

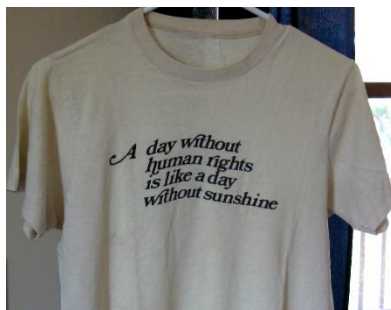
CHAPTER 19: THE JUNGLE QUEEN

My soldier-lover's early departure left me forlornly awake the rest of the night, scarcely a good state for going to work on Monday, but the final logistics for next week's Board meeting at the DC Hyatt Regency effectively kept me awake. The crowd at home in the evening helped me back into the geisha groove with tales of their weekend dalliances and congratulated me on Chi's surprise visit. Only just meeting him briefly the evening before, Russ thought my mysterious Oriental gentleman extremely hot. In a fairly cognizant mood, Charles applauded my heroic Chi soon becoming a father and sympathized with La Mariposita's operatic finale. I recalled my own history as a parent and remarked that marriage and fatherhood didn't necessarily mean the end of the world for eternal lovers.

There was the routine, two-day meeting (with an opera at Wolf Trap that I managed to diplomatically avoid), and I largely ignored the house-work drudgery piled up in the months since finishing off Joan of Arc. A lovely check from Canada soothed my financial woes a bit, while also a bit troubling for being written in their dollars, which reduced my pay accordingly. With fewer Supper Club evenings at home or abroad, and with correspondingly far fewer gentlemen callers, I went out many evenings instead to the local gay bars, reverting to my carousing self of five years before and unfortunately, the immature emotions my early thirties. The delirious dancing with whomever was great fun at the local hot spots I'd not exactly frequented before but I soon tired of watching the crowds of handsome gay young gentlemen posing seductively, cruising each other brazenly, and starting intimate conversations.

My polite approaches to those who'd meet my modest but roving eye were generally gently dismissed, sometimes with an affectionate gesture or a tantalizing dance. Then the guy would bound off elsewhere. One night at a table by the window in the Chesapeake I recognized an earlier repeat La Mariposita guest name of Gibson. He didn't bother to introduce his comrade, a cute, slight youth with a wild mane of curls who crouched un-seductively in his chair and glowered awkwardly up at me. I recognized the romantic intent in the kid's anguished eye but had no energy that night to engage with adolescent confusion.

Feeling up to joining us some evenings, Charles twice enlisted promising bed-fellows, but I didn't keep count for Russ or Tom. Whatever, my geisha score was worse. Standing at a bar like so often in New Orleans, I remarked sadly to dear Charles that my attractive persona wasn't attracting much public attention anymore, and he sighed philosophically, "We're getting old, darlin'." Now in my 37th year, I understood I was no longer a spring chicken. He laconically pulled me out of the mindless patterns of that old chicken and back into feeling mature, a newly-fledged, wiser, eminently virtuous, and estimable geisha-bird. I asked my friend if aging was any part of his depression. He confided that he'd been skipping his medication because it made him feel so icky. That was a concern, but Charles seemed level and rational enough to me.



1978 DC Gay Pride Shirt

The second weekend in June was Gay Pride time. Always a backer of gay liberation, Charles got us all T-shirts with "A day without human rights is like a day without sunshine" on the front. Mine was a small, so it showed off my yogic torso and nice chest. I figured it should have said, "...like a day without oxygen"—more factual. Bearing my merely poetic message, I ran into the glowering youth in Dupont Circle, his eyes now beseeching. His name, another Ken, gave me a start and pause about third-time charms. Both my dearest Kens were already charms. A third win was unlikely, but I gave him a shot.

This Ken's thatch of brown curls was provocative, his lithe body like a teenager—with equipment notably equine! Way beyond my equestrian talents! But fortunately, I'd been trained early to lodge gargantuan gentlemen in the mezzanine, so to speak. This Ken was particularly adamant and athletic about me fucking him upstairs, also so to speak. In between tender battles, he told me his friend Gibson had fondly called me "the jungle queen." I loved the heroic twist on my geisha reputation! In another between, Ken confessed that he'd always wanted to be a girl. To say something to that shocker, I joked that he'd have an easier time of it being a horse.

Three nights in a row after his work in a theater company, with just two more amorous jousts, Ken carried on about feeling like a girl in a boy's body. He had a horror of "drag" but still wanted to wear woman's clothes. I figured respectable transvestitism could be accomplished if one had a good sense of appropriate style, used tasteful makeup, and had little feet like his. In fact, in spite of his iconic phallus, this Ken's slim body and narrow face with big eyes and small chin definitely had a female look. Like Audrey Hepburn? Remembering Chryses at the Blue Angel, I urged Ken to forget about trying for real boobies—just stuff a bra.

For his debut at our next Saturday dinner, Ken came gliding down the staircase from my jungle looking like a brunette Marilyn with Shirley Temple curls in a revealing dinner gown. A good part of his show was thanks to theater colleagues for fitting him with a full bustier and a slip with child-bearing hips sewn in. I toasted the newly-fledged woman, who knew not her name, and impulsively dubbed her Diana, for the huntress-goddess. After dinner Charles invited Diana to come live in our two-front bedroom, making our household again five belles. Princess Diana turned out to be a gourmet cook and treated me tenderly as the caring mother I was.

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The weekend after Gay Pride was also a big deal for me. It was the ground-breaking ceremony for restoration of the Iowa Apartments, the building I'd personally saved from the wrecking ball. The whole neighborhood, early pioneers and late-coming carpet-baggers alike, attended, and I was grateful for my unprogrammed notoriety. The restoration schematics were thrilling, to result without doubt in apartments I'd never be able to afford. I used the special occasion to go see the Ann and Robert's progress on their house and mount a search-and-destroy operation on weeds in my neglected, but flourishing garden.

To validate her geisha credentials, Diana entertained the rest of our two housemates and neighbors: Lou (usually scared of horses), and Jimmy (who wasn't). She immediately started cross-dressing stylishly for her advertising job in the theater company and was accepted with only familiar amusement. At home Diana floated around in feminine house-dresses and robes. Lewis had her check out the stuff Carolyn abandoned, which fitted our new girl to a T—stunning in the power dresses and lacey party duds. Even the same size shoes!

Gallantly, we'd take Diana out to perambulate the Circle, a beautiful girl aglow among admiring men. Observing her sometimes overdone gestures and campy tones of an already alto voice, I caught her alone with advice on appropriate girlish deportment and posture: Whatever pose, gesture, or word she used to portray an attractive woman I suggested be dialed back to about a two on the drama scale. Let them merely intimate femininity, not imitate a femme fatale.

Some evenings we escorted Diana to the theater or concerts where she drew hungry eyes of straight men and appreciative smiles from gays. We gave her tips about flirting a bit less flagrantly—with more dignity and mystery. She started going out on her own as a girl to shop or sight-see but still masqueraded as a boy in the bars. Her newly confident androgyny met with frequent success. Presiding majestically in a blue Victorian gown at a Club dinner of her own personal cuisine (for 18!), Diana made me a terrifically proud patron of gender liberation.

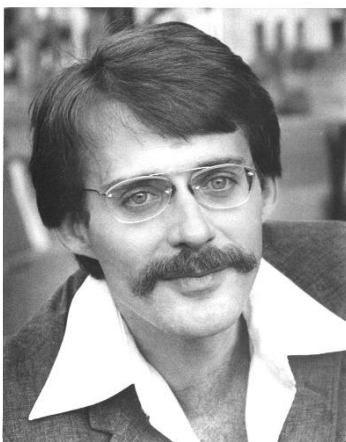
At that dinner, we discussed a possible genetic basis of being gay, and I disclosed some startling facts I'd discovered as a spy doing (classified) research in Russian medical journals. Those doctors had found that while most humans beings had binary combinations of the X and Y sex chromosomes, many had three or even several of the things. Many others had two Xs and a Y, more with two Ys and an X, and some even with multiples of three or more. My theory was an X·Y+X made a gay man, and X·X+Y made a lesbian. I couldn't figure out what the Y·Y combos might beget, but the research had found that multiple Y chromosomes made for violent behaviors, including homicidal. It also found that these trio combos often occurred with overt or covert hermaphroditic morphologies. So some men might be covert females or women covert males, those organs hidden inside their body... Our diners thought it as viable a theory as any.

Speaking of discovering startling facts, of an evening around the end of June I had no company, busy work, or book and bethought myself of the salvaged library under my bed. From the first box I opened I pulled out a huge leather-bound tome intriguingly entitled "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley." It fell open at a stunning survey map of a place in Ohio called Fort Hill, an incredible embanked enclosure on a "mesa" overlooking Paint Creek.

The venerable book from 1843, the first volume of the Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, was full of even more stunning surveys of huge embanked earthworks in elegant geometric shapes, effigies of animals, and even pyramids. In all my years of school and college I'd never heard syllable one about such "Indian mounds" and quickly lost myself in reading every word of Mr. E. G. Squier's mind-boggling work. Soon the esoteric subject of Pre-Columbian mounds became an obsession for me and inspired spirited rants over dinners.

Finishing the Squier, I dug into the boxes and found some volumes from the American Bureau of Ethnology by Cyrus Thomas and some other mound explorations at sites across the southeastern US—a whole world of hidden history. Inspired, I went exploring back home in the Library of Congress and found that Indian mounds had been a huge public fascination in the 19th century, but in those 80s and 90s the subject was politically interdicted because of the Indian Wars. The great John Wesley Powell did his damndest to quash mound-talk and deny any connection between current Native tribes and the mysterious mound-builders.

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The Jungle Queen

I fixated on mounds for the next month or so in the midst of social and professional activities. Around the end of June I got Lewis to do a photo-shoot of modest me for Toronto's "Joan of Arc" publicity. On a bright section of dusty non-sidewalk along the Avenue, he snapped me dozens of times, like a true paparazzo, and the pick of the litter was tolerable, given the aging model. Diana called it a great head-shot of the infamous Jungle Queen.

For the week of the Fourth, Papa and Nana took a beach house in Lewes, Delaware for the family. I rode with Gene, Martha, devilish Bob and angelic Bea to the shore where the Florida contingent was already installed. Several days playing in the sunny sand with my girls and cousins (and too many dogs) passed blissfully with no thought of mounds or men but a great suntan. Nana and her girls fed all of us beach-bums royally.

At the beach house I had no inkling of the tensions running under the family surface until after the last night's supper when, children off playing in the yard, Martha and Gene announced they were separating. Parents and siblings were dumbstruck, and I as well at the structure of the

family edifice shaking. Papa recovered and remarked, not unsympathetically, that it was their decision. I said I hoped their parting would stay as loving as Barbara's and mine was, their steps always in rhyme. "That's the plan," Martha said, and they kissed lightly. Gene looked peaceful, and I could tell he caught my Leonard Cohen thing.

Scarcely back from the beach, I had to fly to Toronto for a Joan wrap-up meeting and an overnight in the Royal York Hotel. General Director Lotfi and Musical Director Mario met me to discuss final concerns. The French-speaking Mario was still disturbed by the translation, being largely unable to deal with Shakespearean English (which Lotfi had specifically asked me to use) and hating the rhymes (the directorial request being to follow Tchaikovsky's poetics). Mario's early comments in December were the main reason I'd spent the last January and February doing revisions, trying to please both sides. After our meeting, he remained unsatisfied, and I figured he'd do whatever he would. I was done with the deal.

Feeling free, I got back to DC to enjoy a couple weeks of chores and pleasures. Evenings and weekends, besides tending my jungle, I dug a trench in the back yard for a wall and hoed my garden behind the Iowa, my common hoe producing enough squash for the whole neighborhood. Interspersed with regular, if occasional, yoga and ecstatic running in Rock Creek Park (no more Ecuadorans unfortunately), the work in the dirt whipped me into alluringly svelte shape for the annual office trip to Santa Fe in early August. My July had been so full of life at the beach, in Toronto, and dirt that I still gave no thought to mounds or men. Santa Fe promised a generous supply of the latter item, and I'd get back to those fascinating Indian mounds on my return.

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This trip to Santa Fe was only for five days, long enough for board members to attend all five operas of the season. John didn't offer me lodging at the ranch this time, though he again urged me to come to work for him. I again replied that I wished to remain the famous geisha, the Jungle Queen, in my glamorous house and DC world. Less glamorously (and missing red-headed cellists), I stayed at the good old Hilton downtown. The first opera was new for me, Puccini's "Tosca," and I suffered for Floria, wondering if I'd ever want to escape an amorous Scarpia enough to jump off a castle wall. Not likely. I'd just fuck him over good and kick him out.

Our meeting did its pro forma business and then an afternoon session to discuss funding prospects at the Arts Endowment now that the National Council had voted to create a new Opera-Musical Theater Program, largely thanks to pressure from the illustrious Broadway producer Hal Prince. To receive OPERA America's input, the Assistant Director of the NEA Music Program sat in on that session. Professional Jim was about my age in nice shape, rather taller than I, with pleasant features, plain brown hair, and a bright, humorous attitude.

Jim was lodging at the fancy Inn at Loretto on Old Santa Fe Trail, where I found myself early that second evening preparing for a dinner together and opera after, Rossini's "Count Ory." Leaving his room, he pulled me into a kiss, not quite voracious but convincing, and I agreed to return after the show. As I hoped, it was delightful Rossini music with his usual idiotic comedy. Afterwards, Jim and I stopped by the Senate Lounge for a drink, and accepting his lame excuse for not dancing with me, I found an enthusiastic partner for the Bee Gees' great "Stayin' Alive." Back in his plush room after the happy evening together, we were both in expansive moods and filled his king-size bed with affectionate Olympic events.

While I sat in meeting, my endearing Baron Scarpia stayed the next day to dine and catch "Eugene Onegin" with me. I snobbishly told Jim the SFO production didn't compare with the Bolshoi's—boasting about working it at least ten times—but tonight's music was as lovely Tchaikovsky as any. He was especially impressed by my operatic chops when I mentioned my

upcoming “Joan of Arc.” Jim told me about his administrative background in an important music school in Pennsylvania, mentioning family connections with Mr. Biddle... I well understood how he’d landed in such a big DC position but didn’t remark. Those personal details didn’t affect our second night in his Olympian bed. Parting in the morning, Jim revealed that he was living with a long-time lover, and I appreciated the freedom that gave us to be together without designs or demands. Like with my Panamaniac Giovanni, I was content to be a mere mistress.

Alone at the Hilton after my meeting and Jim, I skipped the last two operas. No offense intended to friend John, but I couldn’t bear another shriek-fest “Salome.” Though a SFO world premiere, Oliver’s recently revised “Duchess of Malfi” didn’t appeal to me either, probably precisely for being “recent.” I had a hard time getting into “modern” music—unless it was good disco. The nights I hung out at the Senate Lounge dancing to good disco but both times went back to the Hilton peacefully alone. Those two glorious New Mexico sunny days I spent running and roaming the picturesque streets of Santa Fe and getting a darker tan.

The Victorian prude in me was offended by the lack of corners and ornaments in the amorphous adobe architecture. The low, brown houses seemed miniatures, like bonsais, in scale with those dwarf conifers on the mountains. Breathing hard at that 7,000-ft. altitude, I mingled gentle jogging with casual ambling along the roads out of the village, up mountain trails to breathtaking views—and in strict local tradition, carried a big canteen. Dinners were at New Mexican places along Guadalupe Street, everything smothered in red or green chile sauce, and I preferred the green. As sunny, architecturally unique, scenically seductive, culturally rich, and physically invigorating as Santa Fe was, I still preferred DC for those very same reasons.

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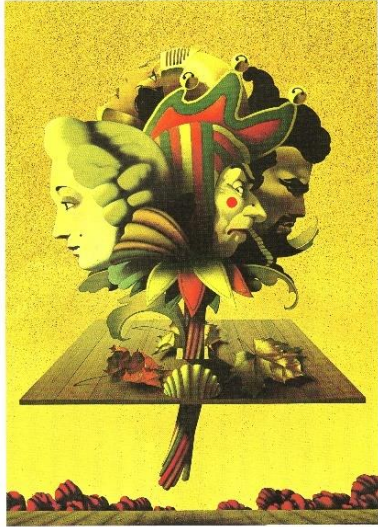
I preferred DC with its sweaty sun in the garden, my beautiful house at Logan Circle, and running around our nation’s beautiful capitol. However, I got home to find the Four Bells fires burning low. Charles was reluctantly taking his pills again and had correspondingly low mental energy. Russ, Tom, and Diana kept their own spirits up, but with the irregular Supper Clubs they often straggled off separately with or without dates for dinners out, events, and carousing in the bars. One night out Tom met a toothsome, dark-eyed youth named Jeff who soon moved into three-front with him. At work Ann told us she was resigning at the end of the year, and I pondered what that might portend for my own career. Like Scarlett O’Hara, I decided to worry about that later. Meanwhile I also found myself straggling off for evening dates with Jim, who met the housemates at a Club dinner I cooked and was troubled by Charles’s lethargy.

He managed to spend several nights in the jungle with me over the couple weeks before I was to leave for Toronto and Joan. I was amused that he’d told his lover all about me, and I sent the fellow my best regards. Jim asked if I ever wanted a partner-lover, and I said it was usually nice to have a man around the house—for when you’re in the mood or to get you into the mood. Or to get some work done... He was appropriately fascinated by my esoteric research into Indian Mounds and listened nicely to me rant about sites I’d read about at the Library. Jim also had never heard of the mounds before and marveled over the surveys in my big books.

Incidentally, I still have several handwritten pages (on King Edward Hotel stationery), a spotty diary of my first ten days in Toronto—which I’ll merely quote from. On Sunday evening, August 27, I opened with the emotional comment “All morning and on the bumpy flight to Toronto, I found myself heaving deep sighs, sighs of relief that the time had finally come.” After that, my informal prose is all going here and there for meetings and rehearsals, subway rides to the CANOP place, joyfully running about the vaguely scenic city, and searching for a decent dinner on Yonge Street. I dutifully scoped out the young crowds in the gay bars, noting, “...all

those kids with the look of a few years ago at home. Very long hair, beards galore.” Later, I recorded a work-break “...out back on the campus of UT. The day has turned perfect, breeze, gorgeous trees, the idyllic silence of school out of session, black squirrels gamboling.”

After a cheap dinner, “I strolled down to the waterfront to sit on the dock and watch the sunset, lovely, orangey-pink, and crazy gulls.” My memory of that Toronto evening is enlivened by the detail of those gulls. Characteristically, I went from that to critiquing the modern architecture of the new hotels.



1978 CANOP Poster Art

A good deal of work went into preparing for the two lectures I was to give for the Opera Guild. They’d nicely handled my lodging arrangements and treated me like a famous celebrity, having me as guest at lunches and a reception. I gather the Guild, had the season poster made from an odd Daliesque painting. You have to look for it to find the pretty face of Joan in back of this (male) bouquet—Rigoletto, Don Giovanni, and Octavian from “Der Rosenkavalier.” She’s wearing her neat soldier hat. I got a thrill out of seeing Joan instead of just hearing her sing.

As well, I started going out with young folks from the production crew or the chorus. I only knew the cast singers from our brief coaching sessions, and the lack of companionship started getting to me. Consequently, I spent a good while on the phone consoling Jim, who was to come on Sunday for dress rehearsal. Such was my first week in Canada as a foreigner who vaguely felt the natives disliked him.

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Production work rolled right through weekends, and on a rehearsal break the next Sunday, I lunched with two nice chorus guys, yet another Ken and a Brian. Ken had me over that evening for dinner (and a little weed), and his roommate John, a hospital intern, lured me into his bed for a disturbingly cold fuck. I wondered if maybe it was the Canadian style. Breakfast in the morning was awkward, as I noted, because “...he had no idea of how to relate to someone after the fact.” The following Tuesday (when I had to move from the King Eddy to the Andore Hotel), Brian caught me on break asking for us to get together Wednesday evening, and “I responded favorably.” He was a full- and able-bodied young man.

Brian also didn’t let grass grow under his feet, popping up right after rehearsal and taking me for a drink in the downstairs Quest bar. He told me Ken and he were confused by me sleeping with John, and I told him I’d also found the encounter confusing. Dispensing with any and all confusion, he spent the night in my new hotel room. He was sincere but sometimes painfully restrained, perhaps another Canadian fashion of passion. We spent a few more sincere nights together during my stay, which grew progressively more restrained. I figured young Brian just didn’t know how to deal with not being in love, a talent one eventually must learn.

My illustrious status as opera translator required several press interviews in that week, most quite fun and easy. My first Guild lecture was on Thursday, apparently pleasing everyone, where I autographed many libretti. As the opera scenes pulled together, I noticed a fair number of lame edits in the language but didn’t really care anymore. They’d make it what they wanted, hopefully better. Mario didn’t make as many changes as he’d complained about, and those he did got to the singers rather late. I should note also that he shunned me, and Lofti counseled that the Musical Director just wasn’t a nice guy. I’d already reached that conclusion.

My Jim showed up in the afternoon of Sunday the 10th, and we caught an intimate hour in bed and some dinner before the dress rehearsal. I'd been to the O'Keefe Center already for staging rehearsals and was no longer taken by the prosaically modern building and performance hall, but Jim was impressed by the huge venue. In earlier rehearsals the principals hadn't given full-voice performances, and in this dress they sang all out with all the dramatic gestures and complicated blocking. I found the preview striking for several reasons.

The young woman singing Joan, Lyn Vernon, whom I'd noted before as rather tall and mature for the heroine, was a mezzo, so her strong voice was much lower than the soprano I'd been hearing in my head. Her stage presence seemed to me aggressively masculine, but maybe that was Lyn's take on the shepherd girl. (She sang well again on Wednesday's opening night, and I heard another mezzo, Carol Wyatt, slighter than Lynn and closer to my image of a Joan, sing somehow more girlishly and beautifully on Friday.) A bass I'd met at the OA San Diego meeting, Claude Corbeil, sang Joan's ferocious father fiercely, his deep voice booming with judgement, control, and condemnation. He scared even me who'd written his stupid lines...

Come Act II, I was frankly appalled by the embattled Charles VII (the Dauphin), sung by a Quebecoise guy named Pierre, painfully stretched by English, particularly the Shakespearean sort. His regional French accent disrupted rather than enhanced his regal role. Certainly an accent would be understandable for the French king, but Pierre was no Maurice Chevalier. Singing opposite the Dauphin as his lovely mistress Agnes Sorel, was a splendid soprano from Ukraine named Roxolana. She was almost as stretched linguistically speaking, but her lines were slower with lots of "ee"—a favorite Ukrainian vowel—on the high notes in her "ocean of love" aria. After telling me the role was very demanding, she made beautiful music.

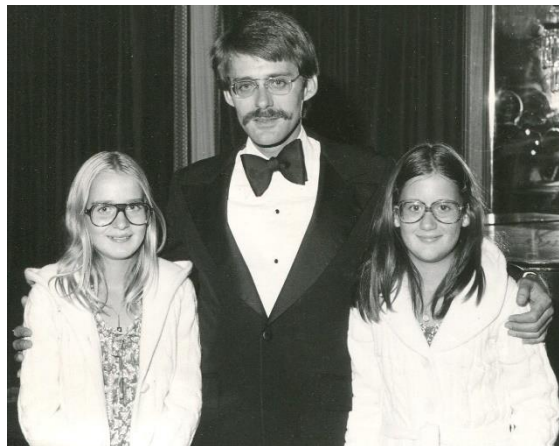
Joan's romantic interest, the Burgundian Knight Lionel, was sung by handsome baritone Brent Ellis, an up-and-coming celebrity whom Jim and I'd just met a month before in Santa Fe. His was the voice I'd always heard from Lionel, and he acted the romantic hero I'd envisioned. I pointed out to my Jim the handsome tenor named Stephen singing the role of Joan's peasant suitor Raymond so smoothly—on occasion a friendly but distant rehearsal-break companion—and beaming Brian in the chorus.

The shock came in Act IV's love duet, the one I'd disparaged poetically and worked my magic on Tchaikovsky's lame lines to make at least a Broadway-worthy piece. When Lyn and Brent started singing, my jaw dropped. They sang words I didn't know. Mario had rewritten the duet—in lyrics even lamer than the composer's—that would never make it onto Broadway. I thought "Fuck it!" The idiot could do whatever for all I cared. (I was later gratified that the opening night reviewer for the Toronto Sun picked the grotesque love duet to complain about, remarking meanwhile on the translation's "most lyrical English.")

They pulled off the stake scene nicely with great special effect flames, but seeing the piece in toto left me unsatisfied. The performances were generally acceptable and often pleasing, the staging atmospherically minimal, and the music lovely Tchaikovsky in spite of the un-nice man conducting it. But I was still troubled by the plot unjustly turning an innocent girl into a child of Satan and then harshly punishing her for being human. Jim agreed with my misgivings but thought that it was a masterpiece, nonetheless.

Before rushing back to DC, Jim stayed with me the next day to tour the limited sights of Toronto and spend that night in the Anndore. In the dark he called me a very special man, and I almost believed him. Jim regretted missing my opening, but by Tuesday I was busy with other guests arriving to attend my operatic premiere.

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Jake, Moi, and Aimée at Joan Lunch

After a modicum of sight-seeing, Chas and I took the girls to dinner and the opera, during which my old friend managed to sock away several drinks and stoke up an exuberant mood. The performance struck me as somewhat better than the dress rehearsal, except for his Highness. I'm sure the spectacle was almost overwhelmingly grand for my young ladies, and my LOC opera reference librarian friend was drunkenly laudatory. I still felt the same dramaturgical qualms, but said nothing. After putting the girls to bed, Chas and I lounged on my king bed and dished the various singers and awkward staging until he passed out.

My next guests were unexpected. Late Friday morning my sister Judy showed up from Rochester with her new boyfriend, a good-looking long-haired hippie-type named Rob, who was shy of my fame but warmly friendly. Judy and I hadn't seen each other since my race-by visit with Chas back in January 1973, and I was favorably struck by her now plump good spirits. Their companionship was most welcome at lunch, on another scenic walk, for another dinner in Chinatown, and at the performance with Ms. Wyatt singing a poignant Joan. When they left Saturday morning, I spent my last day in Toronto strolling idly and lying lewdly about in Queens Park watching Frisbee players—and wondering about the transience of art, its insignificance in the larger picture, and the same things about romance.

Curiously, I didn't consider what I had with Jim to be romance, just tender affection with no strings attached. I enjoyed having him around the house whenever he chose to be with me instead of his lover. Jim's frequent company was greatly appreciated because when I got home from Toronto, Charles was in an exceptionally elevated mood after dropping his meds again and two days later packed it off to Europe for a month—with no warning or itinerary.



Peaceful Meditation

I was alarmed, as was Jim for me, and called Charles's shrink again, hearing only useless regrets about patients who won't take their medicine. He asked me to keep him advised about what and how my friend was doing. I simply had to manage the Four Bells on my own and plug dutifully along on construction work. For peace of mind, I did my untutored yoga and went running in the beautiful fall evenings. Sometimes, reluctantly, Jim would jog along with me, but he wasn't terribly athletic except in bed. He'd often take advantage of my naked yoga postures to distract my peaceful meditations with bodily pleasures.

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Having Jim, Russ, Tom (with Jeff), and lovely Diana around (and Lorro chattering and squawking in the parlor), made Charles's absence less painful, but I worried about him off flying high around the capitols of Europe. He sent postcards from Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, etc., and his comments on sacred sites and such were troubling—like the meds left on his night table. To distract me, Jim took me on walks in the glowing, golden October and got me talking about my long, speckled gay history. With limited experience in carousing and promiscuity (as opposed to my almost 20 years of it), he found my salacious anecdotes fascinating.

Our Columbus Day stroll was my first spent with an actual lover in the conflagration of fall—without wistfulness or poetic overtones. I found a comfortable peace with my attentive gentleman, not the timeless peace of Chi, but a sweet gratitude for present blessings. Jim said I was the happiest and most beautiful man he'd ever met, and I gratefully believed him. A geisha likes to hear such compliments. When we got back to the Four Bells and walked into the parlor (fully intending to flop flagrantly on the blue sofa), my bliss was blown away to find Lorro just a lump of feathers lying dead on the floor under her cage. There being no sign of damage, Jim thought she'd probably had a heart attack.

Strictly speaking, the parrot had belonged to Charles, though I was Lorro's closest friend, feeding, watering, and entertaining her. I'd miss her laughing my laugh and singing the sirens. Pending Charles's wishes for his pet's "funeral orgies," I wrapped poor bedraggled Lorro up in plastic and laid her to rest in the freezer with the roasts. Getting home the next week, direct from Athens, Charles excited mood was saddened to see his parrot in the morgue, and he decided to think about appropriate obsequies. Two days later, he flew off to Mexico City for a fancy international meeting that weekend, and I had no chance to ask about his erratic pharmaceutical activity. When Charles got back this time, we had just two weeks to pull together our Fifth Annual (Less One) All Souls' Celebration for Saturday, November 4.

In my friend's absence, I'd decreed it The Funnies Follies, the comic-strewn invitation asking for outrageous costumes of comic characters. Charles happily dived into preparations, operating with all his former facility (which his shrink thought a good sign). I kick myself for not remembering how he—or most others of my inner circle—chose to costume for the follies. They were surely hysterical caricatures. Unforgettable, however, was the vision of Diana bopping theatrically down the staircase as a bumptious Betty Boop. She took the cake.

I dressed as the Frito Bandito, with pillows tied around my middle under one of Charles's lovely serapes, broad-brimmed sombrero, and billowing mustache. I'd lean against the wall in the hall in that clichéd pose of the Mexican guy snoring with hat over face and bulging belly. I loved lolling around drinking watered-down tequila, still a potent intoxicant, and feeling fat and lazy. Jim came as a bumbling Dagwood with that strange hairdo, and I met his understanding lover, another shorter and plainer Jim, as a Blondie with wavy wig and frilly dress. They played the comic crowd, my Jim at times bending down to kiss the fat Bandito through his mustache. When I'd bid goodnight to the Bumsteads, my repeat fellow Will from San Francisco, the singer, helped me upstairs and relieved me of my bellies. I didn't notice his costume—which fell to the floor a moment later to allow for further follies.

Monday after the party, Charles surrendered to his shrink's prescriptions and by evening was a taciturn bump on a log feeling terribly "icky." I suggested he back off slightly on the dosage to try and stay humane. My Jim popped by after work to announce that he'd been named Director of the new Opera-Musical Theater Program. We called his Jim to come join us in celebrating his new bigger wig at the Club dinner over at Mike and Ed's, and I postponed other festivities in my jungle until our scheduled Tuesday evening together.



The Parliament in Ottawa

Wednesday I flew to Ottawa for a performance of “Joan of Arc” at the National Arts Centre—to be televised by the CBC across Canada—for two nights enjoying more fame in a foreign land. Ottawa was a beautiful surprise. To this parochial American, the capitol of Canada felt like a city in Europe. The architecture stole my heart with castles and towers, and even my brownstone hotel looked historic. The National Arts Centre, however, was a mundanely modern building, but it at least had an enormous house with fabulous acoustics and comfy seats.

This performance of Joan was cast differently, though with Lyn again as the virile maid (in spite of scathing Toronto reviews), the same garbled King, and his generous Agnes. I missed Claude and Brent as Father and Lionel, but their replacements were worthy. I imagined people all over Canada watching raptly, French-speakers struggling to understand the odd English and English-speakers trying to grasp the King’s awful French accent. Afterwards, I again felt terribly unfulfilled. I’d given it my best shot, but Tchaikovsky’s libretto was mortally flawed.



Four Bells on House Tour

My foreign fame for the flop was easily forgotten back home at the Four Bells, where I found dear Charles valiantly striving to get a grip on life. He was managing his dosages as I’d suggested and staying humane enough. We only had a couple weeks left to prepare the Four Bells to appear on the Logan Circle House Tour titled “A Victorian Christmas,” No. 2 on the route. Charles and the geisha crew garlanded the place to the teeth and installed a tree glowing up the stairwell. In this photo of our newly crowned house you can see Mike and Ed’s ladder next door at 1318 and the trees the city put in that fall, but not the missing sidewalk. Besides a great Victorian holiday atmosphere, our famous gay household offered ample liquid hospitality and proudly gave tours of the grand premises. Jim gave his Jim the tour, including my intimate jungle, and revealed my new geisha epithet, the Jungle Queen.

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Apparently the OPERA America world also thought Tchaikovsky’s attempt at French Grand Opera was a flop with a misbegotten libretto. That left the poor old opus lying on my bookshelf for the next forty years. As explained in Chapter 17, in re-translating Joan for the New Orleans Opera to perform in 2020, I took liberties in editing the language and story-line. The composer’s concept for this opera was the tragedy of a divine heroine destroyed by her humanity (“earthly love”) and then punished for her sin gruesomely at the stake. He laid on Joan’s saintly soul his own guilt for being gay and the Orthodox and societal definition of sex as grievous sin.

However, in Act II he has the Chorus of Minstrels sing “Life only offers us one treasure, one perfect blossom sent from heav’n...” and “O, wondrous talisman! Your secret name is love!” I agree that love is one of the best gifts we ever get from a God, and that’s what should have been the drama’s principal theme. But Tchaikovsky betrayed it by making love a deadly sin, wallowing in sexual guilt, and making Joan believe her soul was no longer pure and holy.

Thus the saintly wench “deserved” strict punishment, quickly administered, a cruel, depressing, and philosophically repugnant plot by most standards. The anguished composer hijacked the truly operatic story of Joan as the divinely inspired savior of France who was

tragically captured by the English and burned at the stake. He went on to pervert holy Joan's apotheosis into divine retribution, a distressingly disagreeable plot twist.

In my new translation, Joan is a powerful shepherd maid who uses prevailing religious mythology to get divine permission and command to do what she wants. She's a self-realized woman who controls her own fate, dictating God's will. To become the savior of her country, she summons up angels who order her to take up sword against the English. When in Act IV she rejects superstitious guilt and accepts Lionel's love as God's reward for accomplishing her heroic feat, Joan finally feels the true rapture of earthly love—and receiving that boon, she now aspires to the supreme blessing of divine love. Alert to her new ambition, the angels pop up again and call her to glory—to win the glorious crown of virgin martyr, to become handmaid to the Blessed Virgin, and to enjoy God's divine embrace. It was offer she couldn't refuse, though the ticket to bliss was the pyre.



Hilary Ginther as Joan in New Orleans

Now that's a real operatic plot. The New Orleans Opera production, directed and conducted by Robert Lyall at the Mahalia Jackson Center, realized that grand plot beautifully, everything I imagined the opera being. As Joan, he cast a tiny, angelic girl named Hilary Ginther, a fabulous young mezzo then "taking the opera world by storm," and she certainly took over the stage as the blessed maid. Her powerful new role dominated it, and my new language flowed melodiously. I thought all the other singers were super, the staging beautiful, and the orchestra pure rhapsodic Tchaikovsky.

I hope I redeemed the composer's work by creating the operatic masterpiece he could've written, but for his many spiritual afflictions. I'm grateful I myself don't suffer from that destructive psychology—being a liberated gay man, a former geisha known as the Jungle Queen.

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