel rhymes and took several liberties in my "editing" of Tchaikovsky's language and story-line. So, sue me. It's now the masterpiece the composer intended, but that first translation was still damned good—in spite of the flawed libretto.

For most of 1977, beneath all the usual preoccupations and vicissitudes of geisha life at the Four Bells ran this happy "occupation," energizing and inspiring my aesthetic spirit. This is not to say that all those preoccupations and vicissitudes were necessarily peaceful.

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The vicissitude of sitting in the rescue vehicle watching the fire next door was one of the least peaceful. I had visions of utter destitution as the firemen valiantly fought the flames. Within a half-hour, they'd put the blaze out, and to our utter relief, the Four Bells was saved. Inside 1322 lying on the charred staircase, they found the body of a "drunk" from the parking lot of the Barrel House across the alley who apparently started the fire by passing out with a lit cigarette. We mourned the poor old guy but gave thanks that the fire crew hadn't had to turn on the hose in our house. Instead, they hauled in big fans to blow the smoke out the windows. The acrid smell hung on for a few days as a reminder of the close call.

Those next few days for me were an orgy of jubilant gratitude for our salvation. I felt I'd been given a whole new lease on life to create my masterpiece translation. Meanwhile, I was alarmed by Charles's reaction. Rather than rejoice at our deliverance, he slipped deeper into his depression, also alarming his visiting parents. Bob had to take over the task of getting the new heating unit installed on the roof, while Julie desperately mothered my inert friend. At his next session with the psychiatrist, Charles was put back on another anti-depressant and started functioning again, at least enough to go back to his office.

To escape the smell of smoke and strange energies in the Four Bells and probably on the urging of the lusty month of May, Monday afternoon after work I wandered down to the Mall just to sit in the green shade by the lovely Smithsonian castle. My grateful peace was interrupted by a tall, long-haired, handsome fellow with a big backpack, who waved, smiled, and without a word plopped down beside me. Dutch, by the romantic name of Franz van den Linden (a tree with fragrant blooms), he'd just visited the Capitol. On a summer tour of the US, he was staying at the youth hostel. No excuse was needed to invite him to the Four Bells to become the newest member in my intimate United Nations.

While I was at work on Tuesday, on my recommendation Franz toured the Library of Congress and Supreme Court. He worked his way back up Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House and Renwick Gallery before hiking back to Logan Circle. That afternoon Rene arrived from Alabama for a few days before taking off for a summer in Costa Rica. Unencumbered by hunky boyfriend Bill, the novice philandrist grabbed me as I walked through the shattered front door and hauled me upstairs into bed, though I needed no nap.

When Franz got back from his sightseeing, I was helping Julie with a big Supper Club feast, and Rene kindly showed the Dutch boy my third-floor jungle with its book-box bed. The Tuesday feast (with full complement of friends and pioneers, less Carolyn), was a celebration of surviving the fire. I often toasted Bob as our hero and rescuer, and Charles found the mental energy to drink to that. Little Lou stayed after to share the book-box bed with Rene, and Franz and I eventually slept like baby jungle creatures.

Sleeping arrangements in the next few days were complicated by Giovanni's visits, during which he behaved shamelessly, individually, with the four of us. As acolyte and mentor, Little Lou and I refrained from mutual whoopee, our three others providing sufficient whooping. That Thursday, Cinco de Mayo, both Franz and Rene moved on to Philadelphia and Costa Rica respectively, leaving Giovanni, Little Lou, and me in blessed satisfaction at the dinner table.

Meanwhile, Chi sat affectionately on my right, amazed about the fire he'd narrowly escaped Saturday night by leaving after dinner. As ever, he didn't ask what I'd been doing since, but in his wicked way, Giovanni said we'd been having a party, and Little Lou gushed vividly about Franz and Rene. Though I'd said nothing, Chi kissed my cheek and said, "My beauty! I'm happy you had fun." Giovanni toasted to *la mariposita*, embarrassing me before our assembled guests. Chi stayed the night and spread his peace over me like a starry sky.

The next Saturday, almost a week after the fire, I finally got back to Joan for a good part of the day, then played chef for the Club, happy to chop and stir for knowing that my soldier boy was coming to see me after only two days apart. Feeling better with his new dosage, dear Charles gave me a hand in the kitchen, and I remarked on how much I appreciated having his folks with us, how grateful I was that Bob was managing the installation on the roof.

Charles was grateful too and just wished his father and mother would take charge of his life again, like when he was a child. I argued that everyone had to take responsibility for and care of his life. Everybody else was too busy with their own lives to take care of anyone else. That was why we “grew up” at 18, becoming responsible for our own lives. He promised to stop wanting to be a child again and was sure the medication would help him “grow up.” That was when I really started wondering what my mind-mate’s depression was symptomatic of. Way out of my depth in psychological counselling, I hoped my pragmatic advice might help him.

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Dinner with Chi and Giovanni in attendance was “clean-joke” night, and there was so much comedy around the table that neither Chi nor I had to contribute other than laughter. He leaned close and said, “My beauty, I am so happy with you that I would cry.” On my other side, Giovanni pretended to weep and whispered, “*Besame mucho!*” Surely no other geisha was ever so blest with two such ardent suitors! After dinner both left me, satisfied and gratified, to a couple hours of my art. I was now deep into Joan’s rigid father’s diatribe, and though it rubbed me the wrong way, I found the right words fell easily into dramatic and melodic place.

I enjoyed another visit by repentant Bill that Tuesday evening, and in post-prandial pranks he passionately moaned about wanting me all for his own. I quickly advised him of my opinion that lovers don’t own or possess each other—we just have each other on loan. Occasion arose to also to talk of this with my acolyte Little Lou, and he asked what interest I’d charge to be his lover. I told him that wasn’t in the cards, but my loans were interest-free. Meanwhile, our friendship was a gift to each other—and more likely to last.

The rest of the week was spent with Joan, a lot more recitative and repetitive chorus, and by Saturday I was into the Hymn. The inspiring solo with chorus, “Thou art our hope, our only shelter...” rang in my ears all through dinner. Chi sat close, excited about going after to the ballet at the Kennedy Center. I’d invited Charles and others to accompany us to “Swan Lake,” but all were otherwise engaged. Thus, my soldier and I were alone together in the huge audience watching Prince Siegfried get jerked around between Odette and Odile, the white and black swans. My good buddy Tchaikovsky struck again! The finale was breath-taking.

At the car in the parking building, gentleman Chi opened my door and before I got in, kissed me intensely. Afterwards I found him crying and asked the matter. He answered, “I love you too much—my beauty!” I joked, “As much as I love you?” These sweet nothings calmed us down, and we returned to the Four Bells for a night of magical swans and princes. Late Sunday morning, auspiciously the Ides of May, we rose from our enchanted lake and dressed.

Pulling up his pants, Chi started crying again, and in my comforting arms he said he had to leave me now, go away... He would marry a Vietnamese girl named Beth, an arrangement between their families, and could not come see me anymore. Then I also cried, but my tears didn’t keep him from disappearing before breakfast.

I moped over my cereal but pulled it together enough to dive for solace back into the Hymn. That afternoon I called Giovanni with the sad news, and he popped over to administer CPR. Thumping my body expertly, he brought his *mariposita* back to life and bemoaned with me the sore loss of our soldier lover. Wrapping my precious kimono around me, I struggled to regain

my geisha equilibrium, knowing that peaceful Chi and I would always love each other, even apart. Giovanni said, “And so will we...” That’s when he broke the news of his leaving this Thursday for summer school in Shippensburg. I cried again, to no avail, and Giovanni left me to the comfort of Joan, promising to visit again before Thursday.

He brought wife and uncle to dinner on Wednesday, and they were politely sympathetic with me about my loss. Ricardo had rented a fine apartment for my Panamaniac up there where they’d visit frequently, and it went without saying that when Giovanni visited them in DC on weekend occasions, he’d have no time for his *mariposita*. Already comatose after Chi’s leaving me, I listened to their happy plans behind an expressionless Noh mask.

Once again, magnanimous Cassandra allowed her husband and me a fond farewell scene, but he had to get home by midnight to be up early for the trip to Pennsylvania. In our two hours we relived our shameless year, and after Giovanni left me, I slept poorly in my sad, heavy mask. I’d known it was coming and didn’t let myself lament, unaware then that I’d never even hear from him again. The rest of May I sublimated all my feelings of abandonment through Joan’s possibly psychotic prophesy of a savior to come and her signature aria of farewell to the forests and flocks of her childhood. There was solace in the mystical way art mirrored my life.

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The farewell aria was rather difficult to translate since Pyotr Ilyich’s pastoral language, while terrifically poetic in Russian, sounded trite in literal English. I gave Joan more emotional and personal imagery. Rather than the flat, “*My friends, my fields, my trees, all you I’ve cared for...*” I made her sing, “My peaceful fields and glades, my trees and flowers...” I seem to have succeeded in turning the next literal line, “*Akh! Without me, you shall bloom and fade!*” into what I’d call decent operatic English iambs: “No longer for me your blossoms will you bear!” (In the 2017 revision, this more mature poet rewrote these lines more dramatically as, “My friends, my forest glen, my fragrant flowers,/ Without me your blooms must blow and petals fall!”) I’ll resist henceforth boring you more with Joan’s poetic evolution but can at least keep you abreast of my progress on special scenes in the opera, of which there are more than a few.

I awoke on Thursday, June 2, as always, as we used to say back in the woods, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, looking forward to an interesting and engrossing day at the office, which they generally were, and the whole evening to start on § 8, Act I’s final scene, even grander than the Hymn—with real angels! At breakfast I recalled the date as my sister Judy’s birthday, wished her telepathically a happy one with little niece Jennifer, and dedicated Joan’s aria to her.

At the office, Ann gave me the awful news that yesterday our Baltimore Bob had died of a heart attack. Deeply moved by this first fatal loss of a lover, (What if only a one-nighter?), I found it hard to concentrate on my interesting and engrossing work while grieving the loss of a dear friend—a gourmet chef who dropped dead at his stove while cooking bouillabaisse. We arranged for us all to go up to Baltimore Saturday for the funeral.

Meanwhile I expressed my grief in the first chorus of angels urging Joan to don her armor for battle (and just coincidentally to deny all earthly love and passion!) At the funeral, we staff of OPERA America met the company’s suddenly acting director, the principal operative in Bob’s entourage, an attractive guy called Jay, well known to us all. Tall, raven-haired David shared friendly moments of grief with me and commiserated about my loss of two spectacular lovers. As a funeral ceremony for Bob, I treasured memories of his obese, ugly, loving goodness.

By later May Charles had improved so much with his medication that Bob and Julie decided to go home to San Diego, and my friend was an especially ebullient host again at dinners. I sometimes noticed a tendency to the dramatic and to embellishing anecdotes I knew

well but figured that was all part of being a good raconteur. At the end of the month, the doctor adjusted his dosage down, and in a matter of days Charles reverted to listless depression. Our historic architect friend from Denver, cute blond Peter, showed up in the second week of June, and was aghast to find Charles so dysfunctional. By default, I wound up running around town by day with our guest viewing architecture and by design sharing my bed with him by night.

Right away, Charles's psychiatrist upped his dosage again, and our friend was revived. Besides to see me in particular, Peter had come to town for Gay Pride Day that next Sunday, a block party over on 20th Street. The celebration was imbued with an extra bravado in protest of Miami-Dade's repeal of their gay rights ordinance, the focus of the Orange Witch's venomous crusade. Charles came along with the Four Bells cohort and cheered the outraged speakers with gusto. I celebrated by dancing with imperial geisha dignity in a smiling Noh mask.

On our walk home, Peter lamented not having a boyfriend, and I said we were too old for "boy"-friends. We wanted "man"-friends, and I figured I fit that bill for him. He argued that he wanted a steady manfriend, a permanent lover. I gave him my geisha rant about the transience of relationships and loving only for as long as possible—then letting go. Peter asked if I loved him, and I said I did—when he was in town, I'd be his manfriend. He should just visit me more often.

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The rest of June was a hypnotic spell of working on that long final scene of Act I that came to a musical climax even longer and louder than the 1812 Overture. A few evenings were relieved by visits from other manfriends, old or new. Neighbor Jimmy showed up at a dinner without his Joe, who was away on a business trip, and accepted my nocturnal hospitality. Late in the month a wild, cute friend of Tom's from San Francisco named Johnny visited and chose my bed. Over dinner he told us about the march on the previous Sunday of 200,000 protesting Miami-Dade. I was thrilled how the vicious witch was mobilizing the gay world, and Charles crowed that soon we'd defeat the homophobic inhumans. It was no surprise, but quite troubling, that his doctor soon adjusted his dosage down, and Charles lapsed again into lethargy.

July started on a new note for me, Act II at the palace of Chinon, with a melodic chorus of minstrels extolling the magic flower of love. I enjoyed that flower with various manfriends, including a surprise sleepover by next-door neighbor Mike, his Ed away in Savannah for a family do. Logan Circle started to feel like my harem—or like I was a convenient corner grocery store... Not that I was complaining. Manfriends were a geisha's stock in trade. Most of the month, poor depressed Charles's geisha trade languished until he got his dosage increased and climbed back out of the emotional abyss.

In the middle of July, like a bolt from the blue, I got a call from Chi asking to come see me again. I was elated to take him in my arms. After dinner, as we lay in my jungle like before, tangled in limbs and flowers, he cried that he couldn't forget me, even in his wife's embrace—that he had to love me once more time. Unspeakably grateful for his love, I managed only a whispered goodbye and prayed for another chance someday to let him go again.

Another bolt from the blue came at the end of the month when house-obsessed neighbor Eric showed up for dinner requesting an audience in my jungle boudoir, which I was pleased to grant. An enthusiastic sodomite, Eric explained his former reluctance to engage my hospitality as fear of my wiles. But Bill had said I wouldn't ensnare him, just fuck him righteously. I sincerely appreciated the glowing review. Eric then offered me some mahogany twin beds that had been left in his house. There being only one headboard and two footboards, he wanted to get rid of the "junk." When I went to see his junk, there was no way I could refuse the gift. I could use the elegant woodwork to add a whole new dimension to my sleeping alcove.



My New Boudoir (under construction)

That's what happens with sentimental pack-rats.) In short shrift, we rented my old room to a sweet blond apprentice geisha named Russ.

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Big Lou soon gave Russ a screen test—to high marks—and Little Lou followed up with an amusing exercise in improv. Also, I soon inaugurated my new bed in a Saturday afternoon delight with next-door neighbor Ed, lovingly referred by his partner Mike. Shy but quite capable, Ed was delighted with our intimacy and confided afterwards worries that Mike was getting bored with his submissive affections. Recalling my delightful night with his Mike, I advised Ed to try a little dominance, even jokingly, and to disagree gently on domestic matters or pinch Mike's cute butt occasionally. Inspired to aggression, Ed said he'd jump his man that very night.

In favor of translating Joan, early on I'd foregone the grueling work of a vegetable garden and further avoided the swelter of early August by lying about my breezy jungle suite with the maudlin romantic scenes of the King and his mistress Agnes. It was rather a relief to set that aside for another office trip to Santa Fe. We were running a whole week of workshops at lovely St. John's College again, another course on fundraising (now being called "development") and another on marketing (the new euphemism for advertising).

I repressed my visceral revulsion for both subjects and simply facilitated the logistics of lodging, meals, and participants' attending opera performances. This Santa Fe Opera season included the US premiere of "The Italian Straw Hat," which left me cold, and a rare work called "Fedora," rarely performed for very good reasons. After that last screeching "Salome," I was pleased that John wasn't doing any Strauss this year, and this "Falstaff," its bawdiness fondly recalling Bob's bulky embrace, was much more grandly staged than Baltimore's.

Relaxing in my dorm room, I left the other two operas for the following week and read in Patricia Nell Warren's "The Front Runner." (I seriously wondered why so many gay novels were written by women.) Harlan Brown's story was interesting for reflecting my life, the academic atmosphere and previous marriage, but my "hustler" phase was prior and in the French Quarter. In Michigan and Wisconsin during a different sort of marriage, I'd tried awkwardly to write about my explosive first coming out, and this book renewed my resolve someday to do so.* Its denouement was disappointingly formulaic, surprisingly innovative, and appropriately upbeat.

My free mid-mornings and mid-afternoons were times to climb Monte Sol and admire the mystic mountains and enchanting plains all around. Sometimes I'd spread a towel on the summit and strip to sunbathe, read, or try without appreciable success to draw the surreal views with colored pencils. Sometimes I'd hike up and down the adjoining mountains, enjoying the bonsai trees and fascinating layers of different stone. Monte Luna was the closest across a broad, high

* I published my novel "Divine Debauch" in 2004 and during the pandemic a mercilessly revised edition in 2021.

saddle to the east, and beyond it the Sangre de Cristo mountains climbed higher. A hike to the one northeast took me down across a lower saddle from Luna where a few ponderosas grew.

Stopping among them, I stripped and did my silent faerie dance, cavorting and prancing like I'd done so often in Seattle. Mid-prance I stopped at the sight of a Noh face peering around a piñon branch. Long hair tangled with feathers, bearded face and body smeared with black and red, in a pointless loincloth, he reached out toward me and asked, "You smoke?" I reached for my pack, happy to share a Pall Mall with the wild man, but he meant grass. Just down the slope at his tarp tent, I gave him a joint which he tore open, stuffing the smoke with much ceremony into a long-tubed, befeathered pipe of reddish stone.

His nouveau-Indian wardrobe and makeup amused me, and his rituals with the "sacred" pipe convinced me that he was ripped to the teats on some psychedelic besides pot. His spiritual name was Canyon Wind—because, he boasted, he was a rider on the wind. From my experience, I sagely said that wasn't a good move and advised him to find another metaphor and mode of life. Fuck riding the wind, he should go wherever he wanted to go. Asked my name, I abused his tenuous mental state and called myself Luna, the faerie of Moon mountain.

Naked as I came, I danced away back up the slope to my clothes, leaving Canyon Wind stoned speechless by my epiphany. My colleagues thought the tale of Canyon Wind hysterical and suggested I go back the next day to get my face and body painted too. I was disappointed to find him gone, no sign left of his transient camp but the torn paper of my joint, like a farewell note. I did another Luna dance, hoping he wasn't gone with the wind again.

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After the workshops Ann and Bobbe moved downtown to the Hilton for the next few days of Board Meeting out at the Opera. John kindly lodged me at the Opera Ranch just down the slope from the Opera House. Our meeting was set in the open-air rehearsal hall where both afternoons the monsoon downpours were deafening. Those were my evenings for attending "Pelléas et Mélisande" and "Cosi Fan Tutte." Both the Debussy and Mozart were musically fascinating, but I didn't appreciate their stupid stories.

John gave me a very Santa Fe-style bedroom beside the pool down from his own, but the first night I didn't leave his bed for mine until late. The second evening after "P et M," I met a red-headed cellist who joined me for the night. I couldn't dredge up his name if you strangled me, but his ivory curves still shine in my memory, as does our early-morning naked swim and that moment when he was climbing out of the pool and I buried my face between his bare buttocks. He squealed on a high note and rushed me back into the bedroom for another fling. Late that night after "Cosi," we humped each other on the dark grass in front of the rehearsal hall. I kept thinking how Giovanni would heartily approve of my shamelessness.

The third day, I rode with Bobbe and a marketing woman from the Opera named Laura up to Taos by the high road to see the Pueblo's amazing adobe architecture. On our return as the sun was setting, we turned toward Los Alamos and soon came upon an ethereal view. To the West across the Pajarito Plateau of the Jemez mountains, in the golden twilight blue mesas drifted like islands in purple shadows of canyons, and the new moon hung a silver sliver above. Laura stopped the car for us to stand on the hilltop in absolute awe. Sadly, no one had a camera, but no photo could ever capture that timeless, other-worldly beauty.

My flight on Thursday back to my own other world went through Chicago with an-hour's layover at my next gate. Finishing "The Front Runner," I laid it in my lap, pointedly displaying the cover for the attractive fellow next to me. He looked over from his New York Times and gave me a knowing, responsive smile. Our layover passed in conversation about our travels, his

from Boise visiting parents, DC being home for both of us. Nic lived on Kalorama Road just off 18th Street, a healthy walking-distance neighbor. We sat together on the flight home with drinks and a lovely dinner, sharing details of our gay lives and took a cab to his place.

Nic shared the house with three lesbians, who fortunately loved to cook, but he envied me the liberty of our all-male household. At their dinner, his Sapphic housemates were gracious to his airport pickup, and we scurried off to his room to address our intimate aspirations. I was gratefully impressed by his fine physique, sculpted religiously at a gym. We took another cab to the Four Bells where the whole bunch at Supper Club was just finishing up a dirty-joke night over dessert. They greeted Nic warmly, and obviously back in fine fettle, Charles toasted to my gorgeous discovery in gruesome O'Hare. After the house tour, with no time to linger in my new jungle, I drove Nic home with an invitation to dinner on Saturday.

Home again at last for real, I found Little Lou waiting excitedly to learn all about Nic, which he did in short glowing terms. While tending my plants, my acolyte had made use several times of my book-box bed. Not being of age yet to drink in bars (only sneak in briefly to dance), he cruised the woods in Rock Creek by P Street called the Black Forest. (I'd been too sheltered in my geisha jungle to have heard of it.) Nic spent Saturday night with me, a cuddly hunk of beefcake, and on Sunday Little Lou went with us to the beach at Rehoboth for an afternoon of eye-candy. Back later that evening, I dropped the two of them off at Nic's.

At work on Tuesday, Barbara called to say she'd had her baby on Monday the 29th—a boy! I was proud and thrilled (though not by his name, just plain John), to be a stepfather, albeit *ex post facto*. I'd always wanted a son, and stepson John would be just as good as a genetic one.

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Devoted to Joan, my homelife in September was meanwhile brightened by neighborly visits, including Joe on the sly from Jimmy, and an opera-loving guy Russ invited specifically to meet me. I plowed through Act II's scenes of despairing King and general Dunois, Archbishop's tale of Joan appearing to the French troops... Suffice it to say, I was obsessed with my art.

Inspired, I applied for a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to translate Rimsky-Korsakov operas, application declined. As well, having met him at a meeting, I wrote to Livingston Biddle, just then being appointed new Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, to offer my professional services—only to be referred to Civil Service procedures—which made me appreciate my OPERA America position all the more. My third inspiration was to get my bushy hair cut off to a chic, short fluff well off my forehead, making me look very much the respectable urban professional.

When I walked back down 14th, a friendly, abundant black hooker named Maxine mashed me up against the building joking how hot I looked—for a queen. To amuse the ladies observing us, I curtsied, admitting that I was but a princess. At home, Russ remarked on the scar on my forehead, and Tom marveled that it was right in my third eye. I'd been wearing my hair over it ever since a teenager, forgetting all about it. (At thirteen I'd gotten hit with an oyster shell—don't ask!) Never having seen it either, at dinner Charles was startled, saying it looked like the biblical mark of Cain. The dire sound of that alarmed me, but he explained that it was God's mark promising divine protection from premature death. That I could deal with.

By the end of the month, I'd well anglicized Joan's fetching tale of her divine calling to save France, her recounting the King's secret prayers, and the frenzy as France rises to fight the English invaders. That Thursday, another 29th, was when dear Big Lou came to dinner (with a truly filthy joke), and while washing dishes with me, mentioned that next Saturday everybody was going to Marietta, Pennsylvania—to see historic houses being considered for the National

Register. Immersed in Joan recently, I'd usually been but a brief, reclusive diner, sneaking away early and missing much community knowledge and activity. That being the case, Lou now seriously requested I join their excursion, ominously remarking that the guys were getting worried about Charles and wanted my opinion. He would say no more...

Invited in such sinister terms, I joined the expedition. After all, I hadn't had much real conversation with Charles—nor paid much attention to him presiding at dinners—for two or three weeks. As far as I could tell, on his new dosage, he'd seemed back to his former ebullience, though I again was cynically disturbed to hear him call something “sacred,” shades of poor Canyon Wind. However, I could handle my friend thinking of stuff as holy. We all had to seek our sanctity and sanity somewhere, and if you found it in consecrated objects, why not?

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Our Four Bells crowd left quite early in two vehicles, eight of us belles in Buster van Braun and five fellow-travelers in Ruben's green Cadillac. While Charles, Lewis, and Rob traded off driving, six of us lounged on cushions in Buster's windowless back end, chattering and camping as gay guys were wont to do. The straight man out, newly single Lewis was cool about it, not batting an eye at Little Lou and Jimmy smooching in a corner. His happy news was that Carolyn had showed up yesterday and taken giant Isadora away! No more dog-walking!

I really enjoyed catching up on everybody's rumors and reports, especially the several romances of our new geisha Russ. Charles seemed his normal self, praising his recent gentlemen. Harley went the way of all bikers, but a new acquaintance named Brian had come to dinner three times in the past two weeks. Myself,—after Little Lou absconded with hunky Nic—I'd given no thought to male companionship, rapt with my art. Big Lou had just met a fellow named Marvin in the Lambda Rising bookstore, who spent last night on Q Street—while Little Lou was over at Jimmy's on P, Joe away. The fluidity of our gay community was a thing of beauty.



An Example of a Second-Empire House

advised that it didn't work that way. Big Lou told him he needed to find a husband first.

Our gang of 12 gay men and one straight lunched at Marietta's Railroad House Hotel at Front and Perry Streets, a Victorian brick three-story (with garret) standard station house with most of its ornamentation on the porches. We pulled a bunch of four-tops together into a banquet table and tried to behave politely in public. According to the menu—which in my anal-retentive way I still have—we started with cucumber bisque and chose steak au poivre or steak bearnaise. Charles entertained us with personal anecdotes, many of which most of us already knew from

Another thing of beauty was the first house on our tour, a second-empire confection out past the edge of town, nestled in trees turning autumn and rolling green meadows. Even bigger than Old One-and-Two, the grand mansion was in mint condition. (In this photo example the house should be white.) Giving our crowd the tour, the owners rattled off Lancaster County historical details which I'm sure Charles knew already and sounded like good credentials for the National Register.

The proud owners ate up Charles's raves over their restoration work, while we gay rabble in the peanut gallery gawked at all the elegance. Little Lou remarked that if he had even a tiny second-empire house, life would be perfect, and I sadly

dinners at the Four Bells, all of which he now made more elaborate with sometimes different dramatic details. I wondered how many were really true, but still it made for good theater.

After lunch we strolled along the little town's main street admiring the relatively small Victorian houses and commercial buildings, most beautifully ornamented and many under



An Example of a Victorian Country Villa.

restoration, and then went to the other place applying to the National Register, a vaguely Tuscan or Italianate manor like that in this drawing. The huge house had been built by some railroad or oil baron and was still in fair, if rough shape with impressive tile roofs. It being currently up for sale, we were shown around by the realtor, who repeated the historical background from the application, focusing on Charles as the official honcho.

We in the peanut gallery again gawked at the spacious rooms and stunning staircase and listened with interest to Charles's excited ideas. He proposed a big partnership of us guys to buy the place and turn it into a gay restaurant and hotel. Being investor types, Ruben, Rob, Ed and Mike were all for it. Charles said I could be the manager and live in the tower room—writing and doing my art. I suggested we could call it “The Baron's Manor—for dining and lodging in a baronial manner.” It was a fascinating thought, but I seriously doubted we could ever swing such a visionary plan.

On the way home, most of us were worn out by the house tours and relaxed on cushions, but Charles was still exuberant, recounting historical and folk tales of rural Pennsylvania, some of which sounded to me suspiciously like weird parables. At any rate, he was in rare form as a raconteur for many miles, and then he switched to commenting on the qualities of humane beings and the shortcomings of the inhumane. His remarks on the familiar topic had rhetorical emphases like in a sermon, I noted with rising concern, and again he mentioned sacred things.

We got back to Georgetown in early evening and stopped at a fancy place on M Street near the river, once more pulling tables together for our sizable dinner party. Standing to address the crowd, Charles toasted our devoted fellowship and thanked us “disciples” for believing in him, which I thought a passing strange thing to say. He drank again, declaring that he would happily give his life blood for us and for gay freedom. His tone and demeanor struck me as alarmingly messianic. In consternation, I decided I wasn't hungry and begged off to walk home.

On the straight shot home down M Street, I thought about the long day's intense exposure to Charles and our gang's worries about him. In fact, I also worried now. With each step I got ever more convinced that my mind-mate had some screws loose—slipped a few gears—lost a lot of marbles. Back at the Four Bells, I called Charles's doctor, apologizing for the late Saturday night emergency call, and advised him that my old friend was “acting terribly strange,” in my amateur psychiatric opinion suffering delusions of grandeur and/or divinity. He instructed me to put Charles to bed as soon as possible and call him back first thing in the morning.

When they brought our Charles home later, all well-oiled with drinks, he was at least as “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” as before, but the others were all wild-eyed and frowzled with worry. I greeted Charles with a kiss on the cheek and told him his doctor said to go straight to bed. His face went blank, and without a word to anyone, he marched mechanically up the stairs. Big Lou said Charles had called them his “apostles” and predicted someone would betray him. So he'd written me into his insane script as Judas, the sad role I'd just played, kiss and all.

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