

## CHAPTER 11: A LIFE OF ART

My five weeks with the Bolshoi Opera ended with one last burst of Russian glory in another “Boris. Leaving the Kennedy Center after the show, I said fond farewells to my operatic colleagues, and at home sitting with Charles over a snifter of brandy, I remarked on feeling tremendously empty and happy at the same time. Pursuing my earlier metaphor, he said that was normal after a monumental bowel movement. Passing glory indeed...

The next morning, already well repaired and provisioned and looking forward to three weeks of freedom before going back to Gusti’s, I set off on my road trip. My route was more or less direct from DC across Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas along many country highways. Starting with the Blue Ridge and Smokies on through the Cumberland Gap into Tennessee, I drove through more mountains than you could shake a stick at.

In Tennessee I picked up US Route 66 that alternated with pieces of the new interstate highway I-40. Soon after roaring through Nashville, I stopped to sleep and got to Memphis early that morning. In my solitary silence, almost hypnotized by the hilly scenery everywhere, I pondered tender memories of Arkansas and Dennis, sorely regretting that we’d been so innocent and unconscious in the loving best-friendship we’d shared.

Then I realized that if Dennis and I hadn’t been so innocent and unconscious and had actually been lovers, his enlisting in the Navy would have devastated me even more horribly. Though I hadn’t seen or heard from Dennis now for fifteen years, I figured he’d still be living in Arkansas. If I’d joined the armed forces like most other guys in our class, I’d probably have still been living there too. I rejoiced over the glory of Tulane and grad schools, my unsought marriage and lovely children, my uncounted wonderful lovers, and my fantastic new life in DC.

To time my arrival at Ashdown in convenient mid-morning, I pulled over at a rest stop near Hot Springs and slept, though fitfully. The thought of seeing Dennis again filled me with romantic anxiety. I kept telling myself that I was doing this, like a good little Buddhist, with no expectations. It was just a sentimental journey... We’d simply be happy to see each other again, remember what great friends we were, and discover what our lives had been like in the long meantime. Of course, I wouldn’t tell him I was gay.

From Hot Springs I crossed to Highway 71 at Lockesburg and turned south past Bakers’ Store and old Mr. Bledsoe’s ancient barn the few miles to Penney Hill. Approaching the hill, I was appalled to see that the pine woods thereabouts had all be cut down, and the big hill now seemed so small. On top of it I found the open area where our café had stood and was horrified to see across the highway a concrete-block tumor built across the front of our old house. The old guy at the service station told me the café had burned down some years before. I sat in Lavenia for a few minutes to shed tears over the wrack and ruin of my childhood home.

In Ashdown at the drug store where Dennis had once worked, I checked the phone book, and the old owner said my buddy was living in a trailer east of town and building him a house. I parked down from the trailer, and two teenaged boys came running out of the woods and up the trailer steps. The taller one was the spitting image of Dennis when we were boys. Stunned by emotion, I could barely speak to the small woman in the doorway to explain who I was.

She sent me to the paper mill where the manager called Dennis to the office to meet his old high school chum. He walked in with a surprised look, perhaps amused by my long hair and mustache, and shook my hand. He’d bulked up considerably and looked a lot older. I watched his eyes while we shared life stories, but they were the eyes of a stranger. Dennis told me he and Esther had once visited DC, and calling me “good buddy,” he begged off to go back to work.

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Highway 71 ran south to New Orleans, and I drove it that afternoon in a silent fog of sadness, grieving over the ruin of Penney Hill and the pointless encounter with Dennis—another ruin of treasured memories. Like in a film, I kept rerunning the scene of that beautiful boy racing up the trailer steps, a vision out of the fabled past. Outside of Natchitoches, hitting the end of my rope, I pulled Lavenia off under a tree for a fit of bitter weeping over her steering wheel. Then, dry-eyed at last, I drove on into the evening, stopping near Alexandria to sleep.

In the sweltering August heat, I parked on Canal Street in front of the little shotgun house with its palm tree and rose garden to wait, sweating but happy to see the place after these three years, for Mother to get home from work. We walked down the street to Morrison's Cafeteria for supper, and over our liver and onions, I told her about the ruination of Penney Hill. Mother said our friend Margie had written her about the café burning down, but she hadn't told me so as not to make me sad. I told her about my sad visit with Dennis, moaning how time changes things, ends everything, and she said a mother's love never changes—or ends. That helped a lot.

Mother took the next day off from her new job with the Army Corps of Engineers and went with me on a sentimental journey to the Tulane campus where I reminisced about more joys lost to time. That afternoon she took me to the Quarter to see the construction on the new park along the riverfront. I had to fight back tears again on seeing the profound changes three years had made. At least the old Jax Brewery was still there being turned into a shopping mall.

On the new walkway along the river, a young black boy approached us, maybe fifteen, outrageously beautiful, and his gleaming eye caught and enchanted mine. Suddenly stopping, he said, "Betcha fifty cents I tell you where you got your shoes!" The charm broken, my linguist came to the fore, and I said, "First, these aren't shoes but sandals, and second, I've obviously got them on my feet." The kid's cocky face collapsed, getting even cuter, and so I offered, "Betcha a buck you tell me where I bought them." His eye brightening at this second chance to hook a sucker, he proudly proclaimed, "In a store!"

I let him enjoy presumed victory a moment and said, "Wrong! At a yard sale!" Defeated, the adorable con youth muttered miserably, "Aw, man!" Touched, I took pity on him, giving him a buck anyway to buy another look of boundless black beauty, and advised, "You really need to clean up your act, darlin'." When he was gone on, Mother asked why on earth I gave the bum that dollar, and I rationalized that a yard sale actually was a kind of a store.

After breakfast together, Mother left for work, and I took off for Florida, the familiar all-day drive along the Gulf coast. The hours of pinewoods and silence helped me put the traumas of transience out of mind and focus on present joys. Getting to Barbara's house just in time to kiss my girls goodnight, I dined on leftover spaghetti casserole and told my "first wife" about my sad visits in Arkansas. Barbara said, "We can't ever go back, Richie—only onwards." So I did.

Summer still, Jake and Aimée had no school, Barbara had classes, and Jack was off on a long fishing trip. I loaded the girls into Lavenia, and they played happily on my hippie mattress all the way to Crescent Beach on the Atlantic. Thrilled to be on a beach again, with the kids' help I built a huge sand castle, and we frolicked in the sun and waves. We got back in time for their riding lessons, and Jake's ballet class that evening filled me with paternal pride.

For some days I stayed over (sleeping in Lavenia), and took my girls on outings to Silver Springs to ride in a glass-bottomed boat, to old Micanopy to buy them antique silver rings, and to Manatee Springs on the Suwanee to see the sea cows. All this doting taught Daddy a father's love does actually change—over time growing and deepening. In fact, all real, true love, like mine for Ken, Kenny, and all those beloved others, seems to do that with time.

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Before I headed home, Jake and Aimée went with me to lots of plant stores and nurseries, shopping for things I just couldn't resist, fascinating greenery like palms, tropical oddities, and naturally more Rex Begonias. I bought a dozen small air-plants called tillandsias with bright flowers, envisioning them hanging on my window wall like Persian miniatures.

When I showed up with my horticultural haul, Charles was happily reminded of Mexico and joked that instead of a ruined temple in a jungle, we'd now have a jungle in a temple. Four Bells was indeed a temple of sorts, but not quite a ruin. Charles hadn't finished the plumbing in the basement but figured to get the fixtures set in before I'd go back to work at Gusti's. In my free time I hit up the plant store by Dupont Circle (my other begonia source) and sold them some palms, ferns, aspidistras, and tillandsias, to help defray costs for my sentimental journey.

While I was away, Dave and Lewis looked after the garden plot as minimally as before, but Jim did a great job with my greenery at the house. Once I'd pulled weeds, the okra and eggplant looked fine, but needy neighbors had made off with squash, beans and lots of tomatoes. On a turn as chef for Supper Club, I fried up a mess of okra, and they ate it with compliments. On another, the eggplant wound up in a huge dish of moussaka, equally appreciated. Under my care, the garden kept producing, and I didn't mind the community pilferage.

There was also time to ride my bike through summer mornings in Rock Creek, or the hot afternoons up North Capitol to the Arboretum for soul-cleansing walks in the woods. On an ambitious Sunday I rode across Georgetown and out the canal to Great Falls and met a curly-headed backpacker named Herb who sat on a rock with me and shared his hard black bread. That unspoken communion and affectionate looks were all we could share on our scenic perch, and he left me with a touch of fingers to hike on up the canal. Of an afternoon biking on the Mall, I met a nameless cyclist with beautiful mouth and shorts who rode back to the Four Bells with me and came inside to touch me with more than just his fingers.

As previously agreed, I returned to Gusti's late in the month on a Sunday, almost relieved to ease back into the rat race in the Garden at one of the back stations. Two new Persians had started, a cute Ali and an unfortunately uncomely Muhammed, but this Moe was quite friendly. They both were in awe of the famous Grand Poosti. Some of the American waiters had moved on, and a new cute one named Steve soon blossomed into a drama queen. Though he was a serious threat to my throne, we got on beautifully, terrorizing Bahman and flirting with busboys.

Steve and I both rode our bikes to work, and on afternoon breaks we often biked in Rock Creek or lay on the P Street Beach hillside to sunbathe and cruise the hunky numbers doing the same. Sometimes this led to *après* work assignments in the new little gay bar on P Street, some of which led thence to my boudoir. Not too many, mind you, but enough to maintain my geisha credentials. Steve appreciated the grand ambiance of our Four Bells but preferred his tiny studio apartment, well furnished with toys of his trade. Personally, I needed no appliances.

The first weekend of September turned rainy, making us close down the Garden, and I was stationed in an upstairs dining room to train the two new Persians in high-class service. Ali had a natural talent for dignity, but Moe couldn't quite hide his innate sloppiness. Our training was interrupted when Mr. Mario escorted a middle-aged guy in a tuxedo to one of my deuces, gave him a menu, and then quickly ducked back down the stairs.

As I came up to his table, the guy was muttering angrily at his menu, and looking up at me, erupted in curses and profanity. Taken aback, I calmly asked about a drink before dinner, and he pointed at the menu with more snarls and curses. He placed his dinner order likewise. Meanwhile, the other diners watched, horrified. While I served the guy with supreme composure, ignoring vile personal insults, Mr. Mario spirited everyone away into other dining rooms.

Alone with the dragon, I refilled his wine, inquired what else he might like, politely interpreted his stabs at the menu for dessert, and closed my ears and soul to the flood of foul language. Ali and Moe hid in the pantry, learning a good lesson in high-class service. Through his barrage of vicious expletives and threats, I took the madman his check, returned with his change, and thanked him most civilly. Still sputtering filth, he got up and left.

I collapsed at a four-top and hid my face in the place setting. Mr. Mario came upstairs, thanked me for handling that, handed me \$20, and told me to go on home. Instead, I biked over to the bar on P Street and took a shy kid named Joey home for some high-class personal service. Charles told me the next day that my dragon-customer must suffer Tourette syndrome, but I called it sheer insanity, something I'd never before encountered. Might I never again!

In spite of madmen, mad queens, and ample nookie, as was my wont, with the advent of autumn, I started waxing poetic again:

#### SUMMERSET

*Like a day into evening,  
Summer slips into fall.  
Afternoon hangs all golden  
From the vines in my garden,  
And yellow spots of September  
Are rife in lately green trees.  
Like the sun in branches,  
The year is ripening to fall,  
And my hopes are all be-leaved.  
Autumn, come please, gently  
And turn my evening to colors.  
(9/9/75)*

That lyricism didn't last long—a few days later I waxed suddenly philosophic:

#### WAITER AT WORK

*I lean on the wall in the Garden,  
My tray close under my arm,  
And watch people on the sidewalk,  
My parties at dreary evening tables,  
Blind faces peering from buses,  
Each the center of the world  
Needing to get somewhere special.  
How can so many centers pass by  
So closely, unheeding of any other,  
Even of me here among umbrellas?  
9/12/75*

If I were literarily inclined, I'd remark that these two verses fairly well set me up emotionally for what was about to happen. In the first I wistfully hoped that the autumn (time), would pass gently, and in the second, I felt existentially alone in an uncaring, unseeing world. The autumn of 1975 would pass gently, and someone would heed me under the umbrellas.

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It was likely late September when there was more yellow in the trees that a new fellow came to work at Gusti's, mid-twenties not long out of college, a plain fellow with bottomless blue eyes named Anthony. Impressed, I soon wrote in some detail about him.

We met by the pizza counter one lunch, but I'd seen Anthony the new waiter already in other parts of the kitchen. The first time he was picking up at broil, and I noticed his full mouth. He passed me where I was ordering from Bobby. I watched him into the pantry and said, "Well!" which made Bobby laugh. By the pizza counter he appeared while I was picking up a sausage and mushroom and said something that didn't make any sense in my busyness, but I was left with the feeling that it had been something profound.

We got acquainted quickly but in bits and pieces over the next days when we happened to bump into each other. One afternoon he was in the service bar, and with a moment to pause between parties, I stood with my drink tray under my arm and introduced myself, and he himself. We didn't shake hands or say 'Nice to meet you'—just looked at one another for a timeless moment. Then I had to go fetch bread and butter.

Actually we only got to know each other slowly over a couple weeks, and each time I looked into his blue eyes the bond between us grew stronger. Early along he gave me to know that he was living with a woman in Maryland, and though I dismissed that as irrelevant, it grieved me. On a Friday evening Tony came to work through the Garden back from an afternoon break walk with Billy the busboy, somehow alight and open. He walked right in past my defenses with a smile and warm hug, giving me sudden reason to hope.

The next morning he appeared at the entrance to the Garden, beaming again, while I was scrubbing tablecloths, and I invited him to come in the afternoon over to the Four Bells to see what might come of it. When we left, I walked my bike up the sidewalk with his notecase in the basket, and he explained that he wanted to be writer.

We talked about the vicissitudes of being an artist and a waiter and as we passed the Holiday Inn, Tony said, "I've sensed a lot of sex in the air around the restaurant, but I don't want to get involved with anyone there. I have to get to know someone before I can..." I felt his words directed to me, and so we went back to banter.

At home roommates were about, and we wound up smoking some dope and talking to Charles at the dining room table. I sat back and admired Tony's mustache curling over his lip, his hair in rumpled waves, blue eyes intent and wondrous. Our conversation showed more of his wide interests, and I could tell Charles was impressed with his intelligence.

On the way back to work, we went into St. Matthew's (this heathen's first time). Inside it was dim, but then lights came on one by one, each illuminating a corner or panel of beautiful paintings. We stood somewhat apart, mainly because I didn't feel it proper to hover, gazing around the sumptuous cathedral, but I felt a closeness like none before.

Tony was stationed in the dungeon, and my evening in the Garden was oddly slow, leaving much time to be beguiled by possibilities, in spite of his admonition. My distraction must have been obvious because Moe kept asking what the matter was. He'd never seen me act that way.

The first weeks of autumn did indeed pass gently in Tony's friendship and company at work. On nights off, we went to see the gripping "Dog Day Afternoon" and then "Three Days of the Condor," which gave him an idea of my earlier spy work—without the action. Meanwhile at home, my wall-construction continued in the basement, and Charles and I were surprised and disappointed when Princess Jim decided to move out.

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Within the week Charles had by hook or crook found us new Princess for Jim's room, a hyper guy named Rob with hair almost as pristinely groomed as Patrick's, perhaps a tad more flamboyant than us veteran geishas. Right after that Charles announced that he was off to Mexico for another two weeks, leaving me again as Princess Regent, but I of course had to delegate dinner hostess duties to Dave and Patrick, and newly royal Rob volunteered to help out.

Content in my gentle connection with Tony and bored with building walls, my fancy turned once more to art, sculpture to be precise, works much more utilitarian than the wire abstracts I'd fooled with in Milwaukee. I bought up old Victorian floor lamps and reassembled their posts, finials, and ornaments into unique plant stands—with bases inverted on top. I still believe they were genius, but like most art they proliferated like rabbits. Fortunately, I had many plants to put on fancy stands by every window. Four Bells truly did house a jungle.

Content merely being great friends with Tony, I didn't even incline to poetry, except for a scribbled note: "*I wonder at how so fast you've stolen into my life, with each nearness reaching into me deeper. Yet you say you're unable to give.*" And then on Columbus Day, traditionally a sentimental holiday for me for no historical reason, I went to Rock Creek Park.

### OCTOBER UNDERFOOT

*This noon I walk in the park  
With October underfoot again,  
Up a way of cobbles, ivy on rock walls,  
And here among the bright maples  
It could so easily be you with me,  
Walking up this fall hill  
And lying on golden leaves—  
Instead of no one.*

10/13/75

While merely friends, at every encounter in our work and afternoon walks Tony and I kept touching each other—hand on shoulder, caress on cheek, or twining fingers. We leaned on each other in the pickup line, arms over shoulders... Once at the pizza counter Steve remarked that I must have hit a home run and was surprised to hear I hadn't even made first base—the pitcher hadn't even thrown the ball yet. Steve thought maybe I needed a pinch-hitter.

In fact, our constant physical connection allowed a flow of affectionate energy between Tony and me, like an electrical circuit. We even talked about the weird feeling of being two halves of something, two poles with lightning flashing between. For all the touching, though, we both knew we could never touch lips or we'd explode, like matter and anti-matter. We orbited each other like Siamese stars, drawing and repelling each other in equilibrium.

A week or so later when the trees wore even more gold and crimson, I took Tony to the Arboretum for the fall extravaganza. We walked hand in hand up and down the autumnal hillside paths speaking magical words and rejoicing in the lightning that arced between our spirits. Out in a field of tall grasses, many still with tiny yellow flowers, we lay back in the sun, shoulder to shoulder, and I sighed that we should go soon.

Tony touched my lips tenderly and asked in a whisper, "Do you want to suck me?" I looked into the close blue lakes of his eyes and truthfully answered, "No." Maybe there was relief in his smile, maybe regret, but lightning flashed when he kissed my cheek. Under a sky blue as our eyes, we lay together speaking more magical words till it was time for work.

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*Gift from Charles*

Charles got home full of Mexican mysteries and ancient spirits haunting sacred ruins, and brought me a small sandstone carving of a Mayan figure by a contemporary artist named simply David. (It would be the touchstone of my decades of fascination with Mesoamerican themes.) Sitting with him and our other geishas at breakfast, I described my romantic scene with Tony, and they all thought I was a total idiot. Dave and Patrick shook their heads in stern disapproval, and Rob protested that a blow job was the easy way to get into a guy's pants. More thoughtfully, Charles said it was probably the only way Tony knew how to give.

Maybe he was right, but I protested that what I'd truly wanted was for Tony to get into my pants. He could've fucked me to kingdom come right out there in the middle of that field—even if we exploded... Back at work and in our leisurely afternoon breaks, Tony and I continued orbiting each other's star, never mentioning our brush with mutual annihilation.

This year's All Soul's Day Masked Ball was a preemptive strike on the Bicentennial with a theme of American History. I costumed as Christopher Columbus in a pseudo-Renaissance doublet and floppy hat. Tony brought his woman from Maryland, a mousy girl named Laura, as a flag-aproned Betsy Ross, and he came as the native who greeted my discoverer, but he looked nothing like an Arawak—more like a Cherokee with a Dakota war bonnet. In Laura's presence we could only steal lightning-strike caresses, but it was enough to keep our batteries charged.

Again, being so self- and Tony-involved, I registered few of the historical costumes at the party, but how could I forget Princess Patrick as a very green Statue of Liberty? Or Charles as a quite credible Thomas Jefferson? There were of course lots of powdered white wigs and naughty cowboy getups of dubious historical significance. When Tony left the party with his patriotic seamstress, the famous explorer took a cute Latino boy masquerading as a seductive Pocahontas upstairs for an anachronistic welcome to the New World.

A few days later, statuesque Patrick gave us notice that he would soon move in with Christian in his fancy apartment by Dupont Circle. Princess Rob negotiated to move down from the third-floor rear to Pat's room because it got so cold up there. Charles and I had tacked up the usual plastic sheets over all the windows, but we really needed to do something soon about the medieval furnace. We agreed to hang loose on renting out 3-R for the rest of the winter and concentrate on finishing off B-F. Fortunately, the furnace was between B-F and B-R, and we could at least hope to get the apartment ready to rent out by summer.

Slightly fastidious, Rob got offended by the muddy track out front, and I told him about the brick sidewalk I'd proposed two years before. With many Community Association members in and out of the Supper Club, he gathered lots of signatures on a petition, and as Secretary, I wrote on official LCCA stationery to appropriate City officials reminding them of my earlier request and our continued interest, attaching the petition. Their response was again that it was "in the works." At least it wasn't a dead issue. Rob had no choice but deal with the mud.

One day that next week after our lunch shift, Tony and I came back to the Four Bells for a joint and for me to hear the start of his story about a down-and-out ghetto kid. I thought it a tad too noire. He leaned in close and said he just didn't understand this strange thing we had between us. I told him to write about it someday, and maybe then he'd understand. (That worked for me.)

Tony went on about how he found Charles's tales of Mexico and the Maya so fascinating, so fascinating in fact that he'd decided to quit Gusti's and go there. I asked what about Laura, really meaning what about me, and he said she wanted to get rid of him anyway. I didn't, but a

week of our strange thing later he was gone, leaving me to my begonias and waiting life. I was waiting alright, like my old jaguar,\* to pounce on any juicy entrepreneurial opportunity.

Not a geisha to pass up less pragmatic opportunities, I turned my charms on a new busboy at work, a teenaged Cambodian refugee named Liang, impressive for having been a helicopter pilot fighting the Khmer Rouge. I offered the heroic youth refuge and solace in my peaceful jungle, which he enthusiastically accepted, and added a new country to my collection. The next day Liang disappeared, again a refugee, and gay waiter Steve remarked at the service bar that this time it looked like I'd hit the ball clean out of the park. But I didn't mean to...

Thanksgiving season provided several opportunities to be grateful. I offered hospitality, at least for a night, if they stayed over, to admirers met at dinner, at the restaurant, and even on the street—like the lost tourist kid I found in the Circle while walking Heidi. I lodged Ben luxuriously for three nights, attending to all his wants, which were unusually insistent. When he left for New York, I enormously appreciated Ben's amatory energy and endurance, but then he was only nineteen. His exuberance made me feel my age.

During November, with unpredictable attendance, the Supper Club routine got a little dicey, and we instituted a sign-up sheet. Folks would volunteer for a day to chef, and only then would diners sign up with any guests for that day. On an early December Tuesday off from work, I fixed a big New Orleans shrimp boil which drew in Ken and his Richard, Chas, and Lou, as well as our resident geishas with a half-dozen guests and ever-faithful Lewis and Carolyn.

Among Rob's guests was long-haired, green-eyed Cary who laid claim to the place on my right, telling me how he was an artist from Arizona—doing a few commercial designs, but at the moment working as a telephone lineman. He did look a bit like Glen Campbell. Cary had heard great things about me from Rob and had long wanted to meet me. I was glad to hear my geisha reputation hadn't suffered for my rare appearances at Club suppers. He was surprised how the spicy shrimp made his lips burn, and I told him the only cure for the burn was intensive kissing. After brandies in the parlor, Cary came upstairs with me for the cure.

When I got off Wednesday night, Cary was waiting for me outside the restaurant, and so it went the next week and some. I told him about my favorite artist Gustave Doré, showing off my big folios. Not having learned about Doré in Art History, he was impressed, particularly by the exotic landscapes in "Attala" and the fallen angels in "Paradise Lost." Cary offered to give me drawing lessons, and in his sketchbook I happily drew his lithe nudity in my awkward, slapdash way, which he liked. He drew my face from odd angles with dramatic shadings.



*A Glimmer from Cary's Candle*

After our lesson, Cary tore out all our pages and asked to burn them in my fireplace, explaining that he was an artist for art's sake and never kept any of his work. While the flames flickered, he said he didn't ever want to leave anything of himself behind—just be a candle giving light only for as long as it burned. After each drawing session, we held a fire ceremony.

Then one night he said he had to go—I was a sorcerer trapping him in my spells. Innocent of the charge, I let him go with a kiss. He didn't know I'd found a design of his on a shopping bag from a department store, an iconic DC scene, one last glimmer from Cary's candle, something of him left in my heart. I hope he doesn't mind my secretly hoarding his light.

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\* Concerning the old jaguar, see LORD WIND, Chapter 1, THE JAGUAR.



When Cary left, I was unusually distressed. Used to admirers quickly expending their enthusiasm like passing glory, in our two weeks I'd grown accustomed to Cary's face, his smiles, his frowns, and at moments I'd even imagined a life of art with him, forsaking my stylish geisha career... When I moaned about feeling abandoned like Ariadne, Charles told me to get real. In a gay man's life of art, he said, men were interchangeable—only briefly, situationally relevant.

Besides, I heartily disagreed with Cary's self-destructive kind of art for art's sake. I treasured all my drawings and poems, each piece of art a reflection of a moment in my time, concrete and alive, like my daughters. I'd never destroy or deny them, even if stupid or awkward like my teenage novels. Just imagine how bare and boring the world would be if the great artists destroyed their work: Michelangelo, Mozart, Shakespeare—Doré! It boggled my mind.

Charles figured Cary wanted to erase his art because he didn't believe in himself or his vision and worried the poor guy might even decide to blow his candle out. I wondered if maybe Cary felt trapped in my magic because I'd kept him from running away from himself.

I cast what few spells I knew to protect Cary wherever he might run and then moved on into the new Saturday. It involved preparations for my trip for Christmas with the folks in North Carolina, now only five days away, on next Thursday. Rob got thorough training that morning on the care and feeding of the begonia tribe and green growing round every window, and I waited out two more lunch and dinner shifts at Gusti's for five days off. By later Monday morning, Lavenia was loaded and straining at her leash, eager for the short dash down to Durham.

The folks' new house in Durham really was new and huge, set way at the back of the lot with a whole forest as front yard. Nana took me to an upstairs room with two bunkbeds, one for me to share with nephew Bobby on top, the other for Jake and Aimée. Barbara got there with the girls later in the afternoon—with boyfriend Jack, who signed into a local motel. Martha and Gene with Bobby and Bea had come down from DC the day before with her two Shih Tzus.

In our two-day lull before the familial Christmas storm, Papa and Nana showed us around Duke University, a neo-medieval campus not quite as gaudy as Loyola in New Orleans or as splendidly Gothic as at the University of Washington. As universities went, this no longer academic person thought Duke looked pretty high class. Papa already liked being a professor there a lot more than at the University of Michigan.

We took group walks on a nearby golf course with dogs, played with the kids at ball, tag, and archery in the big backyard, and inside did puzzles, drew pictures, and fought over endless games of Monopoly. After their bedtime, we adults played sprightly games of bridge and Parcheesi, my least favorite pastime. I also put in several hours with a rake clearing the forest's winter litter and leaves well away from the front of the house, a quite enjoyable pastime.

On Christmas Eve, I reluctantly went along with the family, otherwise fairly a-religious, to a festival of carols at a local church, where I ignored the dogma and joined in on the rejoicing. In spite of my heathen self, I felt a warm glow standing with my arms around daughters singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" At least it wasn't Midnight Mass... When I went up for bed, the kids were still excitedly awake in their bunks, but I soon shushed them off to Slumber land.

After a huge breakfast and a too-long delayed, chaotic present-opening, Barbara called Nana, Martha, and me into a bathroom conference where she announced that Jack had proposed to her and asked us if she should marry him. I held my tongue until mother and sister approved the suitor, and then the ex-husband said, "If he can make you happy, sure!" Back out in the dining room, Barbara proudly announced the unanimous decision, and we drank a toast to the groom-to-be, who was speechlessly pleased.

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