

BO PEEP'S SHEEP
A Short Story by Richard Balthazar

Wednesday evening's dance was special because Elizabeth came up from Albuturkey to play a mesmerizing mix of vigorous rhythms. When I arrived, Delia was already there sitting on her heels, arms undulating gracefully, in her gauzy flowered dress looking sensuous with a greeting smile. I was sorry not to see her son Paddy or his poly-paramours in the crowd. In the accelerating tempos I again became a deity of dance, a godling I'm calling in my Aztec fixation Piltzincoyotl, the Young Coyote, but that's a different story. The spell of Elizabeth's splendid music broke down in the late third rhythm when she started a monotonous metronomic beat that messed with my alpha rhythms.

So, I retreated to the porch to relax in the gathering evening, wondering where my other familiars were this summer night, in particular, limber young Victor who hadn't shown up for the past few weeks. I was pleased to see Larry's van swing into the parking lot. He greeted me with a hug: Corazón had a birthday party. I asked how their romance was cooking, and he blushed: All the way! : For real? : Yeah...— Oh, Uncle Rich, I'm so happy! : I'm sure glad it worked. : And I found a great apartment!—A condo sublet down the street from St. Mike's. : And your job at the Chavez Center? : Couldn't be better.—But why are you sitting out here? : Waiting for some real dance music.—It got too frenetic for me. : Sounds okay now though.”

We boogied out onto the dance floor at a gallop. The Young Coyote frolicked wildly, shaking his mythical rattles, and some while later collided face-on with Delia and a famous hug. Our frequent hugs getting longer and closer recently, this one was over a minute of sharing open-hearted energies, and I felt a super-sexual connection to this lovely woman.

We whirled away into our dances refreshed. Countless ecstatic moments of motion later, I turned to see Victor over by the entrance gyrating loosely. We shared affectionate smiles, and then Young Coyote danced rhythmic rituals of my own for an ecstatic good while. Larry pranced by at one point, happily, wiggling a warm grin, and bounced off away. Later I took an ecstasy break for some moments to watch Victor's interesting twists and jerks, the cute kind. Well into Elizabeth's fifth rhythm, slower and soulful, I followed Larry out into the hall for farewell.

He was supposed to pick up Corazón from her party soon and rushed off with a hug and filial kiss on my cheek. I tend to leave more slowly, searching for my old sandals, always having to go back in for my ancient canteen, discovering said worn sandals in the wrong cubbyhole, and at last sitting down to put them on. I felt well satisfied with the flow of the evening's ecstasy and looked forward to drawing some more on my Aztec dancer, whose name I now knew.

Then lanky young Victor came out and shyly sat down nearby to put on his red and black athletic shoes, once fancy but old and scuffed. His black hair was getting longer now, shaggier, the shadow of a mustache darkening his sinuous adolescent lip, a lovely ephebe of sinuous hip as well. I said I'd missed his cool moves these past weeks, and he smiled sadly: I can't afford to come all the time—only sometimes... Now the ecstatic dance group's sliding scale of suggested donation is eminently generous, but...

My sympathy for his plight was real but meant little: Money's hard to come by. : So what's your name again?—I forget. : Rich—some say Uncle Rich. : Oh, yeah, that's right.— Well...—Uncle Rich, you think you could give me a ride home? : Maybe, but where? Victor smiled widely: Gee, thanks—Down off Airport Road.—I really appreciate... : My pleasure, brother. (I was proud of this foray into contemporary male bonding.) Victor folded his hands to me in gratitude, and I gestured blessings on him likewise.

In the car heading down Rufina, I pried into Victor's so young generation: So, Victor, how old are you anyway? : Seventeen.—Senior next year at Santa Fe High. : Grades? : Real good. : Girlfriends? : Some, a few... : Let me guess—basketball? : Yeah, but I'm no good at it. : What are you good at? : Nothing much. : But you love to dance, and you're a great dancer. : Really?—I'm not as smooth as you. : That's true, but you've got an angular grace. First there had been that energetic thrill of Delia's hug, a new feeling in my long history of homo-centric connections, and now this almost abstract attraction to a mere lad, an ephebe, a familiar feeling in that history. Senile desire is pointless and easily dismissed for more important matters.

Finding Victor's house was one of those matters. Through the maze of streets in their southside subdivision, his directions got us there easily, while I tried to keep track of turns to get me back out to Jaguar Road or Airport. He asked me to let him off at a corner, and he'd walk the rest of the way. I didn't ask why—no problemo just turning the corner and up one more block. Feeling expansive, I offered instead: Come out next week, and I'll pay something for you.: I'll try.—Thanks so much, Uncle Rich—I'll try. : Do that.—I'll be looking for you.—Later.

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I kept my eye out for Victor for the next few weeks but to no avail. Meanwhile, the dance evenings, both Wednesdays and Sundays, were ecstatic enough, and I enjoyed sharing them with a growing group of familiars. One was a clean-cut, dark-haired guy who'd start dancing very reservedly, eventually working himself up into a frenzy. Sensing my attention, he'd often give me appreciative smiles. Another, a little lady named Amy who'd shown up at my yard sale, now welcomed me with little waves. The several young women I mentioned earlier with aggressive pelvises were still impressive—or better, intimidating.

One of them, a pretty gal with short curly hair, was quite tall, maybe 6'3," a monumental female who danced in a mostly bent position, reducing her imposing height but emphasizing her aggressive rump. It and her long arms and legs demanded a large personal space, so I always danced away to a safe distance. Achieving his frenzy, the clean-cut guy needed almost as much space. My moves took up a smaller area and minimized collisions, which still happened at times, both of us dismissing them with laughs or apologetic touches. Colliding once with a tall fellow, my arm wound up wrapped around his slender waist for a rare moment of accidental intimacy. After that, we shared frequent friendly glances as familiars.

As often as not, Larry and Corazón danced with us, and I took pride in having brought them together. Her stylish outfits, luxurious hair, and small pelvis were exquisite, and Larry's pride in his partner was palpable. Though Delia danced almost every evening, her son Paddy and his two lovers, Shari and Sun Spear, only showed up occasionally. As the weeks rolled by, bringing their departures for separate college ever closer, the three clung ever closer to each other. Delia hoped they were fairly well resigned to the end of their *ménage*. I couldn't really regret that our bringing them together had set them up for the inevitable grief of parting.

On a hot August late morning, I made a run to the Smith's grocery on Cerrillos in search of my favorite English muffins, which were out of stock in the St. Michael's store. Nabbing half a dozen packs of them, I used the Lujan Street exit, waiting for the light to turn right. Across the two lanes of cars waiting to turn left, I was horrified to see Victor standing on the median with a little cardboard sign: Homeless—Please help. Destitute folks doing that at intersections wasn't all that unusual, what with so many "unhoused" in the city, but Victor... Distraught, I turned the corner and at the pizza joint just up the way zipped back into the vast parking lot.

Stopping by the gas station, I walked over to my young friend: Victor!—What's this..?—Are you okay? His hair looked a mess, as did his clothes: I don't know what to do, Rich. He

showed me his cardboard sign, then looked down wretchedly at the Balloon Fiesta tote-bag at his feet stuffed with a few more clothes, and a plastic bottle of water. : How long have you been on the street, brother?—What happened? Victor smiled at me bravely: Three days now—I slept under the bushes along the Acequia Trail. I made him bring his things over to my car: We’ll figure out something, kiddo.—Don’t worry...—Have you eaten? : Not since yesterday.—But one guy just gave me a dollar... I gave him a hug: Good grief!—We’ll go find you some food.

The easiest place was Counter Culture on Baca Street. I ordered my usual portabella quesadilla, and Victor hesitantly asked for a super burger with everything. We sat out back at a picnic table away from the racket inside. Victor’s family life was a wreck—his mother a meth-head, totally dysfunctional and often violent, and his stepfather used heroin, a fat asshole. Victor worked parttime at an Allsup’s on Airport Road, and the asshole took his pay, calling it “rent.”

Last Saturday night, Victor had been so desperate he spent some of his pay on a movie out with a friend. When he got home short on cash, the fat asshole beat him up, but the gangly dancer kicked and slugged him in the face and escaped into the yard. Then the stepfather locked him out of the house and threw poor Victor’s few clothes out the window. My homeless friend ate heartily while he told me the horrific tale, but I lost all appetite for my quesadilla.

At home, I put Victor in the shower while I washed his jeans and shirts. He was thinner now than I recalled from the dances, understandably so, and when he was clean, I forced some chocolate and cookies on him, my only luxury snacks: You can stay here for a while, little brother—in the back room, but I’ve got to move out at the end of the month.—My landlord’s selling the place, and I’m moving closer in to downtown.

Victor feebly tried to decline my short-term offer, but I wouldn’t hear of it. : You can’t be sleeping under bushes, boy!—And what about your job? : I only work Thursday, Friday, and Saturday—but I don’t have any way to get there now.—I used to walk from home. : Worry not, my boy—I can drive you.—And maybe you can get transferred to one of the stores over here on Guadalupe. : That would be great! : We’ll work on it.

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Work was the operative word. Victor and I started that very afternoon, he helping me with the already well-underway packing for my move. This also included moving some patches of my iris to new beds for them at my new place, horticultural work he thought fascinating: I never dug a hole before!—it’s fun. : Sure is.—I once spent three years digging a huge hole with just a shovel and wheelbarrow. : You’re kidding! : No, 32 by 18 feet, 6 deep.—Made it into a sort of terrarium-greenhouse.—Back before you were born. : I’d like to dig a big canal, like across Florida and make a huge island. : Not a bad idea, Victor. Go for it!

Besides fantasies, we talked more about Victor’s predicament: I stayed Saturday night on the couch with an old lady I know down the street.—She fed me breakfast and dropped me off at St. Elizabeth’s, but they were full up.—Besides, I’ve heard about bad things happening to kids there. : And on the street. Planting the Immortality whites, he sighed heavily: Enough of that at home. : Really? : Yeah, the asshole tried to... to molest me. : Tried? : I always fought him off.—Made him really mad, but he kept trying. : What did your mother think? : Mama never thinks anything, just wanders around crazy and sick from all the drugs. I wanted to weep for him.

With that, we wrapped up our digging for the day, and I took Victor back to my place. In the car, I observed that he had no phone, and he sadly explained that he couldn’t afford one—or a computer: In the pandemic, that distance-learning in tenth grade was a disaster.—And I feel like a caveman without a phone. : Well, you’re a lucky fellow.—You’ve got a real life, such as it is. : You’re probably right, Uncle Rich.—I don’t have to worry about other people “liking” me.

At the apartment, I put him down in the back bedroom for a safe nap. While he snoozed, I boxed up more books in the basement storage room and bemoaned the lot of so many youth nowadays. Their lives were so utterly unlike anything I experienced in my own age of innocence nearly seventy years ago. I'd known nothing about molestation or drugs—or smart phones. Hell, no one had ever even looked at me crosswise, much less laid a finger on my young bod, and smoking cigarettes was the cardinal vice. My, how the times they do change.

Unused to company in my hermitage, I threw us together a supper, my usual tamales and salad. Victor told me his nap-dream about digging a hole and piling the dirt up in the shape of a bird that flew away. So, I pulled out my ancient book on Indian mounds to show him the bird-effigy mounds in Wisconsin. Afterwards, while I piddled at my dancer-drawing, he curled up on the sofa and read about ancient earthworks. At my usual early bedtime hour, I set him up with my collection of movies and video player on the back porch and bid him goodnight.

At breakfast, I asked Victor, now well-combed and clean-clothed, what he planned to do now that he was homeless. : Just keep on working.—Oh, shit!—School starts next week...—Uncle Rich, what can I do? : Don't panic!—Something will come up. To change the subject, I asked what Victor wanted to be in life; he had no idea: I just want to be happy. : That's hard, little brother.—Best try and not be unhappy. : I only feel that way when I'm dancing.—Like I'm in another world. : I call it the Flower World.—I enjoy your unique dancing style.—Such wild twists with your legs and arms stiff and flapping around! : Oh, no, do I really look like that?

: Sort of...—Why don't you try bending your elbows and knees some, you know, be a bit more fluid.—Oh, and the hands are really important.—Don't just let your fingers flop around like noodles.—Hand gestures are maybe our most expressive body language. He jumped up and tried a cocked-hip, limp-armed, pointed-finger, raised-knee move reminiscent of John Travolta, but I didn't laugh: I think you've got it!—Let the wild man loose tonight.—It's Wednesday again. : Oh, Uncle Rich, I need to dance so bad!: You will, my boy.—Peter's playing tonight.

I suggested we hit Savers to get him some school clothes, and on the way, I asked about his real father. : Daddy disappeared when I was like three, and I can't really remember him.—Back then Mama was real sweet, but when I was eight, she got into those drugs...—...and she got arrested for robbing a store.—While she was in prison, I lived with Grandpa Tomas.—He was crippled, and I took good care of him, cooking and cleaning.—When Mama got out three years later, she took up with that asshole Jorge.—And right then Grandpa died.—So they took me back.—Back into hell... : How do you feel about being out of there now? : Totally great!

Victor retired the tote bag and stashed his new jeans and shirts in one of my old suitcases. When I took off for grocery store and errands, he went for a long walk on the River Trail to “think about things.” After going to Ace Hardware for super phosphate for my irises, I was a busybody and talked to Victor's boss at the Airport Road Allsup's store. The greying, overweight fellow was sympathetic to our boy's situation and said he'd talk to other managers about maybe moving Victor to another store. But he should still come to work tomorrow... To show my gratitude, I bought a big bag of cookies.

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Victor came back shortly after I'd moved some more of my iris to their new home and hit the gym. His thoughtful walk had taken him way down the river behind the old racetrack and led him to decide he'd just have to make a whole new exciting life for himself. I told him forgetting the regrettable past was the best thing to do with it, and focusing on the future was the best way to do that. In that positive frame of mind, over our light supper I described my hopeful talk with his boss, and we arranged to get him to work by 10 tomorrow morning.

On the way to Fox Road for the evening's dance extravaganza, Victor thanked me for doing that for him: And for all this other stuff.—You're so kind! : There's no reason to be unkind to you, young nephew. : You do feel like my uncle... : More like your great uncle. : What I really need now is a place to live! : Be patient.—It'll happen.—But ignore that right now and just think about dancing, shaking your booty. : Is this Peter a really good DJ? : Um, 'really good' is a fair description.—He calls himself Bubba-Boom-Boom. : You're kidding! : He's the Boom-Boom-Buddha... We giggled like little kids.

Shucking our footwear in the foyer, we met up with Delia and her sweet threesome doing the same. After our much anticipated, lingering hug, there were hugs all around, and when I'd introduced Victor, he got a round of them too. He was shy at first about hugging Shari and Sun Spear, and when he got through hugging Paddy, he fell into Delia's long, calming embrace. Free of her arms, Victor turned and hugged me too, warmly. I very much appreciated this display of physical affection and held his lithe body for as long as polite. Paddy and his two lovers were troubled, quite naturally so, by the prospect of parting for their colleges on Monday coming, and couldn't keep their hands off of each other.

Bubba's music wasn't yet at his famous boom-boom level, but it was a great, insidious lead-in for loosening up. When I could tear myself away from watching Paddy and his pair of paramours climbing intimately all over each other, I managed to drift off into my dance-trance, to free my inner god and ride the music like a glistening dragon. Equally fantastic were other feelings fueled by the Buddha's boom-booms. It was great to see Victor enjoying his own trance, dancing with occasional attempts to loosen up his elbows and knees. About halfway through the schedule (6:30 to 8:30), a tall, sandy-haired youth came onto the floor and started dancing in an appealing, gangly way.

Looking closer, I recognized him as the kid who'd come into the sauna that afternoon. Modestly wrapped in a towel, but definitely eye-catching. Out in the locker room, he'd dropped the towel to get on the scale and presented a vision of pulchritude not soon to be forgotten. Now here he was close beside me, reviving my vivid memory with sinuous moves of his perfect body under that green T-shirt and worn jeans. My dance was thus distracted for some while by overt desires of the flesh, my first in a great long time, intoxicatingly delicious but evanescent. The shot of testosterone helped me lose myself again in the sheer physicality of dance, reveling in the sweep of my arms and swing of my hips.

Too soon, it seemed, Bubba's dance program ran its course into meditative tonalities that felled most dancers onto the floor. I retreated to the lobby where I could sit in a civilized chair and listen. Soon Victor joined me, exhilarated but exhausted by the ecstasy, and while we prepared to leave, Delia and her brood came out to do likewise. She assured us that we'd see each other again on Sunday evening—before the Trinity had to disintegrate on Monday, off to their various schools. Many hugs all around, and I lingered perhaps too long in Sun Spear's strong embrace, enjoying a momentary, perfectly reasonable surge of overt desire.

While we waited for the light to turn down Henry Lynch Road, Victor reached over and stroked my forearm resting on the steering wheel: The music was really great!—Uncle Rich, I forgot all about my problems. : Well, don't go remembering them now, kiddo.—Better to think about fun things to do.—Want to watch another movie? : Maybe...—What do you want to do? : Oh, I've got a couple emails to write, or maybe draw some more.

We were rolling along Agua Fria before Victor spoke again, hesitantly: Uncle Rich, I saw the way you were looking at that tall handsome guy—and at Sun Spear... : Simply lust, little brother. : And I wouldn't mind if you...—if you wanted to...—to molest me! : My goodness,

Victor!—Is that what you want? : Well, if you want to...—I mean, it would be okay... : You've already thanked me nicely enough, my boy.—And I'd only consider 'molesting' you if you really, truly wanted me to... His silence was eloquent. I laughed: But even if you did, I'm pretty sure my train's done left the station, darlin'.—If you get my drift...

While I wrote my email letters, on my historical recommendation, Victor chose to watch "Dr. Strangelove," a movie from long before he was born, and he was enthralled, amused, and horrified. The poor kid had never seen Peter Sellers before, and I promised him a festival of Pink Panthers. Leaving him to my spare back bedroom, I retired to my barren, packed-up boudoir. Before dropping off, I lay for some minutes in wonderment that even with my fire lit so brightly by the sauna guy and Sun Spear, I'd virtuously refrained from despoiling an innocent, delectable, and willing ephebe. Of course, my train had indeed left the station.

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Thursday morning we were up early enough for a bit of breakfast. I gave Victor a big bowl of granola with dried fruits and nuts, which he accepted with profuse thanks: I usually don't eat much of a breakfast. : That's why you're so thin, kiddo.—Eat!—You've got a long day of work ahead of you. I explained that we'd be meeting my friend Don at Dulce for coffee and pastry, and then I'd drive him to Allsup's for his job: Don's an old gay man, 92, and he'll like meeting a cute kid like you.—Don't worry though.—His train left the station years ago, but he still likes to look at the schedule...

Victor laughed, attacked his granola with vigor, and frowned: In a week I've got to go back to school!—What am I going to do, Uncle Rich? : Nothing right now, my boy.—Something good will happen in its own good time. : I can't help worrying! : Well, don't.—Problems are like Little Bo Peep's sheep.—Leave 'em alone, and they'll come home, one way or another. While my young friend chewed on that, I, however, worried maybe I wasn't helping him much with my faith in the benevolence of the universe. At least I could fatten him up a bit.

At Dulce, Don was waiting for me on the porch and was pleasantly surprised to meet Victor, as titillated as I expected. Over our cinnamon rolls and coffee, he listened to the boy's sad tale of family dysfunction and getting kicked out onto the street. Don has sons of his own, older fellows now, and he got upset hearing about the abuse and drugs. Victor sighed deeply: My only happy time was those years taking care of my grandpa.—He really loved me... Don and I exchanged sympathetic glances, and he patted Victor's delicate hand: Keep your chin up, Vic.—Things will work out. I was grateful for his supporting my faith in providence.

Dropping Victor off at Allsup's, I said I'd be there at 6:30 to pick him up and urged him to talk right away with the manager about moving to another, closer store. Then I went back to my frantic transfer of iris to the new place. Just as I finished planting the first batch, my fabulous Return to Oz, my phone rang, and it was Don. He reported talking to our mutual, even older, gay black friend Harold Green whose health had recently declined seriously: Harold's decided now that he's got to find elder care, and I mentioned young Victor taking care of his grandfather. : Hey!—What a great idea! : Yeah, he wants us to bring him by this evening after his job. I went back to digging another bed, this one for my incredible Battle Star, thrilled that the good old universe was apparently coming up with something promising for our homeless boy.

My day was productive, two more iris varieties moved and the last of my moveable stuff packed up in boxes, well ahead of the movers who'd be here a week from this Saturday. There was even time for a gym workout before meeting Victor at Allsup's. He got in the car downcast: Mr. Cook can't find another store for me to move to. : Too bad!—But don't worry.—We're going somewhere that might solve this problem. : What? How? : Just wait and see...

At Harold's place, a big house on Camino Claro, he met us at the door using his walker, a substantial black man with white hair who otherwise didn't look quite 95, and welcomed us into his commodious, stylish living room. Still unaware of what was going on, Victor shook Harold's black hand and looked with wonder around the room at all the sculptures and paintings. Seating us around a steel and glass coffee table, Harold looked Victor over approvingly and got right down to business: So, Don tells me you're good at taking care of old guys.

Sensing what was up, Victor described his years with Grandpa Tomas and how happy he'd been there, and Harold was easily convinced of his cooking and cleaning talents: Of course, you'll do the grocery shopping and laundry too.—I'll pay \$15 an hour, and you'll live in the back bedroom. The boy stared, open-mouthed in surprise, and I eased the moment: It's a lot nicer than mine, kiddo.—And this isn't far from Santa Fe High. Don pitched in: See, I told you things would work out.—They always do, one way or another.

So emotional he could barely talk, Victor stuttered: I...I'm so...Oh, God!—You're all so kind! He jumped up and ran around the coffee table to give Harold a grateful hug. The ancient man beamed: And you're so beautiful... Don laughed and took Victor's arm: Try and not be so pretty, young fellow.—Harold's got a weak heart! Victor mussed his hair and scowled: How's this? Our host grinned: Still too cute!—But you'll do...

: I won't have to work at the store anymore! : No, you won't, kiddo.—I'll take you in tomorrow morning so you can quit with good grace. : And then you can go to the grocery store for me, Sunny Boy.—I'm out of grapefruit and some other stuff. Hugging us all, our sunny boy started crying happy tears. Well pleased with his charitable efforts, Don got on his phone to order pizzas from Espiritu. I drove over to pick them up, and we dined at Harold's grand glass table under a chandelier of abstract metal shapes. Victor was impressed by all the high style, profusely complimenting the *objets d'art*, which Harold called just some old junk, like himself.

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After his quitting at the store, which Mr. Cook took with calm understanding, and his grocery shopping at the big Smith's on Cerrillos, I got Victor to Harold's place by 11:30. He ushered us in with big smiles over his walker and led us to the back bedroom for our boy to deposit his (used) suitcase. Victor sat on the antique four-poster bed with log-cabin quilt and looked around at the art and ornate furniture in amazement: This is the fanciest bedroom I've ever seen! Harold showed us his own down the hall, fancy enough for a queen's sleeping chamber—appropriately. Victor started his new job by fixing us lunch, both of us old men perfectly happy with avocados, toast, and tea.

On our tour of the rest of the house, elegant antiques everywhere, Harold showed us his “ballroom,” a large room with tall windows and a parquet floor, Victorian settees along the walls, and on one, a grand mahogany cabinet with columned shelves. Harold waved at the high-tech pieces of an expensive sound system and rows of CDs scattered around on the shelves: I like jazz mostly, but African and Middle Eastern music too.

Victor couldn't contain his excitement and admiration: Real African music? : As real as it gets.—Want to hear some? Harold selected a CD and put it into the machine, unleashing a flurry of drumbeats that set Victor and me to vibrating. Soon Victor broke into his lanky dance, and Harold applauded: Too beautiful, Vic!—Remember my weak heart! Embarrassed, the sunny boy stopped dancing and hugged Harold again.

Our tour continued to gleaming marble bathrooms, a cozy library in medieval style, and a spacious laundry room, all evoking Victor's awe and wonder. I left Harold to his post-prandial nap and Victor to wash our lunch dishes and do a load of his new employer's laundry. On the

way home, I gave thanks that my optimism had proven so productive in Victor's dire situation. That afternoon saw the last of my iris, my favorite Heartbreak Hotel, moved to a new bed, some grocery shopping of my own, and a solid workout and sauna. All the while, I kept thinking about my fair lad in his happy new home. Eating my solitary dinner, I missed his lovely presence. In just two days, like Henry Higgins, I'd grown accustomed to his face. While indulging in my usual chocolate dessert, I was surprised by the phone, and even more by it being Victor.

: Harry and I went to Century Bank, and he helped me open an account. : He went with you?—How? : In his Mercedes!—What a car! : Surely he doesn't still drive... : No, I drove.—Got my license last year in Driver's Ed.—And then he bought me this neat Cricket phone!—My own phone! : Wow!—Now you're all set! : And guess what!—He's letting me throw a dance party tomorrow in his ballroom!—To celebrate my new home.—You've got to help me invite folks from the dance groups. : I'll see what I can do. : And find somebody for DJ... : I bet I can get Michael for you. : That tall blond guy? : That's the one. : His music is super!

My short-notice invitations were all accepted: Delia and her three youngsters, Larry and Corazón, Bear, and Geno, who all agreed to invite others. With luck we'd get twenty people there. For the two hours, Michael would facilitate the music for the party for a hundred bucks—and bring some other dancers. Victor was thrilled with the success of my efforts and set to work on a spread of fruits, snacks, and punch for the crowd. Harold was totally with the program: I can't wait to have a house full of dancing kids!—Be sure and get Don to come too. : Yeah, he'd enjoy dancing kids, but it's hard to get him out after dark. : He's such an old fart!

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It all went like clockwork. The dance party was a huge success, and Harold was thrilled to lounge on a settee with Don and watch us (mostly) youngsters prance. From Paddy, Victor got the inspiration to maybe get into producing events, a direction I heartily seconded. Why not? Sunday evening at Body was our going-away dance for the polyamorous trio, much hugging and high spirits with Bear's saxophone accompanying beautifully bald Omi's hypnotic rhythms. Paddy, Shari, and Sun Spear pledged to come back for Sunday evenings at least once a month—of course, a perfect excuse for regular intimate get-togethers.

Monday was busy for me, almost all day, hauling miscellaneous smaller stuff I wouldn't bother the movers with over to my daughter's place to stash them temporarily. I wouldn't let myself disturb Victor on his new phone, not wanting to be a hovering great uncle. Tuesday, a lazy day for me with everything done, just waiting for the movers on Saturday, he called me mid-morning, bubbling with enthusiasm: Uncle Rich, it's all so wonderful, so happy! : That's what you said you wanted to be, remember? : Yeah, yesterday was my first regular work day, and it was so much fun! Harry's the funniest guy!

Enjoying his new phone, Victor described his new routine of housework and was cutely excited over finding Harold's big Joy of Cooking. From it, for their lunch and dinner, he'd made easy recipes. To show me Harold's comic side, my fair lad told two of his jokes, not salacious, funny, but not enough so to remember—as I usually find jokes to be. Victor overflowed with excited ideas: ...And I'd like to maybe be a chef! : Be a chef as a hobby, honey.—Producers make a lot more moola. : God, there are so many things I could be! : Righto!—That's why you've got to shop around, check out all kinds of options, before you make up your mind. Victor said bye to go look in the classic cookbook for something special to whip up for lunch.

Victor's fun must have continued unabated through Wednesday. When he showed up on Fox Road (with Harold in the Mercedes!), he was positively exuberant. His employer gleefully looked forward to watching the action: Heck of a lot better than anything on TV anymore! : At

least watching Victor dance is.—He's definitely entertaining. The subject youth whirled away into his remarkable twists and waving of arms and legs. Our dance was to celebrate his starting school the next morning. As we prepared to leave after, he was still excited: And I've had another great idea, Uncle Rich.—I can start an ecstatic dance club at school.—Like meet on Saturday evenings at Harold's. : Great idea, kiddo! Harold guffawed: I gave it to him!—Don't they have clubs for all sorts of crazy things like that nowadays?

Back to school, young Victor had to work his homemaking responsibilities around that schedule and was consequently a busy bee both Thursday and Friday. He found balancing the two occupations exhilarating. Don and I were invited to Friday's dinner, Don's favorite fish and chips for him and our host and linguine with clam sauce for the *chef et moi*. After dessert, Harold likes a cup of coffee: It usually keeps me awake long enough to get to bed.—Which reminds me.—Before I keel over, I have an announcement.—Vic and I are getting married. Our sunny boy giggled: We're engaged! Party tomorrow night!

While we two old friends stared in astonishment, Harold beamed at his protégé: I never in all my life ever imagined I could marry a man, but now it's legal.—Sure a lot quicker and easier to marry than adopt. We two old friends were at a loss for words, but Victor was very happy: I'll be 18 next month, and it's legal! : Yeah, for once a useful legality.—In New Mexico marriage means common property, so Vic will inherit, and in the meantime we can share everything.—Besides, historically, lots of marriages were simply for financial or political purposes.

Don diplomatically asked if maybe Harold wasn't being in too much of a hurry. : Hell, Donnie!—At my age you gotta be in a hurry.—I've still got three weeks to hang on until we can tie the knot.—You and Richie here have family to get your stuff, but I've got nobody.—Even all my distant cousins have croaked.—This way Vic will be secure for the first time, can finish high school, go to college, start off life not at a disadvantage.—Like my grandson but legally my spouse. Don chuckled: And your caregiver. I called the tactic inspired and then got nosey: By the way, Harold, if I might ask, where'd your money come from? : Dentist.—Sixty years.

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Saturday my movers arrived and in a matter of three hours had moved everything to my new place. Victor's engagement dance party that evening was great fun, drawing Harold and me in, as well as Delia, Larry and Corazón, and four of his friends from school, three girls and a guy, the core of the school dance club Victor wanted to start. He practiced the audio technology he'd learned from Michael last week, streaming great dance music through Harold's computer into his powerful speakers. I asked to join their club and became an official chaperone.

Michael was playing on Sunday evening and facilitated a splendid ecstasy of motion. This being my third dance in the week, I got tired a little early and sat beside Harold in his wheelchair along the wall to be entertained. The sandy-haired sauna guy was back. Before the pretty girl started playing her sad guitar (as always soporifically), we took off, and at my Toyota and their Mercedes, Victor exulted: Uncle Rich, now I know what I really want to be! : What?—An astronaut? : No...—I want to be a geriatric nurse! : I'm afraid, you'll have to wait a long time, many years, decades even, for that. : No, silly!—A nurse for geriatric patients!

Maneuvering his wheelchair around to slide into the car seat, Harold prophesied: He'll go to Nursing School at UNM and get some advance credits for it this year from Santa Fe High.—I just have to live long enough to enjoy his professional services! : I'll do my best to see that you do, Harry, promise... For several grateful moments, I just sat quietly in my car contemplating the whimsical benevolence of the universe.

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