

CHAPTER 22: COMING UP ON A CUSP

After that touching farewell with Chi, I had no time to wallow in desolation. I simply slogged through the slough focusing on my mountains of work at the office, again staying late. Since his announcement of the new job in Houston, I hadn't seen hide nor hair of my Jim, but my romantic isolation was relieved by occasional phone chats with sweet young Phil. After our camping adventure we didn't rush things, instead slowly feeling our way along to friendship. Besides, he too was very busy with his teaching duties at Gallaudet. I invited him to the Four Bells for dinner on Thursday evening.

Charles decided to throw a huge dinner party for old times' sake with old-timers like Lewis, who brought a cute straight guy named Peter who was renting a room in Old One and Two. Of course, there was Gary-One with teeny-bopper daughters, various neighbors like Lou, and all of us householders. The crowd was a weird mix, made all the weirder by Charles, who was markedly extravagant. Over the days before, I'd noted his remarks growing increasingly symptomatic, and by that evening I could tell he was losing his grip. Ric, Gary-One, and I shared more concerned glances.

On earlier occasions, I'd usually held my tongue, but this time I was moved to irritation and called him down gently on a lyrical ecstasy about the "sacred cheese." It was just a poor gouda with caraway seeds. Understandably, innocent Phil was taken aback, and I felt bad that his dinner with us wasn't a more model one. It was nothing at all like our earlier philosophical symposia, but one of those absurd repasts drawn out till almost eleven. At least Phil and Ric hit it off well since Ric had also been involved with deaf youth through a Catholic organization where he'd been living in Kentucky. My jack-in-the-pulpit friend and I said goodnight in the vestibule with a kiss and thoughts of the weekend.

Friday morning I wrote a concerned note to my fading orchid-friend, and we had a short private talk about it that evening in which he admitted having impaired judgement and needing and appreciating my guidance. He was painfully confused about where his life was going and just having taken his meds, then went off to sleep. I was tormented by his anguish, but couldn't dwell on it because first thing I got a call from dear David in Baltimore to say he was leaving the next day for his new job in Miami. In a subdued state of mind, Charles also left on Saturday for a business trip to Denver, bearing my fond greetings to dear Peter.

My Saturday was work all day with Ric on my room, putting up lots of insulation and wall-board and spackling the joints. After cleaning up, I went to dinner at Tom's, where Benton cooked chicken and a great ratatouille, my first time there without Billy. His simple funeral had been in his native Baltimore on Tuesday. Tom was naturally excited about moving back to New York, and I was glad he wasn't too torn up by leaving the job. Afterwards, I went to Mr. P's for a solitary beer and walked home in the rain missing Chi.

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Through an early gray morning after much rain, on Sunday I walked up to Phil's place, an apartment building called the Woodley on Columbia Road. We went for brunch at Avignon Freres and very peacefully got to know each other better, everything I learned about the young fellow intimately pleasing. Before the rain started again, we made it back to his new apartment—he'd just moved to this area of the city—and I admired his big bay window looking out on the park. While it poured outside, we spent the rest of the day in bed.

A couple naps overcame us, and by six we went with Phil's friends Mike and Keith to dinner and a movie. (He'd helped them move too on Saturday.) We ate at El Caribe, where I held Phil's hand under the tablecloth, and went to see Monty Python's "Life of Brian." (Ever since,

it's been at the top of my list for classic films, the possibly ad lib scene with Pontius Pilate is unmatched for laughs in the history of cinema!) Then back in his apartment, we retired for the rainy night. As Phil always got up very early, he took me home through more rain by the time I was usually up for work. Sleeping over in someone else's bed had felt odd, but thrilling.

In the evening I got another call from the Brazilian boy Antonio. We hadn't seen each other for a while because he had an eye operation. In a touching adolescent and Latin manner, he revealed that he was "in love with me," and I wound up giving him the same older man's advice I'd given Little Lou and Rene about the difference between loving and being in love. Unlike those two kids, I don't think little Antonio appreciated it very much. I grieved that promiscuity caused such problems and hoped I wouldn't have to deal with this again with my young Phil. In our intimacies he hadn't shown undue emotional involvement, though definitely a great deal of sensual pleasure. Still, the difference in our ages concerned me a bit.

Phil met a bunch of us Tuesday evening at the Empress for dinner, Ric, Gary-Two, Mike from next door, and a visitor from Ann Arbor named Larry, and we spent another amorous, rainy night at the Woodley. Our intimacies were by phone for some days thereafter while I helped Ric with the ceiling in my room. When I called him Saturday evening, he was just sitting around with the stuffed dog he was making, and we spoke about things to do together. Since it was a beautiful evening, I ran over to his place, and we went to the Axum on 18th to be unimpressed by the Ethiopian food. Nevertheless, we were shortly rolling around on his living room rug.

We got up early and went to the Four Bells to help Ric with the picnic for the popery on the Mall. No one else was inclined, so it was just the three of us who strolled down 14th. We got a good place in close near 12th Street. It was a bit chilly as the clouds thickened, but we had a pleasant lunch of brie, pbj, oj, and cookies as people filled in around us, ignoring the threat of rain. Off and on I looked up toward the altar with Charles's opera glasses to watch white-gowned deacons wandering around like milling ducks.

A quiet while, we rested out of the chill breeze, my cheek on Phil's arm, while the crowd recited the rosary. It was strange hearing those prayers again, but the dead rote tone of people chanting "Holy Mary Mother of God" was familiar. It was weird for Phil since he was from a southern Baptist family. Soon a wave of excitement swept over the crowd, and we all stood up to see whatever. It was even chillier that way, and the three of us huddled together under the blanket watching for the papal arrival.

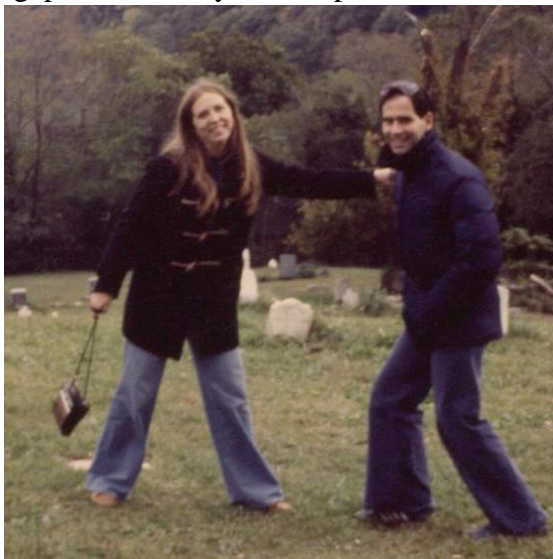
In our shelter, a young Latino mother changed her baby and then read us excerpts from an Italian joke book—while Phil and I held hands under the blanket, my arm around his waist. Then Jean Paul II arrived to the faint strains of loudspeaker church music. Everyone strained to see him, many children held on people's shoulders. I helped the mother's tiny grandmother up on Ric's shoulders—he was a bulky, tall guy—where she wept rapturous tears. It was the most touching part of the experience for me. Seeing the Vicar of Christ on earth was curious only for being in eyeball distance of a person of such ponderous tradition.

His homily also didn't inspire me, though there was little to disagree with in principle. What impressed me was that his message shared something with Charles's thought processes when he was flying high, namely, coming from a conviction that one's premises were sound and universally valid when in fact they were very much open to dispute. Probably few noticed, but I recognized His Holiness impugning individualism, a pernicious thought I hadn't encountered before. He must have seen it as a threat since churches thrive in populations tending to a group mind, relying on a group for their *modus operandi* and attitudes.

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In the brisk fall weather of that week I got back to intensive running, frequently doing four or five miles in the park and on other days the two miles to Phil's place, up in the evenings and home in the mornings. We often went out to dinners, movies, and art events like the "Barber of Seville" by the Washington Civic Opera and the amusing Ballet Trockadero. We even went out to bars because Phil also loved to dance. That Sunday we went down to the Mall for the big Gay March and happily demonstrated our liberation with the zillions of other gay folks.

A teacher friend of Phil's named Janice, delightfully young much like my flower-friend, came along with us to Harper's Ferry, and we three had a great time on the jaunt. The waterfall was beautiful, and the smell of a campfire roused tender memories. Only a few trees shone bright among the greenery, the tiny town clinging to the hill with rushing rivers on either side (swollen from the recent rains). We checked out the atmospheric blacksmith shop, roamed the old street, browsed the junk shops, and trudged up to Jefferson Rock and the cemetery for the lovely view down the gap. I took many artistic photos, of course, like these:



Janice and Phil on Jefferson Rock



Harper's Ferry Blacksmith Shop

After a run around P Street park on Monday evening, I spoke with Barbara and the girls. Her disturbing news was that Papa would have a cardiac catheterization next month, the fiber-optic scanning thing. The girls sounded older still, and Bubba sang me his ABC's. While I was on the phone, Charles got home from his trip in a "goodish" state of mind, it seemed. However, that impression didn't last long. It will be easier to quote my journal. I wrote:

"Encounters with Charles over the next few days were marked by 'surprises.' Something about wanting to adopt some 14-year-old out in San Francisco, a subject that arose to disappear like a sequence in a dream. And dropping one night at dinner that he was going to take the Delta Queen trip down the Mississippi with 'Jim and the boys,' folks unbeknownst to all at the dinner table and identified no further. Then he ups and excuses himself saying a rather final 'Good night' to all and sundry guests to 'go for a walk'—much too lightly dressed for the cool evening with his open shirt and rolled-up sleeves. Feeling rattled, I retreated to the quiet dishpan since most of the diners were no particular guests of mine.

"The next couple days Charles wasn't as visible, busy going out. Then he arrived late for an early dinner (for Ric, Phil, and me to go to Baltimore for Rigoletto) and blithely dropped the fact that he'd been relieved of his position for a decision he'd made. No one knew what to say. Stunned, we suffered through the long drive and terrible performance, and I agonized all the way home about the ramifications of this new development.

“I wrote Charles a note the next morning requesting an urgent meeting at six on various subjects and made some other remarks of a stern nature. He called me at work suggesting we meet at Café des Artistas in Georgetown for a lovely, sunny patio lunch. He went into more detail about the job situation, and I found his explanation almost feasible. He confirmed that he was no longer taking his medication and didn’t intend ever to do so again—since he’d learned to control it with his mind. We talked about the house, reasonably agreeing that we’d probably soon have to sell the place. I was somewhat comforted by his rational manner but tormented by the thought of the imminent Fall of the House of the Four Bells.

“He was off the next day to see his doctor and returned just after noon with the news that he’d be leaving for at least a month’s stay at an estate out in Virginia. He glossed over the dire nature of this announcement by describing the elegant Second-Empire mansion, but I understood that in actuality it was an executive recuperation center. Since he was leaving at three o’clock, I dragged him around the house to price things for a rummage sale to try and cover our mounting expenses. When he was off, I breathed a long sigh of relief. This way he couldn’t buy anything more, and he’d assured me of his continuing financial support. I hoped his stay might help him—and that I could manage Four Bells affairs without him.”

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My flower-friendship with Phil continued to grow with my exhilarating runs to and fro. We were at a stage now with each other of great comfort and openness as we cooked or dined out, often with his many friends, embraced everywhere and anyhow possible, and shared cups of mint tea in early mornings before I’d run away home. I was gratified that he never broached matters of commitment or of emotional needs—and pleased that he was much hairier than I—the black fur on his buttocks exquisitely exciting. We both left town on the same day, Phil for the weekend with relatives in West Virginia, and I for the Central Opera Service meeting in Toronto (with Jim) and the Detroit performances of Joan.

Two chapters ago I described the Toronto and Detroit episodes, explaining how the first was my last amorous encounter with dear Jim, and the second was thrilling but unfulfilling since Tchaikovsky’s opus was so fatally flawed. The best parts of the trip were carving pumpkins with Director David’s teenaged daughters and a run of some miles through the Michigan autumn with the older Liza keeping up with me on her bike. It was a wonderful surrogate family respite and almost made up for missing Halloween with my own kids.

At home, work got even more devouring, all week late and even later runs to Phil’s. I’d had to move all my plants and junk out of my room for Ric to work, replacing the windows on either side of the fireplace, painting the walls and ceiling, and refinishing the floor. He was using my salvaged fancy drug-store cabinets to build in a desk with overhead shelves across one corner, and a curio cabinet across another, turning the room into an octagon of sorts, one wall being the sleeping alcove. The walls would be painted Wedgewood blue with ivory ceiling and woodwork, about as elegant as one could get.

On my Saturday off, Ric and I went for dinner and visit with Charles at Springwood. He was quite subdued, probably well medicated, but he said there wasn’t much of that—he was just learning to think straight. In alarm, I said I hoped he wasn’t thinking about going straight, and he actually laughed, assuring me, “No chance of that! I should have said realistically.” I got the feeling that Springwood was a drastic, painful experience for him, but perhaps it would get his magnificent mind back on track. I missed him dreadfully.

At the center, we met some other recuperating executives, all equally subdued, watched some psychological films, and then left for home. Back in town we stopped at the Rogue for a

drag show that left me cold. A call to Phil's went unanswered, and we took off to the Strap where a spell-binding black boy was dancing nude on the bar. Phil still wasn't home, so I slept alone in the harem bed, truly glad to be living a realistic gay life of drag shows and nude dancers and not be incarcerated in an executive recuperation center like poor Charles.

I prepared for the rummage sale, hauling up salvaged things from the basement and cleaning them up and arranging the rescued books from the boxes under my bed. Fortunately, I had time to tear down the falling two-front ceiling and clean up before Director David arrived to stay with me there. We went to the Vienna Opera's "Ariadne," and then he got me to take him out to the Chesapeake House to see the go-go boys, one of whom was top-notch. When we got home, Phil came over, and we made love on the mattress on the floor under my skylight.

David and I took a bus on Monday from the Kennedy Center to the Airlie House in Virginia for two days of business meetings, led by dear Jim (who stayed in a separate room) and his friend Carlisle (who stayed I knew not where, but suspected..). I perversely enjoyed them—and my early morning runs over the fields. The first was misty, grey and lovely, and the second gold in the sunlight. They were my first experience with running in the certifiable cold, but it didn't get to me. What did were the meals, too much too frequently. Happily home again, I turned back to the sale, arranging items and pricing, and Phil came over again for the night to show me how happy he also was to have me back.

Early in the morning I made us our usual mint tea, and then he was off to teach while I threw open the doors of the Four Bells for the first of two frantic days of rummage sale. With the blessed help of Ric and Gary, and neighbors Lou, Jimmie, and realtor-lady Barbara, we staffed the various rooms, explaining which antiques weren't for sale (like the dining table, chandelier, over-mantle mirrors, and blue velvet sofa and chair), which were (like the red-velvet ottoman-settee, Renaissance Revival pier mirror, and Bechstein piano), and peddling the piles of salvaged architectural details, books, dishes, clothes, knickknacks, and even my precious plants.

The first day wore me out, and I collapsed early in my blue octagonal suite, unaware that in a matter of minutes a piece of the ceiling in the vestibule fell, knocking out the doorbell. When Phil showed up, he silently rang and rang and had to go home disgruntled. We wrapped up the sale Sunday afternoon, disposing of about half of the rescued books, and Lou helped me box up the rest to donate to the library. The nearly half of my exotic plants that sold thinned out the jungle significantly, and the furniture that disappeared really opened up the rooms. I was amazed that we'd brought in over \$2,500, enough to keep the Four Bells going for a few more months.

Exhausted again, we all went to dinner at the new Plaza where Phil met us, and I sensed immediately that he was put out. Over a drink after at Morgan's, he admitted that he was, not only by the broken doorbell, but by feeling neglected. My long absences had left him feeling awfully lonely. I went home with him to assuage his loneliness, but our first intimate bout didn't improve his mood all that much. He moaned that I'd never told him I loved him.

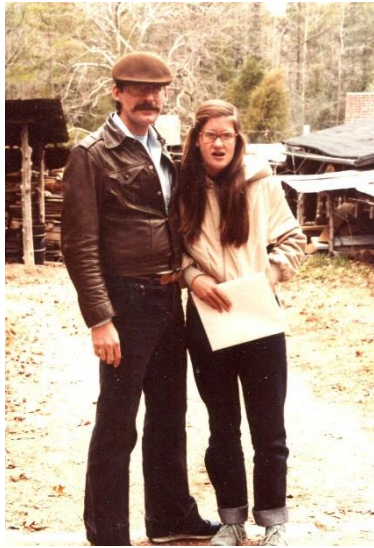
Protesting that of course I loved him—why else would I choose to spend my every free moment with him?—I said he was my beloved flower-friend. Why did I want to do all our fun things together? Why did I run miles almost every day just to be with him? He seemed to accept my declaration, but I knew that Phil actually wanted me to be in love with him. He probably thought that he was in love with me. My geisha philosophy wasn't going to be much help.

I ran the next night to Phil's place, demonstrated my love, had tea, and ran home. The next he came to sleep in my newly finished room. Then I had to go to the family Thanksgiving in Durham, which again left my sweet jack-in-the-pulpit feeling awfully lonely.

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Early on the turkey day, I walked over to Gene's in the Iowa for a ride. His new company in emeritus daddy status in the family was comforting. Everybody else was already in Durham when we got there, and festivities were in full swing, cooking smells all over the house and kids racing around house and yard. I took up the rake immediately to tackle the leaves all over the place, and the five kids and I pounced joyously in the piles, shrieking and scattering them again to the four winds. More raking...

With the dozen of us gathered late that afternoon around the feast, I poignantly felt the strong love that wove us all together, a somehow genetic, inherent love given, unquestioned, and unspoken. We would always be "relatives," always part of each other's lives. Papa's medical news was troubling, but optimistic. They'd found and removed some gunk in his arteries and said he should be fine now. We drank to that and had more of three kinds of pie. The evening was a marathon of cut-throat bridge and board games that tested our ever-loving family ties.



Aimée and Moi at Jugtown

On Friday we all went up into the mountains to a little village called Jugtown where it seemed the whole population made pottery. The displays at every house were overwhelming, especially to one like me who had no need of idiosyncratic pitchers, cups, or plates. Nana, however, bought any number of "striking" examples of ceramic art, including a set of lovely blue luncheon plates. Papa, Gene, Jack, and I thought the village a curious experiment in economic development. Martha and Barbara admired the imaginative art but wanted none of it, and I'm afraid the kids were monumentally bored.

That afternoon I called Phil, intending to assure him that I loved and missed him, but he wasn't at home. I figured that being off somewhere, he probably wasn't missing me too awfully. He'd been planning on Thanksgiving dinner with friends at Janice's place, and he was probably still enjoying himself with them—hopefully having more fun than we'd had at Jugtown.

Saturday the kids helped me spread leaves from the yards in the big woods in front of the house. In the cleared back yard we played with bows shooting arrows wildly and then ran around helter-skelter playing soccer, which game at least Jake knew something about. After another dinner of leftovers, Gene drove us back to DC, getting me home way too late to bother Phil. Ric told me Charles had called to say he'd be coming back home in another week or so.

First thing Sunday morning, I ran to Phil's, and after a brunch with Keith and Mike, we made up for lost time in his bed. At a strategic moment, I made sure to say I loved him. That week the weather turned quite cold, but I found the late night runs to Phil's under a bright moon invigorating, and he kept me wonderfully warm all night.

One night while Phil was riding rhythmically astraddle my hips, he stopped suddenly and asked if I'd been with anyone else since we'd met. Seeing no benefit in lying, I told him about meeting Brazilian Antonio in the park. Without another word, he rode me happily home and then, snuggling up afterwards, said he had too—a guy named Dave he'd met at Janice's dinner. He described their Friday walk in the park and intimacies at Dave's apartment after—right at the time I'd tried calling him. I hoped they'd had fun. Then Phil added off-handedly that Dave was his age, and his remark was like a stake driven in my heart. I hadn't let myself think about the 14-year difference in our ages, but now it was painfully obvious and significant.

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When Charles returned from Springwood, he seemed in no better shape than when he left in October—maybe worse since they were now calling him “psychotic.” In my no-nonsense opinion, such mental dilly-dallying was a matter of indulgence, allowing oneself to indulge in the unreal. I told Charles how the shaman Don Juan stressed that we must struggle to keep our awareness intact while in the “green fog,” which was a matter of sheer will. I figured some work on the house with Ric would take his mind off itself, but he said he couldn’t cope with doing handwork. Instead, he announced that he’d go stay with his parents in California for a month.

The next week was frantic with work at the office, getting the plumbers through their work in the bathrooms, and helping Ric finish off the ceilings in the vestibule and two-front. When he finished, my old friend admitted (with some tears) that he could no longer even hope to help our Charles in any way and went back to Kentucky. To make matters immeasurably worse, early in the week Russ fell terribly sick, went into the hospital, and wound up moving out to go home to his family in North Carolina. That left only me and Gary-Two to rattle around in the vastness of the Four Bells. Used to being a hermit on Kauai, he bravely agreed to watch out for the old place and take care of the rest of my plants while I was away on my trips.

Meanwhile, I saw Phil as much as possible. I met his new Dave at a dinner at El Caribe, a sweet innocent terribly self-conscious about Phil’s “older” lover, but I heartily approved of their budding romance. I told them that after my weeks away for Miami, vacation, and family holidays we’d all surely be quite different people, but we could still be dear friends. Phil alternated nights with me and Dave for a smooth transition, and our last embraces were unspeakably tender. With no regrets but much gratitude, I accepted that our May-December love affair was over.

My flight to Miami was easy, as was getting to the Hotel Inter-Continental on Bayshore Drive and greeting all the folks arriving from the member companies. There followed continuous rounds of meetings, scribbling minutes, quiet drinks with out-going President John (and another offer to come work with him, again appreciated but declined), and pounding on the typewriter. Monday was my only chance to sun at the pool looking out over the ocean, but I managed a few runs on other days, like up to the Vizcaya mansion. Busy with his new company’s business, raven-haired David stayed with me and was affectionate company in the exhausted nights.

There were some events worthy of note, like Wednesday night’s yacht-ride to Miami Beach with the NEA’s Chairman, Mr. Biddle, who gave interviews. While David and I were lounging on the bowsprit, we wound up on TV. Pulling into the private dock at a grand estate (of an immoderately successful dentist) felt like something right out of “The Great Gatsby.” They threw a massive dinner party around a huge pool in front of a great Art Deco house with a 20s-type band. The dinner was unremarkable, but the house was unbelievable, filled with the most amazing collection of kitsch and unclassifiable stuff I’d ever seen—absolutely no taste.

Of course, the rest of the meetings was a blur of work. I joked that I felt like a ping-pong ball. Friday night was dear John’s farewell dinner at fancy Marcella’s, which I thought a boring and expensive travesty on the office tab. Worst of all, besides being trapped at a gazebo table of boisterous boors, was the hideous singing of a certain opera gentleman, surely a close relative of Mrs. Foster Jenkins. Not to be a boor myself, I applauded.

Early on, my Jim caught me in the hall asking to get together again, and I told him to call me—which he never did. After that, we didn’t get a chance to speak, and as I described in an earlier chapter, we parted with no goodbyes. With Detroit Director David as our new President, I found myself even more indispensable, and I was voted an almost reasonable raise, which came in more than handy for the girls’ orthodontics and the looming Four Bells expenses.

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Charlotte Amalie and Harbor

I was up quite early in the morning for my vacation flights to the Caribbean. The best part was flying in a small plane low from San Juan in Puerto Rico across the island and small islands off its east coast. Gliding out over the sea, we passed other islands and then dropped down to St. Thomas at Charlotte Amalie where I'd booked a room, cheap and therefore minimal, at a guest house called Maison Greaux high on the mountainside over the city. Though minimal, my room had a great view out over the little town and harbor.

Immediately I took a run through the splendid tropical humidity and sunshine down the hill into the town to look at the shops and right away was reprimanded by a cop for not wearing a shirt. He stressed that it should have sleeves—I could only be shirtless on the beach. When I asked where that was, he pointed vaguely and said the nearest one was around the point on the east side of the island. Incredulous about the distant beach and outraged at the prudery, I ran back up to the Maison and put on my Athlete's Foot T-shirt. Back at the shops, the arrogant salespeople and crowds of craven cruise-ship tourists really turned me off.

Finding no sign of spots for nightlife or attractions other than tourist shoppers, I reined in my amorous inclinations. Back at the Maison's bar, I briefly admired some cute guys watching TV, a lewd program with amateur strippers, including a homely man. The gross sleaze was a total turn-off. Discouraged and ignoring the awful trash everywhere, I hiked up to the hilltop to catch the unimpressive sunset and talked with a fellow on a bike. I asked about the continuous cacophony of car horns, and he said whoever honked first at an intersection had the right of way. As darkness fell, countless dogs started barking and drove me to distraction.

Awakened far too early by a chorus of thousands of crowing roosters that went on well into the morning, I shopped for Christmas presents and took a hideous fall on the steps among ruined buildings, bruising my back and almost ripping the nail off my right little finger. All the same, I took a cab to the pitiful Morningstar Beach for an hour's shirtless sun and continued around the island to the wretched Coral World pseudo-aquarium. Then when I discovered that for some absurd reason the catamaran trip to St. John wasn't running, it was the last straw.

Before the roosters shut up, I was on a flight back to San Juan wondering why nobody ever mentioned the sordid details of tropical paradises. Bali Hai it was not. Gliding over the sea again, I felt horribly depressed and actually lonely. All my lovers were gone, Chi, Jim, Phil... Even my dearest friend, my mind-mate Charles was lost to me, and the Four Bells was doomed. To make matters worse, I had to spend 16 hours in the Miami airport which was air-conditioned to about 34 degrees. Luckily I found a touristy sweatshirt to keep me from freezing to death.

My arrival some days ahead of schedule in Gainesville took Barbara by surprise, but she dealt with it easily, having already arranged with old friends Susan and Karl to use their house while they were in India (my kind of holiday observance). She put me up in their son Danny's room full of sports stuff and rock and roll posters with their pool for sunbathing if not swimming in the December cool. My girls were still in school, which left me to lie around reading and run about town at leisure. Meanwhile, Barbara kept me splendidly fed.

When Papa and Nana arrived a few days later, they got the master bedroom, and Martha and her kids moved into Barbara's. With the clan all gathered, the holiday festivities began with several parties, lunches and dinners out, shopping excursions, and similar nonsense. Organizing outings was as always like herding cats. Another outing to St. Augustine provided a lovely stroll

through the ancient fort, and our whole tribe trudged along Matanzas beach. A fishing trip with Jack to the Suwanee River thrilled me with vistas of savannah and clumps of tall palms. Of course, we made the traditional pilgrimage to beautiful Micanopy for the antique shops.

In quiet times at the borrowed house, Papa and I had several close conversations just like old times. Once he asked if I was still comfortable with just having ample bed-fellows, and I told him I was feeling sorely deprived in that respect, with all my lovers now gone with the wind and no new bed-fellows on the horizon. I opened up to talk about Charles falling apart and bemoaned the dire Fall of the House of the Four Bells. I may have even moaned about getting old.

Papa comforted me by saying that he'd forever consider me his son, the father of his granddaughters, a relationship untouched by any divorce. His sage advice to me was his theory that everyone's life goes through phases of roughly thirteen years, maybe because of the thirteen moons in a year, and now approaching my 39th year, I was coming up on such a cusp, a transition from the third chapter to my fourth. Now was a time to re-evaluate my attitudes toward life. He was proud of me for the liberated man I'd been in my third phase and confident that I'd become truly outstanding in my next. His confidence steeled me to face the transition unafraid.

On Christmas Eve I broke down and went to the Garden Gate plant store—merely to see their begonias. The young salesman, a tall, brown-eyed beauty, was aggressively friendly and suggested we get together on Wednesday. This Mike also gave me a huge un-sold wreath perfect for Barbara's door for her big party that evening. I was very pleased by this sudden appearance of a possible new flower-friend on the horizon, a Christmas present from the universe. So the day after Christmas I ran the short way over to Mike's address.

I was barely inside the door when he started undressing. Admiring his shapely bottom, I did too and expectantly stretched out on his bed. Mike sauntered over to me with a seductive smile and an exceptional erection and said simply, "Suck it." I was momentarily stunned by his rude, crude approach but decided to play that crass game too, proposing that first I'd fuck his pretty ass and then give him a blowjob. "No way!" he exclaimed, horrified—"I want to come!" I said okay and told him to grab his dick and go for it. I'd just watch.

Mike proceeded to do so, but his technique was lacking, indeed quite boring, and I got dressed. In his throes, I don't think he even noticed me leaving. The experience was my cue to re-think my attitude toward sex. It didn't feel so crucial or even necessary anymore—just rather pointless—though it would've been fun to fuck Mike's pretty ass. Love should be much more than just sticking it in a hole—not merely a merging of hot bodies but a melding of minds and energies—like the profound mind-bond I'd once had with Charles or the spiritual communion of peace that I'd shared with Chi. For sure, I was coming up on a cusp in my life.

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Suddenly there I was on New Year's Eve evening home again, where dear Gary-Two peacefully presided over the echoing rooms and my verdant jungle. With ever-loving Lou, we celebrated gaily over a late Italian dinner at good old Gusti's and in the company of festive pioneer neighbors, rang in 1980 with wine toasts in the cold, dark Circle.

In the first morning of the new decade, I called Jim—who wouldn't leave for Houston till Sunday—and pretended to be sorry he hadn't called me in Miami, claiming I'd been too busy anyway. Wishing each other the best, we signed off on good terms, again with no goodbyes.

Then I called Phil with New Year's greetings, and he happily announced that Dave was moving in with him today. I told him I'd really hoped he'd do that and blessed their young love. Phil suggested we all should get together next week, but we never did.

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