**PRINCE RIC**

By

Kevin Michael Irvine

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*for Michael*

*“Love alters not when it alteration finds”*

*William Shakespeare, Sonnet 115*

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i.

**I. MORATORIUM**

People are like movies. When they’re good, I can fall in love. When they’re bad, I walk out. But the possibility soon flickered on the large format screen inside my head that some people, like some movies, might be worth re-visiting.

It was 1991. The Soviet Union collapsed, Freddie Mercury died of AIDS, and TERMINATOR 2 smashed box office records. On Friday, September 13th, Ric Smith burst into my film editing room at 1:30pm. He was definitely like a movie. Square shouldered, he stood about six feet. His cyan eyes were the marquee to a soul wherein lived all the heavyweights: *Action, Adventure, Romance, Mystery, Comedy!* Those eyes had lured me 12 years before at NYU, and had hooked me into the Bigge Advertising Agency in midtown Manhattan where we created TV commercials for his dad, Malcolm. We pedaled floor wax, car wax, tennies, wedgies, hand wipes, butt wipes, you-name-it and more to North and parts of South America. We sold everything!

Aesthetically, he was the best looking chick-magnet I’d ever met, so I kept him close at Happy Hour. When Ric smoldered, his left nostril flared more than the right. If he looked like he had his nose in the air, it was curiosity more than arrogance. At that second, I was ankle-deep in yards of 35mm motion picture film uncoiling at my feet, and running behind editing a national, 30-second, $140,000 singing-cow TV commercial due to be broadcast on “*The Evening News”* at 6:57pm. When he saw me standing in the pile of film, he smoldered and stepped in with me. “Why is this shit on the floor?” he said. He smelled like Juicy Fruit© gum. His fingers combed through his copious black hair which was a mess, and wasn’t.

“It’s where shit belongs!” I said. No joke, we both had a bad attitude about our product, New Maid Margarine, whose singing-cow was a 1500-pound heifer named Hattie. Don’t ask why singing cows sell margarine. They do. Ric trounced out of the pile of film, but the expensive cel animation of Hattie’s singing lips got caught in his cuff. He dragged the lips over to my desk and sat down. “I’m not going to let him get away with it, Hal!”

This rant was about his dad and our boss, Malcolm Anthony Smythe-Bigge. Ric was heir apparent to a modern corporate dynasty. Madison Avenue advertising had been almost invented by this man we called King Malcolm, owner and CEO of Bigge Advertising Agency, Inc. In the ancient, bloody arena of market share, all roads led to Malcolm, the undisputed king of worldwide advertising. His empire might have been the corporate equivalent of Camelot except that King Malcolm was about as far removed from King Arthur as Idi Amin from the Dalai Lama. Over the years, the company had transmuted from thriving, creative, team-managed style, to cutthroat monarchy with ironfisted king, rebellious prince, and squirrelly subjects all, playing cheap politics against each other with Shakespearean bile. Ric was in line to take over if he played the right cards, but he didn’t know a Bedpost Queen from a One-Eyed Jack. Instead, like a clumsy fire starter Ric made bad things happen. At NYU, he had volleyed the first official shot across his father’s bow by truncating his own name -- the formal English “Richard Terrence Smythe-Bigge” -- to “Ric Smith”. That blast had created a hole in the family boat which at the very least, had permanently sunk Father’s Day.

“Get away with what?” I said.

“You *know* he’s tied to every actress in town!”

Ric relished playing Mordred-like as Malcolm’s no-good, reluctant heir. Add to that Ric could have cared less about advertising. With his $250,000 annual salary plus bonuses, he was pouring his own money into his dream of being the greatest writer/producer Broadway and Hollywood would ever lay money on. While some men might give their second wife for the chance to see their son succeed in such a passionate business, King Malcolm put on blinders with Ric. In no way would he green-light any family money for Prince Ric’s spurious goals. Why? Because Malcolm secretly hated show business -- which was weird since his agency made so much money on Broadway and anything Broadway-related? At that time, we had no idea why.

Since both corporate survival and friendship depended on it, I had paid special attention to the Bigge family’s short history: in 1914, Rebecca Smythe, 16, an orphan from Bristol, England, met Wilfred Bigge, 17, a motorcycle racer from Wexford County, Ireland. She was a seamstress at Brighton Hall who had secret desires for airplanes, cars, motorbikes, or any metal that went fast. She loved machines. In contrast, Wilfred was a soldier of fortune who embodied chivalry. When Rebecca noticed Wilfred cutting patches across her lordship’s manicured lawn with his Triumph Model H motorbike, it was a blur that made family history. Within a year, Rebecca hooked up with Wilfred and they married. Within two, they produced two sons: Terrence and Malcolm. Within three, Wilfred -- already a decorated hero -- was shot in the Argonne Forest shielding 20 foot soldiers who he thought were English, but were actually German. So he was killed by his own men.

It was only a few revs and 17 years later when Terrence, the elder son and an eccentric, upcoming star in the London music hall scene, lost control of *his* Triumph motorbike and wrecked it in the foyer of the British Museum. Details are sketchy, but most newspapers reported that he died as a result of head wounds sustained at the base of the Rosetta Stone which in those days, sat just inside the main entrance. A bottle of single malt whiskey was found shattered inside his polka dot jersey.

Midway through World War II, Malcolm, the younger son, crashed his plane into *another* German forest, just about the same time as Rebecca was burying Terrence in Bunhill Fields, a cemetery famous for dead non-conformists.

After Malcolm limped home, Rebecca took him and expatriated to New York City. In the late 1940’s, Malcolm started a little advertising company. Fifteen years later, he met and married a Wellesley girl named Barbara. Within five years, Barbara Jr. was born, and a few years later, Richard Terrence. Within a trimester, the social-climbing parents gave the kids over to be raised by Rebecca, now called “Grams”. Meanwhile, Malcolm’s advertising company loomed large on the horizon and cast pendulous shadows over competitors and subjects alike. (In the case of his family, these became one in the same). But it was Malcolm’s fury over his brother Terry, with his loathsome career, and the sadness he had caused their mom that had so ferociously turned show business into Malcolm’s personal Gehenna!

There must have been some great howl to the universe when King Malcolm discovered that Prince Ric had become his own private Puck. On Madison Avenue as it is in Hollywood, there is one effective way to strangle an opponent: “Get him before he gets you.” Such was the m.o. of King Malcolm and his subjects, a group to which Ric was supposed to belong but didn’t. No mercy was to be shown any mutinous dog, especially Ric, who had had his share of both parental and corporate warnings. If those didn’t work, Malcolm had another business axiom: “Throw money at it.” King Malcolm had thrown all kinds of money at Prince Ric, who could have had his choice of Yale Law, Harvard Business, or a design degree from Brown, all of which Ric had pissed on. Eventually, King Malcolm had no choice but to face the fact Prince Ric was a stallion with the Three Big Bs: Beauty, Brains, and Balls. With no fence to keep him in, war rose up on the Madison Avenue horizon as Ric became the only person I knew beside myself who absolutely, positively knew what he wanted: show biz!

He had beautiful hands, Ric did, not a blemish or freckle anywhere. We used his hands to model refrigerator interiors, juicers, fried wontons, bug bombs, and paint sprayers, they were so fucking pretty. “Can I have my lips back?” Ric saw the film caught in his cuff like so many wide egg noodles. He un-spooled it with his model’s hands and held it up into the light of the window behind him. “This is the animation we spent all that money on?”

“Rush job, rush charges,” I said. He knew that if a TV spot wasn’t thought through in the first place, then no matter how much money you throw at it, the quality quotient descends in nano seconds. You just run out of time. “I don’t like Andy, that new animator, either,” he said. “He misrepresented himself. You don’t take an ex-coloring book sketch artist and turn the animation department over to him without doing some checking. These cow lips are left over from that kitty litter TV spot we did last summer!”

This was true. Our previous animator, Mel Block, had created a singing cat, kitty litter commercial last October. He’d animated a cat’s lips to make her look like she was singing about kitty litter and the spot had sold millions. Then Mel retired in December. Andy, his replacement, presumably tried to animate Hattie’s lips on the New Maid margarine spot, got in over his head, and secretly cannibalized Mel Block’s animated cat lips. Andy composited them over the cow’s singing lips in a suffocating attempt to make the cow look like she was singing about margarine when in fact Hattie was now singing about kitty litter. It was up to the soundtrack to pull off the difference (hence, the expression: “Fix it in the mix!”) Look at it this way: The margarine commercial blew in on Monday morning, Creative barfed out the script on Tuesday, Production rolled it Wednesday, I made the first cut Thursday, and Andy and the guys in animation worked overtime to get the animated lips to me by noon today for airing on *“The Evening News”* tonight. The project was tagged 40% higher than normal since it was a rush, so if it came out even close to respectable, the bitch factor was low. Thing was, there really were no normal spots. Everything we did, we did at the last minute. That’s what’s hell about post-production: you are the colon of so many indigestible decisions. Anyway, Ric’s bitch fest wasn’t serious. Even under the King’s thumb, he was still a Senior VP. His faux-ugly mood was no more than flexing of the corporate-responsibility muscle. The SVP title mandated that he justify his paycheck with a little executive whining now and then. Finally he said, “Fine!” He walked the piece of film with Hattie’s singing lips over to me and I spliced it into the rest of the commercial. Then, as I bent my head over the tools of the film editor’s trade (splicer, sync machine, Moviola, etc.), he leaned into the corner of my editing table and said, “I’ve got six calls out to three of our biggest actresses in town and nobody’s called back!”

“It’s lunchtime. Maybe they’re out with their agents doing it.”

“I think my father’s put the word out to their agents and told them to ignore our casting call!” Uncharacteristically, his fist struck the air on the “fa” part of “father.” It slammed down on the bench just as I was making a splice. The razorblade of my splicer sliced into the tip of my index finger and I jumped. *“Fuck!”* I flicked blood all over his pearly pink shirt. When he saw it, he grabbed me by the elbow and we charged down the hall to the men’s room. The faces of the account execs poking out their doors, each with their own chawing mouthful of food, became a surreal blur.

As the cold water gushed down over my finger, someone entered and Ric ordered *“Ice!”* There are moments in life in which time stretches and slows down. The thought

of all that blood spewing out into the great New York City sewer system made me feel light-headed and insignificant. Seconds turned into hours. My head reeled. I asked myself: What was it about me, a middle-class kid from South Boston that pricked Ric’s interest and care? Could it be the blood? We had written some skuzzy horror-film scripts.

Then somebody hurled Ric a first-aid kit. Ric said, “Get the nurse!” The men’s room door shut again. Ric grabbed my hand like a rare porterhouse, slammed it down on paper towels, and went to work yakking about his plans for our show. “Bonnie Shears’ *sister* told me Wednesday night at Charley O’s that she thought it was terrific! Think of it, Hal! Bonnie Shears’ *sister*! The hottest act Off Broadway!”

“Her sister?”

“Dumb shit, Bonnie Shears!” He squeezed my finger hard. “If we can get her, everything will fall into place.”

“You put the make on Bonnie Shears’ sister just to get to Bonnie Shears?”

“It wasn’t sex. It was business! I offered her points in the show if she’d get us Bonnie. She’s going to be the next Glenn Close, for God’s sake!” Suddenly he calmed down and said, “The bleeding is stopped, but I think you lost part of your finger.” (There go *my* chances at hand modeling). Then he ramped up again: “Hold this!” he said. Handing me a roll of surgical tape, he rolled a glob of gauze onto my throbbing victim. “How can I work with this Twinkie© on my hand?” I said. He yanked back the roll of tape and then, while wrapping up the gauze, bit down on the scissors, through which he continued to talk. “Auditions start tomorrow in the Village. We need a lead.”

“You want a star! I’ve never heard of Bonnie Gauze.”

“Bonnie *Shears*, Hal!”

New York is all Flash and Trash, Dance for the Man, etc. I wanted him to trust the

material. If our low-low budget, Off-Off Broadway show was going to make money, I thought it should be because of the show itself, not because of some elusive “box office draw,” some bimbo who in later interviews might build some cheap apocrypha around herself by claiming we wrote it “just for her.” I wanted to say, “Integrity, dude!” Had I said it, he might have listened. A dignity-sell might have even relieved some of his stress and made him believe more in the project. Instead I yelped, “You cut off my circulation!”

He did know best. An actor or actress with a so-called “name” would invite all sorts of angels in: agents, stage managers, lighting designers, supporting players, truly the entire spectrum of show business, including (bow heads) film investors.

If it was true that King Malcolm wanted his son’s defeat as badly as Prince Ric thought, if he would stoop to blackballing his own son within the acting community, then we *were* in trouble. There was no doubt King Malcolm had the clout. To New York actors, the best bread and butter in town were Malcolm’s TV commercials, print ads, and the like. They gave physical nourishment during artistic fasts. I wondered if Ric wasn’t getting a little paranoid. Still, I wouldn’t put it past his old man.

Suddenly, the men’s room door hurled open so violently, it banged against the wall and turned on the hand dryer. There in our midst stood the biggest nurse I have ever seen. There was a sound of urgency in Ric’s voice, “Here, Heidi!”

“What’s problem?” She said. She was a German import and built to stay that way. This Panzer of a woman tracked across the floor and aimed her cold stare right at me. I half-expected a lid on her head to pop open and a little Bavarian driver climb out.

Next thing I knew, I was a POW in a prison camp that might have been built by Stanley Kubrick’s art director. Fluorescent light plunged through my eyeballs and lit up the back of my head. I raised myself up from a cold vinyl couch and focused on a Spartan clock on the wall: 4:22. I was told this was the nurse’s station. I had passed out from shock. My head swung around to the direction of the voice. There was Heidi again! Had she operated? If so, on what? Had I read the clock right? Shit! My video session!! “*The Evening News!”* The *cow!”*

I reached for the phone and started to dial Ric with the Twinkie©-finger. Mother of God, *what pain!* Heidi grabbed the phone and watched as I crumpled to the floor. She said that I was to lay back, rest, and I was to like it. Mr. Smythe-Bigge, the Younger, had taken command of the singing cow commercial.

There were aspects of the business that Ric was good at, but post-producing a primetime, national TV spot, on video or on film, was not one of them. Could I trust the guys at Vidpost to guide him through it? Nevertheless, a video online editor works on big bucks, hourly basis. They can’t always afford to be nice because there’s *always* another client waiting. When they’re not nice, you have to know how to massage egos in order to get what you want. This means that you have to know editorial technique as well or better than they do. If you know, you get their respect and sometimes excellent product. Sadly, Ric didn’t know squat. It wasn’t that he was stupid. He just sailed over the details expecting the editors and their operators to handle things like mattes, green screens, effects, titles, and copy. If he failed to get the most recent legal updates, we could be sued, fired, or worse, embarrassed. When *we* made a mistake, 350 million North Americans saw it too! I couldn’t risk it. I had to get out of New Attica. Then I spotted the opportunity. Heidi went to the can. I bolted from the couch, sprinted down the hall, and followed the trail of blood to my office.

My editing room wasn’t much, but it was mine. No other agency in town had one. My equipment and I were cheap and King Malcolm kept it that way. My budgets were never approved to upgrade to digital editing like most of our high-rolling vendors. Trish, my assistant, hovered at the bench. Her auburn hair cascaded down over her shoulders as she cataloged my film trims. “Trish, what the hell happened?”

She said, “Ric took the cow to Vidpost. He said for me to tell you to go home. He’ll call you tonight after the gym.” What a sweetheart Trish was! For a 23-year-old, she was more intuitive, talented, and resourceful than the entire board of directors put together, and for the moment she was my secret. She saw my finger and eyed me. There was some kind of twinkle in those walnut eyes, as if she was half truly sorry and half ready to laugh. She said, “Heidi found your finger here on the bench. It was gross, but I watched her stitch it back on.”

“How many?”  
 “Fingers? Just one.”

“Stitches.”

“Four or five, I think,” she said. “I cleaned the rest of the blood up with my acetone. Mr. Spaulding’s on his way up to take care of the walls.”

“Thanks!” I flew downstairs and jumped in a cab.

If you have never been inside a video editing room, imagine an average-sized, dark room, surrounded by colorful, lighted buttons of every shade. It’s your basic visual and aural bleep factory. This is where the lord gods of advertising create the final versions of television commercials to be broadcast to a bazillion homes every day and night of the year. As I flew down the hall towards the edit bay, everybody had a “Hi, Hal!” for me. So familiar was I with the territory, I failed to let my eyes adjust from the five o’clock sun outside. I was as confident as a sightless person in his own home except that when I opened the door, my shins rammed an obstacle that had never been there before. My body crashed down. A woman screamed. This Friday the 13th was living up to its reputation. I had stumbled over some kind of enormous handbag. Then I heard Ric’s ever-calm voice. “Hal Burke, meet Bonnie Shears’ sister.”

My nose slid across what I thought was white brushed cotton. As my eyes focused, I realized that I was staring up into the face of one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen. Her shark-black eyes reflected the little lighted buttons on the editing console. The highlights of her dirty blonde hair danced with the singing cow now up on the video monitor. Her nose was angular and sharp like the pain I was feeling in my twice-crunched finger.

“Hal?” said Ric. Was he expecting an answer? I was *not* getting out of her lap. At the rate I was going, this was as close as I was going to get to it anyhow, so why stop?

“Hal!”

Eat me.

Ever so slowly, accommodating both Ric and my battered self, I rose up on my elbows, keeping my thumbs under her knees for support, and edged myself up so that I gazed directly into her eyes. “Hello, handsome!” she tittered.

In those days, Ric and I had barely reached 30. I was a kid with rough edges: Roman Catholic South Boston, and a Grandpa whose thesis was “Life’s a warfare!” I had grown up in Southie where life *was* warfare. I can’t say how many fights I’d had. Arguments were settled that way and there were always arguments. I had never expected to get into college let alone NYU, but I had two cool parents. Little by little, odd-job-by-odd-job, I made it. With the family trust, my strategy was to keep my head down, treat everything black and white, ask no questions, give no juice, and play close to the vest. The pipers piped and the snare drums beat until I found myself in Manhattan with Ric. In those days, I thought everybody was straight. Why complicate life? There were no delineations. Comically, on a night not unlike this one, life would reveal a new war for which I was *not* prepared. My black and white strategy which had served me so well was about to crumble under Ric’s rainbow of colors which he would introduce to me surprise after surprise and would, after time, invite my own slacker-brain to come screaming into the light. Happily, it would eventually lead to a reason *for not* slitting my wrists. This however, was not that night!

Looking at Lenore Shears like I was, defined a peculiar, dysfunctional behavioral pattern: I had always found women who are with other men far more attractive than women who are with me. This was true even when, as once happened, it would eventually be the same woman. It may be covetousness. It’s definitely sexist. As long as a woman was unavailable, I wanted her. Once she became available, I didn’t. This led to some minor disappointments over the years. I thought someday I’d correct the problem. But now, in these busy fundraising, trying-to-be-somebody days, I felt as though I was behaving like a real filmmaker should. In this dark, bleeping space, I was sure there was a shadow long enough to hide the two of us for ten minutes, even if she was with *whatzisname*. I didn’t want to say anything lame like “hi” to her, so I said something even lamer to Ric: “How’s your cow?”

Thank God for Sam, our video editor and cool button-pusher. Sam scratched his bald head, turned around to the three of us, pulled his glasses down onto his nose, and announced: “Those lips just aren’t in sync, guys. They’re just not matching the playback. It *doesn’t look* like the cow is singing about margarine!”

Ric stood, slipped his hand under my armpit, and invited me to stand. “That’s just it, Sam!” Ric said, “the cow isn’t singing about margarine. She’s singing about kitty litter. I thought I made that clear.”

What was clear was that Ric was displaying his type-A personality towards Sam when he should have directed it towards me. The sync-sound problem was mine, and it was inappropriate to make our reliable buddy Sam take the rap because of

my chauvinist acrobatics. As much as my thumbs wanted to stay under love goddess’s knees, I had to take over. “Sam,” I said, “we’ve got this new animator. He doesn’t know all the tricks Mel Block knew after forty years.” I let him know he was the only guy in the universe who could save the spot, save our asses, and save the $500,000 the idiots in Media had already spent on airtime before the spot was ever finished. Sam pushed his glasses back over his nose and spun around. This meant he was going to try. “I guess I could add a frame here and there, maybe stretch it out, I can’t tell yet. But no matter which way I roll it, or how many frames I add, the fucking cow is *not* singing about margarine! She’s singing about *kitty litter!”*

“We know, Sam!” I said, “but the spot airs at 6:57, the master has to be at the network 45 minutes ahead of time and the network is a 15 minute cab ride. Do the best you can.” That was all the massaging he needed. Sam went ahead with the job, which left the rest of the time to kick back, watch for Ric’s thumbs-up, and attempt to discover whether or not Bonnie Shears’ sister was really wearing brushed cotton.

Ric said, “Hal, this is Lenore.” Why was he grinning? I was in pain, embarrassed, and stressed. He had to know that she was the only green light in the Lincoln Tunnel of my day. He could back off a couple of squares and let me breathe, preferably into her ear. My finger started throbbing.

“Trish said you were going to the gym.”

“And you were supposed to go home! Heidi had a big, fat Vicodin© prescription for you. Anyhow, I told Lenore all about our show. She thinks that between our talent and experience and the funny script, it’s a winner. She’s going to arrange for Bonnie to meet us for brunch on Sunday.”

What? Up to now, he had not shown anyone the script. There must be some mistake. Besides, what was this white-brushed cotton doll doing here, anyway? The TV spot had been too tricky, and there was too much at stake for us to have our eyes on any girl here except the operatic cow up on the TV monitor. I had to get him into the hall. “Ric, check an invoice with me in accounting?” I nodded towards the door and he was on his feet. “We’ll just be a minute,” he said. I could tell by the way he caressed her shoulder that this was more than business. “I’m not going anywhere,” she chirped. “This is too fascinating.”

I was beginning to hate her.

As the door closed behind us, I stopped him and blared my concerns.

“Relax, Hal.” He patted my left pec. His hands were copping feels right and left today.

“Why do you have to touch me so much? And why are you giving scripts out?”

“I had to show her the script. We can’t keep it a secret. Besides, I’d show her the company checkbook if I thought it’d help nail Bonnie Shears!”

“So it *is* more than business.”

“I don’t mean nail her, as in ‘nail’ her. I mean as in ‘get her for the show.’” He added that while I was out cold in the nurse’s station, Lenore had returned his call and wanted to have dinner with us. “How’s your finger?” he said.

“Is she coming in as a partner? Like with money?”

“With her sister, schmuck!”

“What other perks?”

“I’m taking her to Gallagher’s for dinner.” His eyebrows bounced off the ceiling with the tantalizing grin. Gallagher’s? Great, a steak house! As if I hadn’t already seen enough blood for one day. I was sure he wanted me to bow out. I popped a Tums© just in case. He grabbed my wrist and we re-entered the edit bay. The music was just trailing out on the TV spot. Lenore, sweet Lenore, began applauding and clapping her hands together like a trained seal. I listened for a bark, but she didn’t. Not only had my libido waned, but now I was wondering if she might she wind up in my bed!

“Sam finished it,” she squealed, “and it’s great.”

Sam said, “Take a look!”

Then Lenore got mawkish: “Play it, Sam. Play it for old times’ sake.” I wondered where Ric had dug up this brain donor. He slapped his hands on his knees and burst out laughing. Sam pulverized a green playback button, and the thirty second margarine commercial began to roll on the TV monitor. The cow sang her heart out. Ric watched carefully, but he was not seeing what I was seeing.

In this business, you work so hard and so long on a project that sometimes you *will* it to be correct even when it might not be. I knew that Ric wanted it to be over just like I did. But he was missing the errors. “What’s wrong with that?” Ric said.

“Are you blind?” I said, “It’s out of sync. The matte-line’s visible and for the first time, I’m seeing cat whiskers on the cow’s lips.” Suddenly, we heard a deafening cackle. It was Lenore Shears laughing.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Hal,” Sam said, “it’s all I can do.”

“Well gee, I didn’t see anything wrong with it,” Lenore whined sheepishly. I guess she was trying to make up for her spaced-out faux pas. “Really!” She added. I was waiting for her to stab herself in the head with an arrow. Ric heaved a sigh and told Sam to play the spot once more. Finally, Ric looked worried. Truly, the spot looked like hell. We watched it six times. Then Ric made an executive decision. “It’s a wrap.”

Sam spat into the intercom to the guys in the machine room. “Make a clone, three dubs, and get the master to the network!”

My little corporate heart sank. The throbbing in my finger started now in my head. I hated this. I knew it was wrong. Ric glanced at me and asked what choice we had: “Aside from booming it completely?” I said.

We had never terminated a spot. Even though the consequence was an x-factor, we both knew it would be bad. Media could not back out of their commitment to the network. It was too late to reschedule the spot for the next night. We were stuck, victims of the corporate rack. Here it was, Friday afternoon at six when the rest of the world was finished with its stress tests for the week, and ours hung on, haunting us with cat whiskers on a cow! We were finished. We didn’t know *how* finished.

Ric took the three of us to Gallagher’s. I kept my stomach settled by ordering a filleted trout and house Chardonnay. Ric and Lenore were sensitive enough not to order anything too rare. After two white Zins, Lenore started talking. She was an agent. Admittedly, not a big one, but she had her sister Bonnie as a client, *the* client, and

that meant she had some clout. Bonnie’s acting had kept the two of them afloat for nearly eight years. Bonnie was, Lenore explained, a natural, and only a stage door away from the big time. So, projects were chosen with great care.

On a personal note, old Lenore was demonstrating a level of intelligence I had missed. How could this be? She had been such a birdbrain an hour ago. Moreover, she was buttering my muffin. Gracefully, she placed the whole-wheat muffin on my bread plate and dropped the bomb. “By the way, boys,” she droned, “I think someone’s put the word out on your show.”

Gallagher’s is noisy, especially on Fridays, but suddenly, to Ric and me, the place went dead.

“I don’t know how many people are going to show up for your audition tomorrow,” she said.

Ric’s mouth was trying its best to formulate words while a gulp of scotch lodged in his throat. “*What?”* His question packed an emotional belt. He began gagging. He slid his chair backwards three feet and doubled over. Lenore’s radiant face shriveled. I threw down my muffin.

“Was it something I said?”

A well-meaning waiter reeled about from a nearby table, dropped a piece of German chocolate cake, and ambushed Ric. His enormous wrestler’s arms

hoisted him into the air.

“Not the Heimlich!” I screamed, leaping to my feet.

“I know what I’m doing,” the waiter fired back, “he’s got food stuck in his throat.” Ric’s feet kicked the air.

“It’s not food, it’s scotch! He hasn’t even eaten yet!”

The hulk dropped him. Ric charged to the men’s room. I chased him. Right about then Lenore saw the hundred or so other diners gawking at us. She took it upon herself to be social chairman and waved her nappy. “It’s okay now, he’ll be fine.” Maybe she took a bow.

In the men’s room, Jerome, the attendant, held Ric over the toilet like Mom used to hold me when I was in a similar shape. The terrible sounds subsided, and the maitre d’ entered. “Are we all right?”

“We’re fine,” I said, “but my friend’s sicker than shit!”

“I’m okay,” Ric stammered as Jerome backed him out of the stall and wiped his face with a damp towel. Once the maitre d’ was convinced the restaurant was not going to be sued, he left. Jerome put his arm around Ric and patted his shoulder.

“Take a few deep breaths and relax,” Jerome said. He was 75 if he was a day, and for me, he had often been a welcome relief from numerous stuffy business dinners. Jerome played the horses, taking more than cash tips during his tenure. He had made a small fortune running bets to Yonkers, Saratoga, and other racetracks, and no doubt lived on his dividends as well or better than us. The color returned to Ric’s face. “I guess you’ve seen your share of sick folks in here, huh, Jerome?” he said.

“You bet I have. Aristotle Onassis himself once got the trots on that very same stool!” Jerome slapped him on the back and snickered, “Chee-shee-shee.” Ric slipped him $20 and we walked out.

“What did I tell you?” Ric said. “We’ve been torpedoed.”

Casually, we strode back into the dining room and slinked into our chairs. Lenore had ordered another round in our absence. Was she trying to kill him?

The food arrived. I suggested that Lenore explain exactly what she’d meant and that Ric should not take another drink or bite until she was through finking.

“I don’t like being an alarmist,” she began, “but it seems there’s a moratorium on your show.”

“Moratorium?” We said almost in unison.

“You’re being boycotted, I think!” She was straightforward as far as I could tell, and -- to her credit -- somewhat soothing. She asked if we had seen the trade magazines. We had, but only to check out our audition notice.

“Are you funded, Ric?”

He was getting flushed in more ways than one.

“I don’t get people like you involved unless there’s money!” he said.

“Because according to the article, there *is* no money. Actually, I wouldn’t call it an ‘article.’ It was more like a news item. It said that the untitled Ric Smith Off-Off Broadway production, which has auditions scheduled for Saturday, the 14th, that’s tomorrow, has run into financial trouble. It said it would be unlikely that such a production would get underway before the first of the year.”

Ric bit down on the inside of his cheeks.

“This item, by the way,” she added, “appeared just opposite the notice for your casting call. Every actor in town had to see it.”

Ric darted to the bar. Lenore cut into her petit sirloin and admitted that she had been compelled to ask. Meantime, I read the show-biz trades cover to cover. Why was it that on this day, I had been too busy? And how did Ric miss it? The SVPs always had more time on their hands than schleps like me in post-production.

Ric returned to the table with a grimy copy of *Variety.* He sat down and read. As horror branded itself on his face, he threw it on top of my fish. “It’s a lie,” he said. He plunged his fork into his New York strip and let it stick there.

“Then where did they get it?” She asked.

Ric knew. So did I. This was King Malcolm’s work. Even though he had no particular sway with the trade magazine, and *Variety* was excellent about checking facts, King Malcolm commanded a network that could send up any smoke screen he wanted at any time. This one was designed to cloak his son’s ambition.

Lenore put her hand on Ric’s arm. “If you’re telling me the truth, Ric, and this is false information, then I’m going ahead and confirming Bonnie for brunch on Sunday.”

Was Lenore showing us that she was on our side? She had to be hiding a card. With a hint of rapture, Ric’s green eyes glanced at me, and then glided to her.

“You’d get us Bonnie Shears?” He said, “Because you -- trust me?”

Lenore squeezed his hand. I thought I saw a tear. “Yes, Ric, I would. And because Bonnie needs commercial work in the worst way.”

Ric undid his collar and started to remove his indigo jacket. “Is it hot in here?” Noticing the bloodstains on his shirt, he pulled the coat back on. His square jaw set. The left nostril flared. His wavy half-English, half-Irish hairline slid back and tightened his face, and all from this diabolical irony: he was trying to get away from his father. Bonnie Shears could be his ticket. But he could only have her if he stepped deeper into the political effluvium of King Malcolm’s empire. He was going to have to get Bonnie a damned acting job at the Bigge Agency.

Lenore hoisted that fucking designer tote bag onto the table and whipped out a compact with the diameter of a small lamp shade. As she spread an “Always-a-Starlet” lipstick across her lips, eyes affixed to her reflection, she continued liltingly: “That’s fair, don’t you think, guys?”

The waiter trundled the dessert tray to our table.

“How about a mousse, Lenore?” I said.

Ric leaned forward on his elbows, “we could certainly discuss that option.”

Lenore batted her eyes at the waiter. She ordered the Black Forest cake. Ric’s response must have effected in her some sort of internal whoopee. She replaced the compact and slid the bag to the floor to make room for the cake. I caught her spying the waiter’s butt as he flounced off.

Ric’s hands formed a church and steeple which he then pressed to his chin, “don’t get me wrong, Lenore, but I was under the impression that Bonnie is a serious actress. There aren’t too many serious actresses out there looking for commercial acting jobs.”

A glob of chocolate frosting suddenly appeared on the tip of her nose. “Don’t be silly,” she said, “nowadays an actor or actress can go from Broadway to Hollywood to soaps to commercials to feature films and back again without the least bit of harm coming to his or her career-integrity. We’d like to see Bonnie do a TV series someday.” I forced my eyes away from her.

“But Bonnie always gets good notices,” said Ric, “she has enough respect in town to keep her working on Broadway for the rest of her life.”

Lenore pointed her fork at Ric, “ah, the operative phrase being ‘in town.’ That’s not good enough. The key to success in acting is exposure, honey. And there’s certainly

not enough exposure for her Off Broadway, or Off-Off Broadway. That’s why she needs commercials. I’d do almost anything to get her that big break!”

There it was. In front of God, the restaurant, and the autographed photo of Richard Burton on the wall above us, she had propositioned us. I am not sure which one of us, but I had my suspicions that I was going to be called upon to make a sacrifice.

Ric sat back and crossed his legs. “So the deal is we get to cast Bonnie in our show if we cast Bonnie in one of the agency’s commercials.” I had to hand it to this woman with the chocolate nose. She must have schemed from the minute she met him. Ric buried his head in his hands. “Be right back,” she said. She hopped up, grabbed the big bag, and darted for the restroom.

“Wait, Lenore!” I said. But she didn’t hear me. The restaurant was too loud. I turned to Ric and warned: “Ric! Stop her before she sees –“

“Quiet, Hal!” he said, “I’m thinking!”

“But, Ric! This could kill our deal!”

“Hmm? What??” He said, drifting.

As Lenore paraded through the dining room, a host of quizzical stares appeared that in her mind must have passed for admiration, because she began to nod and smile this way and that. As she came face to face with a stampeding busboy just rounding a corner, they both skidded to a stop. He turned to what had become an audience of curious onlookers, grabbed his stomach, flew into the kitchen, and burst into hysterics. She turned back to us, and then shot inside.

We heard a scream, so Ric paid the check. “Play along. Maybe I can pull a few strings at the office without Malcolm finding out.”

“What about the auditions?” I said.

“We’ll go down to the theatre in the morning and see who shows up.”

Ric had a bigger problem. He knew that eyes and ears followed him everywhere within the company, but now he was sure his phone was tapped. “It’s the only possible way they could’ve found out unless they scrutinized the paper with a magnifying glass; the goddamned notice is so small!”

The waiter came back and told us as Ric signed for dinner that our female guest, the one who had brown nose, had just bolted out the front door.

There was the usual cacophony of sounds as we sprang out of the restaurant. But the one that pierced everything was the sound of Lenore’s spiked heels burning up the pavement a half-block away. Her timing was perfect: it began to rain.

“She’ll never speak to us again,” I said.

“She’ll speak to you. She likes you. Who wouldn’t? The Kennedy smile, and the black eyes that when you’re mad, even melt me! Don’t be stupid! You’re bankable, Hal!”

With the filleted trout sloshing around inside me and my finger still pounding, I didn’t think fast enough to ask if it made a difference how I felt about her.

“And you like her!”

When we caught up to her, she was bashing open a coin box.

“What are you doing?” Ric said.

She shoved him away with her elbow. “Get away from me, I need a paper!” She clobbered the box again.

“It’s nine o’clock. It’s kind of old news.”

She turned on him: “I *don’t* want to read it, Sluggo! I need an *umbrella!”* She brought the word “umbrella” up from her diaphragm and snarled it, like it was being dragged up 8th Avenue underneath a taxi. Her ferocious elbow struck him again. “Get away from me! I have never been so humiliated in all my life! You’re a pig!”

I wanted to help. “Lenore,” I said, “we tried to warn you, but you got away too fast!”

“You’re both pigs!”

As Ric reached out to her, she let go with a direct kick to his left knee, retreated a step, and then let me have it with the bag. She must have been carrying Bonnie’s blank contracts, because the impact knocked me into a 740 IL parked at the curb and triggered the alarm.

“So is brunch off?” Ric said.

She took a deep breath. As her wet hair drooped down the pale cheeks and her make-up began to run, I saw tears in her genuinely lovely eyes. Her shoulders turned concave and her knees touched. “You bet it is, you son of a bitch! I came out tonight to helpyou, but you turn me into a laughing stock in front of an entire restaurant!”

Ric lunged for her. “Listen to me, Lenore.” He struggled to keep her in his grasp. “You need me as much as I need you. It’s business!”

“And I guess this is how you treat all of your business relations! By letting them

make fools of themselves in front of waiters and customers and God knows who else. I

kno w your type, Ric Smith! You despise anybody who’s trying to make an honest living because you don’t have to! You were born into it! I should have known you weren’t taking me seriously. I’m nothing more than another piece of meat to you! Well, I have a news flash for you, bub: Lenore Shears doesn’t give second chances, so take your goddamned hands off me!” She slugged him. The blow knocked him backwards into an ATM. Then she danced a little side-step and aimed her fist at me. I did a good sidestep and she was gone.

Strange, but for two guys who should be proudly christening their first theatrical endeavor in town, we were starting off with our share of enemies. I slipped off my jacket. “Lenore!” I called. She stopped at the light and turned to me. Tentatively, I held out the jacket for her to take. There was a moment of hesitation. In the rain, it seemed like forever. “Take it,” I said.

“I don’t want anything from you. But I don’t want to be wet, either.” She grabbed the jacket out of my hand like an abused dog grabs a bone. She covered the bag with it!

Who could tell what was going through her mind? She seemed to be sizing up the drowning court jesters, trying to make some sense out of the night. Whatever it was, her expression softened just enough to make the favor worth the while. There was a hint of gratitude in those genuinely lovely eyes. She hailed a cab and in a moment was gone. As I descended back into reality, I realized I had given her my jacket! Hell, I was drenched, and shivering!

Then, Ric sidled up next to me. “I guess that’s the last I’ll ever see of that jacket,” I said. We walked back to the embattled coin box. He gave it hearty right hook. It popped open, and we shared yesterday’s news until a cab came along.

“We’ll see her again,” he said, “and the jacket won’t have anything to do with it.”

**II. THE TRENCHES**

It was already a marriage, Ric and me. I cared about his success. Even though he was the rich one, our hurdles were equal. Sure, I was his film editor. But film editing was only a step toward feature writing and directing. As roommates at NYU, we would dream and plot our version of the great American movie. He knew we would start small, maybe with an Off-Off Broadway show in the Village. But whatever the plan, in those confined dormitory quarters, I knew R-I-C would soon spell creative freedom, fame, fortune, and many of the other “f’s” I have come to know and love. He knew it would not. For in those crushing, worldly, concrete ways, he was smart and I was not. Nevertheless, we had a contract: he would “write and produce” and I would “direct and edit” the film versions of our Broadway successes. It was a sacred pact.

I didn’t sleep that night. The pulsating finger and some sneezing had kept me up. When the phone rang at 7:30am, I knew it was Ric, and there was no dodging him. “What?” I said.

“You sound like shit.”

“I caught a cold.”

“Get *up!”*

“I’m up.”

“45 minutes, darling!”

His sweet nothings usually did the trick. As I got out of bed, I remembered that Trish had left an unintelligible message last night. I wondered why she’d called. I stumbled into the living room, opened the blinds, and stared down onto Central Park four floors below. Rain pounded the pavement, but the dedicated joggers were out huffing and puffing in designer rain gear. I sneezed and surveyed the room. I loved the place. Ric had helped me find it. Not bad for a few years work. The next step was buying it. There was no option except to make our show a hit. I had to pay back Ric with something better than money. I had to pay him back with Success. I showered and re-dressed the finger.

Downstairs, Ric opened the taxi door and tossed me the manuscript: “I did a few rewrites last night.” Then, he ordered the driver to the crappiest section of Greenwich Village, and I opened to page one of our masterpiece, a comedy, which we had taken over two and a half years to re-write until it was as ready. We knew formula crap was out. If we wanted to hit big, then it had to be risky. There were a dozen or so other projects we considered over time, but none of them worked quite as well as: “**THE NEARLY TRAGICAL HISTORY OF HAMLET THE SECOND, PRINCE OF DENMARK, AN AUTHORITATIVE ACCOUNT BY TERRENCE RUMLEY SYMTHE-BIGGE.”** You could almost smell the scotch wafting up from the old manuscript. Over 60 years old and written in long hand, Ric had inserted each yellowed, dog-eared page into separate plastic protectors, and had reverentially assembled them into a binder. The text went on for 382 pages.

“Who’s Terrence Rumley Smythe-Bigge?”

“Uncle Terry,” Ric had explained, “is absolutely my favorite relative who I never met. He was Malcolm’s peculiar older brother, killed in a motorcycle accident in 1939. But before that, he was into the London music hall scene. He was an actor and song and dance man.”

Uncle Terry was Ric’s showbiz connection. Although Terry had never done well financially (that’s kind), he’d been an indomitable optimist who’d hung on to a dream of one day becoming a great artist. But Terry had also been a handsome party boy, forever broke, boozing, wenching, and always counting on the unreliable next engagement to pay the rent. He had become an unrepentant drain on Rebecca and Malcolm. In their minds, 1939 was not a year of singing and dancing. It was a year of worldwide depression and war! By the time of the accident in the foyer at the British Museum, Terry had created such a schism within the family, that Malcolm had secretly pissed on his “fuckin’ grave” and had labeled it a “bleedin’ miracle” that Terry was finally, in fact, *dead!* Ding dong!

So now it was Ric who picked up the theatrical gauntlet. Ric believed Uncle Terry had tried to fortify the family with his dreams. Indeed, Ric believed they would have profited from Terry’s success. Moreover, some half-century later, Terry would have understood Ric’s passion. He would have praised Ric, guided him, and given him the emotional backing that Malcolm refused. Instead, this illegible, fragmented, hand written text was all that was left of what Malcolm had called his brother’s “vulgar ambition.”

“How did it survive?” I had said.

“Rebecca kept it,” Ric had said, “Grams, my grandmother Rebecca, had originally stored it in an old chest where she hid her ‘dear things.’ She entrusted it to me and told me never to tell anybody!”

“A Shakespearean spoof? Who the hell wants to see that? Besides, wasn’t there already a ‘HAMLET 2’?”

“That was a rehash, not a sequel. Ours is fresh in both title and content, and we’re calling it ‘HAMLET THE SECOND,’ like ‘RICHARD THE THIRD’ and ‘HENRY THE EIGHTH!’”

If I wanted a high-concept, easy-hook hit so easily identifiable that audiences would want to write bad checks to see it, I had to remember that Ric was the English major with a talent for Shakespeare and Melville. Back at NYU, I had plunged into film, and what do indolent, iconoclastic filmmakers like me know? Not only had I not seen a production of Shakespeare’s boffo tragedy in years, but it had been high school since I had read it (if then).

Ric had said, “this thing relies on totally new information. It was hatched in Uncle Terry’s whacko brain over three years with only the help of a few pints of Irish whiskey and a pencil sharpener. You don’t need more than a scent of Shakespeare to get it. This Hamlet is the bastard son nobody knows about. According to Terry’s script, after Ophelia’s suicide, Prince Hamlet has an affair with a character called ‘The Player Queen,’ which was one of the characters in the show that captures the guilt of Claudius, his uncle. HAMLET THE SECOND is the son of Hamlet the First, and Player Queen, who eventually becomes a fat nun in the south of France.”

“Your mom’s in the South of France,” I had pointed out, “and you have a sister who’s a nun in Chicago, and they both have a weight problem.”

“There are some coincidences,” he had said, “but it’s high concept! Hamlet the Second’s fat, mom nun sends him back to Denmark to seek his rightful title as heir to the throne because her nunnery is broke, and if her son reclaims his title, the nunnery will be saved financially, her son will be king, and everybody goes home!”

“What about these witches? The show opens with three witches and a boiling cauldron.”

“They’re hanging around like a cross between a chorus and the Three Stooges. It’s a nod to “That Play” that I thought was a nice touch on Uncle Terry’s part.” He had peered into my soul, “Hal, I want to do this for more than just Uncle Terry’s sake. I want to do it because it’s a comedy and people need a laugh.” But it was more than that.

The cab hit a chuckhole. I dropped 30 loose leaf pages of revisions. Meantime, something else freaked me out. Driving deeper into the underbelly of New York City, I saw our cab driver as sort of a metered Virgil as he led us into the perdition of Greenwich Village. From my window, I noticed living, breathing bodies strewn across sidewalks, huddled in doorways, straddling fenders of the meat packing trucks, and spread-eagled across park benches. Worse, these zombie look-a-likes seemed to be watching me! From this concrete Purgatory, our “high-concept/easy-hook” comedy was going to board, fuel, taxi, take-off and fly? It didn’t make sense. Who would come to see it? The Salvation Army?

Our mercenary host skidded to a stop in front of an unmarked loading dock. As Ric slipped him fare, something else caught my attention. This daunting mass of mesmerized demons began to *rise* and approach our cab in a kind of hypnotic swagger. Was this “THE A.M. ATTACK OF THE LIVING DEAD?”

“Ric, for God’s sake, *look!”* Frantically, I pointed at them, trying to make him understand. Instead, he reached across me, threw open my door, and ordered me out.

“For the love of God, what are you doing?”

Ric’s brow furrowed. I mimicked him. Paranoia flourishes like rebar in this city. I had lived in New York long enough that I was able to write instant screenplays. This one, now showing on the large format screen upstairs, was about two college roommates, one of whom goes to the elaborate means of writing an Off-Off Broadway show and opening it in the Village simply to *kill* the other one. Why else would he surrender me to this mob to be beaten, robbed, and probably eaten?

“Are you nuts, Hal? These are the actors!”

*“Hey!”* A ragged voice boomed. I jumped, turned, and came face to face with the ugliest man I had ever seen. He had sunken cheekbones, protruding brow, and a mass of hair which seemed to explode out from a Rasputin-like hook nose. He looked like Judas after hanging himself.

“Hal,” Ric said, “meet Creeper Benoit.”

A body spasm raked my shoulder blades and rippled to my ankles. I stared at this grotesquery through a rip in his faded, tie-dyed T-shirt as he hung onto the cab door. The New Jersey turnpike smelled better and was more pleasing to the eye than the aroma and sight of this man, our new landlord and sole proprietor of Swag’s Stage & Opera Company.

“Creeper, this is my partner, Hal Burke.”

“Dude!” Creeper said. He unrolled his pointy fingers like a threadbare carpet.

Ric explained that he had arrived at dawn to coordinate coffee and interview tables for the turnout. Those who had fallen into my Living Dead category were, Creeper said proudly, dedicated actors who simply had tried to be here first. Some of them had arrived directly from reality: bartenders, waiters, waitresses, short order cooks, parking attendants, indeed the plasma of New York nightlife. I analyzed the place as Creeper unlocked the loading dock. This was it: our new theatre! But there was no marquee, no address, not even a street sign to tell anybody where they were. Then Creeper opened an enormous, corrugated airlock-like hangar. That’s when I realized it didn’t even have a *door!*

Creeper hopped up onto the dock and invited us in.

“Great, huh?” Ric smirked and hopped away too.

It was heady, but as Ric took my hand, and hoisted me up, a personal epiphany took place. Doubt suddenly extinguished in the instant my feet left the street. Above the sidewalk, I surveyed the sorrowful group of actors below and knew that our chance to break away was upon us. Ric and I were princes with subjects beholden to us. Suddenly, we were responsible!

Creeper lit up a joint and pointed out that my observation was nothing more than petty bourgeois. To him, the truly noble ones were not Ric and me who had obtained the script and money, but those at our feet who believed in Theatre, in the Greeks’ Muse! And they did so for more than just a check. If that was true, then it was also true that they were not here to goose each other’s character motivations for free. So much for epiphany! What could we do with this sub-kingdom of talent who weren’t good enough for anybody else’s show?

This was also petty bourgeois thinking, Creeper wheezed. In his mind, guys like us went from the highs of princely paranoia to the lows of ulcerated ambition. There was no in between. He did not think this was bad, for as he pointed out so accurately, his theatre and others like it thrived on parvenus like us. Our professional schizophrenia usually made him lots of money. Regardless of what this burned-out theoretician said, Ric was spending money with him and that meant commerce.

As the rabble below waved composite photos and resumes, Creeper held a little organizational meeting. Then Ric took me on a tour.

During the past week, my schedule had been crammed with the usual fall advertising onslaught, so Ric had spent lunch hours in these theatrical trenches scavenging for the perfect home for “HAMLET THE SECOND.” True, the place was big enough. As I stumbled onto the stage and Ric hit the lights, I marveled at the 8000 or so square feet of space. It was an interior amphitheatre with a three-quarter thrust stage surrounded by curving rows of cinder blocks, each block standing on end. It looked like it had been designed by a druid.

“Where are the seats?” I said.

Ric swept his hands across the cinder blocks. “These are the seats!” He said.

“Get out!” I said.

“Don’t be smug,” he said. “The crazy Bolshevik gets audiences!”

“How? There’s no marquee, no seats, and no goddamned door! How could an audience get in if it wanted to?”

“He uses a ladder.”

Then, I noticed we were standing on an enormous turntable inlaid into the stage floor. It was a device often used uptown for quick scene changes, effects, etc. Shows like “LES MIZ” are completely designed around one. I thought it was a nice touch in light of everything else that was missing.

There was no doubt that Ric was sold on this hip Stonehenge. If I tried to talk him out of it, we’d go nowhere. Anyway, it was his money, so I changed the subject, “Trish called me last night.”

“We can use the turntable,” he said.

“She never calls me at home.”

“In case you’re wondering, the place has bathrooms.”

I was wondering. “Did you get any strange calls from the office?”

“I didn’t check,” he said. “I finished with the revisions and had to drop off some paperwork at Holly’s.”

Holly Hedlunden was better known as Holly Headhunter, not because of her nightly availability, which was fabled, but because she was King Malcolm’s exclusive employment agency. She was a rite of passage at the Bigge Agency. It was nearly a prerequisite of employment that the new boys would have to come through old Holly, so to speak, before reporting for their first day’s work. I don’t think there’s a male counterpart for the women at the agency. Personally, I had never been a client of Holly’s, day *or*night because it was Ric who had hired me, and for another I thought Holly was just too available. I never really got Ric’s relationship with her. In those days, though, I didn’t ask all the right questions.

“How’s Holly?”

“Business is down. She’s better today.”

“The audience sits on cinder blocks, Ric? Really?” I thought of my folks coming.

Ric reached for the light switch. “Creeper *rents* seat cushions at each performance. It’s in the contract.”

The lights went off and we went into mostly dark. I felt him standing next to me so close I could hear him breathing. The back of his right hand brushed mine. “Like I said,” he whispered, “it’s the best I could do for the schedule, the money, for everything. But you’re my partner and the director. If you say ‘no,’ we keep looking.”

It’s hell when you trust somebody. My silence betrayed my consent. He put his arm around me and nudged me back towards the loading dock. He was aglow with the possibilities here and his enthusiasm was soon contagious.

If you haven’t been through an audition, how do I describe one? It was true that when we arrived, there were only 20 or 30 actors. But by the time Ric and I toured the space, filled coffee cups, and actually sat down to begin interviews, their number had doubled or tripled. Had everyone missed the news item in *Variety?* There was a line of actors and actresses backed up all the way to a soup kitchen.

Creeper set up his video camera to videotape the proceedings for our “edification.” By that, I guessed that he meant this to be a crash course in bullshit appreciation.

We had planned to have each actor do a cold reading. With any luck, one of them might emote and make a dramatic impact with voice, eye contact, or some great physicality. However, we couldn’t give them more than two minutes each, or we’d be here past Sunday brunch. I decided to conduct an informal interview and have the cold readings later at call-backs. Ric and Creeper agreed. There were just too many and Creeper had to run a cache of pot to Pound Ridge at 6pm.

As the first prospect approached the table, I stood and extended my hand.

“I’m Hal Burke,” I said. “This is Ric Smith and Creeper Benoit. Since there are so many of you, this will be an informal interview.”

“You don’t want me to read?” she said. She was a teeny-weeny person with an itty-bitty voice like a rubber duck. She had a moon face and seraphic smile, with two sweet dimples either side of it. What could we think? I forgave the yellow rain slicker and storm trooper boots.

“Just your name,” Ric said, “tell us something about yourself.”

“I’m Angie.” She handed me her composite photos. “I’m a Neo-Nazi and I play the piano.”

Something scooted across the floor behind us. Creeper had tripped over the tripod. He tackled the camera, re-set the legs, took a long drag on his joint, and shrugged. “It’s your party, dude,” he said.

“It’s not my party! Thanks, Angie,” I said.

It turned into one weird day. The award for Most Unpleasant went to a 14-year-old named Mysteri Myslowski who claimed she was a poor orphan, but the fuchsia limo parked across the street that matched her pink patent leather pumps, totally gave her away. Her brown hair was pulled tight into a bun. She made sure we were staring up her snooty nostrils as she and her boom box charged into a karaoke rendition of *“You Light up My Life”* with string section. Hers’ was a serious Ethel Merman bellow emanating from deceptively small Betty Boop lips. But when those lips parted you could have sailed the QE2 and some spouting tugs through that hole. Worst of all, she was flat. So loud and flat was she that Creeper’s Persian, Mrs. Venable, flung herself off the loading dock. The crowd on the sidewalk edged away as one guy slammed his forehead into a telephone pole while a family of pigeons flapped out of an attic across the street. She finished and left. I think she said, “Thank you.”

Ric threw down his pen and shoved his chair away from the table. “This is absurd. We’ve seen over 70 people in three hours.” As I got up for coffee, I heard another actor say, “you haven’t seen me yet.” Ric and I peered out in the direction of the voice.

A head stuck up at the end of the loading dock. He was some kind of vision in black, as if he had stepped off the set of a biker video without passing wardrobe on the way out. He ran a comb through his jet-black, greased-back mane. The sun backlit him as he jumped up to us, uninvited. He hesitated a moment, allowing us to bathe in his sight. Ric motioned for this stranger in black to step forward. As the kid did so, there was a rustling of metal, like chain links dragging across concrete. I squinted to make out his form as he strolled towards us. There was a distinct smell of leather and Juicy Fruit© gum. The clicking of his boot heels echoed self-confidently. He strode up to the interview table and stopped. His eyes glided curiously from Creeper, to me, and then to Ric.

“Who are you?” Ric said.

The actor pulled a neon-green scarf out from underneath the black leather jacket collar and spit the gum into it. Then he stuffed the wad into the back pocket of his black jeans. He could not have been more than 19. With deeply-set blue eyes, square jaw, and broad lips that on one side curved upwards in a sneer and on the other turned down into a natural pout, he could have been any heartthrob in any year for any number of sex-starved teenagers in anywhere city, anywhere state. “Shane Blue,” he said. His voice was silken and under-modulated, but the words were clear.

“Where’re you from?” Ric asked.

“Omaha,” the kid mumbled. He tossed his head back and stared down his nose at us, “if it makes a difference.”

It didn’t make any difference, except to the good people of Omaha, none of whom I assumed would be caught dead naming their kid “Shane Blue.”

“What do you do?” I said.

“I sing Beatles ‘n Springsteen stuff. But, uh, I also like to, uh --” He took a minute, and dragged his pinkie finger across the edge of the table. I thought he was either testing our attention span or showing off his diamond solitaire pinkie-ring. He wasn’t dusting. “Act!” he said, “when I’m hip to something.’“ He sniffled like he had a cold. I heard a soft buzz and click from the camera. Creeper had stopped tape, stretched his back, and stood erect. Through the close-up in the lens, he had spotted something we had not. “Dude?” Creeper said, “What’s shakin’?”

Ric surveyed the kid. I took hold of my sunglasses and tried to see through his backlight. Startlingly, the boy in black could hold back no longer. He filled his chest with air, his mouth arched down; he dropped to his knees, and began to sob uncontrollably. Ric got up and joined Creeper on the floor to console him. As I stood out of the way, twenty or so heads peeked up over the top of the loading dock. Involuntarily, I turned on them and clapped my hands, shooing them away. Then I spied a viscous substance trailing across the floor. It was dark red like anti-freeze, and had not been there before.

Ric held his right hand firmly on the boy’s back and the palm of his left hand against his chest. Slowly, he removed his hand and offered us a handful of horror: Leatherboy was bleeding.

“Shit, man!” Creeper hoisted the bleeding Shane Blue onto his shoulder, carried him into the theatre, into New Stonehenge, and gently propped him up against a cinder block. Creeper backed off a step. The boy curled into a fetal position and continued to weep hysterically.

“Call 911!” Ric told Creeper.

“Where’s a phone?” I said.

“Across the street in the girls’ bar!” Creeper said.

South Boston had been tough when I was growing up. But it had never been so tough as to drop a “Live at Five” event in my lap. I flew back out onto the loading dock only to come face-to-face with the barrel of a 12-gauge shotgun aimed directly at my fathering lab.

“Not one move!” A female voice said. My body obeyed, but I forced my eyeballs to cavort down the barrel and dart up to the operator. She was dressed in black too: pants and jacket, but with a blue silk scarf around her throat. Nasty stiletto heels supported the shoes. Her cranberry hair was spiked, strangely reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, except for the black motorcycle cap above it and, of course, the instrument in her hands. I waited for her to say something. I couldn’t take the suspense, so I said the first thing that came into my head, “you must be from Omaha.”

She blinked, and then she frowned. There was an instant of stumbling control. “Where the fuck is he?” she said. She had a hard, chiseled face. I thought she might even be attractive in spite of this slight character flaw. If she did not shoot my nuts off, there might be a life together for us.

“Who?” I said.

The barrel nudged my groin backwards a step.

“Where’s that scumbag joker?”

Just then, we were both distracted by the sobs echoing from inside the theatre.

“Get in there, shithead!” she commanded. I jumped back, turned, and felt the gun nudge my spine. Once inside, Ric and Creeper stood up chillingly as they saw the shotgun.

“He’s been stabbed,” Ric said. “He needs a doctor.”

Leatherboy’s sobbing subsided. He must have either sensed her presence or smelled her Old Spice©, because he slid back across the floor away from her. She pointed the gun at him, and loomed over him. “That’s right! Crawl, Super-Slime!” She said.

Through the streaming tears on his cheeks, he pleaded with her, “g’head, I dare you, Sis! Pull the trigger!”

Sis?

“She’s your *sister*, man?” Creeper asked.

She screamed, “shut up, everybody! I want to see his face guts splattered all over this slimy pit! He screwed me out of a hundred grand! And all because he was Audrey’s scummy little pup!”

Evidently, these two apples of somebody-named-Audrey’s eye had just come from a probate court and the reading of her will. Feeling scorned and terminally jealous, she had stabbed her brother in broad daylight in front of City Hall. Wounded, he had escaped to Swag’s Stage. But why here and where the shotgun came from were anybody’s guesses.

“You were pumping her all along, scumbag! My own lover!”

Leatherboy eyed me as he tried to stand. Staggering, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a Saturday Night Special. When she saw it, she guffawed, “ha-ha! You must want it bad, son-of-a-bitch!”

“If it ain’t gonna be mine,” he coughed, “it sure as hell ain’t gonna be yours, neither!” He squeezed the trigger and fired. She was hit. She dropped to her knees, but managed to hold the shotgun aimed at him. Crippled and panting, she fired back. Leatherboy somersaulted from the impact and a geyser of blood gushed from his chest. Instantly, they were both prostrate, each still grasping a smoking gun. Blood raced from my head. I got dizzy. I couldn’t believe what I had witnessed. Nor in the next minute, what I heard: somebody was clapping.

“What the --?” I said.

Creeper grinned and applauded. My peripheral vision dictated that there was a chance I had just been joshed. Both prone bodies began to squirm. Amazingly, Leatherboy slammed his feet flat onto the floor, flipped himself upright, and grinned. Then like a punk aerobics instructor, Sis dragged her right leg up underneath her torso, sat on it, and batted her deadpan eyes. I wondered if it was somebody’s birthday and these were a couple of hired assholes.

“Pretty frickin’ swell, dudes,” Creeper said. “Pretty frickin’ swell.”

The dead boy stuck out his hand and introduced himself with a big smile, “I’m Wynn Keckley! This is my sis, Felice! We’re actors!”

I shook his clammy red hand while scrutinized the lighting grid. Then Ric put his arm around me, “no reality like the present, partner?” All I knew about reality was that I craved the little work bench in my little editing room, the little check that went with it, quiet Trish, and a quiet little mind.

Creeper explained that Wynn Keckley had been hanging around the theatre for weeks begging for an audition. Then Felice removed her wig. A landslide of brunette hair poured down and draped her face like one of our shampoo models. Ric went over to her and extended his hand. “I’m Ric!” he said.

“Wynn’s told me about you.”

He took her by the hand and helped her up. It was time to have a chat. “Ric?” I said, “Can we have a minute?”

“Sure,” he said as he squeezed her wrist, allowing her slender, milk-white hand to slide gracefully out of his grasp.

I led him backstage, if you can call it that. Behind the turntable and past numerous scenic flats, we were suddenly surrounded by six old Chevys suspended on more goddamned cinder blocks. “What the hell is this?” I said.

“It’s Creeper’s design for King Lear as a used-car dealer.”

“Sit down,” I said, hiding my clammy, red hand behind my back.

He opened the door of a red 1962 Impala and sat. I strolled across from him and leaned up against a black 1959 Biscayne.

“Before you say anything,” he said, “I just want you to know I did it as a favor to Creeper. I didn’t know what they were going to do.”

“You knew who the kid was! Why didn’t you let me in on it?”

“I wanted to see your reaction. He was convincing, admit it.”

“And sis? I guess you thought she was pretty good.”

“I’d hire her.”

My pride was being crammed down my throat. I was expected to be a big boy and come into the light. These two psychos were the best we had seen all day. They could very possibly handle two major roles in the show.

“He’s our ‘HAMLET THE SECOND!’ He’s got the look and experience. He played the Guthrie in Minneapolis. What more do you want?”

“What about sis? Besides you, what else has she done?”

“I haven’t done anybody, Hal. She’s in *‘Up with People,’* but she wants to get into acting.” I stepped over to him and slapped my wet palm on his back. His bright yellow golf shirt now had a red anti-freeze hand print on one of the shoulder blades. “Do me a favor,” I said, “cut me in on the scene work next time.”

Ric swallowed a piece of Juicy Fruit© gum. “You’re pissed because we didn’t let you in on it. Are you sure you’re not pissed because of something else?”

“’Something else’ is always going on with you,” I said.

My father had taught high school English and had once remarked that regardless of how Catholic, or how Irish, or how moral he and Mom had raised me, there would be a moment in life for which there would be no definition and no explanation, but which would invariably break my nose with its truth. It would occur when I thought I had the greatest control, the best chances, and was the most self-assured. It would be as startling in its clarity as it was unexpected in origin. Dad chose a corny but descriptive little term to call such a moment, “a life footnote.” This footnote would be an otherwise

throwaway intangible which would present itself and not only threaten a momentary course of action, but might alter my life entirely. He wanted me to always be open to these footnotes because they were more than just footnotes. They were meant to be a conscience.

Intellectually, I thought I had understood footnotes then, but I was just beginning to realize their emotional vitality now. At this moment with Ric, one was hitting, as it had done before and would again. It was a flashing red light inside my head and alerting me to watch out. I was not in control. If I didn’t get a grip, I could be in trouble. Question was, was it the show, or Ric himself?

“We’re doing what we want to do, aren’t we?” He said, “let’s forget it and go on. I promise I’ll cut you in on the scene work next time.”

“I can’t afford for this to fail,” I said. “Psychodramas like that aren’t what I call a real audition. We know they’re good with guns, but can they carry an ensemble show?”

He stood up and pulled his forehead to mine, “it’s not going to fail, Hal. I love you too much. Besides, I can’t afford for it to fail, either.”

He could afford it, and I resented him for it. I backed away from him. “In order for this to work,” I said, “we need four things: the money, the stage, the actors, and a *door!* As far as I’m concerned, we’ve barely got the money!”

“You don’t think the kids are any good.”

“They’d upstage a Jack Russell! They don’t lend themselves to ensemble work, and you know it!”

Pouting, he ambled over to a 1966 Chevelle and leaned against the front fender. There were two possibilities here. Either he was genuinely hurt, or just stumped for something to say. Suddenly, the Chevelle’s fender fell off. Ric lost his balance and dropped to the floor. My spirit was ready to help him, but my feet stayed planted by the Biscayne. He started to giggle. As he brushed himself off, he shook his head. We had some kind of marriage. We were both using each other. Neither of us could or would proceed without the other, and, as I was discovering, marriage tends to blur footnotes. Besides, with me in the director’s seat, he was hurling his investment at light speed past his father’s accountants while taking a huge risk with his career. Discovered, it would be over for us both. It would have been Napoleonic for me to balk.

“So we try the assholes,” I said, “but get us a damn *door.”*

Ric beamed. “I swear I won’t let you down. Just give me your best like you always do and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Forgive me, Father, but I believed him.

**III. SHRAPNEL**

Procrastination is like an acid. It eats away at you. You put things off long enough and before you know it, your palms sweat, you get gas, and, if you’re really lazy, you get hives, until the ugly truth is revealed in all of its twisted, pungent anatomy. Trish had been on my back burner all day. She had left a garbled message. I should have checked in with her hours ago. Maybe a call might be an act of responsibility toward the real job that paid my rent, put sushi on the table, and legitimized my corporate gym membership. So I humbled myself into the girls’ bar across the street to use the phone. As I hustled out onto the loading dock, I saw Wynn and Felice smoking a joint with Creeper. They sat on our interview table with a nonchalance that annoyed me. I knew enough about actors to know that as with any performance, even an audition, they crave a reaction. By denying them one, I was taking the power and getting even for their butt prints on my script.

I jumped off of the loading dock and was immediately accosted by more actors waving more photos and resumes. That’s when I discovered an effective move. As I backed away across the street, I lifted the palms of both hands about shoulder height. With ten fingers erect, I pushed at the air towards them, stepped into Wynn’s sunny backlight, and smiled. Unbelievably, they shut up. Yet I had not spoken a word. Then out of nowhere, a mad taxi that I hadn’t seen (and they had!) careened down the street, slammed on its brakes, squealed the tires, and slid into me. My left hand pounded the faded yellow hood. My heart thrust itself up against every other organ within range. Trust me, you never get blanket sympathy from a crowd of New Yorkers who sees you faint in front of a taxi. Anyway, I passed out.

Next thing I knew, I was laying on some kind of vinyl bed, gazing up into a moonfaced, African American angel dressed all in white. “Shir-ley. My name is Shir-ley,” she said. She had the cutest, fattest face I had ever seen, with a walleye that invited my stare to drift strangely to the left. She smelled like a nurse, like alcohol. Yet if she was the nurse, why was she wearing white denim? And where did these red pillows come from?

“Who are you?”

“I’m the bartender, honey.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in ‘Jersey’s.”

“How the hell did I get to Jersey? I was just at an audition in the Village.”

One of her upper tusks was missing. “That’s the name of the bar, sweet cheeks,” she giggled, “‘Jersey’s!’”

Just then the sound of rubber boots squeaked across the linoleum floor. A Yankees baseball cap leaned in behind Shirley’s Rocky Mountain shoulder. “Who the hell d’ya think y’are,” a voice said, “Super-fucking-man? Think those heaps stop on a damn dime, pal? You’re lucky to be alive!” Beyond the huskiness, through the horn rimmed sunglasses, and just above three, maybe four chins, I saw it was another woman.

“Who’re you?” I said.

“Jo Berwick! Baltimore! You almost got run over!”

Shirley said, “I saw the whole thing. She picked you up and carried you here.”

“Shirl, get me a beer!” Angrily, Jo crumpled the baseball cap as she pulled it from her head. She had a frosted butch cut.

I started to get up, but a sharp pain shot up my left side. I froze in a 45 degree angle. “Not so fast!” Jo slammed my left shoulder, and I plopped back into the booth.

At the altar of my childhood, betrothed to Dad’s footnotes, stood Mom’s more conventional philosophy, proffering the ring of Homespun Wisdom. She had often said,

“Hallie, events have a way of telling you when you’re not living right.” While Mom would never be in this bar, I could see her anyway, crowding in behind Jo, wearing that I-told-you-so expression: the squinted smile, the pursed lips, the head cocked slightly to one side. Wildly, I growled, “back *off*, Mom!”

Jo said, “he’s delirious.”

The front door slammed. I heard more footsteps.

“What happened?” Enter Ric, Creeper, and the two dead actors.

“It’s bad,” Jo said. “He thinks I’m his mom.”

“You know each other?” I said.

Wynn answered that they had all worked together at the theatre back in Minnesota. Jo was waiting in the audition line when the taxi hit me. Creeper shoved a lit joint into my mouth.

Soon, I was able to sit up. Ric brought me a shot of tequila and a draft, which I downed. Then I grabbed his collar, “get me out of here!” I said. So Ric sent Creeper back across the street to postpone the auditions.

Wynn towered over me like a teenage Michelangelo’s *David*. “Mr. Burke?” he said, “I take it you didn’t like our audition.”

Where did he get that?

“I want to make it up to you. I bought you another shot and a draft. You could use it after the accident. We can talk later about the show. I got ideas.”

I gulped down the shot and sipped the chaser. I had to give him credit. Aside from the leather outfit, he had the right look for “HAMLET THE SECOND”. I hated the politeness crap, though. As the liquid fire trickled into my system, I winked. Not at him. I just winked.

Jo said to Ric: “You’d better get him to the E.R.”

“I don’t want to go to the E.R.” I said, “I want to go to the office!”

Ric shrugged. “Why? Nobody’s there! It’s Saturday afternoon!”

“I told you! Trish called me at home last night and she never calls me at home! Something’s up!”

“So now you’re a mentalist? Okay, let’s go,” he said, and hoisted me up onto his right arm. Jo took my other arm. There were some boisterous bye-byes as Jo helped us un-crinkle the crinkled cab off the sidewalk. Ric tipped the driver. He re-assured him that he wasn’t going to be sued, and we headed uptown. About a half-block away from the Bigge Agency, Inc., cradled in Ric’s arms, I couldn’t help but feel his panting. It was enough to make me sit up. What I saw forced enough adrenalin into my system to choke a lion’s share of sobriety down my numb throat: a motorcade of limousines was parked along Madison Avenue, directly in front of our building. Flanked by a half-dozen motorcycle cops, headlights flashing, it warned passersby, and indirectly, signaled us.

“Ric, *look!*” I pointed to the entourage. Lloyd Nussbaum, the company attorney and King Malcolm’s champion, escorted someone (we couldn’t see who) out of the magnanimous glass entrance doors of the Bigge Agency. Nussbaum was surrounded by the usual junior partners, each decked out in the armor of their “Team Bigge” uniforms: gray flannel suits and maroon ties. If Nussbaum himself had an equivalent in politics, he was our Secretary of State. Ric never liked him. He saw him as a senescent old “yes man” just waiting for the day when his golden parachute would open and land him and his trophy wife in any fashionable section of Stamford. Maybe. But old Nussie had always been good to me. Too often, he had covered my ass in the legal department. I thought that of all of them, he was the closest to a real team player, if it exists in corporate America. For that, I forgave the gray/maroon. Anyway, it was transparent that the real reason Ric hated him was because Nussie was closer to King Malcolm than Prince Ric could ever be.

“I told you something was up!” I said.

Something was. This kind of entourage was no Saturday routine. “Stop here!” Ric said. His urgency overrode our driver’s liability concerns. The driver screeched to a stop, turning every head for two blocks, including Nussie’s, his boys’, and a bunch of suits I couldn’t make out. “What’s going on?” I said. His eyesight was 20/20. Mine wasn’t. I counted the seconds. “It’s the NewMaid Margarine clients!” Ric said, “It’s the singing cow’s daddy!”

We stumbled out and Ric slammed the door, leaving us frozen under Nussbaum’s steel gaze. His index finger pointed at us, turned upwards, and beckoned.

The lead limousine’s door shut, police sirens blared, and the motorcade surged in the direction of downtown. Nussie re-entered the castle. When the traffic cleared, we sprinted inside.

Our building, especially the lobby, had been recently renovated at a cost of about ten of our cheap horror movies, had we made them. Bathed in sunlight, the lobby

was a wall of glass. The 250 foot ceiling, recessed lighting, Italian marble floor, espaliers, and jungle variety of plants, all gave the impression not of harmonious Nature and Commerce which was intended, but Nature beaten into submission by Commerce, which is what it was. The concept was wildly emphasized by the three story escalator which served as the centerpiece of the lobby. It was on this centerpiece that Nussbaum lifted up and away from us. He turned back, and seeing us, turned away.

“No matter what’s happened,” said Ric, “no matter what they say, no matter what you hear, whatever you do, don’t say shit!”

I reached in my pocket for a stale piece of gum which broke into four pieces. I thought it would help cover the tequila. Instead, I swallowed it all with the gulp I gulped as we ascended to our doom. If it was true that our margarine client was in that limousine on Saturday afternoon at 5pm, then there was no question we were culpable. As in other businesses, clients do not deliver compliments verbally or by limousine. Not only was it *not* a compliment, it had to be bigger than a mere complaint, which might have been handled over nine holes or during a racquetball game between two SVPs. Even then, it would have been done on Monday during regular business hours. This was way bigger. Ric’s jaw tightened. His forehead stretched. But he was obdurate, too. He seemed to welcome, even relish, his fate.

There were no carpets at the Bigge Agency, Inc., especially in King Malcolm’s Throne Room. The old man had a flash-fire phobia left over from the blitzkrieg. So the escalator dropped the visitor off in the CEO’s secretary’s lap. In case of a fire, King Malcolm only had to flee down the escalator, moving or stopped, and he was safe on street level. The lesser offices like Creative, Legal, and my own, were located above. While we, his subjects, had spectacular views of the buildings next door and across the avenue, the Throne Room had an enormous Japanese triptych to behold; and if lush, delicately painted landscapes come to mind, it wasn’t that but an egregious, photo mural of the City of Tokyo at night, a reminder of our once greatest client, Asian Tourism.

We made our way towards His Majesty’s stronghold. The enormous mahogany entrance doors stood ajar. Ric’s hand touched one of them. He caressed it like he would a prized thoroughbred just before Belmont. With a gentle nudge, the doors parted and revealed the dark, forbidding Throne Room. Eyes were on us from every corner. No one made a move or a sound. Everybody who was anybody at the agency was there in a corporate tableau, standing or seated, waiting for the execution. Holly Hedlunden sat on the white African leather couch. In her prime, there was a chance she had been decent looking. But lately, in the last ten years, the peroxide, the nips and tucks, the cinching, and the ridiculous bent for puffy white dresses had turned her into an old Glinda, Good Witch of the North. Her knees were properly together, but her feet were sticking out directly east and west of each other. At 58, she still tried to stuff those size-9s into size-7 shoes, which, when she walked, gave the impression of quarter-to-three feet. She had no sense of humor. You didn’t laugh at her anywhere near Madison Avenue or she would find out. Being a one-woman employment agency, she was top barracuda. It had been rumored that she had once been King Malcolm’s concubine. In his defense, that was a long time ago. But, Ric had said that he had stopped by to see her last night. What did that mean? If he was telling the truth, there might be life for us after today. Then I caught her spying Ric’s crotch as we walked in.

Nussie stood behind the Throne to the left. He was the first to move. He picked his teeth with a matchbook. His eyes connected to someone on the far left. It was Trish! The poor kid! Had they dragged her all the way in from Riverdale? That meant she missed her Saturday softball game. Our eyes met. I tried to express my disappointment for whatever had happened. She only gazed at the floor.

The minions stirred, the casters rolled on his ergonomic chair, a puff of a Cuban cigar danced above him, and King Malcolm swiveled around to face us.

One cursory glance and you knew instantly where Ric had inherited his good looks. Undeniably handsome and elegant, now in his 80s, he had a full head of silver hair set above a war-weary, yet wise, even friendly face. Most conspicuous was the family trademark: the deeply set, all-seeing, all-knowing baby green eyes. These were his Supreme Command organs from which he judged one and all who met him, worked for him, became his client, or was the fruit of his loins. The redoubtable power of this man’s eye contact was legendary. No one could effectively lie to him. When someone did, it was as if all existence ceased for that person. Malcolm had no casual acquaintances or employees, even in the mailroom. If you were to know Malcolm, then you were to become part of Malcolm. Once you were drawn to him either by his personal grace, his genius for business, or the exquisite hospitality of those eyes, he would, in a sense, swallow you whole. If he spit you out, there was no life after him. He had built his empire this way, conquering client and competitor alike. He was the richest, most exalted adman on Madison Avenue. If, like Caligula, he would have declared himself a god, no one, not even the trade magazines, would have blinked. It was for these and so many other reasons that Prince Ric had been such a heretical pain in King Malcolm’s ass.

“Afternoon, boys!” King Malcolm spoke in a velvet tone which needled Ric. Then the King turned to Nussie and with a wave of his cigar, ordered everyone out. The echoing click-clicks of leather heels against the marble floor rendered the sound like a small hailstorm. Holly scooted forward on the couch and heaved herself up with one of those muted leather-farts. As she limped past us, she peered into our eyes and, ever so slightly, shook her head. Nussie came after her. Evidently, his decorum would not allow him to look directly at Ric, so he glared at me. If he was truly experiencing the sorrow he displayed, I was sorry. To me, he was a gentleman. I still had hopes of being a gentleman someday. I felt I could not afford to betray this mentor. Trish followed. She gave me a slight glance, scratched her head, and left. The hailstorm subsided, and the gentle close of the thoroughbred doors signaled a private audience.

I thought that assassination might be Malcolm’s other reason for not having carpets, allowing him to hear someone creep up from behind and thereby avert being cracked over the head with the Carrara marble bust of Cato, looming up behind him on a pedestal. If the irony of that dreamy murder was wasted today, I promised myself that someday it would make it into one of our movies.

Malcolm rose, lit his cigar again, and puffed. I watched Ric. There were no signs of the unbridled anxiety that leapt up inside of me. Nor did he seem the least bit curious. Malcolm arched his shoulders and sighed. “Hungry?” He asked.

Ric’s frosty eyes sank into his head and the lids turned lazy. His chin jutted out, and he exhaled. “With all due respect,” he said, “don’t play games, *sir.*”

Malcolm’s eyes flashed. Wickedly, he grinned at the truculent salutation. I couldn’t divert my eyes, but I wanted to. It was embarrassing to witness two grown men tear each other up like two bull elephants in a pasture, and all because they were so much alike.

“You’re having dinner with me,” the King said, then nodded. A lifetime of resentment clouded in between them, so thick and foul I could smell it. It seemed that all that was left of an ironhanded father’s relationship with his inexorably rebellious son was this cordial but savage courtesy: the dinner invitation.

“You’ll join,” Malcolm said to me. He strolled behind us. Ric and I faced front. “You look terrible, Hal,” he said. I froze. I didn’t care to have the King’s attention aimed at me for any reason. Yet, there were so many details that must have been apparent: the bandaged finger, bloodied hands, ripped shirt, stale smells of beer , tequila, anti-freeze, and everything else. “One of those days, sir,” I said.

“Indeed, Hal Burke, one of those days.” He blew a fully pendulous puff of smoke which floated between Ric and me, and levitated hypnotically in front of us until we sucked it up our noses.

“Use my showers. I’ll have dinner clothes brought in.” He couldn’t have missed the red hand print on Ric’s shoulder.

Aggressively, Ric cleared his throat. “Why don’t you save us all a lot of trouble and get it over with?” he asked.

The royal shoes ceased strolling. “Your limousine is waiting in the garage,” he replied. “Be at the airport in two hours.”

The thoroughbred doors shut, and he was gone.

“What’s going on, Ric? We’re fired or something. Aren’t we?”

Ric shrugged, “there’s nothing left to do but dress for dinner.”

I had never been privileged to enter the executive washroom. But I was unsurprised to find eight showers, a sauna, steam room, and an oversized hot tub. Fitness machines lined one wall and had probably never been used. When and if the old man wanted to work out, he flew to Lucerne.

Ric tore off his clothes and showered. But the thought of that hot tub was just the ticket for the spiking pain in my back. I stripped and jumped in. I closed my eyes and in no time, dreamed that I was magically transported to the White Mountains in New Hampshire: my turf. Mom and Dad had taken us there winter and summer. Then, in this hot tub dream, I stood at the top of an enormous ski jump. I was naked but with skis strapped to my feet. King Malcolm, in full regalia and jewel-studded crown, hovered over me! He held a stopwatch. To his left were my mom and dad. They were overwrought. On his right, dressed like punk cheerleaders at a sadomasochistic basketball game, stood Wynn and Felice, chanting and egging on the crowd: *“‘Up with people!’ Up with people!’”* Behind them, Shirley and Jo Berwick wore nun’s habits and sang hymns out of upside-down *Advocate* magazines.

“I didn’t ask for this, Your Majesty!” I said to the King.

“You did, Hal,” the King said, “it says so right here in your script!” He hit me on the head with Uncle Terry’s “HAMLET THE SECOND” manuscript.

I gulped as my eyes ogled the distance down the slope. I pleaded with him, “but Your Highness, I’m not a jumper! I barely learned how to snow plow when I was 14!”

The King blew a fully pendulous puff of smoke and said, “if Richard Terrence can do it, so can you!” Then he guffawed, *“ho, ho, ho!”* The sound echoed down the slope and thundered across the valley. Had I been in advertising too long? The King’s royal hand pounded my aching back with a stupendous thud, and I plunged down and down and down into the white abyss. The last thing I remember seeing was an angel in white with gold wings hovering in a cloud of cigar smoke at the end of the ski jump. It was Lenore Shears. She held a wand with a little star on the tip. Her eyes followed me. When I was within three feet of her, traveling at 60 mph or more, she waved her wand grandly in the direction of Total Nothingness and chimed, “this way!” My skis took flight. I was airborne. I looked back and they all waved bye-bye.

“*Ric!”* I screamed.

In the next second, I splashed into a hot spring. An arm grabbed me by the throat. It hoisted me out of the water. I doubled over against the tub, and coughed up chlorine.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Nude and lathered, Ric rescued me.

My fists slammed the water, “where were you when I needed you?”  
 He hurled a towel at me, spun around, and headed back to the shower. “Has everybody gone nuts?” He slammed his shower door.

I pulled the towel off of my head and decided to behave.

In the limousine, seated across from each other, he must have noticed my intentionally meek and apologetic body language. We were driven to the old Pan Am heliport and then, by Bigge Inc. helicopter, to LaGuardia. Lloyd Nussbaum met us there and carted us over to Malcolm’s pride and joy, a Citation III, dubbed “Bigge Brother.” A licensed pilot, Malcolm loved to fly. This little jet was his favorite non-human toy. Ric had said it was less stuffy than the corporate Lear and a lot more maneuverable.

The plane’s interior was more compact than I’d suspected. While the cockpit was separated from the cabin, and a short aisle led back to the head, it felt more like a flying yacht than an aircraft. Still, it was a new adventure, and I was going to enjoy it.

Ric and the taciturn Nussie found their seats first. I sat down opposite them, facing the rear. The engines whined and we began to taxi.

“Buckle up,” Ric said, “Malcolm’s driving.”

Nussie’s throat-clearing was a warning bell, “ever flown in one of these, Hal?”

“No, sir,” I replied. Riding backwards like this, I remembered once that I had had motion sickness on the New York/New Haven Express. I had never been sick like that before. Why I chose this moment to test that particular immune system was a mystery. I could have easily asked one of them to switch seats. But since I wasn’t very popular right then, I stayed where I was and shut up.

The plane surged down the runway. I could feel the incredible lightness of the fuselage as the wings lifted us effortlessly into the air. But, instead of the normal g-force one experiences by being pressed *backwards* into one’s seat, this one forced my stomach *onto* the seatbelt. I tried to squirm back as hard as I could. My fists dug into the armrests. The expression on my face must have been telling.

“Hal? Are you all right?” Ric said.

We rocketed up vertically. The higher we climbed, the more I rose up over their heads. My tummy became a dead weight as it thrashed against the belligerent seatbelt. I wasn’t going to hold out. Something clicked inside my head. I should warn them. “I don’t think I feel very good!” The words hung there helplessly, straight down into their faces.

“Hal! He’ll level out in a second!” Nussie said, sweating like Nixon.

“No! I’m gonna be sick!”

Nussie wiggled unsuccessfully. Ric involuntarily patted his arm. Eruptions started inside me, undoubtedly from the divine but quirky tequila. What was I going to do, barf down their throats? “Ric!” I said, “I can’t hold it!”

My interior cheeks gushed saliva. Mayday!

“The *bag*, Nussie!” Ric said, “give him the *bag!”*

Too late.

Malcolm leveled off, and I spent the next hour helping Ric and Nussie clean up. Neither of them talked much, surprise, surprise, but Ric eventually managed to pry our destination out of Nussie. We were on our way to Quebec City. But we were due to arrive much quicker than it would take for the suits to dry. Humiliated, I listened as Nussie called Malcolm and advised him to radio ahead for more dinner clothes.

We got to Quebec City at 9:35pm. After a brief show at customs, we were met by the airline maintenance team, which were accustomed to this kind of thing. We changed in to fresh suits, and were driven to the Frontenac, Quebec’s grand old hotel,

overlooking the St. Lawrence. King Malcolm must have beamed himself there, since

he didn’t ride with us. I had been in Quebec City before as a kid, at one of Dad’s teachers’ conventions. The walled citadel couldn’t have made a more lasting impression. Its arms reached out and wrapped me in tranquility. We stood high enough above the city that its sounds disappeared into the night air. A drizzle had dampened the plankings of the boardwalk, mirroring the soft, inviting light from the lanterns along the way. The street drank in the light and reflected the charms and substance of a world gone by. I gazed out over the wall to the St. Lawrence. The benign landscape bathed me in a fluidity of culture that merged centuries. I loved it. I was an idiot!

Ric stood next to me while we awaited our last supper. “I didn’t expect to be crucified together,” he said.

“So if they call ‘Spartacus,’ I should stand up?”

Ric gazed onto the faraway lights of the hillsides. He knew we had become poseurs, neglecting the proven trusts of the company in favor of selfish ambitions. Conversely, I thought we were just following our instincts, realizing our own independence. Wasn’t that what it was all about? I had fed this concept to him daily, like vitamin C. So, I was as responsible as him.

Nussie appeared behind us. “It’s time, gentlemen,” he said, like an undertaker. He led us into the hotel and upstairs to an intimate, exquisite suite overlooking the city. In the center of the room stood a dining table with lighted candelabrum, and French

crystal place settings for four. A waiter stationed himself beside the portable bar while a quartet of violins played, *“The Mephisto Waltz.”* There was a distinct smell of cigar smoke as we were seated, Ric and I across from one another, and Nussie facing the window, and the King’s chair.

“Would you like something from the bar?” the old steward asked.

Ric studied me. If he was waiting for me to order something non-alcoholic, he was wrong. “Scotch, neat.” I said. Ric ordered the same. Nussie asked for a gin-something. As our drinks were delivered and the jazz band segued into *“Mass in C Minor,”* the door to the adjoining room opened. King Malcolm appeared. He was jolly enough as he caressed a fresh Cuban cigar between his fingers.

“One of life’s greatest pleasures, eh, Lloyd?” The King said.

Six months prior, Nussbaum had been diagnosed with throat cancer. He had beaten it for the time being, but his lips could never touch one again.

“Rolled on the inner thighs of a Cuban flower,” Malcolm said, sitting. He swallowed at least five inches of the thing, and then removed it. “Do you like cigars, Hal?”

What to say. What to say. “Ahem,” I answered judiciously, “I haven’t courted a taste for them, sir.”

“You will never be a true gentleman until you do. You will wind up like Richard Terrence, here. He is not a gentleman. Did you know that?”

Ric grinded his teeth.

“Mr. Burke, I asked you a question.”

I glanced at Nussie for help, but there was none. “Yes sir, perhaps not. But I think he has potential.”

I said before that there was no humor in this man or in his version of business. I knew instinctively that I did not belong in the same room with him tonight or any night. It felt like I was being run over by Heidi’s Panzer. But, my bankrupt attempt to break ice was not lost. Ric asked for a cigar. It shattered the King. For a moment, I believe he saw the son in Ric he had always wanted. Malcolm snapped his fingers, and the steward presented Ric with the royal humidor filled to capacity with different varieties. Ric grabbed one and lit up with the candelabrum, instead of using the King’s lighter, which was offered.

“Grandstander!” King Malcolm said.

They stared at each other as if each was seeing himself reflected in a sci-fi, present/past mirror. Then Malcolm said, “you boys like the drama, I believe. We had a bit of the drama of our own today, didn’t we, Lloyd?”

Nussie leaned forward and addressed us straightforwardly: “we’ve been hit with a lawsuit, guys.”

The blood flushed from my head. Was I as white as the Irish linens?

The King raised himself out of his chair and stepped to the window. He addressed our reflections. “Has it been four years?” he said. “Time is so short. Yes, four years almost to the day. In that time, we have endured your reckless, irresponsible disregard for the welfare of the company in favor of your own private concerns. We have over-paid you, vacationed you, insured, profit-shared, and 401k’d you.”

Ric tried to speak, “sir, I think that Hal and I, in the time that we’ve been there, have helped restart the company --”

“Lloyd and I find ourselves facing a dilemma, you see!” The King interrupted, “on the one hand, there is this undying love of a father for his son, and, frankly, his son’s friend.” Terrified, I nodded in response to this contaminated morsel. “On the other,” he said, “there is your disastrous singing cow commercial! They bloody well hated it!”

Ric cleared his throat.

“Guys,” Nussie said. “they hated it to the tune of six million, U.S.”

Malcolm fumed both in his expression and, literally, with the cigar. He strode to the center of the room and ambushed the musicians. “Get out!” He ordered. They scurried away, leaving the *“Mass”* to self-destruct. Then, cigar still lit, Malcolm took a position behind Ric. He placed his arthritic hands on Ric’s shoulders and said, “it’s not the litigation that troubles me, although everyone knows how I feel about the courts.”

He hated them. He would do anything to avoid suing or being sued, even if it meant paying more money.

“Banks, insurance companies, lawyers, they are all shits!”

This was another lob against old Nussie, a fine attorney in his own right, who could do little more than respond with a glare at of the floor.

The King returned to his perch at the window.

Ric said, “Sir! If we’re being sued, there’s got to be a better reason for it than them *hating* the spot. Nobody on their side asked to approve it. We turned the agency upside down to get the cow to air on time. We finished it alone! Nobody else gave a damn to take a look. Were they expecting to approve it *on-air?”*

Malcolm offered no reply or comment. Instead, Nussie presented the details: “Hattie, the singing cow, is the most prized cow in the industry. Your father personally courted the account for eight months before this spot was green-lighted. It was a test spot to show the client just how our agency would perform as a whole. Normally, we turn down such opportunities.”

“But, the cow!” the King said, “the *cow!”* His eyes bugged out and rolled up to the ceiling. His mouth massaged the word *“cow”* in some kind of Wall Street ecstasy.

“We have nothing to prove as an agency,” Nussie continued, “except in this case, there was too much at stake.” He named the subsidiaries of the dairy company who owned the rights to Hattie, all of whom would have contracted to use us for more advertising, had we performed.

“It was our test!” Ric said, a little too corrosively.

Malcolm rotated towards him. The tiny flames which glowed inside his pupils were not from Hell, but only a weird reflection from the candles which made it *look* like they were from Hell. “Which you failed miserably!” the King said. “I saw the thing! Mind you, my personal standing in this industry means little, but you’ve embarrassed the company!”

“If it meant so much to you, then you bloody well should have been there!”

The King lost it. Foul cigar and all, he dived into Ric’s face: *“I am not your babysitter!”*

My eyes darted to Nussie, who toyed with the lace hem of the tablecloth.

*“Nor am I yours, Mister Burke!”* The King yelled. I jumped three feet. His mouth was millimeters from my ear with a sound clarity and loudness worthy of THX©. How did he get there so fast?

“Leave him alone!” Ric said. He pitched his napkin to the table, stood, and approached his father. “I don’t believe this!” he said, “ so the spot was not excellent! I saw the matte lines! The lips were not precisely in sync! But goddamn it, I would have broomed it if I thought it meant losing a big client or some goddamned ridiculous, million dollar lawsuit.” Spittle collected at the corners of his mouth as he crossed the room. He stopped beside my chair, “and he would have too!” His nostrils flared and he socked the air again with a rigid index finger pointed at me. I know. I saw his reflection.

A glaze clouded Malcolm’s eyes. He studied a partial reproduction of Picasso’s *“Guernica”* above the sofa. That is to say, somebody took a section of it and framed it.

“Matte lines?” Malcolm asked, “I could care less about matte lines. Sync? Sync was passable.” He exchanged a curious glance with Nussie. Ric and I were doubly perplexed.

“I don’t get it,” Ric said, “if the sync didn’t bother them, then that means the animation was okay. If it wasn’t the animation, the sync, or the matte lines, then what’s the hair up their asses?”  
 Nussie was tired of straining his neck looking up at the two of them. He rose and stood behind his chair.

“Your television spot aired, gentlemen,” Nussie said, eyeing us acutely, “coast to coast on *‘The Evening News,’* not as a finished television commercial, but as a glorious black and white work print!”

Now the blood returned to my face. *I* went red from embarrassment.

“In point of fact,” Malcolm raged, “it was not ‘glorious’ at all. The picture contained editorial grease pencil marks, no jingle, and no product identification.”

The film and video industry is not unique. Crammed with pitfalls, it can be like a riding a motorcycle: deadly once you assume you have it mastered. There are too many technical pitfalls, too many creative options, too many birdbrains, and too many masturbatory hands passing a project along the assembly line for any detail to be ignored.

In this case, I had somehow allowed the network to get hold of, and broadcast, the work print. The 35mm motion picture film, trounced on by Prince Ric’s royal Cole Hahns©, was only a guide, a black and white shadow, of the real thing. Yet, how could this happen? The work printtransmitted to millions of unsuspecting, potential margarine buyers out there? From Nantucket to Lahaina, from Key West to Fairbanks, had we been torpedoed by the cow from hell?

I thought fast: The guys in the Traffic Department would have only messengered what was provided to them from Vidpost, and Vidpost knew better than to send out a clearly-marked “work print.” What about the network? Their clearance people knew better. They would not just put up an editor’s work print on their broadcast tape machines, and let it *play*. They would notice the slate at the beginning of the spot, in big red letters, flashing: “NOT FOR AIR.” On the other hand, there are countless spots produced in black and white. Maybe they assumed this was one of those. But scratches and grease pencil marks on the picture, no jingle, and no I.D.? Something was rotten.

Ric sat down. His expression turned brackish. I shut up. This was business. We did not complain. We did not explain.

“Are either of you,” Malcolm asked, clearing the typically English catarrh from his crusty throat, “the least bit interested in your fate? Do you care to know what will become of you, at least with regard to the agency?”

Thanks for qualifying, you bastard! I’m going to move to California and open an IN-N-OUT BURGER©.

“You’re going to tell us,” Ric said. “We don’t have to ‘want’ to hear it.”

Malcolm nodded at Nussie, who reached for his bifocals with one hand and, with the other, retrieved a legal document from his brief case. Blithely, he unfolded it and read the last rites: “’By the power invested in me by the State Of New York, I, Lloyd Nussbaum, acting for and on behalf of Sir Malcolm Anthony Smythe-Bigge, and The Bigge Agency, Incorporated, of New York City, do hereby notify Richard Terrence Smythe-Bigge, also of New York City and employed by The Bigge Agency, that a *lien* in the amount of (not to exceed) six million dollars, U.S., shall be executed and held against Richard Terrence Smythe-Bigge and all of his titles and ownership(s) of the following stocks, bonds, holdings, personal belongings, and all other possessions, living space(s), credit cards, IRAs, CDs, mutual funds, and the like, and will enjoin each and all subsequent future stocks, bonds, title(s), and ownerships, and shall therefore remain in effect until such time said lien is satisfied, or the party, Richard Terrence Smythe-Bigge, becomes deceased.’”

Nussbaum was no longer the affectionate “Nussie” in my book. He stopped reading long enough to drink his gin. “With regard for the privacy of your holdings, Richard,” he continued, “we will not go through the litany of your ownerships. You know what they are. Do not attempt usage of, or acquiring any additional -- even your most insignificant plastic -- since your assets are now collapsed evermore.”  
 “Frankly,” Malcolm added, “everything that is yours until this is resolved is, from this moment, under my control. Since you brought us to this mess, you’ll find us a way out.”

“I need air!” Ric said. He stood abruptly and marched to the door.

“Richard Terrence!” the King called.

Ric turned to them. “I know what you’re doing, sir,” Ric replied. I expected him to say something more, but then he left. Since I was not about to sit alone with these two male versions of Scylla and Charybdis, I followed him.

“Hal?” Nussie said as I approached the door. I sensed my execution was to be much swifter. “Your contract is terminated.” He peered at me across the top of his glasses, and continued to rifle through more spurious paperwork, saying, “it expires at 12:01 a.m., Monday, September 16. You will receive an amount twice your allotted salary for a period of 90 days, at the end of which you will receive a final settlement of straight pay equal to twice the amount of months of the years you’ve been with the company. It’s not a bad deal. If you’ve been with us for four years, you will receive eight months straight pay. Your life insurance, health, and dental coverages will remain in effect one year forward from the date of your termination. You will be able to pick up your personal belongings at the loading dock of the Bigge Agency between the hours of 10am and 11:30am. Monday, September 16.” He removed the bifocals.

“Please do not attempt to re-enter the building,” Malcolm said. “Your assistant, Trish, is packing for you, so you know we’re trustworthy. After 30 days, you will receive a sterling recommendation from personnel. I shouldn’t think you would have any trouble finding another job. You are, in our opinion, eminently employable.” He swooped up his napkin, and wiped his sweaty brow. “Please send my regrets to your mother and father,” he said, “I found them very sweet on their last visit.”

That was weird. Mom and Dad were in the office once for all of 15 minutes just before the holidays. Malcolm had not met them, as far as I knew. If it was in passing, it could have been nothing more than a nod of the head. Yet, this was the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-devouring King. Nothing gets past him.

“Thank you!” I said, making direct eye contact. As tears threatened to give up my sorry ass, I took a deep breath, and closed the door on my future as an agency film editor forever.

Downstairs and outside, I found Ric leaning against a lamp post, smoking one of Creeper’s joints. I crossed the boardwalk and joined him. He stared out over the St. Lawrence. A fog had rolled in during the non-dinner.

“Here,” he said.

I took a drag. In the old days, when the drug culture had deflowered inviolate college life, I found out that I was not a depressant person, but had preferred stimulants. Diet pills and uppers had led to cocaine. Ric and other friends had nudged me that I might have a problem. Many thanks to Ric for helping me through it without hospitals. Since then, I’d sworn off everything but alcohol. But right now, this shit tasted pretty good.

“How’s your finger?”

“I will survive.”

“What about the head cold?”

“I’m terminated,” I said.

Ric looked away and said, “guilt by association, or they think you’re an accomplice. Did they cut you a good deal: a 90 day double-salary with a settlement at the end; insurance continuance for a year, and good recommendation from personnel?”

“Something like that.”

“Boilerplate,” he said, “for the ones they like. I guess it couches some corporate guilt; and they like you. You just got caught in my crossfire.”

The air was damp. A breeze cut through us and, for a second, clutched onto some litter dangling from an overfull trash can, scattering it.

“By the way,” I said, “I didn’t know your old man was titled. Nussie called him ‘Sir’ Malcolm.”

Ric scowled, “About five years ago, Malcolm schemed this ad campaign to revitalize English tourism. Guess the gimmick: 16th century torture devices from the Tower of London. Everywhere people went, they saw this hooded executioner on billboards, in newspapers, magazines, even at the movies. The guy always had an axe, the cucking stool, the iron heel, the thumb screw, you name it, inviting you back to ‘This England.’”

“Did it work?”

“Tourism jumped 35 percent in six months. The Queen liked it so much, she dubbed him ‘Sir Malcolm of Penis!’“ Ric giggled, “ooops!” he said. It must have been infectious, because I giggled too. Then he doubled over. He took three giant steps away from me, threw his arms up, and thundered into the night sky: *“I dub thee, ‘Sir Malcolm of Penis!’”*

The laughter drove him backwards into the fog. I thought I gleaned a figure behind him. I drew in a breath and was about to warn him when he trounced on an illegal pair of $650 elephant skin shoes. Startled, he whirled around and faced his father.

Nussbaum hovered at the King’s side. Unsteadily, Ric stood at attention and saluted them. He cocked his head, and wrinkled his nose at them. “Mein heir!” he said.

The King exhaled. “When are you going to grow up?” he said.

Ric shoved his hands into his pockets. He backed away and leaned against the wall. “And when are you ever going to *die?”* Ric replied, “Because until you do, no matter what you do to me, I’m the guy who grinds your valves better than anybody.”

“You did it to yourself!” Malcolm said.

*“Bullshit!”* I said. It was my turn. Deductive reasoning had been at work. My conclusion was that there was no possible way that a black and white work print could have ever made it to air without collusion from the top.

“Shut up, Hal!” Ric spat at me, “you’ll blow the only points you got in this deal.”

“He had to plan it all along!” I said.

He grabbed my lapels and hurled me up against the lamp post. “You don’t know anything, pup!” he said, squeezing my hand. He swung us both around to face them.

Malcolm and Nussbaum must have seen us as drunken fools because they presented their backs, and walked.

“Excuse me, *sir!*” Ric said.

Nussbaum urged the King away, but was ignored. King Malcolm turned.

“Excuse me, sir! I’m having trouble seeing you!” Ric waved ten erect fingers maniacally in the King’s face. “You must be so transparent, you’re not even here!”

Malcolm’s sunken, disappointed expression took on the look of a tragedy mask. Elsewhere in there was a hint of melancholy. But was it for Ric, or for himself?

“You think I don’t know what you did to me? The ‘news item’ in *Variety?* The calls to agents? The phone tap? Now the cow? What kind of fool do you take me for?”

“Richard!” Nussbaum whispered.

Ric glared at Nussie, “why don’t you feed on your own ass for a change, Tonto, instead of a lifetime of sucking his?”

Nussbaum shuddered.

“You think I don’t know why you beefed up this civilized little beheading tonight, with the jet, the hotel, the violins, and your stinking $20 cigars?” He said.

Thank God Ric let go of my hand. My finger throbbed beyond belief. Then, Ric took center stage, balls-out: “Everything led up to tonight, didn’t it? Just another one of your chess games? Tonight was to be Daddy’s farewell ‘All-This-Can-Be-Yours’ lecture. Acting-Like-A-True-Heir-Apparent 101! ‘Come ‘round to my side, Richard Terry. Stop living your life like a commoner!’ But to get me to listen, an opportunity had to be created. I had to be in ‘check’ first, so I had nowhere to turn. So I couldn’t breathe. Then, like Satan after a bad pizza, you belch yourself up from Hell and offer me the keys to your lousy, rotten kingdom.” He clicked his right heel flat against the boardwalk and blew the accusation of his life, “with one catch. I trade my soul.”

The King slipped his hands into his pants pockets. “I don’t want your soul, Ricky,” he said.

The Prince recoiled at the endearment. “Yeah, you do! It’s the one thing in the world you can’t buy, and that makes you hungry for it. When I don’t give in to you, sir, then you are ‘mated. I win.” Ric cocked his head, clearly pleased with the logic. “Otherwise,” he said, “you’d take me as I am.” I could almost see his triumphant spirit dance heavenward. He smacked his lips like an exclamation point.

The King’s jowls swung low and rested against the knot in his necktie. Then he glanced up at Ric and approached him, stopping just short of his nose. “What have you won, little hustler,” said the King, “the chance to fail again? All I have ever offered you is success. But you seem immune.”

“When I succeed, it won’t be because you gave it to me. Why don’t you just admit you’re beaten? Give up and get out of my life altogether.”

Remember when I said Ric tended to make bad things happen? Malcolm’s dour stance and the exigency of his stare were frightening. His probing snake-handler’s eyes enchanted the poisonous appetites of an unforgiving son. “From your first intransigent breath,” Malcolm said, “you cursed me. Like Terry cursed me. Oh, his was unspoken, but worse than yours spoken. His was an attitude of vile contempt and sullen resentment towards me, his only salvation. I knew you were like him; and since his affections bypassed me so completely, neither did I expect much more from you. But now, looking at you here as I do, another horror daunts me. It’s as if his tormented soul visits you upon me and posts his venom to my grave.”

Ric trembled, and then checked it. “You’re a dick!” He said.

“Very well,” Malcolm replied. “I grant your wish. I am out of your life, altogether. You no longer have a father.”

Then, Ric began to recite MOBY DICK by Herman Melville: *“‘I turn my body from the sun!’’*’ he said.

“There is no enjoinder,” Malcolm concluded, “our quarrel is finished.”

*“‘Oh! Ye three unsurrendered spires of mine; thou uncracked keel. ‘“*

“There is no claim on your possessions.”

*“‘Thou firm deck and haughty helm!’“*

“Of course,” Malcolm said, “since everything you own has come from me, it must still be confiscated.”

Ric thrust his body at the King: *“‘Death-glorious ship! Must ye then perish, and without me?’“*

“Because, I do not exist!” King Malcolm eyed Nussbaum with a gleeful sneer.

*“‘Oh, lonely death on lonely life!’“* Ric screamed, tearing off his suit jacket.

Malcolm took Nussbaum by the arm and they walked.

Enraged, Ric flung the jacket at them: *“‘towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying, but unconquering whale!’”* Stumblingly, he removed his shoes: *“‘to the last I grapple with thee!’”* He lobbed his left shoe. It struck Nussbaum in the elbow: *“‘From hell’s heart, I stab at thee!’”* The right shoe hit the king squarely below the neck: *“‘For hate’s sake, I spit my last breath at thee!’”* Ric pivoted, dropped his pants, and mooned them. At the top of his lungs, from between his legs, he roared: *“Thou damned whale!’“*

And he farted. It was a princely fart, for sure. But since even in Canada, princes can be arrested like the rest of us, I helped him pull up his pants. When at last our eyes connected, there were evident tears. I gathered his jacket and shoes and forced him to dress.

“We lost, Hal,” he said.

We walked for a while until we found a bench. There we sat retracing our steps through King Malcolm’s labyrinth. I had to give the King credit. The singing cow was the crystal ball in which he had divined and beheld our downfall. That the agency had lost a big-ticket account as a result was a throwaway, an expense of battle.

Ric bobbed his head.“You should dump me too. Nobody ever does any good having me for a friend.” The pouting, self-deprecating body language was funny.

“Why?” I grinned.

“I take things away from you. I take things away from everybody.”

I didn’t remind him what he had given me.

“What about that production gig? It might have been your big break, except I overworked you writing that stupid, bloody, Cayman Island horror movie script. What about the cable show? I took you away from that.”

A woman named Sonja had offered me to direct her house plant show. It was just before Ric had brought me into the agency. While he was getting started in advertising, I really had no opportunities except Sonja who had seduced me physically and mentally by promising she would be my ticket into show business. But when Ric had called, I flew out of Sonja’s bed, pants and psyche around my ankles, and never looked back.

“What about Alyse?” He said. That touched a nerve. He *did* take Alyse away. A college romance, Alyse was everything I had ever dreamed of, hoped for, prayed to, or pleaded with. She had held, guided, supported, touched, and kissed my body and soul until there was nothing left of me. I had wanted to be super-glued to her. She was brash, rich, savvy, and had no trouble getting her million-dollar face and legs into any of the hot clubs. Then Ric stole her. Eventually he lost her too, but not without some extra hurt. Alyse was an ulcer on both our souls. Ric shouldn’t have mentioned her. He pulled his knees up to his chin, sniffled, and his eyes got shiny. Do something!

So, to the furthermost stacks of my neglected, cobwebbed, library-branch of a brain, I went and borrowed my own Herman Melville quote from MOBY DICK. Melville wrote, and I quoted*, “‘And so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which like Satan, would not sink till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.’”* I meant it to be comforting. I’m not sure he took it that way. Anyway, I surprised myself for remembering it and privately thanked the South Boston school system.

Meantime, we were truly finished and it was cold. We didn’t have much cash between us and I didn’t have a credit card. We counted about $450.00 cash which turned out to be enough to get us both on the last flight out of Quebec.

At 2:30am, we arrived by taxi at 87th and Park. He got out of the cab, gave me thumbs-up, and swaggered to the front door of his building. I asked the driver to wait. I watched as Charles, his doorman, denied him entrance. The nightmare was on. So I took him to my place. He had never cared for the West 70s. “Too many actors,” he had said.

We drank a full liter of Irish whiskey. At one point, he peered out onto Central Park. “Somebody must have really loved you to help find this place!”

“How could you let him get hold of everything?” I said.

“You don’t know Malcolm. One thing he knows better than advertising is money. He’s handled mine since my first savings bond, like he handles Mom’s, Grams’, and everybody else’s. Don’t your folks take care of your money?”

I hadn’t grown up with enough money to buy paperclips, let alone stock. “You should have known he’d hold it over you,” I slurred, “you want what you have and freedom from it too. You can’t have it both ways. Not with this king. You think he’d let you use your money to produce an Off-Off Broadway show knowing how he feels?”

“It’s my money, my life, and I’m clever.”

“If you’re broke, you’re not that clever.”

“What’s your Grandpa say? ‘Life’s a warfare?’”

“‘Life *is* a warfare!” I said.

“Malcolm was no father!”

I got up and stumbled to my room. But as I walked out, I reminded him, “Malcolm’s king and you are the *enfant terrible* who won’t go to bed without a caning!” I left him a pillow and afghan on the couch. As I closed my bedroom door, I watched him undress. He’d always slept naked in college, so spying on him like this was nothing new. Ric naked was Ric vulnerable. I liked seeing that. His body was only medium build, but what was there was Greco-Roman perfect. I thought: Too bad I was straight.

The next sound I heard was banging on my front door. With both hands, I squeezed my head, hoping to will the sound away. I rolled over. My knees hit the floor. I hoisted myself into the living room. Morning was upon us, maybe even noon. Ric was sprawled face down on the couch, the afghan pulled up, around, and over his head.

I fell against the door and peeped through the peephole. A woman stood there. She wore white-rimmed sunglasses and a scarlet silk scarf wrapped sensationally around her head. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn’t make it out. I unlocked the door and opened it.

“Ric Smith?”

“Who the fuck are you?” I said.

“I’m Bonnie Shears, asshole!”

**IV. RETREAT**

“Ooops! Hi, Bonnie!” I giggled, “how’d you find us?”

“This is New York, hon,” she said, “with twenty bucks, a mild antidepressant, and the right doorman, you can find Hoffa.”

“But, Lenore said -- ”

“Forget Lenore! Are you going to let me in or do I have to fight off your nosy neighbors all day? Christ, I already signed three autographs.”

Sure she could come in. Was I dreaming?

She strutted into the room, jammed her hands into the trench coat pockets, stared at the pile of Prince Ric snoring on the couch, and said, “is he not chilly?”

I tugged the afghan out from under his head and covered his butt with it.

Her arrival changed things. I wasn’t sure what. Her shoulder-padded, angular clothes revealed features like Lenore’s, but the way she carried herself, standing in front of me as if posing for some fashion photographer, confirmed hubris. She was notLenore. Wide, flat lips wrapped around almost to her jaw. Better for stage projection, I thought, plus other things. She had not bothered to gloss them like her sister would have, nor was other makeup evident. I could hardly believe that standing in my living room at this moment was just about the sweetest, most beloved, talented darling of the current Broadway season. Her smash, “PERGOLA RAPTURE” had brought her rave reviews, ran 64 weeks, and, via the one-sheet advertising, delivered her expressive face into bus shelters, shopping carts, and throwaway coupon covers. The advertising for that show had been done in a muted, knocked-off Monet style. Dressed in a lace, hooped skirt, and a bouncy straw hat, Bonnie sat under an oak tree reading an Edith Wharton novel. The look on her face was like pensive reverie. A Victorian manse stood majestically in the background. I’m sure the serenity of the ad, combined with the intense wholesomeness of her expression, sold tickets as well or better than Julie Andrews hip-hopping over an Alp. Bonnie had stayed in character in television and radio interviews as well. She was a class act who portrayed a quiet, erudite elegance, and was generous to a fault. Everybody wanted to interview her. I’m sure I couldn’t hide my star struck stare. But this was a business call. So I stopped staring and said, “Ric! Guess who’s coming to brunch?”

Ric’s body jolted, his head drooped. His eyes must have been focusing on the pattern in my throw rug because he didn’t turn to face us. There was a moment of addled awareness. His head swung around low until his eyes discovered one of Bonnie’s shoes tapping impatiently on my copy of “HAMLET THE SECOND.”

“Can I take your coat?” I said, strictly to kill time.

She peeled it off and flung it at me, revealing blue jeans and a scarlet silk blouse. She plopped onto the arm of the couch, forcing Ric to retrieve his feet, and lit up a

non-filter Camel. “This is a switch,” she said through the smoke, “usually I’m the one naked at these things.” Gracefully, she swirled the match to put it out. I handed her an ashtray. “So, if this is Ric Smith, may I ask, who the hell are you?”

“I’m Hal.” I said, “Ric, wake up and meet Bonnie Shears.”

He squinted and ran his right hand through his hair in a futile attempt to flatten it.

“I understand you two bozos wanted to see me,” she said, jovially. She sucked in more smoke and blew it across the room. She was like a human, fire-breathing, Disney dragon.

Ric’s eyes surveyed her blankly. Suddenly, he popped up, stuffed the afghan between his legs, and sneezed.

“Wake up, little prince. Thy princess hath arrived. I’m here to talk about your show!”

I ducked into the kitchen to get coffee going. Right then, I noticed a voice mail message. It was Mom: “Hallie! Call me. Grandpa’s been diving again. Dad and I are taking him to the E.R. Okay. Bye.” I ground the beans and wondered what Mom and Dad would say about our executions. As Ric finally came around, we both listened as Bonnie Shears lauded “HAMLET THE SECOND”. In her words, “it was the most raucous, delightful play” she had read in years. “Years, honey!” Bonnie said, “A massively unexpected, side-splitting assault on her madcap vulnerabilities, which are many!” She liked a good laugh. “I need a comedy, you guys! I’ll do anything for this show. I am so over that turn-of-the-century, I-don’t- have-a-vagina crap. God, I need air!” She said, and lit up again.

She’d do anything? At last, we saw the resemblance to Lenore. “What about Lenore?” I said.

“Didn’t you hear me, ‘who-the-fuck-are-you’ what’s your name? Fuck Lenore! She does what I tell her.”

“Isn’t she your agent?” Ric said.

“She’ll keep those glossy, over-blowed lips shut. She’s also my spoiled baby sister. Watch out for her. Her mind’s on her makeup. You know the type. When she told me what happened at Gallagher’s, I absolutely doubled over. We’re not speaking, by the way.”

“Neither are we,” Ric said.

“She’ll come around when it’s time to do the contracts. The swine maiden gets another half-percent bonus every time I sign.”

Ric eyed me as I returned to the living room. The coffee was on its way, so I put out a few croissants and, with a nod to tragedy, a tub of margarine with Hattie, the cow-from-hell on the label.

“Don’t pig out,” she said, “we’ve got reservations at the Ritz in 45 minutes, my treat.”

I excused myself and bolted for the shower. As I did, her enthusiasm

percolated like the coffee, “so you’re Ric Smith! You’re a lot cuter than I expected, and not the octopus like most advertising execs I meet in this town.”

Suddenly, Ric followed me into the bedroom. He fumbled with the afghan. “Hal!”

“What the hell are you doing?” I said, “stay and entertain her while I shower.”

*“You’re pretty sexy in that little homemade afghan, Ric Smith!”* Her loud voice echoed down my hall. Christ, my neighbors could think this was a three-way.

“What the hell are we going to tell her?” He said as he closed the bedroom door.

*“You have a major, swimmer’s body!”*

“I don’t know what to tell her,” I said, “truth is good.”

“That I’m disinherited and daddy confiscated my cash, so we can’t do the show?”

*“You know me, horny broad stroke that I am!”* Through the door, Bonnie’s muffled voice was as clear as CNN.

“You’re not going to tell her?” I begged.

“It’s Bonnie Shears, Hal! When you’ve got Bonnie Shears for your show, everything else falls into place. By the way, I need some socks, a shirt, and maybe a sport coat, and where are your silk ties?”

*“Where do you work out?”* The bell tolled again.

He rummaged through my closet. We were identical sizes in nearly everything except one, which became evident again, as it had so many times before, as he pitched the afghan on my bed. “What about that commercial acting job you promised?” I said. “That’s what she wants. How do we make that happen?”

*“Downtown!”* He yelled back at Bonnie. *“Athletic Club!”* Then he turned on me in a violent whisper. “We’ll have to cut her some points in the show instead.”

*“Perfect!”* Bonnie said, *“we must steam together!”*

“More points?” I stripped and stepped in the shower. “You already promised points to Lenore! We’re going to owe everybody in town. Just what we need, a copy of a copy of Tallulah Bankhead getting points in a show that we don’t even know is ever going to be produced.”

“Hurry up! I need to think.”

The hot water streamed into my face. Maybe it would burn a little color back after the past two days. Then, while I was toweling off, he nearly knocked me over to get into the shower himself. In minutes, I dressed the finger, dressed me, and went back to the harpy in the living room.

“What’d you do to that finger, hon?” She asked, sipping my coffee and not waiting for a reply, “haven’t you got any Equal©? I looked everywhere.”

“Sorry.” I resented both her preferred interest in Ric and her raid on my cabinets. “How long has Lenore been your agent?” I said.

She arched her back, frowned, and slammed down her coffee cup. “What did I just tell you, Bond, James Bond?”

“You want to steam with Ric?”

“Forget Lenore. Bonnie is Bonnie. Lenore is Lenore. It’s Bonnie that likes your show and that’s all you need to know. Unless there’s something else you want to tell me, since you seem to be so obsessed with the bitch.”

Now I understood how intuitive this Tony Award-winning actress was. She had read my deer-in-headlights expression. Perhaps that’s what made her good. That and her balls.

“She’s got my jacket,” I said. I told her the story.

Her head jolted backwards and she guffawed, “you’ll get it back. They all get them back. Okay, I have a little surprise for you. She’s meeting us for brunch” Then her booming voice shot through my eardrum as she tried, once again, to get Ric to hear her. *“Ric Smith, c’mon in here and let’s talk coconut oil!”*

Ric reappeared in my clothes. How was it that he looked so much better in my stuff than I did? Did I have the same dysfunctional problem with clothes that I had with women?

She squeezed his left pectoral. “Damnation alley! You are a picture perfect! The hell with coconut oil, let’s talk about tan lines over some Sangria!” A deep breath issued forth from those two famous, bodacious tatas.

“Do our show,” Ric said, “and I’ll rub you down with grappa.”

“That ought to perk up a few pubes!” She said, “*Ha!”*

The Ritz was jammed. But since the maitre d’ clamored for stars like Bonnie, we knew we wouldn’t wait long. Bonnie launched us into the bar, split the crowd like General Sherman, and strafed her fans with “Luvvie!” and “Sweetie darling!” and “God, say hello to Dr. Grossman for me! I recognize those little pointy stitches!”

My inklings of seeing Lenore again were fulfilled. In springtime yellow, she was perched on a bar stool nursing a matching yellow Harvey Wallbanger.

“Hello, chicken neck!” Bonnie said, as we sidled up behind her.

Lenore snuffed a Virginia Slim and half-turned to her sister. “Look who’s talking,” she said, “you’ve laid so many eggs on Broadway, you’re audiences have to get their cholesterol checked before they can buy a ticket.”

Bonnie coughed up phlegm.

“Talk about your barnyards.”

Even in profile, Lenore was as radiant as she ever was. But did it matter? I felt like the guy who’d beached the *Exxon Valdez*. What was I going to get to do next?

Lenore eyed her sister wickedly. Her nails clawed at the Wallbanger. “Obviously, you don’t think I’ve been embarrassed enough for one weekend.”

“Perhaps if you hadn’t stuck that expensive, plastic nose into the dessert menu,” Bonnie said, “we’d all be friends today.”

That object of my adoration was plastic?

“Leave my nose out of it.”

“I’m sure that’s what the chef said about his Black Forest Cake,” Bonnie said. “Besides, we’re all here for business, and sometimes we have to do things in business with people that we don’t always appreciate. Didn’t you read Shelley Winters’ autobiography like I told you to? So let’s start over again, shall we? Meet Ric Smith and Hal Darling!”

“Burke!” I said.

“You’re ‘darling’ to me!” Bonnie reached into her pocket for another Camel. Ric lit it for her. Where he got the lighter was a mystery.

Lenore flung Bonnie her butt-filled ashtray. Bonnie emptied it on the bar, stuck it in her purse, and asked the bartender for another. “One can never have too many of these.” It was a trip to watch these two step on each other’s hem while powdering each other’s nose, plastic though it may be. Anyhow, we got drinks and Lenore calmed down after I coaxed an apology out of Ric for our behavior at Gallagher’s. He complimented Lenore on her right hook.

“Don’t you have something for Hal?” Bonnie snorted.

Lenore sighed and reached down under her bar stool. There was that infamous tote bag. As she brought it up to bar height, I ducked.

“Here’s your jacket,” she said. She pulled out my familiar wad. “I would’ve had it pressed, but Bonnie hasn’t got laid on my couch lately.”

We were bemused by the dynamics. There was only so much I could tell them, without telling them the truth. Was I to give them every bit up to but excluding our prior night’s rendezvous with Moby Dick? When they asked about the theatre, I told them about Creeper and yesterday’s auditions, about Wynn and Felice, Jo and Shirl, and about how everybody and his brother had “ideas” for the show.

“That, you gotta expect!” Bonnie said. “Let them contribute. I’ll tell you when something will work or it won’t. The point is, try everything!”

She was going to be difficult to direct. She probably needed motivation to pee, which she did, just as our table was called. Lenore daintily wiggled off of the bar stool and followed Bonnie to the ladies’ room. “Nail that table,” she said.

As they left and Ric and I were escorted to an elegant four-top near the front, Ric’s brow furrowed. It was hopeless. Perhaps the events with his father and the vain expectations of this brunch were sinking in. Maybe he tried to think positive, but the seeds of disaster planted in Quebec City last night bore the fruit of despair today. His double screw driver was only fertilizing the truth.

I gulped my drink, “if you don’t say something soon, there won’t be anything else for me to do except hit on Lenore.”

“I can’t do this now,” he replied, “get this brunch over with, say as little as you can, and take me someplace where I don’t have to be reminded what a screw-up I am.”

I gave him the only suggestion I had for two guys with hardly a jacket between them. “Boston?” I said.

He lit up like Paris.

“I’ll call Mom after brunch. There’s a 2:35 out of Penn Station. Besides, Grandpa’s not doing too well. Maybe now is a good time.”

“How do we pay for it?”

“They send me train tickets home for emergencies. There’s a drawer full of them at the apartment.”

“On your salary, they’re still sending you train tickets?”

“It’s hell to be loved,” I said.

Bonnie and Lenore found the table. It was the perfect position for Bonnie, who expected to be seen by everybody.

Bonnie hocked into her napkin. “Damned fags! Cigarettes, I mean. Would you believe my sister thinks I’m being too forward with you, Ric? She says I shouldn’t mix business with pleasure. So, for what it’s worth, I just want you to know that that’s the way I am.”

“You mix business with pleasure?” I asked.

“I’m forward. But it doesn’t mean anything. Business is business. I had a little problem with my last producer.”

Lenore’s mega-giggle exploded, distracting customers and waiters alike. “A littleproblem?” she said, “she dropped a computer on his head from the lighting booth during the second preview.”

“I didn’t *drop it* on him. One of the legs collapsed on the folding table, and it slid out the window. It hit the balcony first, and then it hit him in the head.”

“The point is,” Lenore said, “she develops emotional attachments with people who feed her scripts. I have warned her and warned her.”

“Chill, bitch! They get the picture!” Bonnie’s famous eyeballs bulged. I thought I saw steam blow out her ears.

“She’s going to wind up like Frances Farmer!” Lenore exclaimed.

“Insane with a manslaughter conviction!” Bonnie said, pounding the table.

Half-heartedly, Ric leaned forward in his chair. It looked like he was going to purge. Truth may have been the only weapon left. If he lied and she found out about it, she might walk. If he told her the truth, she might stick around.

“Hal and I have to be honest,” Ric began, “your enthusiasm for the script, your tenacity in finding us, even Lenore’s willingness to show up after what happened the other night, we have no choice but to be straight with you.”

Bonnie sank into her chair, “aw, hon! You’ve lost your backers”

“Not completely,” he said, “but we need some time. The show won’t be going up as quickly as we thought. You’ve both been very sweet.” His voice trailed off. Then he added, “I promise, we’ll get the backing if I have to sell my body at Stella’s.”

I wished he had not said that. Not only did it insult his personal integrity, but Bonnie scoffed at the idea that soon she might be able to actually *buy* him at a hustler bar.

Lenore eyed me while she sucked on a slice of a honeydew melon. She puckered as she slid it in and out between her lips.

Suddenly, Bonnie jumped up. She grabbed Lenore’s Harvey Wallbanger and downed it. Then she started to sing, a capella. Thanks to Perkins, Styne, and Sondheim, Bonnie became Ethel Merman at ramming speed. *“‘I had a dream, a dream about you, baby! You’re gonna come through, baby.’”*

“You cow! Sit down!” Lenore barked.

Heads swirled and spun from every direction, sucked into this maelstrom of talent who, now encouraged, kneeled onto her chair, and continued to bellow: *“‘Curtain up! Light the lights! You got nothing to hit but the heights!’”©*

Adoration and applause shook the walls as designer pens danced atop a sea of waving fans. The maitre d’ copped a bouquet of daffodils from the bar and placed it in Bonnie’s arms.

Aside from Lenore accusing her sister of drug abuse, the rest of the brunch went pretty well. Bonnie assured us both that she would wait in the wings until time was right.

As we left, Ric led Bonnie out ahead. I held the door for Lenore and suddenly, Lenore and I had a moment alone. “I want you to know something,” she said. “Bonnie and I may get on each other’s nerves, but I know one thing for sure: if Bonnie likes you, she’ll stick by you. You guys do what you have to do. She’ll be around when the time is right and so will I.”

My face flushed. I took her by the hand. “Let’s have dinner, you and me.” I couldn’t believe I had said it. She glanced down at the bag and without hesitation, reached in and handed me a business card. It featured a line drawing, a caricature of Bonnie’s face, with both of their phone numbers at the bottom. “It’s our personal card,” she said, “we don’t give them out. They tend to be expensive.”

“We’ll be in Boston. I’ll call you when we get back.”

Bonnie and Ric stopped, and turned. Then Bonnie whistled and snapped her fingers at hip level.

Lenore squeezed my hand one last time and strutted over to Bonnie. With a peck on the cheek from Ric, they were gone.

“Bonnie said she could care less about the commercials,” Ric said.

“Quid pro quo, dude!” I warned, and walked away.

Penn Station was swarming with weekenders returning from God knows where. I hated the place. It’s not Grand Central. But only a few people roamed the platform for the train, and that was a plus. We had 20 minutes, so we went to the pay phones. Ric dialed two phones down from me.

“Maggie, it’s me,” I said. My sister’s voice was barely audible under the din of rap music. There used to be six siblings in the humble, one-bathroom Burke estate nestled on a quiet, middle-class street in Southie. As a kid, I couldn’t wait to get out. South Boston’s troubled, blue-collar, xenophobic past had embarrassed hell out of me over and over once I got to Washington Square. I knew the world was nothing like the insular, white, stubborn bastion where I grew up. When asked, I always said that I was from Boston, or Beantown, never Southie. Then I’d change the subject. If anybody had the bad taste to ask what part of Boston I was from, home suddenly became Back Bay. Until one day, to the horror of the town and the dismay of our steadfast and ultimately heroic parents, my sister Maggie brought home a rapper named Icekawfee. Through the dreadlocks and beyond the pierced ears was a handsome, cultured guy in his second year at Julliard.

At the time, my parents’ conversation went something like:

“He drives a Honda for God’s sake, Charlie.”

“Sal, he’s black.”

“He’s a Jamaican.”

“That’s not white.”

“And I married a non-Catholic who won’t go to church.”

“I’ll change my religion.”

“You can’t change your socks.”

“I want my daughter happy.”

“You want another draft of Guinness in peace at O’Meara’s, and you know you won’t be able to show you face in there once they see the dreadlocks and hear his music blasting from the front porch! I’ll make you a deal: take instruction to become a Catholic, come to church with me and the kids, and I’ll talk to Maggie.”

That was pretty much the end of that. Dad never went for instruction and had to find another pub, Maggie kept seeing Icekawfee, and Mom had won another argument. There is nothing quite like the bond between an Irish Mom and her kids. It’s Matriarchal Totalitarianism cubed. Right or wrong, she wins. The reasons why Mom had allowed Maggie to see Icekawfee were myriad. The bottom line was, “Maggie, you don’t sleep in the same sack until marriage!” Since Mom had shown incomparable tolerance, she had won Maggie’s respect. Maggie was thereafter duty-bound to celibacy. If she broke her promise, she was excommunicated. If, over the long haul, Icekawfee exhibited honor and rectitude, and more importantly, continued to make Maggie happy, then what the heck, better to have a rich, CD-producing son-in-law than some dumbass in his third sophomore year pounding poor Maggie for two more sets of twins.

For me, that was when Southie grew up. If the folks could be that forbearing, then most likely they weren’t the only ones. I was no longer ashamed of home.

“Hallie! Where are you?” Maggie said.

“We’re in Penn Station. Is Mom there?”

“They’re at the cabin.”

That would mean Dad’s genuine log cabin built (partially) with his bare English teacher’s hands on Lake Winnipesauke, New Hampshire. Normally, it would be too cold to go there this late in the season. But this year was different. Everybody wore shorts.

“Grandpa’s got the bends again.”

“Yeah, Mom said he’s been diving.”

Suddenly, in her thick Boston accent, she hollered at someone. “Iceman, turn down the rap for a second, I’m on long distance with my brother!”

Immediately, the din died.

“Who’s home?”

“Just me and Ice right now. We’re babysitting Mikey.” Mom had birthed my brother Mikey when she was 44.

“Tell them Ric and I will be at the cabin tonight,” I said.

As I hung up, the last part of Ric’s conversation went like this: “We’ll be back in a couple of days. Yeah, we met them for lunch. Those two, they’re Blanche and Baby Jane Hudson, the prequel. Believe me, you’ll be working with her soon enough. Gotta go. Me, too. You don’t know.”

He noticed me nearby as he hung up the phone. He glanced at his watch. “Ready?” he said.

“Who was that?”

He grabbed his daypack. “Work,” he said, “the train’s here.”

As he jogged ahead and the train clacked into the station, I admitted to myself that he had a life beyond me. But, I was also not aware of a lot of things.

On the next-to-empty train, there was plenty of room for us to spread out. I told him of the change in plans: that we were on our way to New Hampshire, not Southie.

“Fine!” He said. He laid down across two seats, and pulled his legs into a fetal position.

We got off the train at the Back Bay. I rented a car off Copley Square. Boston was its sleepy Sunday evening self. On Storrow Drive and up the ramp heading north to the interstate, the sun glided down in the distance behind BU, Emerson, MIT, and Harvard. Study lamps popped on in 10,000 dorm rooms. There is an urban tranquility here for students the likes of which Ric and I had never experienced at NYU. Too many gardens, promenades, commons, and parks, I had thought, and too close to home.

The New Hampshire sky was clear. We got to the cabin by 8:30pm. As we pulled up, Mom flung open the big old log door and threw out her generous arms. There was spirit far beyond flesh in that woman. It had reached out 20 miles back, glowing like a beacon, ardent and more inviting with every curve in the road. It drew me towards her ever more completely until at last, I was in her embrace again. It’s hard to not sound sappy, and I defy anyone who’s experienced it to admit regret. Except I wish she hadn’t looked at me the way she did when she saw my finger. No matter how I would explain it, she’d make it my fault.

Dad came outside. At 67, his quiet, hang-dog grin made him funny. With bear hugs for both of us, he helped with the bags.

“Don’t just stand there,” Mom said, “fill the glasses! This cocktail hour’s bound to be short. I’ve held the roast til it’s almost fish bait.”

Dad was discerning. He had been a bartender long time ago and by now was convinced there was no better booze than 100-proof, bonded, straight bourbon sour mash whiskey, guaranteed to be four years old or better, and single barrel, of course. Also, it had to come from Kentucky, since Tennessee whiskey was charcoal filtered and neither one of them cared for that. His great American nectar was “sippin’ whiskey” to us undernourished, lite-beer, wine-cooler, raw-yellowtail, upper crust, Westside sissies. Once I had made the mistake of offering him a Canadian blend on one of their visits to my apartment. It was all I could afford. Even Mom said: “Pour it back in the horse!”

Ric and I threw off our coats, unpacked, and beat it back to the bar downstairs. Mom mashed the potatoes. The fireplace spat, splashing color into the living room, as Dad ever so gracefully filled the shot glasses and elegantly cascaded Kentucky’s finest. “Down your hole!” Dad toasted each of us, with just a ping as his crystal met ours. Mom had trained him to go easy on the clinking, since it was her hard-earned money from checking groceries at Star Market that got them the good stuff in the first place.

A door creaked open from under the stairs. From the tiny first-floor guest room, my granddad appeared. At 96, frail and hobbling, beneath the Red Sox baseball cap, and behind tortoise shell glasses, he said, “I hear clinking.” He coughed like the burning wood. “Yeah,” Mom said. “Clinking is all you hear. I wish you’d hear us when we tell you to stay out the water!”

Ric and I greeted him. Dad poured him a drink.

“Grandpa, you’ve been diving again,” I said.

“Smell the fish?” he wheezed.

I said I could tell when he got a case of the bends. He had a history of rising too fast. Ric ushered the old man to his rocking chair.

Mom said, “Hallie, does this have anything to do with that Twinkie© finger?”

Dad drifted into his chair and Ric took over. “He’s been cut up, run over by a taxi, and airsick in Quebec! We both lost our jobs, we can’t do the show, and he wants to date the wrong person.”

“You lost your job?” Mom said. She hurried over and sat next to Dad.

“Lost your job?” Dad said.

“Was she pretty?” Grandpa grinned.

“Very pretty,” Ric said, “I’ll start from the beginning.”

“Start with the woman!” Grandpa said.

Ric did the talking and they listened. Dad interrupted just long enough to make drinks. Ric shrank from over-elaborating about King Malcolm. He didn’t have to get specific. Everybody knew plenty.

“Maybe if you two concentrated more on your careers,” Dad said, a little too bluntly, “none of this would have happened.”

“Charlie,” Mom said, “twenty years ago, I might have said the same thing. There’s no job stability nowadays. People can’t make careers like they used to. All these agencies get bought up by conglomerates. They don’t see people as assets. People cost money. Between insurance, vacations, pregnancies, and God knows what, people are a liability to corporations. It’s better they have their goals. Maybe they won’t have to be beholden to a paycheck like --,”

“Me?” Dad finished her sentence.

“Some people who get trapped.”

Ric said, “We’re going to make this show a hit and go on and make the movie, and we’ll do it with or without my father.”

“Movies!” Grandpa interjected. “What in God’s name do you want with the movies? Hell, there hasn’t been a decent movie since Dalton Trumbo died.” The old man’s reference rattled Ric. I wasn’t about to interrupt with a filmography. Grandpa said, “surprised I know who Trumbo is? I used to take him fishing.” He readjusted himself in the rocker. Then he shook the ice in his glass. “Fill me up, Charlie. Thing’s soggy.”

Dad made him a fresh one.

“Dalton Trumbo would rent out me and my boat when the world got too much for him and he needed to think. He wouldn’t drink this stuff, though. That’s probably why he died. If he drank this stuff, he’d be pickled like me. We’d still be fishing, he’d still be writing, and Hollywood and the world would be goddamned better off.”

“He was a Communist, Pop!” Dad closed Grandpa’s fingers around the glass.

“And you’re an alcoholic. I’m still eating with you! Besides, just because he was an unfriendly witness to the skunk from Wisconsin don’t make him a Communist. He fished better ‘n you, he spoke better ‘n you, and he made more money ‘n you. Up your hole!” Grandpa guzzled the drink.

“Pop!” Dad said, “the expression is ‘*down* your hole!’”

The old man smacked his lips. “You go your way, I go mine.”

Squabbles leeched into our veins with the high-octane booze. None of these were serious, except we tended to get off track. It was also fun to see poor, conservative Dad verbally throttled by his Yankee liberal father-in-law, who never understood how an English teacher could be so tight-assed.

“I don’t suppose you teach your students that Othello was a Moor and Moors are *black!*”

Mom reminded Grandpa that the story was not about Dalton Trumbo or Othello.

“When we get to Hollywood,” said Ric, “we’ll do our best to write like him.”

“So first you make a hit play,” Grandpa said, “then you do the movie. Well, if that’s the case, then I got something to say.” The old man put down the drink, took his cane between his knees, and rested his palms on it. His old brow furrowed and the deep, craggy lines in his forehead challenged the Royal Gorge. “I’m an old shit,” he said, “with barely a high school education, but considering my years, I think those goals of yours, they’re fine, especially when so many of you kids today seem to be drifting with no anchor. Can’t say that I wouldn’t be lost too if I had this crap fest of a world to contend with. Thing that makes me mad is your old man, Ricky. No excuse for behavior like that to your own flesh and blood. I don’t care if you got three heads, you’re still his son. You *are* his son?”

Ric smirked.

“Then Family be damned. You’ll be fishing without a line to dwell more on it. Move on. Find another family. For families, as much as the world makes of them, are just another shithole you crawl into when there’s nobody else to blame for your own mistakes; and as you may know, they’ll often fuck you as soon as a stranger would!”

“Pop!” Mom said, “what have I told you about that language in this house?”

“This house?” Grandpa said, “I thought you meant the house in town.”

“You know which house I mean!” Mom said.

“Any house you’re in is what you mean.” He placed his hand on Ric’s shoulder. “Listen to me. Go make a future. Life is a goddamned warfare against ignorance and power and money and bigotry and people who talk louder than you! Behind every rock, under every bridge, there’s always another troll looking to cut off your balls. You have to be clever. You need to have eyes in the back of your head. You got to be an Eisenhower or a Rommel or a Caesar. Life’s a goddamned warfare and nobody can win it *for* you! Otherwise, you’re vermin in a ditch!” He hacked and bent forwards in his chair.

“Pop!” Mom said.

“Get him to bed,” Dad said.

Ric and I helped him stand. We carried him into his room where he slept the rest of the night.

**V. SABOTEUR**

“Don’t argue with me!” Mom said. She wasn’t in any mood after feeding Grandpa.

“Sal,” Dad said, placing his hands on her shoulders, “there’s no way anybody here is driving over these narrow New Hampshire roads to Laconia emergency *again* with 100-proof bourbon in our bellies. I checked him. He’s fine.” He took Mom by the arm and told her to go spend some time alone with Grandpa while we put dinner on the table. It was about then that I got thirsty. Dad agreed. Then I heard Ric’s voice from down the hall. He had joined Mom in Grandpa’s room. While Dad made more drinks, I peeped through the crack in the open door.

Mom’s eyes were red. Of course she was overwrought about the old man. Then I heard Ric say, “He cared more about me than any relations *I* ever had.” She hugged Ric, saw me lurking, and shooed me away.

I went back to the bar. We ate. Around midnight, everybody went to bed.

At 5:00am, everything was quiet when suddenly the door to the bedroom creaked open. I shot up in bed with short gasps, like after a jog. Half-awake, I felt a distinct presence in our room. I barely made out a figure in the doorway. It breathed hard and smelled like the lake. As it moved into the room, its feet made a squishy sound. I struggled to get away from it. Frantically, I pinned myself against the cold log wall. I tried to form words, but there was no air in my lungs. It spoke, *“not a word!”*

As moonlight cascaded in, my eyes beheld something out of a horror movie. Naked, covered in mud from head to toe, it looked human, but the reeds and dried leaves sticking to its body made it look like a freshly dug up potato. It panted with excitement as a live snail plopped off its wrist and splattered onto my sheet. Never mind cutting off my finger, or getting hit by the taxicab, or any other crap, this time I knew I was dead.

*“Hal!”* It said. It knew me! Its voice was familiar. It sounded like Ric. As I glanced over at his bed, he wasn’t there. Christ, had it *eaten* him?!

*“Hal, wake up,”* it whispered.

Like Scrooge ducking Marley, I jerked the quilt up to my nose, as if that would protect me, and banged my head.

*“It’s me, dick.”*

I sat up and massaged my eyelids. Ric grabbed me and pulled me close to him. “Listen! The most amazing thing just happened!”

I jerked away. “You’re disgusting!”

“You have to listen!”

“You stink.”

He stood up and away from me. “Get up.”

“What time is it?”

“Never mind, follow me.”

I crawled out of bed, threw on jeans, a T-shirt, tennis shoes, and followed him downstairs. As the door closed and we were out of earshot, I said, “*asshole!* What the hell are they going to think when the neighbors start talking about their son’s idiot friend skinny dipping at five in the morning?”

“Nobody *saw*.”

“You wouldn’t do it in King Malcolm’s moat.”

“King Malcolm’s moat isn’t magic.”

Sure, the lake was pretty. But when he had come out here, there had only been the moon. For me, there could have been no “magic” then like we were seeing now. The morning sun illuminated a thin, creeping fog across the still water. We hiked less than a quarter mile when I spotted his clothes in a pile near the lagoon. There were no cabins at this corner of the lake. Chances were nobody had spotted him. There would be a time to come when I wished someone had.

“Get down!” he ordered, like a duck hunter.

I crouched down next to him, lost my balance, and my butt sank into wet slime.

“You didn’t have to sit in it.”

“Now what?”

“I’m going to tell you something, and I don’t want you to tell anybody.”

“Whatever.”

“Promise!”

“Okay.”

“Swear!”

I looked at him in total disbelief. He grabbed hold of my ear and twisted it. “No matter what, no matter how crazy you think I am, *swear* you won’t tell!”

“Let go of my fucking ear!”

“Swear! Goddammit!”

*“I swear!”*

He let go. Then he leaned back on his left arm and turned to the water. The drying mud on his body began to crack, giving him the look of some aboriginal medicine man. He wiped his face and neck with more of the wet slime as he launched into his tale.

“After we went to bed, I started thinking about your life with your folks, and mine with mine. I remembered my Uncle Terry and things I hadn’t thought of since I first heard Grams telling sis and me about him when we were kids. There aren’t any photos of Uncle Terry, since Malcolm pretty much destroyed them. So I never knew what he looked like. I know he owned a motorcycle. That’s what killed him. But did he have a leather jacket? Did he wear glasses? Was he tall, short? Who was this anomaly who was probably so much like me? After about an hour of that, I got out of bed and came here. Plus, you were snoring, which didn’t help.”

“It was working just fine for me.”

“The moon mocked pale daylight. I took off my clothes and went into the water. I didn’t care how cold it was, the colder the better, as far as I was concerned. I wanted to *feel* something! I swam around for awhile. It felt good since I haven’t been to the gym in four days. I swam over to your dock and back. You don’t have to worry, nobody *saw.* It was just me and the lake. The mud between my toes reconnected me to something I can’t describe. I wallowed in it and covered myself in it.”

“And dragged yourself back into my bedroom with it.”

“The more the mud grabbed onto me and caked, the purer I felt. When I got back to this spot, I didn’t walk out; I crawled out, like a lizard. I got back here right where you’re sitting, and kept my eyes on that lake. The night fog curled up, and a tadpole darted across my right foot. That’s when it happened!”

I wanted to feel what he felt. But all I felt was wet.

“Life gets going so fast, I get caught up in everything that doesn’t mean anything, and I lose track of time. I got this incredible ego, surprise, surprise! I think about all the egregious shit we produce at the agency, the crap we peddle to the American public. It’s loaded dice. Just because we buy time on a damned network to sell a product, people grab it up like the truth. That’s power, Hal. And it feeds my ego, which gets fatter and smellier no matter how many times I go to the gym. Add to that all the impossible deadlines, the dinners, the schmoozing, and what’s it prove? That I’m an 800 pound gorilla, and I want to fuck, and I want to feed. My morality is, ‘get him before he gets me’ and ‘he who dies with the most toys, wins*.*’ If you’re in my life, get used to the fact that my ego’s going to subdue your ego, or you’re not going to *be* in my life. I lived it. I applied it to everything, including the show, including you.”

“O, please,” I said, “you’re a creative, cool, easy-going, honest, ad dude. You’re not a screamer. Clients come to you for ideas when Malcolm’s minions have gone bankrupt. How bad is that, being popular with clients? Then you turn around and give everybody in your sphere flowers, champagne, and tickets to Maui! The ones you don’t like get tours on barf boats around Manhattan, true, but that’s as bad as it gets! You’re loved, Ric. Stop the bullshit.”

“I know you love me.”

Christ! He had done this to me once before. He had made me say the words in so many other words back in the dorm room.

He clawed a glob of mud. “We have to change, Hal. I don’t know how, but human thought has to change about how we behave in this world. *My* thought has to change and yours too. Otherwise, I’m just another 800 pound gorilla with no other purpose on this earth except fucking and feeding. And like my father, I’ll die or be killed doing little more than that. I want to die a man who’s made a difference!”

Ric was not the reflective type. He was a clever, unstoppable business machine who took no time to reassess his progress or consider consequence. I wasn’t sure how to take what he said next. “My father taught us to live by one principle, ‘everybody wants something from you! *Don’t trust anybody!*’ Growing up, there was no such thing as a good friend, a loyal teacher, a wise counselor, or another kid with a hug without the strings of ‘wanting’ something. Nobody ever taught me how to say ‘thank you’ because we weren’t allowed to have anything to say ‘thank you’ for.”

“Everybody wants stuff they’ll never get,” I said.

“Can you imagine what would have happened if I applied it to my life like he wanted me to? You and I, Hallie, we’d never have met or been friends. You never would have been hit by the taxi, your finger would be whole again, you’d be in the city right now getting a massage from last night’s blonde.”

He leaned into me so close I felt his body temp. “I crouched down on my knees right here,” he said. “I chewed on a reed, pondering my wicked, wicked ways, when I heard this faint tinkling sound, like a wind chime. My ears pricked up along with a warm breeze. It was an old, out-of-tune piano, echoing from a phonograph with scratches and hisses. I wasn’t sure what I saw wasn’t just a cloud of fog as I watched it. The tinkling piano became more real. I kept my eyes on that little, amorphous cloud of fog until it took on a yellow-green color. The harder I squinted, the more color I saw. In midair, the color swirled. The music got louder with a heavier presence now, but still echoed. Pretty soon, the cloud came into focus and morphed into *this guy!*”

“You’re hallucinating!”

“He was wiry and small, dressed in a green and yellow plaid suit with a matching vest. He danced this weird, reckless dance across the water, which became his stage. He

carried a cane like they used in vaudeville, and wore a derby hat, which he tipped as he soft-shoed across the water. The music stopped and then he spoke. *‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Pardon me if I call you that, for only you know what ye really are.’*

“He grinned, and, with a thick East End accent, he said: *‘Let me assure ye, ladies and gentlemen, this is a clean show! Be not at all worried about what ye are about to be hearing. I’m a homebody, ye know. I love marriage so much, I’ve had six of them! Not all at once, mind you! I’ve had me trouble. I was driving me cart along with me third wife, Celia. Oh, what a yakker she was. Sitting next to me one day on our way to her sister’s, all at once me neighbor yells, ‘Stop, man, stop!’ So I pull over to him and I say, “Why do you stop me poor arse in the middle of the bleedin’ street?” And he says to me, ‘Man! Your wife fell out of your cart three houses back!’ And I looked at him and said, “Thank God, I thought I’d gone deaf!!’*

“A ‘ba-dump-bump came from the orchestra.”

*‘Did ye hear about the blind man who passed by the fish market and said, ‘Good morning girls!’ And how about the young woman, a fetching one at that, and as she rode her bicycle down the cobblestone street, she says, ‘I’ll never come this way again!’ Then there was her sister whose mum always taught her to say ‘No!’ to the boys. So when the boys said, ‘Do you mind?’ she said, ‘No, I don’t mind!’*

“He popped his hat up and down on his head and danced around in hysterics. Then he noticed me sitting by the water and stopped his act cold. He laid the end of his cane on his right shoulder and sidled up to me. He studied me with an arched brow. *‘Just what do ye think you’re looking at, young fellah?’*

“I told him I wasn’t sure what I was seeing. He cocked his head and grinned his bad teeth.

*‘It IS you, Richard me boy!’*

“’How do you know my name?’” I said.

“*‘God give me strength! How do ye know your own hand? Do ye know ME?’”*

“I asked him why he thought I should.”

*“‘Because,’* Ric mimicked, “‘*the four old men in the white robes and the funny hats, call them Fates, or call them Mattie, Mark, Luke, and Johnny Come Lately, they let me come all this way to have a few short words and then be off. We haven’t much time, Richard, me namesake.’”*

Ric drew his naked legs up into a yoga position. “I knew who I was seeing,” he said, “hallucination or not, asleep or dreaming, for me this was Uncle Terry, appearing in a special concert for an audience of one, as he was when he was happiest in life: on stage. He took out a small flask from his pocket and gulped. *‘A spot of the inspirational,’* he said.”

“There’s scotch in the afterlife?” I asked.

“*‘Heaven, my dear little prince, is like life. It’s all what ye make of it. And what ye don’t make of it here, if your worthy, they allow ye to make it there. For souls are souls and they carry their burdens and their talents with them from here through eternity, forever and ever. If you’re smart, ye contribute. If ye don’t, ye go to hell. Like life, it’s that simple. It’s all up to you. But I didn’t bring me sorry self all this way to talk about what happens later. Later is all bound up with now, and that’s why I’m here. Believe me?*”

“I got the feeling I shouldn’t waste his time, so I said, ‘yes. I believe.’”

*“‘Ye done me a great service, Ricky, by you and your friend taking the reins of me opus, “The Nearly Tragical History of HAMLET THE SECOND, Prince Of Denmark.”’*

“I told him I hoped he’d give us his blessing.”

*“‘I’m not sure ye want me blessing, but you ‘ave me approval.’* He gazed up into the sky, like he was pondering his place in the universe. *‘Ah, what work that was! What time was spent to make it proper! Had I lived, I’d hopes of seeing’ the bleeding’ thing up and running in Mayfair or Leicester Square, I did. After all, I was but a poor music hall comic. I had no money of me own for it. And the family, especially me brother, your father, thought me shallow and coarse, without the least bit of caring or love for me blood relations because of it. But that was a lie; I’m here to tell ye. What I did in those days, I did because I was born to it. Writing was all I loved well. Perhaps some was good. Perhaps most was not. But I went after it with heart and soul. And Malcolm, dear brother that he was, submarined it.’*

“He turned sullen. I wanted to know if Malcolm’s tactics were any different than they were now. He answered after some thought:

*“‘What I say to you now, I say truthfully, for there is hardly reason to lie. Malcolm convinced everyone, even me own mum, that I was an erratic, irresponsible, drunken fool, disowned of common sense and duty to King, country, and his mighty self. For as you know, Malcolm commands fealty. All right, maybe I was drunk at times, but all for the fact that nobody read the road map where I was driving. The destination being what I could do to make my dreams come true to benefit us as a family. Nobody ever, ever understood until you came along, Prince Ric.’”*

This was the first time I ever heard Ric use his own endearment.

*“‘How is my mum your Grams?’* he asked. Since I’ve been kind of derelict in my duties towards her, I wasn’t sure what to say. Did he know I hadn’t seen her in two years? I told him that she was fine as far as I knew, that I loved her very much, and I appreciated her saving his manuscript for us to pick up where he’d left off.

*“‘She and I,’* said he, ‘*had a special friendship. She loved me no matter about Malcolm. A true mother, she was. As God is my witness -- which he is now, as a matter of fact -- I would have given everything for her to see that show, for her to know that I had the talent, the stuff for it! She believed in me; and my successes would’ve fallen upon her tiny, white head like May time raindrops in St. James Park. You must believe me, since it’s occurred to me that thanks to you, it’s no longer too late, and she could still see success happen with you at the helm, Richard Terrence. You have in your capable hands the ability to float that damned wreck of a show and save an old soul’s reputation -- mine, to be exact -- as it lists and flounders off the stormy coast of failure and teeters at the vortex of oblivion.’*

“What about Malcolm?”

*“‘Don’t let Malcolm impede you, since I suspect he is. Fathers and sons have been stepping on each other’s toes since God invented dirt! Find your way alone. Knowing Malcolm as I do, the closer you try to bring him to you, the more he will try to stop you. Don’t trust him, or ye may wind up like me, a silly old ghost from another part of the past, not a pot to pee in, trying to make old peace with new blood unknown.’*

“I asked him about the accident that killed him.

*“‘The accident? Well, I like to forget the accident, ye know, Richard, it being’ the fuckin’ end of me life and all. It’s not the most pleasant of recollections. But if I must, then here’s what happened. Minus me crash helmet, I was motorcycling London, having just made the turn towards the British Museum. After dodging V2 rockets for weeks on end, I was well on me way to becoming a defensive driver, as they say in America. This one day, however, I noticed some mischief had befouled me brakes which weren’t acting as brakes should. The more I drove, the further it took for me to stop, and the more I applied the blasted brakes, the faster revved me motor, as if the idle stuck. Well I was sober as the current Pope late this one afternoon when the sky clouded up and rain sheeted down across me face like rice at the Royal Weddin’. As I was taking me shortcut past the museum, wouldn’t you know it, a woman and a bleedin’ baby carriage stepped bigger ‘n life off the curbstone and dead into me path. Since I couldn’t stop, I swerved, and what with the rain and all, toppled a chestnut vendor, poor fellow, and his nuts went bouncin’ all over the street. Thank the good Lord the gates were open to the museum, or I’d have plowed into them too. I must’ve had some speed going, since there was nowhere to go but up. Up, that is, the steps of the British Museum, and bang into the main lobby. No matter how much fame I prayed me whole life for, I never quite expected it would come to this! Every head turned, every squeal was squealed as the Bobbies gathered like the Keystone Cops chasing Charlie Chaplin into the last reel, trying’ to slow me sorry arse down. “YOU THERE, STOP!” They yowled like fools! “Here, HERE!” they screamed, like they were members of bloody Parliament! “IF I COULD, I WOULD, YE IGNORANT SONS OF DISRAELI!” And that’s when I see it: coming upon me like the iceberg to Titanic. Me unsuspecting noggin was momentarily to become permanently acquainted with the world famous Rosetta STONE! Ye know how it sits there right off the front lobby. Well, I thought to me self, what a PLACE for it! I swear I hit that fuckin’ black rock so hard I erased a hieroglyph! Methinks one can still see the indentation right ‘ere, over me left eye! ‘Ave a look!*

“He peeled back a wisp of hair. I saw a scar, but I couldn’t tell if it was a hieroglyph.

*“‘Oh, what a falling-off was there! And that was the end of Terrence Rumley Smythe-Bigge and the parcel of dreams carried he with him in the frayed back pocket of his worn, woolen suit.’*

*“*I was obliged to ask him if he thought that it was Malcolm, his own brother and my father, who had sabotaged the motorcycle. I was sure it was.

*“‘Are ye now? And do ye think me own brother scorned me so, that he would stoop to arrange for the murder of his own brother just because I wrote a play?’*

“‘It was more than the play,’ I said. ‘He hated you for your dreams just like he hates me for mine. We threatened him, and so he got rid of us. Tell me the truth!’ He stood there stunned at the fact that I might be angry with him.

*“‘Let me shed some light on eternity for ye, boy: when one does wrong to another in life, ye don’t get the facts right away when you pass just because ye be dead! Truth is not something that floats about the universe like pollen and ye breathes it up your nose and it makes ye sneeze! Truth is an idea, the unassailable product of the mind. Ye don’t see it, ye don’t touch it. But ye know when it’s there. As such, it don’t always come out, especially in death. One must wait even throughout eternity like me for one of two things to happen: for the one who did the committing to admit it! Or for others to solemnly conjure that product of the mind we been discussing in a fair trial. Since it has been far too long for the latter to happen, your accused can hide behind a statute of limitations. I doubt stubbornly that he would make it to the bench today for questioning before his peers, if he has any. Now the former, there’s the rub. I will never know if the mischief*

*that befouled me brakes, stuck me idle that caused me to dodge the baby, spill the chestnuts, and rocket me into the British Museum was that of human hand, especially the hand of thy venerable father unless he, at some point in the life of his soul, admits to the sorry fact. Until then, I can only surmise, presume, and allow me self the splendid irritation of thinking that he certainly could have!’*

“I had a way hard time with this. In the after- life, if there is such a thing, teachers always taught that Truth was revealed. But what the hell did they know? I was dealing with the real thing here.

*“‘Let me say, Richard Terrence, Malcolm was not Malcolm just by way of a few scattered, ignominious cranial quirks! Malcolm INVENTED Malcolm by way of deeds in the war effort, some of which wound up in the newspapers of the day!* *He flew in the RAF, was shot down, rescued his crew, and had a hero’s welcome upon his return. I, on the other hand, couldn’t get drafted, having had a trick shoulder and the eyesight of a bat in daylight. It wasn’t a contest for that truth of heroism once he was back, for everyone knew he carried it on his person and up his arse! Unspeakable! I must go! If I think upon this much more, the milk of human kindness flowing’ within this spirit will go rank!*

“His little cloud began to drift away from me. I called after him. He was leaving, and I wasn’t ready.

*“‘Remember me, little Prince Ric, and remember what I’m about to tell ye: A man goes into the Chinese laundry with his dirty clothes, and he leaves a little note saying’ USE MORE SOAP! Next day he picks up his clothes, takes ‘em home, and inside the package is a note saying, ‘USE MORE PAPER!’”*

“The tinkling piano started again! He laughed and high-kicked to the music across the water, his stage.

*“‘Say thanks to Ray. Ray’s me accompanist who gets one pound per week to play these out-a-tune ivories!’*

“Somebody turned on an applause sign.

*“‘A married German couple, long retired, live in a home for the aged. In comes Klaus one day and says to his wife, “Greta, I got Social Security at last!” And Greta says, “How did you get Social Security? You never made an honest day’s wage in your life!” And he says, “I opened my shirt, showed the lady my gray chest hairs, and she signed me up!” And Greta says, “You should have opened your pants, you could have got disability!”*

“More laughter and more applause as he started to leave me.

*“‘Remember this, lad: No matter what you think of me or your father or of what we did to each other, for I was not innocent, believe you me, revenge is deadly to the spirit. Obsess, and at the end you will wonder what life would have been like had you not. I’m sorry you don’t have a real father. Leave him to heaven and pursue thy goals with honor and pizzazz! Any other turns in the road and you’ll be heading away from your birthright. Yes, yes, Raymond! I’m coming! And your birthright being’ Success! Ladies and gentlemen, as I say good night, indulge me now. Let me be gone with a poem. It’s*

*an all-but-forgotten verse from me dear friend, Master William Bulter Yeats, but bears repeating in light of our appearance here tonight, and making your lovely acquaintance. I dedicate it you, my dear Prince Ric, and to dreamers everywhere to whom the very birthright I speak of has been so elusive:*

*“Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths*

*Inwrought with gold and silver light,*

*The blue and the dim and the dark cloths,*

*Of night and the light and half light,*

*I would spread the cloths under your feet;*

*But I, being poor, have only my dreams;*

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;*

*Tread softly because you tread on my dreams’“*

“A morning breeze swept across the lake and rippled the water. He faded before my eyes, just as he had come, and skipped away across his stage, tipping his hat, until finally both the music and he were gone.”

I bit my lower lip pondering Ric’s delirium. He stared across the lake as two old fishermen clonked into a rowboat for an early catch a half-mile away.

“You don’t believe me.”

Besides being numb, I was also pissed and dismayed. Pissed because he was so demonstrative. I could never have divined a specter like this, given it life and language, reason and conscience, hope and purpose. Dismayed since I was sure he was thinking about killing his father. I got up out of the dirt and walked. He came after me. Wet slime splattered into my face as he grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“You’ve entertained the option before. You told me years ago you wished he was dead. Once is plenty, as far as I’m concerned. Like Bill Sikes’ dog in OLIVER TWIST, I’m devoted to a fault until I see the blood on your hands. I know you, Ric. I know what you’re thinking. You created the fucking ghost to legitimize it.”

With a primal, unsettling attack stance, he watched me. “You don’t have to believe in the ghost, but you have to know that he helped me find another way.”

“Another way to what? Produce the show? That’s what you’re supposed to

be doing, instead of crawling around on your belly in the mud, talking to Casper, and

planning patricide!” I huffed away again.

“We have to know who we are first,” he said, “before we can do anything.” His stalwart logic could have justified a flat earth.

“Listen to you.”

“You don’t have to listen anymore. You’re absolved. I knew you wouldn’t get it.”

“What was the big speech about the 800-pound gorilla and ‘get him before he gets you?’ What about subduing egos, changing your *thought*, and the ‘advice’ from your so-called Uncle Terry? What’s different about you now from before? Are you better?”

“I’m better because I’ve decided to become the person I really am.”

“Bullshit!”

“Don’t be rude,” he said. His eyes darted about as if looking for eavesdroppers.

“I don’t buy it!” I said. “You don’t want to change your belief system. You want to change your course of attack. You’re not yourself when you let rage take over, and frankly, it’s a little hard to swallow.”

He jumped in front of me. “This way I will be. This is a way that no one suspects. This is a way that’ll kill Malcolm like I never dreamed. And the beauty of it is I get total, complete revenge, *and* I change who I really am. Ric becomes Ric!”

“Whatever method you pick,” I said, “it still leads one place and points to one thing, and it’s not the show. Take Terry’s advice. Take Grandpa’s advice! Let it go. Fine! Be your own person! But don’t let Malcolm, or revenge on Malcolm, drag us down any more or take us one more second away from our goals.”

“That’s just it. I wouldn’t have gotten it if it hadn’t been for them. I *am* my own person now. You’re not going to like what that is, Hal.”

Embarrassed for everybody, I went and retrieved his wadded-up jeans and T-shirt and pitched them at him. They bounced off of his abs and dropped into the mud. A few moments trudged by as we stood there fuming, exchanging trepidations for both of our pampered sakes.

“Hallie,” he said, “I have to tell you something.”

My gut winced. I shivered, but I wasn’t cold. Inside was all heat. I felt like the Burning Bush. Whatever he had to say, it would change our lives as friends forever. Ric bent down and picked up his clothes. He had a natural grasp of dramatic timing. It’s what made him instinctively good in theatre. Like Brando, Ric could keep you in suspense as long as it worked for him. He slid the tank top over his dirty head and stuck his feet into the jeans. Then he pulled the pants tight around his waist and buttoned the fly. He ran his fingers through the mud-choked mane, dug a clump of dirt out of his right ear, and sniffled. He peered into my eyes. Tears softened the mud on his cheeks. I couldn’t imagine what could be so shattering to him or, what it might do to me.

“I’m gay,” he said.

His head plunged to his chest. He emitted a strange, guttural sound. I don’t know what god in the universe would ever forgive my reaction. I started to giggle.

“I said I’m gay. Don’t you get it? It’s perfect. By admitting who I am, everything else falls into place.”

“You? Gay?” I said, “That’s a pretty hilarious thing to do just to get even with Malcolm!”

He eyed me weirdly like he knew he hadn’t captured his audience. “I’m not doing it for Malcolm, dude.”

Had I been born deaf, dumb, and blind? Had I marched off to fight life’s war and had I dragged my demons behind me with alacrity, cheerfully proud? Didn’t I see that I was just another unsuspecting, dog faced vermin high stepping past thousands of starving refugees from another psyche, ones that I had missed all along, the refugees that life’s war is all about, one of whom now commanded my attention? The refugee staring me in the face electrified me. Had I missed it, totally? I flared up, enraged. My face flushed. A momentarily indescribable force, completely alien, took hold of my will. I knew then that Ric was serious. Conversely, I couldn’t stop laughing so I shoved him with both hands. He flew backwards into the mud. Uncontrolled, he splashed around in the mess. Then, he sat up. “What’d you do *that* for?”

“No jokes!”

“Hallie, I’m telling you I’m gay. I always have been. I just never let anybody see it because I never thought I could admit it to myself.”

That force from before took hold a second time. I lifted him up out of the slime

and shoved him down again. He dropped into the marsh. The splash instantly washed away the mud cascading across his handsome, idol’s face. I didn’t care. I couldn’t look at it anymore anyway, so neither should the rest of the world. My hands’ first strike didn’t distract me long enough to think, so I rushed him, up righted him by the shoulders, and hit him. Forget the king. I was ready to kill the prince*.*

He took hold of my right fist on the next blow and deflected it, so I backhanded him with the left. The dressing on my mutilated finger sailed into the water and blood gushed like in THE WILD BUNCH. Did you know that the human heart pumps blood with such pressure that it can squirt up to 30 feet? With a wound like mine, there was blood everywhere. Instantly, he pulled his legs up under himself and stood, challenging me to sucker-punch him again. “Come get it!”

“You *fucking* liar!” I heaved him away from me. He stumbled in the reeds, but found balance. If he wanted me to do all the talking, I would: “Ten years! Roomed together, ate together, showered, and even *slept* in the same bed once. We mess up our careers together, all the crap you throw at me with your looney ideas, that dysfunctional, pathetic excuse for a family, the thankless job you put me in, your unmotivated, untalented, idiot friends, and you’re telling me now you’re fucking *queer? Faggot? Fairy? Cocksucker? Queer? Faggot? Queer?”* My temper hurled without O-rings into space. Suddenly, from a high school karate class, my foot remembered how to kick. It slammed into his chest. I tumbled into the water after him, but this time I had competition. He regained his balance, clutched a rip in my T-shirt, and pounded his fist into my face. I flew backwards as he jumped me. He turned me face down into the mud and pressed me into it. But my adrenalin shot too much petulance through my veins. Brat that I was, he couldn’t hold me. I jerked away and my hands found his throat. I squeezed as he flailed his arms. I dunked his head again and again as I wrung his neck tighter until -- like out of a dream -- I heard Mom’s voice.

*“Hal David Burke!”* She wasn’t 50 feet away. “Hal! What in God’s name are you doing’? Charlie! Get over here!” Mom hopped over rocks, through the tall grass, and was upon us. She tore my hands from Ric’s throat and dragged my body off of his. I gripped him so tight, he was dredged out of the water as Mom yanked on me. She slapped me full force across the face, like she did once (only once) when I was a kid. “What the hell you think you’re doing, killing each other?” Her Boston accent was majorly pronounced when she was mad. Dad rushed to Ric and helped him up. Ric stood, holding his neck with one hand, the other supported by Dad’s shoulder. Then he jerked away from Dad and leered at me through the turbid clay like a rabid mutt.

“What the hell is going’ on?” Mom demanded. “Answer me!” She slapped me in the face again.

*“Sal!”* Dad said.

“I don’t care! Call me an abusive mother! I want an explanation!”

“Hal,” Dad said, “what happened?”

I hung my fomenting, confused, wet head low. “You can thank him!” I spat in no particular direction. My corpulent Irish rage knew no bounds. I charged at Ric again. “As if they don’t have enough to deal with right now!”

*“Hallie!”* Mom screamed.

Dad tumbled between us and yanked Ric away, as if to protect him. Then, he shoved me back. That stunned me. I wasn’t prepared. It wasn’t me that was guilty! “Go to hell, Ric!” I screamed. I stormed off, taking with me all of my pouty, self-righteous stuff. I cursed into the mild, mild sky and threw up my arms. How could I have let this happen? I could have taken my freedom from them right then, leaving them standing by the lake for hell’s eternity. When you feel betrayed by the ones you love the most, there’s really, like the song says, nothing left to lose.

It’s also pretty crappy when you want to get away from somebody and you’re stuck in the New Hampshire woods with an obligation to the enemy to get him the hell back to Boston. I walked it off. I disappeared into the countryside. I wasn’t aware anymore of my dripping, bloody finger nor the new scar on my forehead. I calmed down long enough to try to put it in perspective. I thought that this new tack of Ric’s was only a ruse. It was just another way to get back at his old man. Christ, if Malcolm ever found out Ric was gay, it probably *would* kill him. One thing was for sure. If I didn’t know it before, I knew now firsthand how Ric -- if you loved him – could be murder!

I sprinted down to the lake, tearing off my clothes as I ran. At the water’s edge, I looked around to make sure that I was alone like I always did, and pitched them. Naked, I dived into the water. I didn’t care that Ric had done the same thing two hours before. This was *my* lake. I had grown up here. I had a right to it. I had things to think about. The lake helped me ruminate. So with two fundamental questions in my head, I let the same slime crawl up in between my toes, up my ass, and into my ears. I had to be muddy to ask the big questions: *Why am I here? And who gives a shit?* I swam around with trout that had no answer.

I like sex. I love sex. I’ve had mountains of sex. Maybe I was dating somebody at a given time. Maybe I wasn’t. If I was laying in bed at 11:00pm on a Wednesday night and I got horny, I’d shower, get a cab, and be back in my bed with a trophy inside 90 minutes. I lived in New York City. It’s possible. Sex is ordinary. It’s what we do. I like it *and* it’s ordinary. It’s a special club we have; not a place, but a sensibility. We take off our clothes, we feel each other up, and we get felt up; we exchange fluids, we have a brandy or a soda, and we go home. It can be bawdy or explosive or multiple. Mostly I remember. Often I don’t. It’s like anything else. Too much and it’s ordinary. People and dolphins like sex and have it for fun. Lucky us. But, before we’re allowed into this exclusive club, we sign papers. In the papers is fine print. In the fine print, there are contracts. These contracts go back. For a liberal kid like me, they are as intricate as a Moorish carpet. And we sign them. I contracted in Southie the moment I was born. I could have all the sex I wanted when it presented itself. No teacher ever brought up the sub clause that I had to have sex with someone I cared about. I knew it. I lived it. The guys in my fraternity who patted each other on the ass after three beers knew it. The football players knew it. The R.O.T.C brats who slept in bunk beds and listened to each other jack off and sometimes joined in knew it. What I did was passionless, and orgasmic; minus care, logic, and memory. In all of the ten years since NYU, no sex partner, nor acquaintance that I may have diddled, nor middling fuck buddy ever gave a shit about me, my life, and my dreams, nor cared that I was here on this earth except for the one person in my life that I was now removing from my life. Humiliated and dirty, I crawled out of my own personal slime.

When I got back to the cabin, Ric and Dad were helping Grandpa into Dad’s SUV. “See to your mother,” Dad said. “We’re taking Grandpa into Laconia.” Both Dad and the old man knew something was wrong. I went over to him as Grandpa stepped achingly into the truck.

“How do you feel today?” I said.

Grandpa shook his head, “like a dried up, old apple.”

I could see Ric watch me as I went inside. Stoically, Mom packed away dishes. I rested my clean hand on her shoulder. Immediately, she saw my finger. Without a word, she grabbed gauze and tape, and wrapped it up, like Ric had done not so many hours ago. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

“That head wound needs a bandage too. There’s more gauze in the bathroom. It’s none of my business why you two got into it,” she said, “but I won’t stand to see my family, and that includes Ric thanks to you, tear each other’s flesh and psyche apart in our presence and under our roof. That, I grew up with and had no control over, fighting being what you did in that neighborhood. We raised you better than to behave like that, Hal Burke. You have an education!” As long as she lived, she played unbeatable cards. “Go to him,” she said, “if he was a faithless wife, we could throw him out on the street and be done with him. But until you know for sure, friendship’s more sacred than marriage since it’s not legally binding. People are friends because they’re friends. Protect it as long as you can.”

I swallowed whole my pride.

“Are you going back tonight?” She said.

“Yeah.”

“Fine. I love ya’. Fix it up.”

I kissed her on the head and slipped away.

Outside, Dad closed up the truck. Ric crouched down on a decaying stump. He held an ice pack on his jaw. There was no blood, but his jaw swelled. My intolerant Irish genes had hit him hard. I skulked to him. He quailed a little, like he was ready for another hit. Instead, I motioned to him to go for a walk. He followed.

Then Dad called to us. “Hey, guys!”

“What?” I said.

*“‘Love alters not when it alteration finds*.’”

Fuck! Fuck Fucking English teachers! Their fucking Shakespeare and their fucking sonnets! My lower lip got teeth marks! Why did he have to say that?

On the incline just up the road, we found a spot between two sycamores where we watched the lake come alive with boaters, water skiers, and campers. I took it all in since I didn’t know when I’d be back. I said, “Maggie and I found a rabbit in a trap over there. It was dinner later.”

Ric said, “You remember the day we met?”

“Over there, Grandpa showed us where he’d fed family of raccoons on poppy seed muffins during the winter of ‘67.”

“I went into the campus bookstore one morning,” he said, “you were buying film criticism by Bluestone. You were wearing French-cut jeans. The clerk handed you your change and you dropped a bunch of coins. That’s when I noticed you first, bending over to pick up some quarters.”

“Debbie Wintrop and I carved our initials here on prom weekend.”

“Lord Byron carved his initials into the ruins of the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion, 72 kilometers south of Athens. ‘Place me in Sounion’s marbled steep,’” he quoted, “‘where nothing but the waves and I, may hear out mutual murmurs sweep; there, swanlike, let me sing and die.’”

“Look, don’t throw out everything I know about our first meeting. It wasn’t morning. It was afternoon. It was raining, and I was buying film criticism, but I had on a raincoat that came down to my knees, so you couldn’t possibly see what kind of blue jeans I had on, let alone, you know, anything else; and it wasn’t just change, it was my lunch money. We were fucking freshmen!”

“You use that word too much.”

“Did you know that Mom,” I said, “when we were kids, sucked the chocolate off the almond ‘Kisses©?’”

Ric screwed up his nose.

“She’s allergic to nuts, so she’d suck the chocolate off, then she’d line up the almonds on the arm of the chair for us kids to come up and grab for treats.’”

“You couldn’t have known I was gay.”

“Control freak. Why didn’t you give me a chance?”

“Listen to me, Hallie. Once I figured out I was gay, and it was early, it took every muscle, bone, every DNA strip in my body to keep it locked up. I didn’t choose it. I

didn’t want it in my present or in my future. I was taught to despise it. So I killed it. Then, I buried it so deep; nobody was going to find it, especially you. If nothing else, I loved you so much, I didn’t want you hurt by my psyche.”

“You loved me?” I resented his therapy. I was about as liberal as any straight man could ever get except when the words “my” and “ass” appeared in the same sentence. “Ric,” I said, “we’ll deal with it later.”

“It happened, Hallie. We’ll deal with it now!”

“All these years I see you as potentially some great, driving force, only to find out

I’m wasting my time with a drone.” I apologized. He wasn’t a drone. “I hate what you do to me. You make a life a circus. You turn me into a clown when you’re ringmaster. Why is that?” I looked at him and really tried to figure it. I didn’t know what else to say, “What’re you going to do next? Get a lover or something?”

“You met him,” he said.

“Great. What page am I on?”

“Wynn Keckley’s at the top of the A-list at the moment.”

*“Shane Blue?* Mister Upstage-My-Own-Mother, *Shane Blue?* Mister That’s-Our-HAMLET THE SECOND?” My brain went to toast again.

“His name’s Wynn, Hal. Wynn Keckley.”

“The actor? The first person you decide to be with is an actor in *our* show? What is with you?”

“Hallie, are you mad because he’s an actor, or because it’s not you?”

I groaned. “Wynn Keckley is a sulking teenager from Omaha. What could he possibly mean to you? You’re almost 30 years old, for God’s sake. He’s what? 17?”

“He’s 21 and the sulking is a persona.”

“Like Bonnie Shears’s is a persona? Isn’t anybody for real?” Then, it clicked. “You guys both smelled like the same gum! Funny, I couldn’t stick you two together in my head with a piece of Juicy Fruit© gum.”

“Try not to laugh.”

“What about Jo Berwick, Baltimore and her bartender friend, Shirley Sweet Cheeks?”

“They’re lesbian buds of Wynn’s. They’re really actors. I promised him I’d let them audition. If you weren’t so shit-faced on tequila, you might have picked up on that.”

“And, Felice?”

“She’s really Wynn’s sister. She sings professionally. She’s really straight.”

I was not a born detective, but this was making me think I should be playing a mnemonic card games more often.

“All those times you said you were going over to Holly’s?”

“Schmuck! Why would I spend time with that flat-footed, corporate wasteland?”

“As opposed to what, a gay bar?” We had reached some kind of blockage. “Liar!”

“What you did down by the lake,” he said, “I don’t think it would have been much different if you and I were married and you found out.”

“It was an honest response anybody might have had to someone they love!”

Ric stood. He took a step towards me. Ever so slightly, and with his head down, he leaned in close to me so that our cheek bones were less than an inch apart. He exhaled. His breath was hot as it blew down on my neck. My eyes squinted. I tried not to look into his eyes, but he kept my sightline anyway. Those long black eyelashes were so close I could feel their air as he batted them. Then his head rose up a little. I trusted him like always, maybe even out of habit, and let it happen. I felt his lips against my lips, which simply touched and stayed there and I didn’t mind that they stayed there. After a moment, his mouth brushed by my ear and he whispered, “you’re so at home here, Hallie, in your woods. I’m glad it was here when it happened.” Then he breathed into me and kissed me.

Dad honked his horn. I looked down the hill to see Mom tramping out of the cabin. The jangling of her keys reverberated. Ric dropped his head against my chest. Some sort of spell was broken. What was going to happen to us? Sure, he could take care of himself, but where did I figure in? What he did next seemed involuntary. His arms dropped to his side, inviting me to wrap mine around him. The dismayed gaze behind those eternal, green eyes bathed my folly of misunderstanding and cleansed it. I knew Ric was helpless, just like I was. This was one sub clause I had tried to sign over and over in life, but no one, up to this moment, had asked. I drew him close. My arms slid around him. Our ears touched. Our breaths became one. Dear God, Ric had taken on the smell of my lake. But what was the water compared to this? He slid the palm of his hand around the back of my neck and sank into my arms. “Thank you, Hallie,” he said. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

**VI. DEFECTOR**

Ric knocked me backwards with a teenage giggle, spun himself away, and sprinted down the hill. I chased him, only to stop at the cabin to see off Mom, Dad, and Grandpa.

“Lock it up tight, Hal, when you go!” Dad said.

Mom said, “are you sure you don’t want to come home tonight?”

“No, Ma. We got to get back.”

As they drove off, I felt the dried mud crack behind my knees. I went inside. The bathroom door was open and the water was running. I headed for the bedroom to get fresh clothes. But as I passed by, I stopped and looked. Ric lathered up behind the glass shower door. He didn’t see me. He slid the wash cloth under his armpits and over his body. He loved that tan line. He spent hours in the tanning bed at the *Athletic Club*. I was sure he was going to miss the tan line *and* the club, along with everything else, including my dirt, which gurgled down the drain, since he would never be invited back. With his head down, the water cascaded through his hair, giving it the look of a black waterfall. He splashed the wash cloth around his waist and between the legs. How could I have overlooked something so basic in this guy? Liberal or not, no amount of education could help me come to terms with the idea of two guys in bed together. Perhaps down deep in another life, given a background that was *not* South Boston, I might have been willing to acknowledge a meager, dormant, prickly sensation at the thought of being attracted to somebody of the same sex. Maybe if every woman on earth had been abducted by aliens, and only guys were left, I might wonder about it. If I committed a crime so heinous that they slapped me into prison for 100 years, maybe in my 99th year, 11 months, and 29 days, I might think about it then. I was no closet case. But from where had sprung the fountainhead of this emotional bond? What impulse kept me standing here, enraptured, and uncontained right then? Why was I watching him? If my sexual preference was like cash and I was in Las Vegas, would I throw it down on green felt and bet it?

Suddenly, Ric saw me: “Hallie! Are you watching me again?”

I cowered, turned, and with horns, retreated to the bedroom. I threw my muddy clothes into a pile, sat down on the corner of the bed, and waited for him to finish. I came to the conclusion that I was not, in the romantic sense, *in love* with Ric. If love existed between us, it was platonic. Yet even that “platonic” word bugged me since I knew what the Greeks had been up to. This was not love. But I had admired him so much, and had wanted to be like him. I had always wanted more guts than Sal and Charlie had passed on. Ric had guts and other things. He had enviable taste in clothes, music, movies, women (so that was a mistake), and his innate sense of advertising. Besides, along with the chemistry between us, he had delivered a full spice rack of power, looks, money, and personality to the sauté pan of our relationship, all of which he blended and cooked into our lives with the talents of a TV chef. Ric served up Ric awesomely. Suddenly, I had my answer. This wasn’t love. This was hero-worship! That I could live with.

“Bathroom’s yours,” he said. Vexed, he wrapped the towel firmly around his waist. I got into the shower. If this was true, I thought, then what did it make me but some bottom-feeding scavenger? What more was I doing with my life than riding in his draft, exerting little energy, making no contribution, playing it safe? And those ominous words of his old man resounded in my head: “*Everybody wants something from you!”* Metaphorically, was I gnawing on Ric, too? What kind of a friend had I been? Then I came to the conclusion that I couldn’t bounce these recriminations on the psychological handball court in my head any longer. Every consideration hurt. Besides, I knew enough in those days to know that self-evaluation doesn’t necessarily make you smarter, it just makes you more depressed.

Ric came back into the bathroom and said, “where’s your First Aid kit?”

I draped a wash cloth across the shower door. “Why?” I said. The little terrycloth curtain created an illusion of privacy.

“You need a bandage on your head.”

“Bottom drawer.”

He grabbed a pack of gauze and surgical tape from the kit. I turned my half-erection away from him. “Hallie, just say it! Say the word ‘gay!’ Gay, gay, gay.”

“How about we call it ‘your problem?’”

“It’s my time, Hallie. It’s about who I am as a man, and what a man does when reality calls.”

I shut of the water, dried off, and climbed out. He sat me down on the stool. “Hold still while I fix you.” Clinically, he placed a piece of gauze on my forehead and taped it up. “Look at it this way, Hal: you’re mad but you’re not mad at me. You’re mad at yourself for not seeing it. Now that you’re seeing it, you’re doubly mad because you think I lied to you.”

“You *did* lie to me!”

“I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“If it’s not the whole truth, then it’s *not* the truth and that makes it a lie!”

We didn’t talk in the car. I drove. He slept, since he he’d been up all night. We got into Boston mid-afternoon, returned the rental, and hoped that the train to Manhattan wasn’t too full.

As we pulled into Penn Station, I was unforgiving. For myself, for then, for the past, for future, for forever, for the way he had acted in front of my family, and for how he had betrayed our friendship, I was done and finished.

Silently, we made our way along the platform. That’s when we spotted Wynn Keckley craning his head out over the “down” escalator, across the crowd of disembarking passengers. It was a scene from any 1940s movie about two people who had lost one another, and had found themselves again on the platform of any train station. Except in this case, it was Ric who had found himself. He trotted, then cantered, then accelerated into full gallop towards the object of his desire that, as anyone can guess, did likewise. They raced towards each other at such full speed, they became Daud and Lawrence on camelback rescuing each other in the Nefud desert in LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. Wynn hurled himself into Ric’s arms. In full view of a grinning bank billboard, unsuspecting commuters, and me, they planted full lips and tongue in the wettest and deepest exchange since the last horse dove off Atlantic City’s Steel Pier.

I glanced around to see if anybody saw us. My chin sank into my collar bone. I re-adjusted the daypack on my shoulder, and quietly, anonymously, walked past them. Without looking back, I headed out of Penn Station, and out of Ric’s life forever.

In the next few days, I phoned friends who had taken a back seat, including Lenore Shears. She’d left a message. But, why? What could she want from me, more clothes? I decided sit back, let go, and let life eat me for a change, since I had choked on so much forbidden fruit with Ric. I had spun out of control, and control was not a concept I ever managed well. So I called her. We met at a casual, intimate Italian place on the West Side. We talked superficially. The evening was exactly what I needed, and just as well, since nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me for the effect of the Pinot on her.

Within 40 minutes of dinner, before my leather jacket could hit the floor, she lay naked on my couch with outstretched arms. She unzipped my jeans, untied my laces, and popped three buttons off of a brand-new shirt, all while licking, sucking, and biting every piece of exposed flesh she discovered. The girl went wild. She made noises that I had have never heard, except maybe in adult movies.

“Let’s see it, c’mon,” she said.

With jeans still wrapped around my ankles, she grabbed the back of my thighs and huskily planted my knees on either side of her supine body. Her teeth tore into my boxers, which would never see laundry day again. “Oh, yeah, baby, give it to me!” She said. I hoped she was not too chatty, since she leaned in that direction. She dove between my legs like a hungry what? Vixen? And gobbled up my dessert fruit. She buried her head there and didn’t come out for what seemed like hours. I would have returned the favor, but she hogged the position. The shirt came off, then the boots, and when I was able to kick off the jeans, she grabbed me by the butt and my favorite protrusion disappeared down her throat. She guided my hands across her breasts and down her sides as she writhed and undulated underneath. I hadn’t been laid in over six days, so I had trouble prolonging. She was too good. I would climax long before penetration and as much as I enjoyed what she was doing, I wanted *that*. I also realized that in the middle of this abandon, I hadn’t even kissed her. I backed off of her, slid my erection down the middle of her body, and took her in my arms. In that kiss, I forgot everything: career, show, friend, family, past, future. Everything was for the moment. Her hips thrust towards mine and we rolled onto the floor.

“Bedroom!” My hand grabbed her left arm.

“In a second,” she said, as she licked my neck.

It was her turn. She straddled my face until I couldn’t breathe. Then she went down on me again. The whole episode would be over in seconds if I didn’t do something. I stood, took her in my arms, and carried her into the bedroom. She rolled the white goose down comforter aside and I charged into the bathroom.

“Where’re you going?”

“Condom!” I said.

“Don’t, hon! I stuck my diaphragm in when you were facing the other direction, and my lube has a big dose of the other stuff.”

“You certainly came prepared.”

“I’m your little boy scout.”

She could’ve *not* said that.

“I know what you want. It’s what I want. If I’d wanted you to put on a condom, I would have personally unwrapped it.” I dropped it on the counter and went back. Suddenly, for some stupid reason, I thought of him, and I said, “Most women go for Ric when we’re out together.” She shrugged. “Ric’s okay in a magazine-cover sense. But you’re real guy-guy-guy! I was ready to give it all up that first night if you hadn’t embarrassed me at the restaurant.” She bit down on my ear. My corona pulsated. Her tongue licked the ooze and lubricated the veins. She introduced the lube and squirted it into her palm. She spread it up and down. Eruption threatened again.

“Give it to me,” she whispered, massaging my groin. “It’s the perfect shape for how I want it. You guys are straight shooters: straight as an arrow on Robin Hood’s bow!”

“No curves like most guys, huh?” I said, to my everlasting damnation!

“I don’t know *most* guys, thank you!” She slapped my forehead! “The *few* bananas I’ve known are bent up and pointing to the ceiling when I’m down here on the bed!” She rose up, took me by the shoulders, and gently pushed me backwards on the bed so that I sat on my calves. Violently, her hands spread my knees apart. “Lean back!”

I obeyed. Her model’s body thrust towards me. She spread her legs open and slid into me. Loud was the groan. Then she backed out. Slowly, so that we could both feel every nerve touch the other, she put me in again like I was a piece of plastic, and watched it. We watched as our organs touched like they had a mind of their own. We became one in movement and grace as we rode each other into mental oblivion. I spread my legs wide. She wrapped hers around my waist and leaned into me. She slammed her hands behind her onto the bed and pushed herself onto me. Her body allowed me to swell and thrust inside of her. I flexed, over and over, to prolong, as she inched closer onto it. With each thrust, it seemed like it could still go deeper.

“Inside me! Come inside me! I want to feel it.”

Did you know that some male pigs have orgasms which can last up to 30 minutes? Men are pigs. It’s not often that we can, or are willing to, orgasm simultaneously with a woman. When I’ve allowed it to happen, it’s always been pretty good. I wanted it to happen now. So with a resolve I didn’t know I had, and a determination to do it right, I slowed down and slid evenly, patiently, in and out of her, waiting for when she was ready. I relished the feeling of being inside this resplendent creature. I wouldn’t even try to describe it for her, but I saw stars. It was an orgiastic explosion between my legs that took hold of every muscle, bone, and follicle in my body. I plowed into her so deep, our legs spread so wide, with such force, I thought my erection might stab her to death. She screamed. Her pelvic muscles glommed so tightly, it was as if they were going to break it off, taking it inside her permanently. I kept shooting and shooting until I collapsed, enervated, on top of her. I stayed inside of her, squeezing every last drop into her, undulating still longer to contain the passion, the beauty, the poetry, of Lenore.

“Got any fat free chocolate?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“And milk?” she giggled, “I have to have milk.”

I popped up out of bed and wrapped a towel around my waist.

“Don’t cover it up. I like to see it. Let’s be naked for tonight or a month.”

I dropped the towel and went to the kitchen. Yes, I had fat free devil’s food cookie cakes. She joined me, not bothering with a towel either.

“What did you mean when you said, ‘You guys?’“ I asked out of nowhere.

“‘You guys,’ what?”

“When you were talking about ‘straight as an arrow on Robin Hood’s bow.’ What’d you mean when you said, ‘You guys’?”

She thought for a second, and then studied me: “I just meant guys like you and Ric.”

“How much do you know about Ric?”

She looked at me crestfallen, or maybe, like she had been caught. “You mean, ‘How much do I know about his penis?’“

“Wasn’t that what you were talking about?”

“Was I?” She chomped on the devil’s food cookie.

“I thought you were.”

“Were what?”

“Talking about penises!”

She grabbed a napkin and wiped her nose. “Is it *clean?* Sometimes this new nose gets in the way. I don’t want another scene like at the restaurant.”

“It’s clean.”

“For your information,” she said, crumbling the napkin, “I was not talking about anybody’s penis! I was talking about *your* penis! I happen to like it! I like its shape! I like its size. It *works* for me! I wouldn’t park in this garage if I were you!”

She grabbed her milk glass, rinsed it out, and filled it up with tap water.

“Don’t drink that, I’ve got bottled.” I opened the refrigerator, but she closed it.

“Save it,” she said. “Bubbles give me gas.” She drank the tap water.

I savored watching her as she leaned against the sink, drinking. “What are you looking at?”

“You,” I said.

She rinsed the glass a second time and eyed me. “I’ll tell you the truth, as long as you *swear* to keep it between us. It’s nobody’s business.”

I nodded.

“The reason I said that is because I slept with Ric. *But he can’t know I ever told you!*”

I swiveled and stumbled into the living room. There, I buried my head in my hands.

“Get off the dress, honey!” She pulled it out from under me. She folded it and draped it neatly on the back of a chair. “You won’t tell, will you? I hope you don’t think I’m some kind of *virgin* or anything. I’ve been with one or two other guys!”

What to say! I wasn’t going to tell her about Ric’s new direction. It wasn’t my business. Yet, if he was gay like he said, how did he wind up in bed with her?

“All I meant was,” she said, “I know my way around a bedroom; and a couch, and a floor, and --” she grinned, “ -- kitchen, bathroom, shower, steam room, car, closet.”

She couldn’t miss my reaction.

“What’s eating you?”

“Ric!” I said, “The guy’s full of surprises.”

She pulled my hands out from under my chin. “I want you to know something. I *don’t* evaluate sex because it’s personal and I don’t believe in it. Guys do it just because they’re guys and they have to show off. Some women do, but *I don’t!* I’ll tell you this: What happened here tonight between us can’t be compared with anything that’s ever gone before in *my* life, okay? I absolutely saw Orion with you.” Gently, she pulled my head onto her left breast, “besides, yours is bigger and prettier than his is!”

I sat up and bumped her chin, beaming like sunrise at the White Mountains: “Really? Are you sure?”

“What, luvvie?”

“I’ve known Ric for 12 years. In all that time, he’s always been the one that got the girl, the grades, had the money, and power, *everything*. Now you’re telling me what you had tonight is bigger and prettier than his?”

She stood in a huff. “You *men*! Will you broom the *size* shit?”

I felt a tickling sensation between my legs.

“I don’t know what your relationship is with him, Hal Burke, even though I’m beginning to get the picture, but you’d better watch what you say about Ric because Ric doesn’t see you the way you see him at all!”

The blood pumped down there.

“If it wasn’t for Ric, I might not have ever gone to dinner with you.”

“What’re you saying?”

She took a deep breath. Her breasts heaved upwards, bathing in the moonlight. She slapped her hands on her hips. “If you had a good time tonight, maybe you have *him* to thank!”

“What? Did he *pay* you or something?”

“*Oh!*” She chirped, spun on her heels, and flounced down my hallway like Marcia Brady.

I chased her. “That’s not what I meant. What does Ric have to do with us?”

She stared me down. The new erection was beginning to show. I covered it with my left hand as she took a step towards me. “You’ve just about ruined everything Ric told me about you. He made you out to be some talented, intuitive, sensitive, supporting, caring, *loving* *god!* He almost made me cry last week at dinner telling me how much he thinks of you. He *loves* you, Hal. You’re the only thing that makes a difference to him. On the contrary, if it wasn’t in the middle of such great sex, and don’t get the wrong idea about it, it *was* great, even though ours tonight was phenomenal, I would have thought you two were *gay* for God’s sake!”

It shrank.

“If anybody’s on a pedestal,” she said, “you are to him! If you don’t believe me, ask my bitch sister. She knows him well enough since she had him too!” She grabbed the big tote bag from the bedroom and hustled into the bathroom. I followed her in, watching her in the mirror. “Don’t look at me that way,” she whined, “it was just a little three-way and ‘you’re all Harper Valley hypocrites!’”

“Three-way?”

She spread a new layer of the “Always-a-Starlet” pink lipstick across the broad gateway. “The Thursday night I met him, after Charley O’s. September 12th, at 11:00 o’clock, his balcony. All Ric talked about was you, in between, well you know, the other stuff. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“A three-way? At Ric’s? After Charley O’s?”

“Yeah, yeah, and yeah. Bonnie and I do some weird things, but that takes the Black Forest Cake! And *don’t* tell *her* you know!”

“You had a three-way with your sister and Ric.”

She sucked in air. “Yes, during a re-run of *“The Beverly Hillbillies!*” Miss Jane was chasing Jethro around the cement pond! Oh, don’t go all holy on me, Hal Burke.” She dropped the lipstick into her purse. “If you’d been with us, you’d have been swimming too.” She stuck her finger in my navel. “Of course, I wouldn’t have wanted you there. I like to keep a few things private.” Her hands drifted under my armpits. She sucked my nipple. My teeter-totter attachment was up again. I was coaxed to turn around. Her tongue slurped down the center of my back. She sunk until she squeezed my hand and ushered me to the shower. In a moment, like an urban miracle, the shower was hot and steaming. I stepped into the tub with her. Voluptuously, this doll stretched out her body. Her hands slapped the travertine. She bent forwards and, from behind, took hold of me. Gleaming, I was inserted. Her buttocks caressed my lower abs as we rode each other up and down, as we were bound to do pretty much the rest of the night.

When my eyes opened next morning, Lenore was filing her nails. “Hal, honey?”

“What?” I said, backing into reality.

“What are you going to do now? Are you going to get a job?”

“Huh?”

“Since I assume you are not independently wealthy, maybe you should think about that.”

“I got a good deal from the agency. I don’t have to panic.”

“Don’t let any grass grow, Hal. Bonnie does that all the time. One or two Tony Awards and she’s off to the St. Barth’s with her Birkenstocks© in the air!”

“Who the hell does she think she is?” I said.

“She’s gone for weeks and by the time she comes back, nobody knows who the hell she is!”

I rolled out of bed to brush my teeth.

“I think you should entertain getting your job back.” She picked at a cuticle.

“Lenore! You have no idea what’s happened.”

“You mean the Saturday night massacre? Quebec City?”

“You *know* about that?”

“Ric told me everything. He felt bad for you. If he could get you your job back, he would. Anyway, he said -- and I agree with him -- if you swallowed your pride and went to them, they’d probably take you back in a heartbeat.”

What did she care about my future with the Bigge Agency? God, I never understood women, even my own mother, and she was the only one who could tell me what to do and I would do it. “Do me a favor, Lenore, butt out.”

She hopped out of bed, got down on her knees, and took hold of my thighs.

“Hal, honey, he’s not the only one that’s concerned with your welfare.”

I pulled her to her feet. We faced each other. “Lenore, don’t you think it’s a little odd sleeping with someone you hardly know and next morning counseling them to resume a career you know nothing about?” She kissed me. The turn-on was happening.

“I know enough to know that he wants you happy. You love what you do. He never expected your job to go down with his. Come here.” She took my hand and we rolled onto the bed. She forced me to kiss her in spite of the talking. I wanted to be away from Ric and everything he meant to me. But I also felt something of Ric’s in this selfish embrace with Lenore: the long arm of his care for me. “Tell me you’ll do it,” she said. “See what they say. If they say ‘no,’ then move on. But don’t walk away because of a little pride ding.” With that, she wrapped her legs around mine, and we stayed that way until noon when we came up for lunch.

As she walked away from the deli, her blonde hair blew straight up in a fall wind. She pointed a finger at me like it was a gun!

I headed to the agency to pick up my things. Maybe I would talk to Trish and see what was happening. I would go straight to the loading dock, as Nussie had advised, pick up my stuff, and disappear without anyone knowing but Trish. As for my job, the company would have found a replacement already. There are always the reliable relatives of VPs waiting in the wings. So many had been *birthed* into their positions by family ties, that once there, they were protected by a cousin, a wife’s brother, a nephew of a vendor, or anyone with the influence to keep the dude alive. It didn’t matter that they didn’t know anything, which was insulting to the ones who did. I rang our special buzzer.

“Audio/Visual,” Trish droned.

“It’s me.”

“Hal! Oh my God!”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ll tell Mr. Nussbaum.”

“What’s he want?”

“I don’t know,” she stumbled, “he just said to let him know when you came by. Is that okay? I promised I’d tell him, but I won’t if you say so.”

I told her it was fine and she buzzed me in. Last night had been so incredible, no one, not even Nussie, could sink this great, fake feeling of freedom.

Trish gave me a bear hug. “Oh, Hal,” she said, “things have been so weird.” She ushered me into the mail room, “I’m not cut out for this corporate politicking thing. Last night, I couldn’t stop crying.” She grabbed a tissue from behind a postage machine.

“What’s going on?”

“For one thing, Marjie, Ric’s secretary? She’s been let go, and I just feel so bad; like it was her fault or something. She’s got two kids and a husband who sells pot on the side who got arrested. It costs money to deal with that stuff.”

I took her arm and we found an empty office. “What did they tell her?” I asked.

“They said it was her fault that the singing cow commercial made broadcast like it did, without being finished. I think they thought maybe she picked up the wrong tape and sent it off to the network without checking it or something. They accused her of not being able to read!”

“She’s one of the best assistants we’ve got!”

“They said she didn’t understand audio/visual elements and she didn’t know how to read the label on the tape box which would have indicated to her whether the tape was *work print* or the final *master!* And if she didn’t know how to read a tape box, then she didn’t belong here. They put the blame on her since she was the one who had the tape messengered to the network that Friday night.”

“That’s a lie, Trish! We were running late that day like usual, so I had the master sent to the network directly from Vidpost! It couldn’t have come back through here.”

“Marjie’s been so good to me, she’s been at the agency such a long time, she puts in all this overtime, organizes the football pools, gets the Friday bagels for the department, and everything! Is this what they’re going to do to *me* in a few years?”

“Trish, in a few years, you’ll have your own agency.”

“Since you’re gone, there’s nobody to protect me. You think I want to work for the bozos in Media, or the screamers in Creative?”

Somebody knocked. The door opened and Lloyd Nussbaum appeared. “Am I interrupting?”

He was, but for her sake, I said he wasn’t. He closed the door, strode around the desk which was cluttered with air bills, transportation invoices, and a jar of somebody’s mixed nuts. He sat down.

“I’ll just go,” Trish said.

“No,” he said, “please.” He eyed me as he explained that the infamous Saturday meeting had caused her to miss her championship softball game, like I didn’t know. “We apologized to her team. They have new uniforms thanks to Bigge Advertising! Meantime, Hal, I want to discuss a few issues,” he said, “before you make any decisions.”

“Decisions? I didn’t think I had any decisions to make.”

“Malcolm and I and the partners, we appreciate your hard work, and I wish to say in front of your assistant, that you are very much an asset to the company.”

“Was that on your mind when you wrote up my release?”

Nussie creaked backwards into the chair and readjusted his eyeglasses. “Let’s get beyond that.” Trish blew her nose. “As the case unfolded before us,” he said, “we concluded that you were not really to blame.”

Trish eyed me with fear and hope.

“That is to say,” Nussie slurred a little too much like Bill Buckley, “we *all* make mistakes from time to time. Pity the agency that is not as susceptible as any individual might be.”

“What’s up, Lloyd?”

He took a second to assess an invoice on the desk which he could not possibly have had any interest in. “We’ve decided corporately that we may have been a bit hasty.”

Here was a small waterhole in my death march. “What did you have in mind?”

“Trisha and I had a mano-a-mano yesterday.” He spun the invoice out of control onto its stack of replicates and leaned forward on his elbows. “She’s convinced me that you are rare. Not many people understand what it is that you do do.”

Trish coughed.

“There aren’t many out there who have the capacity to learn to the new computer based digital editing consoles and who, at the same time, understand the rudiments of classical film editing.” He was talking about learning the computer driven editing systems, the next generation of corporate assets. Anybody with $100,000 could purchase one of these machines, set it up in an apartment, and become a one-dude agency. King Malcolm hated to spend money. So as I said before, he stuck me with the petty, in-house A/V department: cutting bench, splicer, matching Spanish Inquisition decor, while the rest of the world jettisoned into cyberspace in cool new suites like a sci-fi movie control room. The King’s corporate excuse was, “Hal, if your in-house department exists to *save* the company money, then why do we *spend* so much money on it?” I had said, “because if you want to *have* a company in five years, and not be out-bid and out-produced by the new kids on the block, then we have to upgrade.” My proposals had gone unread.

“What would it take to get you to stay?” Nussie said.

Trish stood. “I’ll be outside.”

The door shut and I leaned into him. “What about the mega-lawsuit from the singing cow clients?”

He waved me off. “Not your concern.”

“It was my concern on Saturday night. What about Ric?”

“Malcolm feels that Richard, being the senior vice-president on the project, and his assistant, Marjorie, held the ultimate responsibility. There was evident carelessness when there should have been the most scrutiny.” He rose from his chair and challenged me. “Ric’s corporate fate is out of my hands.” He gritted his teeth. “Might that obstruct our progress?”

I couldn’t, emotionally, think about Ric or take any more responsibility for him. I retreated to the chair. “No,” I answered, sealing my fate.

Nussie sat back down too, breathing hard. “What conditions might I take back to Malcolm?”

Awaking into my role as Benedict Arnold, I said, “renew my contract. Three years for now.Not just boiler plate. I want some conditions drafted through my own attorney.”

“No hindrance. “

“I want more money.”

“Give me a figure.”

“Five grand a week and stock position.”

“Profit participation?”

“We’ll talk. I want computers. I want to plan and supervise building the space. I want an entire floor because that’s what it’s going to take! I want to be able to hire editors and assistants, since Trish and I will be producing. While we’re talking assistants, I want Trish’s salary doubled and the title Director of A/V for her; and I want autonomy. I don’t want to have to answer to the dweebs upstairs – you know who I mean -- who know less than me, like the idiots in Media who buy air time for spots that aren’t even shot yet!”

“What title?”

“I don’t care about a title. I want to do my job the way I know how, and save the company money like I promised. I’m loyal, Lloyd! Did you miss that?”

Nussie stood. “We can always use Boy Scouts!” He said.

“I want Marjorie back, Ric’s ex-assistant. She’s part of the team.”

He put out his hand and we shook. “How’s your smoking?” I asked, trying to show friendly concern for his last chemo.

“I think I’m through with it,” he said. Then he left, whisked past Trish, and disappeared. I motioned her back into the office. She was elated. “Thank God! Now we can get back to normal. What about Ric?”

“Sorry, Trish,” I said, shaking my head.

It’s amazing how a person can work side by side with someone for years and never know or understand how deeply they are affected by others until something like this happens. Of course, since we’re dealing with me here, it should come as no surprise that I had no clue how Trish felt about Ric. Her eyes welled up. She grabbed another tissue. “Aren’t you going to change their minds?”

“How?”

“But he’s part of the team.”

“I didn’t think he was that important to you.”

“I thought he was important to *you!* Isn’t he the reason you were hired? Didn’t Ric convince them to budget an in-house department for you?”

“Yes, but -- ”

“Wasn’t it Ric who grabbed the big clients for you?” She sniffled, “Isn’t he your *friend* anymore?”

I took her hands: “Trish, it’s not going to happen. It doesn’t have anything to do with me. Ric burned his own bridges.”

“You mean with his father.”

“The King disowned the Prince. Would you rather I didn’t take back the job? Should I hold out?”

“Maybe you should think about that.”

“Trish! Ric wouldn’t *want* to come back. He’s past the point of no return.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“You weren’t there, you didn’t see those two tear at each other in the presidential suite at the Frontenac.”

She leaned against the desk and blew her nose. “It’s not right.”

“Get back to work. I’ll call you after I hear from Nussie.”

“Tell Ric I sure do miss him. He was the best.”

“I’ll tell him as soon as he calls.” I said.

But I had no intention of talking to him. Anyway, how could I? I didn’t know where he was, but I didn’t bother to check 411 for a Wynn Keckley or a Ric Smith in Manhattan, either.

In the next days, Nussie and my attorney hammered out a deal. Trish and I began building our in-house editing department. The first business was dumping the old equipment, which we tried to donate to NYU Cinema Department in exchange for a tax write-off. I had hoped that my alma mater would be happy for the gift, but the department head balked. There was no longer any need for the old stuff, since a famous feature film director had already donated twenty new digital editing systems. After calling four other film schools, the Sanitation Department finally trashed it for, I’m ashamed to say, a $250.00 donation to their union.

For the first time, Trish and I were invited to client meetings. Starting small, we were soon writing advertising copy and developing storyboards for full-on television commercials. We hired actors to act, narrators to read copy, musicians to score music, etc. We built editing and sound mixing rooms to put the spots together. I directed. Trish produced. Nussie was as good as his word: Trish was promoted to Director, then Executive Director of Audio/Visual. After saving the Bigge Agency a fortune in outsourcing fees, I was made SVP.

In that time, I rarely saw King Malcolm. He passed me occasionally in the lobby. He might or might not acknowledge me, but I didn’t care. I had what I wanted. For the time being, I was my own little warlock waving my own little wand in my own private corner of the castle. Trish and I were courted by actors’ agencies, production and post-production facilities, composers, editors, and copy writers. We had dinners, flowers, and champagne; brownie and cookie baskets to prove it. Ticket agencies showered us with freebies and swag bags for the hottest shows. Even the movie studios dropped world-premiere seats in our laps. When we weren’t working late, we were out basking in the glow of our power trips.

In this blinding limelight, coming from the bottom like we had, Trish and I made it an imperative to be as forbearing as we could be to other people, no matter how stupid. And they were legion! It was important to build our department on restraint. It made budgetary sense too, since we always got what we wanted.

My sister Maggie married Icekawfee at St. Bridgid’s in Boston. The entire clan was there including Dad and his flasks of single-barrel Kentucky bourbon brothers, sisters, and cousins. I paid for everything. The celebration went on for three days. My tux slouched within a few hours of the first day. Iceman’s rap band performed full sets, some sober. Grandpa was there. He shuffled with his new walker which had a seat attached just in case. He had not been in the water for a while, so he was better than I had seen him last time. Late in the afternoon on the first day, I sat down with him. “How’s Ric?” he said.

“Good, I think.”

“I’m worried,” Grandpa said

“Are you staying out of the water?”

“Haven’t been in the water since that morning.”

“What morning?” I said

“The morning when I saw Ric speak to the little man in the green plaid suit.”

“You were diving that morning?”

“I dive where there’s water,” he said, crossing his boney knees. “You don’t believe me?”

My tuxedo slouched even more.

“Your ma’ says I got a vivid imagination,” he said. “I told you about Corregidor? In the South Pacific?”

I said, “In 1944, you were the ‘Avengers’ of the troops who had been captured in 1942 – “

“That was Bataan,” he said. “It was Corregidor, *after* Bataan, where we went next. Did I tell you about that?”

I said, “Tell me again.”

“Imagine the top of a mountain sticking out of the ocean,” he said, “sheer black rock. In fact, we called Corregidor ‘the rock,’ with caves where the enemy hid, firing at us. Our ships pounded the island day and night, and the boys parachuting in didn’t all survive the enemy fire, or the shells from our own ships. Now imagine a wind that whips up out of God’s mouth. It takes hold of your parachute. Something made of lead. It slams you into the rock, into the jagged cliffs. If neither enemy nor friendly guns got you, the wind did. You’re knocked out and down onto some ugly sand that masquerades as a beach. Then you get shot or you drown. When *we* landed, hundreds of our boys lay in the water already. We walked over and jumped around corpses like they weren’t pieces of wood. Once you look into those cold, dark eyes staring up at you, you see each one of them had a life and a story and folks and others who loved them and who they loved back. When the surf turned red, we didn’t have time to stop and say prayers, nor cry over last night’s poker buddy whose $75 I now carried in my pocket. But their sacrifice I saw through their eyes. I had to win the fight for them; otherwise they’d have died in vain. Each man on that beach that day, alive and dead, did what life asked of them. Life’s a warfare, Hal! You have to get outside of yourself and see it from somebody else’s point of view!”

I sipped champagne.

“I saw what happened on the lake that night! I went out swimming like I always do. I was there. I know. He’s fighting a personal war against his old man; worst of all personal wars. Get outside of yourself, Hal! See it through *his* eyes. It’s like a good movie, getting wrapped up in somebody else’s life! Except in this case, it’s audience-participation! You could help him, if you wanted!” He sipped his bourbon and stared out to the crowd.

At that moment, Maggie pulled me onto the dance floor.

We celebrated Grandpa’s life next weekend. Typical Irish: a wedding and a funeral in the same week. He was buried with full military honors.

Ric’s old condominium went up for sale. Nussie offered it to me to buy. With the bank’s 5% down, contract in hand, and without hesitating, I bought it turn-key, furniture, and all.

Lenore built her little empire. She had nabbed more clients than just Bonnie. Within a few months, she’d also nabbed me! We contracted with her talent agency for actors in our television commercials. I was able to keep her people busy in spite of the fact that it might have been a conflict of interest to use them while she and I were screwing.

Bonnie flew to Hollywood and landed two juicy feature films, which completely revealed her assets to the world, but only marginally introduced her to the industry.

After some months, Lenore and I drifted apart. Frankly, we both got bored since our relationship was based mostly on sex. Besides, she talked too much.

I lived fast, carved out time for daily sex, and had way too many offers. Life spread its opportunities before me like a nymphet dropping rose petals in a DeMille epic. My eyes didn’t allow me to see much past the day of. The company handled my investments, insurance, and retirement. I had a housekeeper named Mrs. Morroho who did my laundry once a week, cleaned the living space, and left me music demos of her classical guitar playing on my rented parlor-grand piano that I didn’t know how to play. I joined a mega health club on the Upper East Side that had a full-service restaurant to accompany the latest gear, spinning, aerobics, and hottest babes since last summer’s swimsuit issue.

I leased a BMW and wrecked it on a wet New York State Thruway on my way to a cola shoot. I survived, but from then on, the agency rented a limousine which took me wherever I said, even on weekends. It was always stocked with cola. Afterwards, I held onto the belief that New Yorkers have no place behind the wheel.

Before I moved into Ric’s place, Ric had left messages sometimes, usually nothing more than “checking in.” I didn’t call him back. I was too tired or it was too late.

I hated to be lied to, and he had lied big time. I learned to live without him. But I thought about him every day. I wondered where he was at that moment, what he

was doing, or whether he was working. I went to movies alone, but it wasn’t the same. Ric had always had a love/hate relationship with movies. At eighteen, we had gone to see Faye Dunaway in the movie, “EYES OF LAURA MARS.” When Tommy Lee Jones bangs on Faye’s window at the climax, you know he’s there to kill her. She has a weapon, but she doesn’t know it. Ric had jumped up and screamed, *“Get the gun! Get the gun!”*

I missed him. Did he know that I had taken back my job, or that I turned his department around financially, or that I bought his old condo? Did he know about Lenore? Would he have wanted to hear me brag about the others? These little self-absorbed moments were fragile, but consuming. Often in traffic, in between airports, or late nights in luxury hotels with expensive scotch, he would pop into my head.

The memories were mostly good. While I wasn’t looking, the blood from the old wounds had dried up and, like my finger, hardly a scar was left. For me, Ric and I had been a couple of kids who had learned about themselves and their appetites together, but who were really nothing but shadows of adults to come. And there was one added spice to our recipe: Wynn would take care of Ric. The thought of him in Ric’s life actually made me shrug it off a thousand, haunted times. As long as Wynn was around, there was no need for me.

Wynn and events had split Ric and me apart, creating a Red Sea of indifference. It would take a modern Moses to bring us back together again . I thought this was fair since it was the job, not Ric, which had affected in me such a burst of maturity and caused me to hate him so much less. Still, I ignored his calls.

**II. THE PLOT**

I became an agency super-minion! I busted ass 65 hours a week minimum, directing and supervising TV spots, sales reels, movie trailers, and tribute reels. I worked out four mornings a week with a trainer named Duke from Barbados. I never took lunch, opting for park jogs. Expenses were heavy, nightly. After dinners, I would bolt downtown to bars and night clubs to hang, meet lap dancers, and drink to forget the day. For three years I had the routine nailed, along with some outstanding lap dancers.

One steamy summer-weeknight-whiskey-venture, I checked out a hot, new, modular, thumping dance bar called *Ravage!* off Times Square. Supposedly “classy” and “babe-heavy,” it sounded like the place to show off $7,000 worth of new teeth. I was not ashamed of the cosmetic improvement. If Lenore Shears could buy herself a new nose, my new teeth might get me more of the action she enjoyed on a regular basis. On this particular night, I hailed a cab to my condo, threw off work-drag, stepped into designer jeans, black T-shirt, $650 boots, and hailed a cab *back* downtown.

For a Wednesday, the place hopped with party-boys and girls of all ages, shapes, sizes, and color. The oval bar was four deep. A few minutes passed before I spotted a sexy brunette. She wore sunglasses and a slinky, black dress with matching purse slung over her left shoulder. She might have come from an award show, but she didn’t have an award, just an empty martini glass. She licked an olive.I winked and via signage, offered to buy her a drink. “Vodka?” I mouthed. She nodded and held up her olive, gesturing *three*. I paid for our drinks and went to her.“Hello, and sign in please!”

“I’m Kitty. And you are?”

“Duke!” I said, stupidly glancing at my right pec. I often used that alias. It kept me safe from the weird and the serious. Of course, I never told my trainer, the real Duke.

She purred, “now that we both know we’re liars, lie to me about what you do.”

I told her that I had recently inherited a dry cleaners on the lower East Side. “I know something about clothes,” I said, “having been in the dry cleaning business since I was two. But I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“It designed itself,” she said, “it’s easy! I shoplifted a Catwoman© costume and got out scissors! Edit, edit, edit! The mask is in my purse. Want to see?”

“How about breakfast?”

“Why Duke, you don’t waste any time!” Her eyebrows curled like a crowd wave at Yankee Stadium.

“It’s the cleaning fluid. It turns me into a regular hydra.”

“I guess that means you’re rich as well as being a white George Jefferson.”

We danced until midnight when we grabbed a table by the stage. I ordered another round. She admitted to having been a model, but only when she was 16. Since then, she had gone on to study acting and was trying to break into advertising. Just what I wanted! Everything Mom and Dad had sacrificed, scrimped and saved for, every all-nighter I’d pulled to push my grade point average past 3.3, every meager step that had led to my big future was about to be realized if only I could tell her the truth! I would, after all, become what I never wanted to be: an agency sugar daddy! I held onto the lie about the alias and the dry cleaning. I was too young to be paying for sex via auditions.

She knocked over her drink. A busboy buzzed the table with a rag. A new one arrived instantly. “Why the sunglasses?” I asked.

“I scratched my cornea with these nails!” She held up ten horrendously twisted, arthritic fingers: like two open Swiss Army© knives. She said arthritis attacks at all ages.

The music died and two spotlights caromed across the stage. An announcer screeched through a badly-wired mic, “Good evening, ladies and assholes*. Ravage!* New York’s premiere nightclub, welcomes you to our Wednesday night follies!” A fanfare blared. “*Ravage!* Where every night is a new adventure in *smut!”* Screams shot up. “*Ravage!* Proudly presents *Naked Conga Night!”* A second roar shook the room. “Wait til you see *twenty naked dancers* representing *fifteen countries,* performing for you live and as *naked* as New York nudity ordinances allow --”

Kitty licked her upper lip. “Gee, George Jefferson, front row seats for ‘Naked Conga Night!’ How lucky can a girl get?”

“’Movin’ on up!’”

*“-- Featuring our special guests: Minnie Van Lake* direct from Cairo, and her partner, fresh from Alexandria, *Helix!”* To applause and foot stomping, two dancers appeared. *She* was dressed as Cleopatra in an ankle-length gold dress with a slit up the middle. *He* came on as one of her slaves. They boogied and chased each other across the boards, stopping long enough to wiggle loins at appropriate tables, and indiscriminately flash the audience. Under a brass headband, Helix’s wig flowed down over bodybuilder-shoulders. He peeled off a skimpy brown vest, and kicked construction boots to the beat. She, with her voluminous breasts and palpitating hips, bopped over to us, swung down low and revealed her silicone Grand Canyon. Meantime, the customers next table over lifted his loincloth. They inserted bills into the thong underneath. Helix yanked off the loincloth, rubbed it up and down against his sweaty armpits, placed one end between the teeth of a screaming girl, bit down on the other end himself, and did a toothy tug-o-war with her. As the music pounded, so did my chest. But Cleopatra distracted me. She launched onto our table, slammed her feet astride our cocktails, and Kitty and I disappeared under her dress. I took hold of Cleopatra’s gown, and hurled it sideways. But in my zeal to get out from under it, her spiked heels skidded on a puddle of vodka. The royal Egyptian feet flew up, and she tumbled into my crotch. Kitty screamed as we hit the floor. Hysterically, Cleopatra kicked like a deer hit by a pick-up. She squashed my nuts. I groaned. About that time, I noticed Helix gazing down. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t have given him a look, but then, a “duh” moment occurred. “Helix?” I said, suddenly sober.

Helix flexed. “Hal?” he said.

Was I dreaming? I wanted to pinch myself, but the pain in my nuts assured me I was awake.

“His name’s Duke!” Kitty said. “You two *know* each other?”

*“Duke?”* He asked.

*“Helix?”* I said. “Don’t you usually travel in pairs?”

He sailed down on wires. (He wasn’t on wires, but that’s how I remember it).

Cleopatra screamed, “Get me up!” Ric rolled her off my tummy like a dead seal rolls off a Nantucket buoy. He grabbed my hand. As he removed the wig, I came face to face with he who I must have been missing way more than I knew.

Cleopatra snapped his thong. “Hey, Helix! We’re in the middle of a number!” Distracted, he asked my date’s name. “Kitty,” I said. He turned to her. “Here, Kitty,” he said. He draped his wig on her head and fitted it with the brass headband. “How about a striptease for two hundred bucks, and tips?” Kitty said “Wow! *Okay!”* Then he paid her with cash from the personal ATM between his legs.

I never could have estimated the lack of reserve in that girl. She straightened the wig, downed her martini, dropped an olive into her mouth, and sprang onto the stage. As the music started, she hoisted Cleopatra with her arthritic hands, and the two of them simulated lesbian sex. Of course, the crowd went crazy, and Kitty’s self-designed little black dress pretty much went to pieces.

While yanking bills from inside his crotch, Ric hurried us out. The girls at the next table who had been tipping him jeered, and one guy yelled “fags!”

The cab driver did a double take when he saw Ric’s costume. Who knows what he thought, but he sure couldn’t miss the wad in Ric’s hand.

“Live sex shows?” I said.

“S*imulated* sex shows. There’s a difference. Let’s go out.”

“Don’t you have a purse or a paper bag or something? Where do you keep your wallet?”

“My ID’s in my shoe with my key. Money’s in hand. I have to change first.”

So we stopped at a broken down brownstone on East 98th. He invited me up. He asked the driver to wait, but no luck. Not here.

“It’s a walk-up. I’m in 6W,” Ric said, “Felice found it for me.”

“Felice?”

“Wynn Keckley’s sister. She was his partner at auditions.”

“The shotgun girl?”

“A persona, Hal.”

Ric had always been proud of his body, but he was seriously more developed now. He caught me looking. “Like my legs, straight boy? Steps and steroids! I’m too old to go it alone. I turned 33 in October.”

I knew when his Scorpio-birthday was.

He unlocked the door. “Concessions to my job,” he said, “buff, athletic, and dance don’t necessarily go together! Wait here.” He disappeared down the hall.

His apartment was what was called a “railroad:” 12 or 14 feet wide and six rooms deep. If you’d put six large walk-in closets together, it would look like this. The linoleum floors were speckled with paint drips from who-knows-when. Antique floral wallpaper stained by water leaks and nicotine, peeled from the corners. Stacks of unopened moving boxes told that he’d never taken it seriously. An unplugged phone was on the floor next to a milk crate. Sitting on the crate was a muted 12” television with bent rabbit ears adorned by wadded-up aluminum foil. The kitchen was clean, at least, being the first room we entered. After a few minutes of smelling burned popcorn from next door, Ric reappeared in a forest green T, button-fly jeans, and black boots. “Let’s go,” he said.

Funny, I can go long time without emotion since in my business, I regularly engage in the big five of the seven deadly sins (Sloth being out since no one can be slothful at an agency, otherwise they’re out on their ass; and since everybody’s weight conscious, Gluttony hides). Otherwise, Anger, Pride, Avarice, Lust, and Envy reign supreme. They blow through our business like fog into a bay, and we live with them. I seek neither authentic laughter nor unprejudiced care. Reality is usually just a gray day, overcast by clouds that don’t produce. Then out of nowhere, on nights not unlike this one, not seeing a need to shake it off, and being totally smile-less, frown-less, and with no mood swing for anybody, my eyes suddenly tear-up. This often happens at revival movies, weddings, and when reading well-written greeting cards at the market. This time however, unprepared as I was with him, I turned lobster red.

“Hallie,” he said, “c’mon, I’ll tell you all about it in the cab. Let’s go to the other bar where I work*: Splash*.”

“What’s ‘*Splash?’*”

“A gay bar in the Village. I sling gin too. I’m the star bartender. Guaranteed two-fifty per night when I can get a shift. Nice teeth, by the way.” We got a cab, and he nestled into his corner of the backseat. The glow in his eyes de-iced my wings which lately had flown low and with bad visibility. “What are you doing now?” he asked.

“Not calling you back.”

“Melville said to Hawthorne, ‘It’s a sign of strength to be weak.’“

“And John Wayne said, ‘Don’t apologize, it’s a sign of weakness.’“

He rolled down his window and hocked. “Actors speak lines writers write,” he said, “I’ll take the writers over the actors any day. You did what you did, just like me. Besides, when you moved, you didn’t list your number.”

“Mom had my number!”

“How are Sal and Charlie?”

“Grandpa passed.”

“I would’ve called had I’d known,” he said, “I’m sorry!”

“He liked *you*!”

“How’s work?”

I laid out Nussie’s offer, the deal for the new department, Trish, my salary, Maggie’s wedding, and worst; that I had bought his old condo at auction, furnished!

“And California king?”

“It’s too big. I can’t get in the closet.”

“That’s because you’re always headed in the wrong direction!”

“Funny!” I said.

“So essentially, you became me! “You took over my whole physical existence. I hope you kept Mrs. Morroho!”

“I had to. She came with mortgage!”

The cab pulled up to the bar.

“Ric!”

“It’s okay, Hallie,” he said, with an insincere pat on my knee, “somebody had to, and if I had a vote, I would’ve elected you!”

I paid the driver and he led me into my first gay bar. I admit I had sexual xenophobia. I thought, “Don’t freak. You’re straight. He’s not. He didn’t try to convert you before. He didn’t even try to experiment with you, when others guys did.” I was here anyway, and no amount of the exponential fear that I grew up with could make me balk, turn, and walk away from him a second time. But it was a major culture shock: male tits on the TV monitors and live naked bodies taking showers up on stage behind the bar.

“Meet Bud!” He said. A buff bartender, mid-40s, with buzz cut and 5 o’clock shadow, kissed him on the mouth. Ric introduced me as his first real crush. “Hal’s straight, though. No kissy!”

“I don’t kiss straight guys,” Bud said. He held up two wet hands, “too much deodorant and not enough mouthwash.”

I popped some gum.

“So,” Ric said to me, “Hal has become the Prince!”

“No Prince in this bloodline!”

“They took advantage of that! Not everything’s about you, Hallie.”

“Where’s Wynn?” I said. I should have been a little less bullish. By that I mean, not knowing anything about Ric and his life, maybe I should have found an x-chromosome inside that might have shown more sensitivity since the way I said it corrupted the moment. Ric’s eyes trolled the floor. “Wynn’s dead, Hal.”

I spun half- away from him, beer in hand.

“He wasn’t getting paid much for his acting jobs, when and if they came; and he didn’t make many tips at the diner. If we were going to make a relationship, both of us had to be working. Meantime, his health went downhill.”

On a pedestal in the corner, a stripper flicked his g-string against his pony-like butt.

“He was HIV before we met. But in three years, there was nobody else; and they’re out there. The billionaire boys clubs, summers in Mykonos, Fire Island, winters in Key West, PV, and Wailea: rich brats. I could have seduced some of them maybe, raise some eyebrows and money for our show at the same time. But it wasn’t worth it if it meant losing Wynn. I never cheated on him.”

“You’d seduce your own grandmother.”

“That was then.”

“As if Lenore Shears never knew the shape of your pudendum!”

Hmmm. Why did I say that? I was drunk and it sounded funny? I thought it might exhume a friendly feud, and get us away from Wynn’s story. Instead, he slammed his beer bottle on the bar with such a thud, it shook Bud, a bar-back, and some drag queens in line for free Mai-Tai’s. *“What?”* he said. “I *never* had sex with Lenore!”

“It’s okay. I’m not supposed to know!”

Ric stood up over me, clamping his fist onto my shirt. “Hal Burke! I don’t know what she told you, and I don’t know what you thought when she told you with that crazy brain of yours, but I swear to Christ that I never, *ever* touched that bird brain!”

Bud bought two emergency shots of tequila.

“Why would I?” he said, reclaiming his barstool, “she was yours! I respected that, like an *idiot!*” His eyes darted to the TV monitor: naked legs were entwined under red light. It looked like a pile of pornographic pasta. “What *did* she tell you?”

“She said she liked the shape of our packages.”

*“Our* packages?*”* Ric’s nostrils flared and the veins in his neck popped. Bud nudged the bar-back.

“She said that not only had you two done it that night after Charley O’s, but it was a three-way with Bonnie during a re-run of ‘Beverly Hillbillies.’ Miss Jane was chasing Jethro around the cement pond!”

Ric downed his beer. He slapped his hands twice on the bar, and pointed to his open mouth. Bud had a new bottle each and two more shots in front of us instantly. Ric sucked a wedge of lime and said, “In the middle of sex with Lenore, she told you she liked the shape of my – what?”

“Pudendum. It was a joke. Men don’t have – “

*“I get it, Hal!”*

“She said she liked the way we were straight like arrows on a bow! They don’t curve up or bend down. Perfect for what she likes. ‘Straight shooters,’ she said. She said that during sex, most guys are shaped like bananas curving up at the ceiling when she’s down on the bed! She didn’t like that. She liked them *boom*, straight out from the middle, like this!” I stuck out my forearm perpendicular to my waist.

Ric put his hand around my neck. “Pookie?” he said, “I give you credit for knowing a few things like the Earth is round, we orbit the Sun, that Saturn has rings and Pluto may not be a planet. But suddenly all I’m getting is a cold blast of South Boston dumbassedness!”

“Fuck you!” I said, “I’m dealing with you, with what you did to yourself, and what you did to *us!”*

With one hand, Ric grabbed the brass rail by the waiter’s station. With the other, he clasped the back of my neck, drawing me to him. “Listen, Hal! There’s a little boy who’s 11, in sixth grade. Then there’s another boy who’s 13, in eighth. You remember I told you that Grams raised us Catholic, since even though she was English, she’d married a Catholic from Wexford County, Ireland?”

“Let go!” I said, but he only pulled tighter.

“In those days, if a non-Catholic married a Catholic, it was in the contract that the kids would be raised Catholic, so she raised me that way. That’s when I met this boy in my school: Paul, two years older and the only *older* man I ever loved.”

“A crush!” I said.

He pushed me away. “We were altar boys. We sang in the choir together. He got me to join Boy Scouts. He taught me the difference between a square knot and a granny, and how to build a fire. He was the handsomest kid I’d ever met, and he was *my* protector! He taught me how to walk with my head up, stand with my shoulders back, how to dive without drowning, catch footballs without squinting, and swing at baseballs without embarrassing myself. Paul was three people actually: he was the man I wanted to be, the man I wanted to be with, and as turns out, the father I never had.”

“What happened to him?”

“That’s just it,” he said, hanging his head, “I had to let him go out of my life.”

“Why?”

“It turned into a physical thing. I threw up when I knew he was going to be around. I got dry mouth and couldn’t talk. A school nurse thought I was epileptic. When I found out he was going to high school the next year, I got so depressed I unwound everything. I quit choir, Boy Scouts, baseball, football, diving, and told Grams we should move.” He lit up a Camel. “I knew what was going on inside me. I knew what love was, and mine was no crush. I felt what I felt. Once, on my way to class, I saw him waiting for me a half block away. So, I slowed and dawdled against a fence. Why? Because I didn’t want him to see me throw up. That’s when he walked into school and out of my life forever. I sat and rocked back and forth next to my smelly patch of snow.”

“That was mean. You edited your own friendship!”

“I’m sure he wondered what the hell the matter with me was, or what was up with him*.* When a kid of 12 – me -- has to say goodbye to the love of his life -- Paul --and lets him walk away because he – me -- doesn’t want to hurt him – Paul -- then that kid – me – learns as much about love as Life has to teach!”

“I never doubted your capacity for that,” I said.

“Remember NYU when we roomed together?” If you *did* look at me, you’d know that I’m *not* straight like an arrow.”

Bud leaned across the bar and grabbed my wrist, “I couldn’t help overhearing. This woman you’re talking about, if she described Ric like a straight arrow, I can vouch that he’s *not* straight like an arrow.”

“How do *you* know?”

Ric gnashed his teeth, “Bud’s seen me *dance*, Hal, and if you know male strippers, which you don’t, you know that they don’t always stay soft when customers are shoving fifties up their thongs. In all the time we were planning and writing and working together, did I *ever* give you even so much as a hint that there was more than a business relationship between us?”

“All I remember is being jealous!”

“There seems to be a wide-ass berth between your perception of what I did in those days and what really happened. I would never have put the make on Bonnie Shears’ sister just to get to Bonnie Shears! If people want to do the show, they do the show, and they can keep their goddamned hands to themselves. I didn’t do it then, I wouldn’t do it now. I don’t *do* casting couches.”

“What about Wynn?” I said.

Ric peeled the label perfectly from his bottle. He mounted it carefully on a dry cocktail napkin. “Wynn was different,” he mumbled, “he was somebody I wanted to be with for the rest of my life. The only difference between you and him was, he was available.”

“Then why did Lenore lie?”

“Use *your* brain, straight man, since you’re always working the last electrode in mine.” Bud poured two more shots of tequila which disappeared down our throats, along with two more chasers. I was beginning to acclimate to these generous gay bars!

There’s some kind of magic in tequila which, when seeping into my system, I get the feeling that I can hurdle past countless obstacles to my thinking and land safely at the objective on the other end: a conclusion of such incalculable merit, such precision in its truth, so crystalline in its beauty, that it would be sought after, admired, and valued by statesmen, and the Pentagon, and even magazines with horrifically large circulations. Sadly, this nuclear high is short compared with the hangover it creates. In my case, it lasted long enough for one major realization: *“What the fuck, Ric!”* I said*. “Maybe Lenore was working for Malcolm all along!”*

Ric’s beer spewed out of his nose. He coughed and heaved. Bud and I slapped his back. Once again, he was the center of attention in a public place, choking on alcohol.

“I don’t know,” I slurred, “it’s possible. We couldn’t have known it, of course. I mean, how could we? If she was, which I don’t think she’s smart enough for, she screwed us both.”

Ric’s eyes opened like a time-lapse bloom of a first spring orchid. “You *have* turned into me, you little green apple!”

“Wasn’t Lenore the first one to know about the ‘news item’? Wasn’t she the one who told us about the moratorium on the show the night at Gallagher’s? Wasn’t Lenore in the edit room when we finished the singing cow spot?”

“She didn’t have anything to do with that. She’s not technically literate enough to sabotage a video master. That came from the inside.”

“We don’t know that; and if I were us, which I am half-of, I’d think about it.”

“We could eat her alive!She’s a big time agent with huge clients. Don’t you use her?”

“Not like we used to.”

“But you have*.*”

“We were screwing! If I didn’t use her, she’d shut me off.”

“Have you read the trades lately?”

I shook my head.

“I read them every day! She just produced a four-color, full page ad last week announcing new offices for her *commercial clients!”*

Then like slow moving lava, like blazing sludge down Kilauea, a second realization daunted me. “She could be the reason I got my job back!” I said. “That morning after, she advised me to go to the agency. She said she wouldn’t be interested if I was out of work. I mean, she was coy and everything. Fill in the blanks since it’s *your* father we’re talking about.”

“And your *ex!”* he said.

“So King Malcolm hires Lenore to engineer three things: sink the show, get rid of you, and hang on to me?”

“In return, Lenore rakes in the contacts, builds clientele --”

“And new offices! What about Bonnie?” I asked.

“What about her? She didn’t need Bonnie.”

“She did in the beginning.”

“What did Bonnie get out of it? Last I saw, she’s in Hollywood making soft-core, after-hours crap.”

“She got what she got.”

“She’s a great actress.” He pondered the long-lost opportunity of working with her. “They just don’t know it yet in Oz. She had me believing she’d do the show! She searched us out, gave us notes, and paid for brunch at the Ritz!”

“How did she know where to find us?” I said.

“Lenore,” he shrugged, “she wanted your address, so I gave it to her.”

“Lenore wouldn’t let Bonnie find us if Bonnie wasn’t in on it.”

“Bonnie’s tenacious. If she really liked the script, she would have *choked* it out of Lenore’s little chicken neck.”

“If she knew what was going on?” I said.

“Maybe she didn’t. “

“Huh?”

“Maybe Bonnie didn’t have anything to do with Lenore’s plot.”

“Why defend Bonnie?” I protested.

“Because!” he said, relaxing onto the barstool, “if we’re going to go out and get even, we have to find out who our friends are.”

My bladder was full. I squeezed my knees so I wouldn’t be reminded of the dread I dreaded knowing that I was going to have to go pee in that bathroom. I tried to think about something else. I was enjoying this time with Ric. I didn’t want anything to spoil it. After everything that had gone before, we might be able to start fresh. Meantime, my sweet head swung low from the chariots of tequila. “One thing bothers me,” I said. “Lenore couldn’t stop talking about how much you thought of me, how much you loved and appreciated me. Talk about cloying.”

“Yeah!” Ric said, “the night she and I met. I laid it on thick so she’d know I had a talented partner.”

“So you *don’t* love me and you *don’t* think I’m talented.”

“I always loved you and you’ve always been talented

“Why invent the three-way? You, Bonnie, and her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if you’d found out I’d seduced them, it’d be the last nail in my coffin. It was her way of showing you what kind of friend I really was. She wanted me out of your life permanently. Look at it this way: she was a terrorist hired to bomb us. She killed me with kindness in your head while knowing that no amount of lies she piled on would help you swallow the fact that I did them *both!*”

“You didn’t, did you?”

“Do I have to *prove* it to you?” he said.

Bud rang up a sale, and approached.

“Bud,” Ric whined. Bud placed his elbows on the bar and leaned in. “Here,” Ric said, “for our drinks.” He dropped his weaving chin, peeled off $200, and slapped it into Bud’s hands. “Launder it!” he said.

“I don’t have to launder it,” Bud said, “it’s going under my pillow!”

I hoisted my sorry ass off the barstool. “I gotta pee.”

Bravely, I marched downstairs into the pit of my worst nightmares. What I found was the coolest bathroom I had ever seen: clean, bright, with black and rose-colored tile lit by blue spots. But the pretty, stainless steel pee-trough had a long mirror just above it, about waist-high, running the whole length of the room. What was the point, watch yourself go? I didn’t get it. Anyway, there was nobody else there, so I unzipped, craned my neck upwards, and thought about Dorothy Gale from Kansas. As I purged, I felt a strange sensation next to me, like someone breathing on my shoulder. I talked myself out of the possibility that I was being watched. Everything had gone so smoothly up to now. But staring at the ceiling like I was, how could I be sure? Something fleshy and pointy touched my elbow. Was somebody trying to grab my attention at this strange juncture? Then, I looked down and saw it: an erect penis pointed straight up to the ceiling. Its owner slapped it against my forearm. Without warning, I turned and sprayed him who was attached to it. Ric’s hyena-like laughter echoed off the rosy bathroom tiles. He howled as he struggled to put away his object of my terror.

*“What the fuck are you doing?”*I screamed.

“You didn’t have to *pee* all over me!” He squealed, and grabbed a towel.

“You are some piece of work, Ric Smith!” I said as I doused my hands.

“You had to see what it looked like, Hal!” he said. “I’m not a *straight arrow!”*

I really wanted to dodge this. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I washed my hands a second time. He zipped up, and then grabbed my pecs. “We can’t start over, you and me,” he said, “until we absolutely trust each other.”

I got his point.

**VIII. ONSLAUGHT**

As we headed uptown, I put my arm around him while he talked about Wynn. After so many opportunistic bugs, Wynn had fought another parasite: cryptosporidium, which contaminates drinking water. It had infected thousands in Wisconsin with nausea and diarrhea and had been discovered in the water supplies of over 200 cities. It can be fatal to an AIDS patient. It’s marked by the gradual but complete devastation of the colon. Nothing stays in the system. The victim wastes.

I stared out my side of the cab. Times Square pulsed to the beat of late night theatre-goers, tourists, and locals. The melting pot had no knowledge of a boy named Wynn Keckley up on East 98th Street, who -- when his time was up -- had left our Earth without a blink of an eye from anyone, particularly me. “You’re moving,” I said.

Ric giggled, “This is *my* soap opera. Leave me alone.”

“I mean you’re moving in with me. I’ll get you on my insurance.”

“*Me* insured on *your* policy at *my* father’s agency? You better have a big, fat blue genie if you want to ride that carpet.”

“We’ll work it out.”

“Did you take a tolerance pill, Hal? You write me off for three years, we see each other for a couple of hours, and you ask me to move in?”

“How long were you seeing Wynn before I met him? Where did you two meet?”

“He picked me up at a newsstand when I was reading *Variety*. He pretended he was the vendor. He spoke in a thick borough accent, *‘You buying that, mister, or are you going to stand there and crumple it so’s I can’t sell it to nobody else?’* I thought this was rude, even for a New Yorker. I reached into my pocket and gave him $5. Then the real vendor popped up from behind the counter. I looked at him, he looked at me, and we both looked at Wynn. Sheepishly, Wynn over handed the bill. He grinned, shrugged, and asked if I wanted to go for a coffee. Except for work, we were never apart again. That was about two weeks before auditions. By then, he’d introduced me to Felice, Creeper Benoit, and the girls from the girls’ bar.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have believed me if I said I’d been hustled by an actor from Omaha? When I was forced out of the agency, I had nowhere to go. He was all I had. He made my dancewear.”

“The butt floss?”

“We call it ‘dancewear.’”

“Obviously, he stayed on budget.”

Ric stretched his body away from me.

As we approached 94th Street, we saw fire trucks and heard sirens. Our cab got stuck in traffic, so I paid and we jumped out. When we got to his corner, the color drained from his face. His building belched rancid smoke from the top floor. We sprinted down the block and discovered it was not his building, but the building next door. But the blaze threatened both sides. He saw Felice. She yelped at a fireman who was hooking up a hose to a hydrant. I gagged on the putrid smell as a hand-wringing street mob watched on. Ric darted to Felice. She hugged him. “Thank God, Ric! I thought you were up there!”

With the flames shifting, Ric’s gaze turned to his apartment.

Felice said, “No, Ric! I know what you’re thinking! Don’t!”

“Have you got a copy, Felice?” He asked.

“I think so,” she replied, “I’m not sure!”

Ric eyed me, “Hal, have you got your copy of ‘“HAMLET THE SECOND?”

I couldn’t remember if I had it or not. Had I taken it with me when I moved? “Maybe! Probably!” I said. “There’s no time!” I tried to hold him back.

“We’ll never get out of this hole without it!” He broke past us and went inside. Two firefighters charged in after him. Gray smoke wafted like a hammock where we stood and stung our eyes as we were pushed past panicked tenants. The smoke grew blacker and thicker as a beer-soaked, potbellied man in his late 50s burst out of the building and cursed.

A firefighter’s bullhorn blared: “Evacuate the building!” The hacking of axes and the thumping of boots signaled we should get the hell out of the way. Felice and I ran past fire trucks and ambulances, and onto the steps of a building across the street. Breathless and sooty, Felice looked at me for the first time, “hey, aren’t you Ric’s friend, the director? I met you at the audition.”

“The last time I saw you, you had a 12-gauge shotgun pointed at my crotch.”

“It *was* a prop.”

I looked up. Across the street, silhouetted by the smoke, fire, and flashing lights, Ric stood watching us. His jeans were torn and smoke seeped through his shirt, but his eyes shot through everything. His arms wrapped around the original copy of “HAMLET THE SECOND,” Terry’s copy, perfectly preserved in the protective plastic binder which he had assembled so many years before. I ran to him. “You fucking idiot!” I screamed. “You could’ve been killed!”

He handed me the script. “Take me home!” He said.

A cop questioned us, and then she let us go.

We stumbled into my condo at 8am. I placed Terry’s script reverentially on the new dining table which had set me back a bundle. Randomly, I wondered what Ric thought of the place, or if he even cared. I had stored his things until he could come back to claim them. Meantime, would he approve of the bleached hardwood floors and the country French pine furniture? I had replaced the track lighting with recessed spots. Two billowy couches faced each other in the living room. I, or rather my contractors, had opened it up. There was travertine flooring in the kitchen, marble counter-tops, and butcher-block island. Without a word, he sat down with Felice at the dining table. He studied a silver centerpiece. “Going southwestern?” He said.

I found three bottles of Cabernet which I’d been saving for anybody *not* in film/video/acting/dancing/advertising/Broadway show/you-name-it-I-don’t-want-to-sleep-with-it business. Ric had lost everything but his script. Felice had lost her brother. I wasn’t sure what I’d lost, but I knew it was something. I sipped while they memorialized Wynn. She told us about their family in Nebraska. They had known that Wynn was sick but were in denial about his lifestyle.

“That’s funny,” I said, “shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

Ric snorted, “how long were you in denial about me, Freud?”

“If a kid of mine turned out to be gay,” I said, “I’d want him to be happy.”

“Whoa! You’ve come a long way, baby!” he said. He relaxed into his chair and studied the floor through the wine glass. “What about Penn Station? You denied me and Wynn there. You walked out on us when you didn’t have a clue who he was or what he meant to me. If we hadn’t accidentally run into each other tonight, what would you be doing now except *not* returning my calls?”

“I couldn’t make up my mind.”

“For three years? Jesus fulfilled his whole ministry in three years!”

“I’m not Jesus. It took what it took.”

He snapped his fingers, “now overnight, just because somebody happens to die in your sphere, you’re suddenly emancipated?”

Felice drifted.

“You were a Historymajor before I came along. What the fuck were you doing in History? I was the one who got you into the film classes. After grad school, you couldn’t get arrested until I hired you at the agency. If you thought you could direct, it was me who said so! If I didn’t stand behind you in rehearsals, you couldn’t direct yourself out of a Barney’s bag.”

Felice poured more wine.

“Goals? Dreams? Motivations? You didn’t have shit until I gave them it to you!”

“Don’t rehash!” Felice interrupted.

“Rehash?” I said.

“Look at this place!” He attacked, “how long have you been here? Some paint, designer couches, and bleached hardwood? Please!”

“I was keeping it for you!”

“Oh?” He said, spinning a silver platter, “one or two pieces of buffed aluminum do not a redo make! Where’s my stuff?”

I went at him nose to nose, “if you mean that Spanish Inquisition crap you got from your mom, it’s in storage! You might as well have raided the cellar of a 600 year-old mission.”

“Guys! Do we have to go through this?” Felice coughed.

“And you, Ric?” I said. “You had everything. You had a banquet on your table before you ever got banned from the ranch! Even after! Tell me: why the bartending, the stripping, and the shithole apartment? What were you proving? You could have easily got a job, a great job, with a competitor. I would’ve taken California before I’d take some borough grease-ball shoving fifty dollar bills up my butt.”

Ric charged ahead on his own channel: “you wouldn’t know how to make this place yours. Just like everything else you stolefrom me. It’s a good thing you’re *not* gay! I would’ve had to watch my back to make sure you didn’t steal Wynn!”

Like a fart at a rodeo, I couldn’t hold back. “Like father, like *son!*”

He eyed me weirdly, and growled.

“Easy for you,” I said, “letting people you love fall out of the food chain, like we’re un-endangered species.”

“Excuse me, if you were an animal, you wouldn’t have treated me the way you did, or gone back to work for *them*, or bought this place when it came up for auction. You

wouldn’t have looked twice at Lenore if you didn’t know she was with me.”

“Lenore?” I said. “How long are you going to shove my nose up the butt of *that* mistake?”

“Your women have to be with somebody else before you actually *see* them!” he said. “You’re the animal, Hal! You andthe King! And with all due respect to the animal kingdom, he’s The Serpent and you’re,” he threw up his hands, “a chameleon! You are whoever anybody wants you to be if it gets you what you want. One day you’re the devoted friend, the next you’re John Dean!”

Felice rolled another joint. “Oh, boys?” She sang. She licked the papers, lit up, and inhaled.

I strutted around the table. He wouldn’t look at me, so I let him have it at the back of his head. “Maybe I relied on you for direction now and then,” I said. “But in 15 years, admit what I’ve contributed to us!”

“Acid reflux!” he snarled. He snatched the joint from Felice and sucked.

“When you went your way,” I said, “I respected it. But you paid me back by leaving *out* the part about you that was most vital. You weren’t the person I thought you were. Maybe I blamed myself for being the village idiot, but you censored our friendship from the start. Edit! Edit! Edit!” I yanked the joint away from him and rammed it into my mouth.

Felice pounded the table three times: “*Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!*”

The pot was working.

“Stop raggin’!” She barked. “Why don’t you just *kiss and make love* right here on the goddamned, brand new, bleached fucking hardwood floor or whatever it is? Don’t mind me, I’ll find something to do. After all, Wynn was only my *brother!* It’s no big deal he *died!* I’ll just go and watch *‘The Today Show.*’ How about that?”

Humbly, I poured wine. “Sorry, Felice,” I said.

“Yeah,” Ric said, “sorry, Felice.”

She flung her hair to one side and sat down. I handed her the joint.

“You fucking guys remind me of my birds!” she said, inhaling.

Red-eyed and stoned, Ric studied her and said, “you keep birds?”

She growled, “I don’t *‘keep’* fucking birds, asshole. I *have* them outside my window. Blue jays live in my tree. You know about blue jays?”

I rubbed my throat which was sore from the fire, not to mention the yelling, not to mention the pot. I took a drink.

“There’s this tree outside my window with these blue jays. I used to think, how cool, until one day I watched them attack another bird’s nest! They went after the food, and then they went after the eggs. I researched blue jays. Turns out they’re scavengers! Worse than, you know, the big white birds at the beach.”

I batted smoke from my left eyeball. “Seagulls?” I said.

“They’re aggressive,” she said.

We eyed her with the perplexity of an audience who’d just seen MY DINNER WITH ANDRE.

“Don’t you get what I’m saying?”

*“No!”* We said in unison.

She took a sip and another hit. “They sure are pretty!” she said.

We finished the wine and the pot, hugged, and crashed: he and Felice to the facing couches, me to my too-big California King.

At 3pm, I showered, dressed, and left for work. Above the cranking, pounding, honking, and screeching, I remembered that I might have missed a meeting, or appointment or something. I left Ric a note and keys. Meantime, Felice caught a flight to Nebraska.

As I entered the splendiferous Bigge Agency lobby, Bryce, an account exec who could have been one of our magazine models if he’d pursued it, raced past me with a junior bacon cheeseburger in hand.

“Slow down, Bryce! You’re working too hard!”

“Hey, Hal! King Malcolm kept me at his house until four this morning.”

“What for?”

“It’s a career, dude!” He panted, and sprinted away.

One of the many onerous elements here was that the elevators operated only from the second floor up. Sure, there were parking garage elevators on the first floor, but they only went to P1, P2, and P3. If you were headed upstairs, you had to use that damned escalator to the second floor to get to the upper floor elevators. Ultimately, you had no choice but to pass King Malcolm’s office. This was one of many devious ways in which the King managed his subjects. Usually, he positioned himself near his assistant, pretending to hover and hand down instructions when in reality, he was spying on everybody. I prayed, “please, don’t let him be out there.” But as the escalator carried my head into view, there he stood in full Italian silk regalia. Fuck.

There was no real need for the King to speak to me. A nod of the head was all I’d ever gotten from him, except in Quebec City that night with Prince Ric. This time, I barely received a nod. As quickly as my leather heels clicked me away, I darted to the elevator bank when I heard, *“Hal!”* It was Nussie’s voice straining. No one spoke above a whisper on this floor once the elegant and somber walls had embraced them. Maybe this was out of respect for the King. Maybe it was because we knew the King and his prevaricators heard everything. For whatever reason, silence was golden. Nussie appeared out from the King’s chambers. “Are we going to be late?” He asked.

I wondered, ‘late for what? “No,” I said.

He tapped his watch with a repetitive finger, “Trish said she hasn’t seen you.”

Ooops! *That* was it! A meeting hadbeen called the previous week to discuss a tribute to King Malcolm which would be held at the Waldorf Astoria at the end of August. It would be a lifetime achievement award in recognition of his pecuniary generosity to, I forget, one of the museums. A retrospective reel of not more than eight to ten minutes, would be culled from our archives, and edited to a piece of unlicensed music. The ten-minute reel would essentially “highlight the career and engender the magnanimity of our boss and owner, King Malcolm the First.

Tribute reels are necessary at lifetime achievement banquets. Audiences get bored with toasts and testimonials from overstuffed colleagues. If tickets range from $1000 to $1500, you want more than rubber chicken and the usual croissant-shaped donors exchanging career anecdotes. You want to be entertained. For me, tribute reels are an editor’s wet dream. You needn’t deviate from advertising guidelines set down before Moses: 1). who you are selling to is clearly identified (The Tributee); 2). what you are using to sell him has limited source material (The Body of Work); 3). you are preaching to the choir, so your audience is captive; and 4). since no one else knows what editing is, you edit your shot selection to the best piece of music. If you have any rhythm, you will receive accolades, applause, and down the road, another reel to do for some other asshole.

“I was in session off-site,” I replied, and followed him in.

The King’s office doors parted and I entered the Throne Room. Malcolm placed four inches of a monstrous Cuban cigar onto a Steuben ashtray, a gift from John Delorean, as Nussie ushered me to the conference table. Two Ivy League marketing interns, a striking West Indian female named Ranisa, and a tattooed Hoosier named Cesar, book-ended the king’s chair. They weren’t a day over 18. To me, they were mini-Nussies. Had it been up to me, I would’ve retired them right then with full benefits, pensions, and 401k contributions before their careers could ever start. Imagine the heartbreak, stress, suicide attempts, and angioplasty I could spare them.

“Come on in,” the King said in a velvet tone. He slid into his chair, removed his Hublot King Power Dwayne Wade© watch, studied it, and dropped it on the table. “Time, my friends, has been good. It’s given me the opportunity to build my empire, realize my dreams, and now to be tributed for it.”

“It will be a stylish evening, sir,” Nussie offered, “and far more entertaining than last year’s.”

“She who signed the UN charter,” the King smirked, “lovely woman.”

This was Nussie’s and the King’s way of distancing themselves from the rest of us. One could not have known who they were talking about if you did not run with their pack. It was a social event so pedigreed and ascendant; an inner circle so redolent of power and influence, even the papers ignored it.

“Let’s not take anything away from her,” the King said, “amazing career, that.”

“I dare say,” Nussie said, adding, “she lacks the body of *your* work.”

Ranisa wrinkled her brow and nodded affirmation, like she knew the reference but was too nervous to talk. Her eyeballs bopped around the table.

“Yes, Hal,” said the King, “that’s where you come in.” He snapped the watch onto his wrist. Those terrible green eyes, the objects of my angina, sprang forth from their sockets, and with vise-grip force, latched onto my pupils. It was as if he was injecting his soul into me. “I’m going to make an announcement soon,” he said, “I’m telling you now so that you understand the significance. It’s not to leave this room.”

“No, sir!” Cesar affirmed. Was he going to click his heels?

“I wish first to share it with the newest, the oldest, and the most trusted of my team.”

Nussie was the oldest. The kids were the newest. But me? Most trusted?

“This tribute,” he said, almost in reverie, “will be the highlight of my career. I have received tributes before as you know; each one special. But this one will be like none other. This will be a final tribute. My news is that I’m retiring at the end of the year, you see.” His creepy, dictatorial stare eased away from me. I was able to breathe again, and consider the portents. Nussie was ready to retire too. Were they both leaving? Malcolm wouldn’t let that happen.

“The tribute must be perfect,” the King urged, “I want to include everything from the beginning of time!”

“*Your* time, sir,” I reminded him, with a relaxed grin.

I think he up-chucked a floret of broccoli from a nouvelle lunch, “*my* time,” he corrected, “thank you, Hal.”

I curled up my feet under the chair. This was not like him. He appeared kind, even jocular. Of course, it was not like me, either. But an event like the King’s retirement doesn’t happen every day. It was hard to contain enthusiasm.

“Advertising as we know it,” Nussie made clear to the interns, “was *invented* by this man. Sir Malcolm Anthony Smyth-Bigge is the forefather of all that we see today that sells merchandise! In essence, he is not incorrect when he asks for everything from the beginning of time. In Madison Avenue time, that *is* everything!”

The King grinned, “I suppose it’s egocentric to plan one’s own tribute, like writing one’s own eulogy. But for me, nothing can impede this night. After all, it’s a fund-raiser, bottom line. No matter who’s being honored, it’s our job to make it dazzling, unforgettable, and entertaining. To that purpose, Hal, you must dig into our archives, come up with a script and an inventive hook that will play to the history of our advertising techniques, how those techniques changed lives, indeed the world. What we sell makes it what it is. I want the oldest marketing examples that played cinemas in England during the blitz, War Bond stuff, and the ‘50s, anything from that period that shows the serenity of modern life contrasted by nuclear warheads pointed at Europe. Stuff like that. Hell and swans down!”

“The Cuban Missile Crisis!” Ranisa blurted too fast.

“The ‘50s, first,” Nussie countered.

“For the ‘60s,” the King continued, “show Mrs. Kennedy and fashion. Show how that pillbox hat had more of an effect on the way we live in America than the assassination itself. Do the other Kennedys. Follow her to Greece. Do the lunar landing; we worked on that for the War Department. Space age plastics. There’s a banner! Get to the Reagans. Nancy loved us. No negativity. Cigarettes? Watch out! Microwave ovens! Don’t forget the cars. They love cars, especially German cars! Use every decade’s growth and relate it to the advertising dollar! Show how we have shaped the history of the modern world to the point of no return!”

“Even when we haven’t,” I said and shouldn’t have.

The King glowered at me. “Why Hal,” he said, “that’s your *job*.” He scooped up a plastic bottle of re-cycled water and drank. He put it down, and the familiar, bulbous eyes of the megalomaniac came back, “as the wheels of commerce turn, we are the source, the cause, the end-all, be-all of its engine. Our beloved republic, her success or failure, lives or dies in how well we stoke her engine; and we have stoked her better than anybody in the history of Madison Avenue. Keep that in mind as you dig. It’s our past, present, and heritage for the future. Let our children not receive, like so often at the holidays, an instrument unworthy of music.”

Nussie said, “Hal, these are your interns, Ranisa and Cesar. Use them. Let them do the leg work.”

During the meeting, I had changed my mind. I wanted to send them to the vaults and lock the doors. The less seen of them the better. If they really came up with ideas, we’d have to impute them corporately and I wasn’t going to let that happen. Trish and our staff could handle this. “Eight to ten minutes in length?” I said.

“Not longer,” said the King. “I’ll want to approve it and run it for the account execs. My God, how long has it been since we’ve seen that material? Even with yourtalents, Hal, one cannot ensphere it all in ten minutes without expecting changes.”

“We’ll be fine,” I said, smiling, “what’s the target?”

“August 23rd,” Nussie replied.

We had a month.

As the elevator rose up to my office with me and the interns in its belly, it stopped on the fourth floor. Holly Hedlunden, the human resources VP, stepped on. Her eyes were red. She acknowledged us, “I see you’ve met the new meat.”

“We’ll be working together,” I said, nodding.

“I know all about the tribute reel,” she said, going sullen.

“The retrospective?” I said.

“Make it bury the bastard!” She snapped, as the elevator opened to her floor. She waddled off with prickly melancholy. She was 5’2”, but so was Darryl Zanuck. So, I handed my notes to Cesar, and stalked her. She slammed her door. Since her assistant was nowhere in sight, I gave myself a 10-count, sidled up, then knocked. I pushed the door open. She sulked in front of her computer. Outwardly, we had nothing in common, but we actually did. From the armoire crammed with TV monitor and videos, to the desk over-stacked with files, magazines, and papers, she liked French country pine furniture! She had given me the idea for the condo! “Close the fucking door!” She fumed and typed blindly, “I’m e-mailing my gender-nonspecific son in Seattle.”

“I couldn’t help noticing,” I said.

She punched out one last note. “Noticing what?” She said. “How much do you know?”

“Off the record?”

“We haven’t spoken in four years *on the record,* Hal Burke. Why start now? He’s out. I know it. You know it. Move on.”

It’s funny, but since advertising erupts with daily cannon fire, people who fight on the same side often sit in the same trench. She opened her purse and grabbed a tissue. “He’s senile, Hal! 38 years, I gave him everything! I *have* given him everything! I *made* him! I *made* his business! I got him the best directors, the brightest talent! I was the intuitive one, the ballsy one. I guided client dinners, massaged the egos, and put up with the cunty wives. I sent flowers, champagne, and limousines to asswipes who didn’t deserve a rickshaw. I got the hookers for the brass, the blow for the directors, qualudes for the producers, and pot for the actors. The clients came and we held onto them in no small part thanks to me! I put the soap in the dish, and this is the thanks I get? A sellout? Good-bye, Holly! Take retirement now, Holly! Kiss my limey arse, Holly! *To the fucking Germans!”*

“Germans?”

“Don’t be insipid, Hal. It took years to like you. We’re out of work! Every one of us, down to the new-hires in the mail room and your prepubescent interns! I read the contracts, the drafts, every word, footnote, page number, index, everything.”

“He’s selling out?”

“It’s just a little bit more than my Depends© can handle!” She collapsed her head onto a *Vanity Fair*.

Adrenalin buffered my system. As I sat on her tweedy, powder-blue sofa, a stack of personnel folders slid into my lap. They were wrapped in a fat rubber band on which she’d scribbled the words: “Fire the shits!” I said, “But when you sell a company, you sell people too, right?”

“A company is a *name*, Hal! Corporate identity!” She pointed to a miniature mauve neon sign of our logo which sat on her credenza, “the Germans are coming with their own management and creative teams. Our services, for whatever they’re worth, are *‘Kaput,’* as our new bosses are probably saying right now.”

“Who are they?”

“Can’t say. Your tribute reel will be our King’s last fucking hurrah. He’s waving bye-bye to us from the cockpit of his bloodsucking private jet. He can burn up in the ozone for all I care. Surely, there will be the ‘period of transition.’ We will be asked to cooperate with the new owners. I’ll cooperate all right. I could trash his rep faster than I can say ‘unzip!’”

“Would he really do that?”

“It’s a private company. He’s the owner. After the sale, he’ll have more rocks than his great-grandchildren’s great-grandchildren could play with in their lifetimes, if he had any. It’s fitting the bastard can only leave it to his shell-shocked mom, faggot son, expatriate wife, and a fat nun!”

The news changed everything.

At 5:13pm, I went to my office, locked the door, and called the condo to speak to he who might be there who would have my keys.

“Ric, pick up!”

“Hi,” he said.

“Don’t get me wrong. We’re definitely moving in together, but something’s come up. We can’t be seen together at my place.”

“It’s okay. Felice left me her key.”

“Why?”

“I have to feed the birds.”

“She said doesn’t keep birds.”

“She doesn’t. She just asked me to throw some seed down while she’s gone. She worries.”

“Perfect. I got a plan.”

**X. BATTLE PLAN**

That day, something wicked came my way. What I liked about advertising was the vitality of the work, processing hundreds of requests and deadlines per second, being creative with film and video, and walking others through minefields of optical tricks and digital phenomena. True, it had paid the mortgage, swollen my bank accounts, and had spilled over like manna to my family. But still I craved a career outside of it! At the pinnacle of an adequate level of success, enjoying the respect of my colleagues, clients, and vendors, the real reason I was in New York after all was the long-form writing, directing, and producing, which had languished. There was a crack in my soul. When was I going to just do it?

Ric had been right. My big dream was not born with me. I hadn’t known what I wanted at 18. It was Ric who had taken me by the nose and led me like a mule into advertising which I mostly found stimulating, challenging, and illustrative by way of teaching a method of understanding the world: that is, speaking to the lowest common denominator. When you want to sell a product to hundreds of millions of customers, you paint it with loud, forceful colors, but subtle and attractive brush strokes. These concepts are carefully placed against each other until the whole picture is unveiled in prime time. That’s when the viewing public is convinced that it must own it, no matter what its quality or necessity. Advertising is the lying, stealing, cheating, wrenching manipulation of key elements of commerce which grows and festers with every new cable channel and mouse click on the Internet. It is the inscrutable, amoral, arrogant, and unnerving concept that the most useless can be sold in mass quantity to the least needy if it’s done with the right blonde.

Advertising also taught me to stop buying into my own bullshit. I realized my strengths. I learned I could make a difference in other people’s lives. Soon, daily decisions were no longer just mine, but had consequences for friends, relatives, and coworkers. I was responsible. Like standing on Creeper’s loading dock three years before, I had impact. I sold me to myself. Was I thankful to advertising for bringing me to these conclusions? Yes. Was I going to fulfill the promise of a career in advertising that the industry after the sale of the Bigge Agency to the Germans was willing to offer? No.

Advertising was a hen house that had taught me to survive, be my own person, and have confidence in the brain that Sal and Charlie had so tenuously passed on. I suspected if I stayed in the barnyard, it would mean *not* becoming *me*. Not to push the metaphor, but I hadn’t been laid by the same hen as Nussie. Not another day would go by without drawing up a battle plan to tunnel my way out.

I met Ric at 9:12pm at a restaurant called Black Sheep on West 11th. It was bricky and dark, which hid the circles under my eyes.

“Are you moved?” I asked. He looked great in my white T-shirt and jeans.

“I’m always moved when I’m with you. By the way, thanks for the clothes. The shoulders are a little tight.”

“Ha-ha! Are you moved into Felice’s?”

“All it takes for me to ‘move’is to unlock a door and walk in. What kept you? I thought we were going to be spending some time together.”

“Did you go shopping?”

“With what? I absolutely have nothing! My wallet burned up. I can’t go back to work since my ‘dancewear’ went up in flames.”

“You saved the script, but you let everything else go?”

“Priorities, Hal.”

“What about *Ravage!*?”

“I make them money. They could care less what Minnie Van Lake has to say. But I need ‘dancewear.’”

I tossed him a corporate credit card, courtesy of the Bigge Agency, “just make sure when you’re signing my name, the signature matches.”

He ignored it saying, “I won’t compromise you, and I don’t want any money from the old man.”

“I earned it.”

“You, and every other white collar criminal.”

“For somebody so broke, you sure have scruples.”

“Scruples are all I got.”

I put the card back.

“There’s a cute Asian at the bank down the street from Felice’s,” he said. “He’s got a crush on me. It’s the way he looks at me when I walk in, like he’s a sushi chef and I’m live yellowtail. He’ll release the funds I *do* have in that bank, ID or no, if I have to run him down all the way to Mitosi’s.”

“What’s Mitosi’s?”

“A cross-dressing massage parlor in Soho. They have geishas. I think he’s one.”

I sipped my Chardonnay. “I’ll get you cash,” I said.

“How about a loan? That way it’s on the level, we both know where it came from, and someday you’ll get it back. What’s so mysterious that you agreed to meet me in lesbian restaurant?”

I told him about the King’s tribute, how I felt about the job, but I avoided the sellout. He listened over a pepper steak and wild rice. By the time I finished finking, my osso buco was cold. “It’s going to be the event of his corporate life. Everyone’s going to be there.”

“So?”

“Aren’t you listening?”

“What?”

“Don’t you want to have some fun?”

He bit down on one last piece of gristle, spit it into his napkin, and then picked his teeth with his pinkie. He was ruminating, I thought. “What are you saying?” he asked.

He wasn’t getting it. At the same time, if I told him the whole truth, the impact of Holly’s news about the corporate sale was an x-factor. But his inheritance was at stake. I had to do something. “We could bury him!” I said.

“Hal,” he said, “whatever you’re thinking, it wouldn’t bury him, it would bury *you!*”

“I want to do our show.”

Ric gazed up into the Tiffany lamp and spread out his arms: “Lord, save my friend Hal Burke from his own ignorance!” Then he leaned in towards me, “Hallie, when you move out of one house and into another, you don’t burn the old one down, you leave it standing to get your equity out of it. You have equity where you are. You have respect. You want to trash it because?”

“It’s mine to trash.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“I sold out to a king who seduced me with power and money.”

“You’re in New York. You needpower and money.”

“I lost my best friend because of it.”

“That’s your fault.”

“The job turned me into Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“You’re hardly Dr. Jekyll. ‘Heckle & Jeckle,’ maybe.”

“It did the same to you.”

“Me is *me!*”

“I’m running roughly three years behind you.”

“In that case,” he said, “exactly when are you coming out of the closet?”

*“Stop with the closet!* The job diverted our goals. We should have had “HAMLET THE SECOND” up and running, and be onto new stuff by now.”

“Stupid, stupid, stupid! Look at what you’ve accomplished! People look up to you. You have clout. You are loved.”

“My ass!”

“Don’t tempt me. Something else is going on. We’re talking the Grand Ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria. As near as I get it, you want to submarine the King’s tribute in front of New York’s richest, most powerful scum.”

“Who said anything about *me* doing it?”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this.”

He hated looking down the barrel of a shotgun like the one I aimed at him right then. “The King has a buyer,” I said. After all, he was the Prince, due to inherit his father’s kingdom, not watch as it was sold off, parceled, and most likely folded into another country’s economy. He slumped into his captain’s chair, and then he eyed the two cute women at the next table who shared a cigarette. “Can I bum one?” he asked.

The brunette handed him a pack of non-filters and a childproof lighter. “Menthol,” she said.

Ric grabbed the pack, took two, and lit up one. He exhaled and passed it back to her. “Thanks,” he said as he picked a bit of tobacco off the end of his tongue. He slid the second one behind his ear. He had smoked like a burning tire in college.

He stretched into the chair and pressed three fingers against his temple. As I watched him, I knew that had I been gay, he could easily be the dude I would want to be with. Be it our years together or simply that he had eroded my calcified belief system, in those eyes for the thousandth time, the physical beauty and grace whose spirit had been so time-honored in my soul, was seducing me again tonight and he didn’t even know it. Fuck!

“You sure know how to kick a guy when he’s down,” he said.

“News doesn’t wait for the lava before it reports pyroclastic flow.”

“Thank you, Confucius. Who told you?”

“Holly copped the contracts.”

He snorted! “Holly? You got all this from Holly? Could it be he wants to get rid of *her!* Ever think of that? Holly and my father go back.”

“The King told *me* he was retiring. He wants out, that’s why I’m doing the tribute reel. Since there’s no one to leave the kingdom to, doesn’t an outright salemake sense, if you were him? When you can’t leave the empire to the fruit of your loins and you want out, what would you do? It’s your empire. You don’t have any partners to approve it. You do what you want with it.”

“Did Holly tell you the King doesn’t have partners?”

“Not exactly.”

“She’d like to *think* she knows. She may be on the board, but I’m the only one who knows.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you,” he mumbled, “but you have to do something for me.”

“What?” I gulped.

“Kiss me.”

I spat up a mouthful of wine which splashed his white T-shirt.

“Goddamn it!” He hurtled out of his chair and knocked the two cute girlfriends’ table a foot across the Mexican paver floor. Their wine glasses teetered.

“I’m sorry!” I squirmed. I swiped dribble from my chin.

“A simple ‘no’?” He wiped down his chair and his side of the table as the waiter swooped in with a rag and fresh napkins. Ric apologized peripherally to the girls and sat. Then, he looked at me like the rat I was. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

“Why’d you ask me that question?”

He extended his hands as if to take hold of mine. “For three years,” he said, “I paid his rent, did his laundry, cooked his food, made his bed, changed his diapers, and played caregiver. I never complained. I never explained.”

“You haven’t been with anybody since?”

“What’s that say about me?”

“You’re horny. You’re not going to be horny with me.”

He took a drag from the wine-soaked cigarette. He said, “I’m a loyal royal, Hal! I’m the knight in shining armor you’ve heard so much about!”

Frankly, I thought he wasn’t asking too much, so I put my elbows on the table and opened up my hands. He snuffed the cigarette, and scooted his chair closer. He relaxed both hands and laid them down flat. Involuntarily, my hands lowered and nestled in next to his. Never touching, I could still feel his heat. Ever so slightly, my thumbs touched the tips of his index fingers. He didn’t move when I said, “I told you because I thought you should know. I thought it might make a difference to you, and maybe to us.”

“It may make a difference to you. I can take it or leave it.” His eyes said it. The arched brows punctuated it. The pulsating nostril sealed it. He *could* take it or leave it.

“What about the show?”

“Blunted purpose.”

“We can do it now.”

Funny, I thought I could never get past the idea of two guys together in bed. If I‘d ever thought about gay sex, it was always *other* guys’ faces, not once splicing my face onto the bodies in my head, or Ric’s. Touching him like I was at this moment was a weird rush. I inserted my thumb into his palm. He trembled, like his palms weren’t sure my thumbs should be there at all.

“Let’s go,” he said.

I paid the bill and followed him outside. A cloud of steam rose up from the subway grating and hovered. As I looked at him, a thousand pictures of his face wafted through my brain. Here stood the guy I had admired, and who had cared for me since the day we’d met. I put my arms around him. I placed my forehead against his like he used to do to me. The steam enveloped our bodies as a train squealed below. I didn’t look away as his eyes fixed onto mine. We stood smelling each other’s breath: his cigarette residue laced with a hint of garlic, a tinge of Chardonnay. The aromas all worked. I hoped mine did. My arms glided around his waist. He drew me to him.

“I held you,” I whispered, “that night in the cab.”

His lips were less than an inch from mine. “You let me kiss you at the lake.”

“That wasn’t a kiss.”

I drew in a breath and exhaled. Something stirred. This physical response hadn’t happened at the lake. But at the lake, life was falling apart. His eyebrows brushed mine. The graceful lashes batted my cheek. Our lips touched. He pressed his body close to mine and squirmed into me. His tongue lubricated my too-dry mouth, so I opened wide. Then, I don’t remember.

Next thing I knew, we were on a park bench. My head was in his lap.

“What happened?” I said.

“You passed out.”

“When?”

“A few minutes ago.”

The city went too quiet. I wanted to hear traffic. Instead, I heard him say, “I’m the last thing you want.”

“You’re the last thing I expected,” I replied.

He slid his hand across my forehead. “The whole time I was with Wynn, I never let on that I loved somebody else.”

“That happens in 99% of relationships. I saw it on Oprah!”

“I never would have hurt him.”

“I don’t want to know,” I said, sitting up.

“Yeah, you do,” he said, hammering me with those eyes. He put his hands behind my neck and kissed me like I have never been kissed -- since usually it’s *me* that’s doing the kissing! At that moment, everything fell together. I was wet inside from an unexpected drenching. It had to re-compose. I hoped he didn’t see. I got up from the bench and faced away from him.

“Are you all right?” He said. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

I took a “Wynn moment,” knowing how Ric had always appreciated it when Wynn took time saying his lines. I knew I had his attention. Then after a minute, I said, “I hope you know that nothing on Earth would have allowed me to come between you and him. You know that, right?’

“What do you mean?”

“I knew he’d take care of you and that was good enough for me.”

Ric kissed me on the back of my neck.

“Do you have any scotch at Felice’s?” I said.

At Felice’s apartment, I poured two glasses.

“I don’t drink,” he said.

“I *do!”*

He urged me down on the bed and removed my shoes and socks. Our eyes hardly wavered from each other as he undid my belt. I reached up and unbuttoned his fly, one stud a time, until I could smell his groin. He retreated long enough to yank my jeans to the floor. Then, he towered over me. For the first time, I let loose my balking pride and corralled libido. With unbridled pleasure, I savored his beauty which for me was like none other, and captured in its form a virility both aesthetic and carnal, immortal and hot. I touched his calves and ran my palms up his thigh. Lithely, he slid down on the bed next to me, gingerly guiding his fingers around my waist. Likewise, my hands caressed his shoulders and glided across the elegant, sculpted abs. Lightly, he kissed me, as if testing. This was way cooler than I had imagined. I triumphed at the thought of irretrievably subverting the imperious canons of youth, and giving in to a part of me that I had so emphatically, even heroically denied. Willingly, I surrendered to this adult sensibility which unchained my moronic fears from the dungeons of intolerance and sliced the throat of ignorance.

So different was it feeling his strength hold me, like I would have held a female partner. I became the object of as much desire as I had had for my own conquests. I yielded to him finally, irrevocably, with a passion that I had not ever felt, really, for anybody. Then there stood his genitalia, the object of so much dread just nights before. I took it in my hands and studied it like it was some kind T-Rex left over from Universal’s Miniature Dept. Welcome warmth embraced my own. Ric placed his lips around mine, leaving me in the position to do the same to his. I reciprocated.

“You don’t you want do that,” he whispered.

“I’ll do what you do.”

“Get a condom.”

“I don’t want a condom! If you’re going to be there, I want to be here.”

“Hallie, we haven’t done anything unsafe. You think I’d let you?”

“It took 15 years to get me here; I’m finally enjoying you, touching you, feeling you completely. All I want is giving everything up, having you here in my arms, and you in mine, and you want a condom?”

“Don’t get gushy.”

“Are you telling me you’re HIV?” I said. The emotion that I had been so careful to rein in wasn’t holding back another tear duct, or tachycardia.

“Hallie!” he said, “don’t!”

I couldn’t hold back. Instantly, I envisioned Wynn on a hospital bed. Only it wasn’t Wynn, it was Ric. He was the one who was sick now, approaching ground zero. He rocked me in his arms as my tears dripped into his groin.

“Don’t let it happen!” I said, “don’t you fucking let it happen.”

“All I’m saying is,” he giggled, “I haven’t been tested lately. My doctor says, ‘if you feel fine, you’re probably fine.’ He doesn’t like to test me more than four times a year. But you have to remember who I’ve been with and taking care of. I’ve been around it 24/7. I don’t want to take any chances with you until I get new results. I’m not going anywhere. I loved you from “Hello!” Nothing’s going to come between us.”

I couldn’t believe the words. I looked into his eyes. He held me tight as if he would never let go. I wished he could hold me like that forever. *“Fuck you! You’re fucking going to my fucking doctor tomorrow!”*

He handed me a tissue from a box by the bed. “Christ, Hallie! When you get in touch with your ‘anima,’ you don’t mess around! You should have known that there were risks.” He licked the tears from my face and rested his chin on my shoulder. “I thought I’d lost you,” he said.

“You did lose me,” I wheezed, “I walked out on you like I walk out of a bad movie. But I decided you were worth re-visiting.”

He pulled me back up to the pillows and cradled me.

“Look what you’ve done to me,” I said, genuinely wondering what would become of my previously caged psyche which he had released into the wild, “I’m a fucking mess. I’ll never be able to show my face in Southie again.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of gays in Southie,” he said, “you just have to know where to look.” He pulled the covers up and held me close. The few remaining drips from my eyes fell against his left pec. My right hand came to rest on his lower abs, just above the pubic hair. Ever so slightly, the sheet which had been propped up like a tent at a two-ring circus slowly descended. The show, for that night, was over.

“Hal,” he said, “get a grip.”

I rubbed his inner thigh. My ragged fingernails irritated his scrotum.

“You need a manicure!”

I settled deep into the sheets.

“So, do you want to know who the silent partner is?” He asked.

“How *is* your mom?” I said, “You never mention her.”

“It’s not Mom!”

“Who, then? Your sister, the nun?”

“It’s *his* mom.”

I sat up. “*His mom?”* I said. “Grams? *Your grandmother?* The one who raised you and Barbara Jr.? *Grams* is the silent partner?”

“Show some respect. You’re taking me to see her tomorrow.”

“We’re going to see my doctor tomorrow.”

“Since when does a doctor see you on Saturday?”

“My doctor’s gay and, like your friend at the bank, I think he likes me. He’ll squeeze us in.”

“We’ll see your doctor day on Monday,” Ric said too thoughtfully, “but tomorrow we go to New Canaan.”

The alarm peeped at 7:46am I propped up and shut it off. I drew back the sheets and reveled at his body. Had I poured wet concrete over it and stood it on its feet, I was sure I could pass it off as a rare Hellenic artifact to the forgery section of the Victoria & Albert Museum. But the penis would have to be removed since over the centuries, they had all been robbed, and he wouldn’t appreciate that. Anyhow, I crawled between his legs and massaged his genitals with my tongue. He had the softest, smoothest skin down there. He stirred as I fellated him. Since I had never done it before, I couldn’t be sure I was doing it right. All I knew was how it felt when someone else had done it to me. I tried to make it good, watching out for too much teeth action. Suddenly, he jerked up in bed. He tried to get away from me. “Stop it, Hallie!” he ordered, inching away. But the faster he squirmed, the tighter I held him until I thought he’d explode. His quads tightened as his body arched. His shoulders fell back and his hands pushed down on mine as he prepared for the blast. I knew I was doing it right since with one loud, exhaustive, spasmodic groan, he erupted. It plowed the back of my throat. The impact rolled me sideways. I coughed like some dying dude.

“Jeez, Hallie! Are you sure you haven’t done this before?”

I jumped out of bed and chased it down with leftover scotch. “It’s okay,” I said, gurgling. “I heard somewhere that as long as you don’t brush your teeth *before* you give head, 95% of the time, stomach acids kill pretty much everything; especially *my* stomach acids.”

He lolled onto a pillow. “You watch too much ‘Oprah.’”

I went back and straddled him.

“Don’t take any more chances, with me or anybody!” he said. Within seconds, he returned the favor. I fell on top of him depleted. We slept until 9:12am.

When I woke, he looked into my eyes. “When you come out, you come out,” he said.

I rolled into his arms. “How come you’re so smooth down there?” I asked.

“It’s part of the job. People stick tip money in there. It’d be pretty gross if all they got was a handful of hair.”

“That’s got to change,” I said, “anyway, something tells me that’s not all they get.” I climbed out of bed and called Trish. Since there was nothing pending but the tribute reel, and the interns had been assigned to do research, I knew Trish could cover. I told her I was taking the day off. I hopped in the shower. He followed me with a safety razor and a can of Barbasol©.

I bought him a few pairs of khaki pants and jeans, some shirts, underwear, shoes, socks, and “dancewear” at a sex shop. We dropped off the new wardrobe at Felice’s, then hopped a noon train to New Canaan, Connecticut, and the mansion of mansions of his esteemed, 93 year-old grandmother whom he called “Grams.”

**XI. ALLIES**

A sea of flora escorted us up the drive to an imposing Tudor. As he got out of the limousine which Grams had sent to collect us, I noticed how perfect the pants fit him. “Nice butt,” I said.

He glanced to see if our driver had heard, and said, “lay off the gay crap, we’re in *her* castle now. She lost her husband in World War I and Terry in World War II. She’s been through five wars, and a depression. That’s enough traumas.” He brushed back his hair, only to let it drape down again. As we climbed the brick walk, I couldn’t tell the flowers from the weeds. Story of my life! “What do you think she knows?” I asked.

He scoffed, “my family hasn’t got past the weather, stock market, or dress designers in conversation in a hundred years. I doubt if any of them is going to tell her about a black sheep grandson who shaves his nuts, and strips at gay bars for a living.”

The great front door was opened by unseen hands. Ric nudged me. “It’s her!”

Grams appeared. She stood about five feet. She had the frame of a woman who once had been stout. Her crevassed, eggshell face manifested a straight-laced, ironclad, Victorian orthodoxy. Yet there was a gleam that leapt from her sky-blue eyes as she planted them for the first time in so many years on Prince Ric.

“My Richard!” She exclaimed. Cane in hand, she reached her arms around his neck. Ric gave her a bear hug. They held each other, connecting the dots of a century between them, bridging the gap so often built by the people who come in between.

“Look at you!” She said. “So handsome! And who’s this?”

“This is Hal, Grams.”

“Hal from college?”

“The same,” Ric replied.

“How do you do?” I said.

“I know you already. He’s told me so much!” She ushered us inside, took hold of the big door, and heaved it closed. It boomed shut. “Under normal circumstances,” she said, “I’d be spending fall in Knightsbridge. I love walks in St. James Park. But the doctors say I can’t travel. So for now it’s Connecticut. All the better since I’m seeing *you!”*

A housemaid appeared.

“Tea, Nell!” Grams said. “In the parlor.”

Nell disappeared, and Grams led us into an oak-paneled room. French doors opened onto a patio. Quaint as an old movie set, New Canaan reposed in the lush countryside below: quiet, unique, and expensive. A formidable, hand-carved, cherry wood billiard table stood in the middle of the room. “Check that out!” Ric said. I caressed the green felt. I thought how tough it would be to play it since the pockets were no wider than four fingers, barely enough to shoot a ball into.

“There were only seven,” Grams said, “Presidents Harding and Taft each had one, and who was the third?”

“FDR?” Ric said.

“I doubt it. He wouldn’t have been able! One was lost in the great quake, and another went down with Titanic. Disaster follows them. This one your father had shipped to me after one of his baccarat streaks. I can’t imagine its former owner parting with it unless disaster had indeed struck; and what did Malcolmthink I could do with it? Hal, have a go.” I was reluctant to touch. Each ball could have had a little camera inside.

She sat down, propped her cane between her knees, and rested her wrists on its curve. Ric sat across from her. She checked to make sure her hearing aids worked. The left side of her mouth curved down, probably post-stroke. “How are you, Richard?” she said.

“Surviving,” he replied.

She pounded the cane lightly on the Italian marble floor. “Word is you’ve been disinherited. You’re now a cashier in an espresso bar in Soho.”

“Like I said --”

“How is it that someone as talented as you could fail to negotiate a position at another agency? How could you have allowed a boor like your father to checkmate you?”

Ric rubbed his hands together. “I called you, Grams,” he said, “because I was the one who caused all the trouble between me and father. It really was my entire fault.”

“Start from the start.”

“Can we talk first about Terry?”

She lurched in her chair, as if unseen hands had shoved her. “*Our* Terry?”

I sank the cue ball.

She raised her left hip slightly to retrieve a lace handkerchief from a pocket. She wiped her neck and brow. “That subject wasn’t on my list!” she said.

“I dream about him,” Ric said.

“What a coincidence! Do you still have his manuscript?”

“Yes, of course! That’s why we need to chat.”

The skin above her eyelids sagged. Her pupils had trouble seeing through it. “And after all this time,” she said.

“Remember how you said disaster followed the billiard table? Well, disaster follows that show,” he said. “The disaster attached to the table is superstition. The disaster surrounding Terry’s show may be home-grown. Does Malcolm know we’re here?”

“When you called me,” she replied, “it was such a thrill, nothing could spoil it. Disinherited or not, you are still flesh and blood. He can’t change that in his devil’s contracts! *Did* Malcolm blackball you?”

“I tried to get a job everywhere, Grams!” he said. “My only other option was California.”

“We don’t want you there.”

She grasped her cane, stood, and pressed an intercom button. “Forget the tea, Nell,” she ordered, “bring sherry and a six pack! On second thought, forget the sherry! Bring *the bar* and the six pack!” Instantly, Nell wheeled in a portable bar as if she’d been waiting. Grams poured three shots of Irish whiskey. Ric opened three beers.

With pinky up, Grams placed a crystal shot glass to her lips and downed it. “Pray for me!” she said. We did likewise. She protested as Ric poured her beer into a wine glass. “Bottle!” she said. “If I drink it out of the crystal, I might drop it. Better to drop a brown bottle worth thruppence, than Irish crystal worth sixty pounds.” Then she belched. “Now about Terry,” she said, “what do you want to know?”

“I’d like to know -- ,” Ric said.

“I’ll say this,” she interrupted, “for all of his profligacy, for the horrible fights he caused in the family, for the sorrow he brought to me, for the rage he caused Malcolm, Terry was still my favorite. He was the one with the bear hug in the morning, the laughs in the afternoon, and music halls in the evening. He used to say, ‘Never tell mum a joke on Saturday night, because she’ll get it in church on Sunday morning.’ And mostly I did! Malcolm would scowl when I encouraged him. He denied me Terry’s vaudeville act, so Terry ridiculed Malcolm’s resentment, which only fueled the fire. My sons, so much like the tragedy/comedy masks in theatre. What happened to them was what happened to the world: terminal loss of jest. Tragedy overcame comedy, like Cain overcame Abel. In their zeal, neither side ever understood that they could have been parts of something so much richer. Then, Terry was killed, Malcolm’s trumpets blared, and I had to get on. But everything was sadder and grayer. Today, I see in you Malcolm’s will and Terry’s muse in a rare combination that I prayed might co-exist someday.”

Nell barged in with a tray of fruit, assorted cheeses, and crackers.

“I can’t give you money,” Grams said. “Your father absolutely controls my finances.”

Ric scooted his chair close to hers. Their knees touched. “I didn’t come for money, Grams.”

“Then, what?”

“You never told me the details of Terry’s accident.”

Just then, we heard a siren. Ric stood up like a spy caught by the enemy.

She dismissed him with her hand, went to the French doors, peered out, and waved. A squad car drove up. “I hoped you wouldn’t mind,” Grams said, “I have a surprise.”

We had no clue as we joined her at the window. The squad car stopped and the passenger door opened. Out stepped two obese women, one about 70, and the other in her 40s. The older woman held down an unyielding floppy hat, which seemed to want to take off. Pearls danced around her neck, diamonds flashed on her fingers, and a classic aubergine dress with white collar indicated there might be some power here. The younger woman wore a nun’s habit over a powder-blue cotton.

“Who is it?” I said.

Ric was incredulous. “It’s my mother and sister,” he said, “Queen Barbara and Princess Barbara Jr.”

*“Sister* Barbara Jr. now!” Grams added.

The local police chief helped them up the driveway. He noticed us on the terrace and tipped his hat. Nell met them.

“My tax dollars at work!” Grams said. She waved to him. “I had them flown in from Chicago and shuttled here. Your mother, Queen Barbara, is visiting your sister, the Princess. Princess Barbara is now a Sister of Mercy.”

Ric hung his head. They hadn’t spoken in 15 years, the estrangement based on his mother’s move to the south of France when he was 10, and the brutality from his older sister from the beginning. This big sister bully would make a great nun, I thought: domineering, humorless, and controlling, just like the King.

No matter how fleshy they appeared, seeing them as we did from the terrace, nothing prepared me for their corpulence as they approached the parlor door: like Tweedledum and Tweedledee in drag, or floats in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Queen’s countenance gushed pomposity; the Princess’s contracted like she smelled an unsupportable odor.

Ric turned white as salt. He almost glowed. The four of them stood in a torturous tableau, each waiting for the other to speak.

“Are we allowed in?” the Queen inquired.

Grams waved her cane. They crossed the threshold at the same time, but their shoulders stuck in the doorjamb, kind of like Moe and Curly. Their phony modesty to each other fed the image.

“If you can *get* in,” Grams said.

“Hello, Mother,” Ric said, “hi, Bips.” His nod was too formal.

The Queen huffed, “your sister and I booked a private jet and flew over seven hundred miles with a day’s notice. I packed in a flurry without a damn book. Try to give us a hug.”

Prince Ric stepped towards them, and ever so slightly raised up his arms in a royal embrace. They did the rest. Magnanimously, the Queen took hold of his waist and clutched him to her bosom. His sister’s contorted, stony face melted. She ambushed him from behind. The next sound I heard was: “Ugh!”

“Mummy,” the Princess said, pinching his waist, “he’s so skinny!”

The Queen fingered his shoulders like a butcher poking a side or beef. “He’s good in the arms. You’re fit, kid. I think you’re fine!”

“Come sit down,” Grams said.

The Queen’s and the Princess’s puckered lips whizzed past Grams’ cheeks, as Grams scrambled to avoid them. She re-took her position on the straight chair.

“Good to see you, Grams,” said the Princess.

“Always glad to see you, Rebecca,” the Queen added, then coldly eyed me, “who’s this?” She shoved her white-gloved hand out to me.

“I’m Hal,” I said. I shook her forefinger. I expected a fart, but she didn’t.

“Hal from college,” Ric said.

“I never knew a ‘Hal from college.’”

“Shush, Mummy, you do!” the Princess scolded. “Hal was Ricky’s roommate. Bless you, Hal, for taking such good care of my brother.”

Hmm. “My pleasure,” I said.

The Queen scrutinized me with an invisible monocle: her head tilted back, she squinted her left eye, and peered down her nose at me. “I suppose I remember,” she said, “oh, don’t ask me, I can’t remember last year’s Cannes Film Festival!”

“Mom,” he said, “you never met Hal. But I’ve told you about him.”

“Princess Bips, sit down here,” Grams said, indicating two straight chairs near her. She patted the seat of the chair closest to her for the Queen.

Ric relaxed his elbow on my shoulder. “That was quite an entrance,” he said.

“The police car was your Grams’ idea!” The Queen shot back, “the train took too long, and her limousine was busy collecting you.” She put her hand on Grams’ knee, stretched her neck close to her, and screamed into Grams’ ear: *“What do you do to get attention from the public service officials around here?”*

Grams winced. She turned down the hearing aids.

Ric said, “she can hear you.”

Grams hollered back, “I donate time for voter registration, I read to the blind, I tip the postman, I remember police birthdays, I give Yorkshire puddings at Christmas, and I pay my taxes on this white elephant!” Grams waved her cane in the direction of everything. Princess Bips ducked.

“What you do for a woman your age is wonderful,” the Princess said, “I only hope – “

Grams cut her off. “Don’t hope! What I do keeps me alive. It heals the ennui when loved ones aren’t around.”

“We are rebuked,” the Queen snarled, “per usual. Now get on with it.”

“Why are you here, Mom?” Ric asked.

“Family business,” the Princess answered, “*family* business!” For a Sister of Mercy, she had a nasty evil eye.

“Hal *is* family,” Ric said.

“We need a witness!” The Queen said, and tapped the Princess’ shoulder,

“Your mother and sister have announcements, Richard,” Grams said.

Ric glanced at his mother. She stroked a silk scarf culled from her purse. It was as if nothing could make her actually look at him. “Each of us,” the Queen said, “has succumbed to the pride, ego, financial strangulation, and emotional battering by your father, Malcolm.”

Ric scoffed.

“We know who you are, Richard,” she went on. “We know where you’ve ended up after all the money we spent on your education. You’ve been disinherited and you’re a waiter at a Greek deli in Queens!” She wiped her brow with the scarf.

“Is that what you heard?” he grinned.

“Feta cheese!” She shuddered. “How could you? Anyhow, Ihave an announcement. I am no longer living my life, if one could call it that, for your father.”

“You’ve lived in St. Tropez for 23 years,” Ric said, “how could that be ‘living for anybody’ except yourself?”

“You mean *you!”* The Queen’s triple chins clumped like an overripe pumpkin in a trash compactor. Her eyes traced the floor. But then her head rose and her violet eyes welled up with tears. At last, she made eye contact and offered him her hand.

“Get real, Mom!” he scowled, and turned away.

“I’m sorry, Ricky, truly I am.” She took back her hand and blew her nose in the scarf.

“You’re bluffing.”

“I hadno life!”

“Please, he paid your way into paradise.”

“He did not ‘pay my way,’ *he bought me out!”* she boomed.

“Mummy! Calm down,” said the Princess.

“Like he would buy out a competitor!” The Queen scoffed. “He sent me packing faster than Henry II locked up Aquitaine, but with one dissimilarity: he didn’t lock me in, he locked me out! You think I am the kind of person who would leave my daughter in high school, and my son in grade school to live in the South of France where I barely had canasta partners? If only you knew what it was like in those days! It wasn’t the man; perhaps I could have turned the other cheek, but the girls and the parties night after night! The money, the obligations! Success is a nasty gift. If he was not such a devil himself, I would have thought he’d made a pact with one. Yes, I protested. His was no longer the environment to which I wanted my family subjected; and what came the answer? Not, as in other families, a compromise. No! But a buyout! Simple. Mannered. Neat. English.”

“Stop!” Grams said. “Don’t blame the English. There have been plenty of American men who would have done the same thing.”

“You English!” The Queen snarled. “You’re a broken-down old barn of a society, yet *‘Oooo, royalty! How can we live without royalty?’* You make me sick! You’re a socialist democracy, but you call it an ‘empire.’ You imperious pigs! Ask Ireland, Scotland, or India! They know what a bully you are. It’s Hong Kong’s good luck they no longer have to support your quirks, and may you suffer curried chicken into the next millennium!”

“Mother!” The Princess said. “You’re off track.”

“May I have one of those?” The Queen said, pointing to the open bottle of scotch on the bar.

“I think we should all have one of those,” Ric said.

“I’ll just have a half-glass of the beer, if that’s okay,” said the Princess.

Ric played bartender. He poured shots for five (one extra for me), one half of a beer for Bips, and delivered.

The Queen grabbed *two* shots and held each in her lap. “Perhaps,” she said, slurping, “if I hadn’t had to put up with Malcolm all those years, I would be less emotional.” She threw her head back and downed the first one.

Grams’ glasses slid down to the tip of her nose.

“Mom,” Ric said, “you moved to the top of Silk Panty Hill in the most indecent spa in Europe. You didn’t have Malcolm to contend with, but somewhere along the line, you completely resigned your duty to us. Frankly, seeing the rocks on your fingers, the pearls around your neck, and the silk scarf in hand, it’s hard to feel real sorry.”

The Queen pondered the emerald-cut diamond on her forefinger, as if she weighed the carats against her children. “Oh, this!” she said. “It’s not from your father. This and the pearls are from a little jeweler man I’ve met. I’m suing your father for divorce. I have enough baggage on that coddled egg that *any* judge in The Hague will yank the caviar from his mouth, rip the silk threads from his suit, and lay bare his pallid English soul for the rest of us to take a bite of. *Woof!”*

Ric paced past me around the pool table. “You think,” he said, “it’s going be that easy? How easy is it, Mother, to have a kid, give him over to his grandmother for rearing, see him in between shopping sprees, parties, and flights to Zurich, abandon him at 10 with nothing, not even a birthday card for 23 years, then come back into his life for a shot of scotch and the announcement of a divorce from a father he never knew, either? Why should I make that easy?”

“You owe me!” She said.

He charged into her face. “I *don’t* owe you!” he said.

“Remember who you’re talking to, Malcolm!” the Queen screamed.

She caught him off guard. After a second, he said, “I’m Ric, Mom!”

She harrumphed.

“Don’t throw fresh dirt on an old grave!” Grams said, pounded the floor with her cane. She studied us. “True,” she said, “we’re cold. It’s why, Richard, you survived without a mother. It’s technique in your genes. But either rebuild your relationship from here, or go your separate ways with no regret. And you,” she said, turning on the Queen, “I have no respect for anyone, English or not, who doesn’t fight for her family.”

Broiling, the Queen bolted up from her chair. Her breasts bounced like they were attached to bungee cords. “How dare you, old witch! I fought for my children!”

Grams shook her greatest prop, the cane, in the Queen’s face: “Until Malcolm waved six million pounds sterling in your face and you were gone faster than rotary dial telephones!”

“Stop it!” The Princess said.

“Sit down,” Ric intoned.

The Queen obeyed. She socked down the second shot. “Very well,” she said, “that’s my announcement: the divorce.”

“You should have divorced him years ago,” Ric added.

The Queen balked. “If you are to know Malcolm, you are to become

*part* of Malcolm. Estranged or not, we’re linked. It’s easier to get away from Disney marketing than it is to get away from him. But it’s my daughter’s turn now. Hurry up, Bips!”

Ric gestured like an MC, offering her the floor: “Princess Bips?”

Wringing her hands, the Princess sat up in her chair, which squeaked under her weight. She cleared her throat. “First of all, Ricky” she said, “for years I’ve wanted to tell you, but I’ve either been too busy teaching or praying or doing other things for the sisters in our order. We must work hard there to become the people God meant us to be. We work off the sins of the world, you see. Personally, before I could tackle that, I knew I had to work off my own sins, one of which just wouldn’t go away.”

Ric folded his arms on his chest.

“I’m not a full person! I’m only half a person. I’m ashamed to admit that I have sinned; and my sin has to do with you, Ric, and how I treated you. I’m sorry for our fights, for the way I hurt you and resented you. I don’t have an excuse. Maybe it was because you were so handsome and talented, and I was so ordinary and fat. Maybe it was because you just showed up in the family after I had already staked my claim. I never could get used to you vying for the tidbits of attention I barely got. Someday, I will pay for my tantrums and my resentment of you, but deep down, you must know that I love you! Always did, always will. I’m so proud of you, no matter what you do. If only you could find it in your heart to forgive me, I know then that God will grant me the other half of me.”

Like a pissed-off goalie kicking an errant soccer ball, Grams pitched a box of tissue at her. “Blow, Princess!” She said.

“Grams, take it easy,” Ric said. He knelt down next to his sister and took out a tissue for her. Gently, he removed her spectacles and dabbed her eyes. “It’s okay, Bips.”

“There was no excuse for what I did. I got you in trouble constantly. I changed your answers on take-home exams. I blamed you when I got into trouble. When Grams told you to clean your room and you did, I’d go in and mess it up. When your friends would call, I’d told them you’d died. Remember the boy? Paul? He was one of them.”

Ric glanced at me.

“I didn’t want him calling,” she said, “because I thought *he* was too cute, and I didn’t want your attentions taken away from me. I knew how you felt about him. I teased you, harassed you, and bullied you. I made you cry ‘Uncle.’ If I prayed twenty hours a day, every day for the rest of my life, I could never make it up to you.”

“I don’t suppose any of you realizes,” Grams interrupted, “that to us old folks, time is of the essence. So Bips, if you live as long as me, you’ve got forty years in front of you to pray for his forgiveness. But if you want to do something for God now, then for God’s sake, *get to the point!”*

The Princess wiped her eyes and cleared her throat. “For 17 years,” she said, “I’ve been with the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago. But I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m not right for them. I’m going to become Discalced Sister Barbara Smythe-Bigge at the Baltimore Carmel.”

“Carmelites?” Ric said. “Aren’t they cloistered?”

“What’s ‘discalced?’” I asked.

“I’m removing myself from society,” Bips replied, “there to be cloistered in prayer and obeisance to God.”

“Don’t, Bips,” Ric said, “you don’t want to do that.”

“It’s done,” she said.

“What’s ‘discalced?’” I asked.

“She leaves from here,” the Queen said.

Finally, the Princess acknowledged me: “‘Discalced’ means ‘barefoot,’ although, wedo actuallywear shoes. The order was founded by Teresa of Avila in the 16th century. She too was part of a larger community when she heard God call her to a smaller one that afforded more time for prayer and solitude.”

“I don’t suppose you tried to talk her out of it!” Ric hammered the Queen.

“Her mind‘s made up,” the Queen replied, “except for one detail.”

“The dowry,” Princess Bips said.

Clearly, here was a piece of information that had bypassed him. “What dowry?”

“When I entered the novitiate,” she said, “father set up a trust fund for me, a dowry. In the event that I would one day leave the order, it was to be made available to me. Our Mother Superior at the time attempted to explain to Father that we took a sacred oath of poverty. When we leave the outside world, we bring nothing with us. Father, on the other hand, explained to Mother Superior that if she did not allow me to have

the dowry, he would not allow me to join the order. He agreed that if, at the time of my death, I had remained with them my whole life, the dowry would then go to the order. He explained it so well, with so much cash, that Mother Superior was forced to create a loophole of sorts. In exchange for my vows, the order would take in this enormous amount of money, the interest of which paid out to them while I was there. After much fasting, praying, and brow-beating the Cardinal, Mother Superior obtained a dispensation. The money went into their trust, and I became a novice.”

“And now you want to leave?” Ric said.

“Yes. Now that I’m leaving for the Carmel, I can have the money back but I don’t want it. I want the life I’ve chosen. If that means no net, in the sense of no high wire act and *not* ‘net profits,’ then so be it.”

“What should she do about the dowry?” the Queen droned.

“How much are we talking about?”

“Thirty million dollars,” said the Princess, “and that’s when I went in. Imagine what it is now.”

Thirty million dollars! What a concept, I thought. We could *buy* an Off Broadway theatre and rent it back to ourselves!

“Thirty million dollars? Have you checked with the Carmelites?” Ric said, “they might like living off some of that interest, too.”

Sister Barbara shook her head. “I can’t get it. It’s something in the contract. The Sisters of Mercy are not allowed to give it back without Father’s approval. They won’t do anything without him.”

“Have you tried talking to him?” Ric said.

“I’m as separated from him as you, Mummy, and everybody else. I can’t live my own life without his hooks in me. I’m an adult. I want out. What do I do?”

“I wish I knew,” said Ric.

*“You* did it!” She said.

“I’m disowned and disinherited, Bips. I got nothing. Maybe you and I should switch. You take my poverty and I’ll take your cash.”

“There’s one alternative, Richard,” said the Queen, “somehow, some way, you have to claim your birthright! You must wrest the kingdom from the King! And it has to be done before this sale to the Germans.”

“You know?”

“We all know,” the Queen said, “that barracuda Holly Hedlunden called me! Funny, the allies you make in life. She was one of his girls.”

“Grams? You’re the only partner.”

Grams said, “it will mean untold amounts of money. And Malcolm has so completely botched his family; I’d prefer to see you make something happen. If you *can* wrest the kingdom from the King, I will support any decision you make about the sale after.”

Ric put his face in his hands. Then he said, “No matter how much I hate the man or what he’s done to us, I can’t put it together inside me to bring him down unless I know one thing.”

“What?” The Queen said.

Grams replied, “He wants to know if Malcolm was culpable for Terry’s death!”

Exasperated, the Queen scratched her third chin with the emerald: “What the hell has Terry got to do with it?”

“Mummy!” Bips blurted.

Ric said, “I need to know for sure that he’s responsible for Terry’s death.”

“Who cares about Terry?” said the Queen. “Your father’s a *shit!* He’s been a shit to me, a shit to my children, and a shit to granny! I say seize the day! ‘Carpie kill ‘em.”

Ric slumped onto the arm of a leather couch across the room. “I can’t destroy a man just because he’s a shit,” he said.

The Queen rubbed her left eye. There was a long pause. “Well,” the Queen said, “in that case, darling, everybody knows he did the bastard in!” A cemetery’s quiet descended. She looked at us incredulously. “Oh, come on!” she said. “Malcolm hated his brother! Malcolm was a hero, he was his own Memorial Day parade! Terry was a clown, a nobody. It was war. In war, people only pay attention to heroes. That’s probably why Malcolm got away with it so easily. End of story.”

“Were you there, Mom?” Ric said.

“I didn’t have to be there. I know Malcolm!” From her purse, the Queen retrieved an unmarked video cassette tape and handed it to him. “Here! Watch and call me.”

“What’s this?”

“Your sister and I taped individual statements. If you want evidence, it’s here. It’s everything. I’m not happy with my makeup, but we were in hurry. Watch it. Think about it. It’s everything you ever wanted to know about your father from both of us. If you think you have doubts now, wait until you see it. I’ll be back in St. Tropez day after tomorrow. Call me.” She stood and approached Ric. She grabbed hold of his elbow and whispered, “No matter what you think of me, watch your back! I still love you enough that I don’t want you to wind up like Uncle Terry.”

Then the Queen took hold of Sister Barbara’s hand and motioned for her to get up. But the Princess was not going to be led. Casually, she removed her hand from her mother’s grip, kissed Grams good-bye on the forehead, and went to Ric. “What I say on that video is not the most loving content,” she said, “but I think God appreciates truth, so that I’ve given. I’ll be praying for your success. Get my dowry out of Father’s hands. If that means taking it away from the Sisters of Mercy, then that’s what has to happen. Once it’s in your hands, you’ll know what to do. I trust you, Ricky. Good-bye, my handsome prince.”

“Bye, Bips,” he said, and kissed her.

Then they were gone.

Ric turned to me and breathed.

Grams said, “No one comes in ‘great.’ Generations of royals have proven that. Greatness is earned like your grandfather, my husband, earned his. Who knew that a 21 year-old Irishman would lay down his life in the Argonne Forest for his friends, and go down in my personal history book as the greatest man who ever lived? No one ever matched him, particularly his felonious sons, who would have eventually killed each other anyway.” She said it in such a way with such bitterness; it must have been the answer Ric had come for. She removed a sepia photo from a pocket in her dress. “Here, Ric,” she said, “I want you to have this. It’s my only photo of Terry.”

Ric took it and studied it. “That’s him!” he said. “That’s the guy in my dreams!”

It was time to go. She wished us Godspeed, and the limo took us away.

We sat in first class on the train back to the city. Ric bought a pack of non-filtered Camels. At the New Haven stop, we had 18 minutes. He lit up and paced the platform. “Hallie, what you said the other night at the restaurant, when you were yammering about the King’s tribute, what did you have in mind?”

“Before, or after I spit up on you?”

He spun around and said, “You wanted to ‘fuck advertising’ and go out and do the show? Isn’t that what you said?”

“I never said, ‘fuck advertising.’ That’s heresy, even for us!”

“You said something about *me* doing it.”

“I meant if we’re going to try to embarrass King Malcolm on the night of the tribute, I said that I can make it possible for *you* to pretty much get away with anything. I’m producing the show. The union A/V guys, the hotel employees, the equipment rental people, everybody works for me. Within the framework of the event, I’ll basically have the keys.”

Ric studied me. “You’re editing a tribute reel?” He said.

“The two sycophants from Yale are cutting the reel.”

“So, you produce it, Malcolm and his knights and everybody signs off on it, you finish it, you rehearse it at the hotel, and one minute before it plays, we switch out the tape.”

“With what?”

“With *our* tape!”

“We don’t have a tape, unless you’re thinking of playing your mom’s and your sister’s statements. Are you? I mean, we don’t know what they’ve said.”

“Sure. It depends.”

“On what?”

“It depends on what they said and it depends on the tape we’re going to produce called,‘THE NEARLY TRAGICAL HISTORY OF HAMLET THE SECOND, PRINCE OF DENMARK!’”

“Are you nuts?” I said, ‘“HAMLET THE SECOND’ is two hours long! The presentation reel is eight to ten minutes! You think that Malcolm is going to sit there and let his assassination tape *play* for that long in front of 1500 V.I.P.s and their rubber chickens?”

“I never said anything about taping the whole show. But what if we just taped *part* of it; enough to fill in the ten minute length of your tribute reel? We tape a little intro

with the Three Witches, then we go right into the part about the fratricide!”

“There *isn’t* a part about fratricide in ‘HAMLET THE SECOND’.”

“We’ll leave that to Mom’s and Bips’s statements. I’ll fill in the rest.”

The conductor called us back. Ric snuffed the butt and followed me. I hated the smell of cigarettes. I made him sit across the aisle.

We returned to Felice’s first-floor, one-bedroom flat which was a small but cute little oasis in the rear. Handmade lace curtains hung from the windows, which looked out to a little garden with a maple tree, the one she had told us had the pretty but mean blue jays. We popped in the VHS tape. At first, it was funny watching Tweedledum and Tweedledee fuss with the camera. The two amateur filmmakers couldn’t get the lens focused or get the camera pointed right. Finally, the Princess found the auto-focus. Between camera thumps and hisses, we watched as the two of them poured their hearts out. Everything they had said at Grams’ house was repeated. This was going to be some smoking gun.

I listened to the tape as Ric microwaved popcorn.

Their single-mindedness and their determination to tell the truth as they saw it, was laced with bile. You couldn’t fault mother or sister since they’d suffered under King Malcolm for so long. We plopped onto Felice’s double bed and watched as they accused King Malcolm of securities fraud, bribery, Machiavellianism, adultery, racketeering, chauvinism, insider trading, child abuse, child endangerment, embezzlement, spousal abuse, mental cruelty, blackmail, and best of all, the Queen said, “Sodomy!”

“No wonder she was always in a bad mood!” said Ric.

As the tape ended, he shut off the VCR. “Too bad we can’t use everything!” He said. Then he darted to the bathroom, peed, and gargled.

Laying there while he was gone, as I stared up at the cracks in the ceiling, I imagined I was studying the hull of a ship I had just spied through my enemy periscope. I thought about sinking the luxury liner above known as my career. It must happen. It was going to happen. Ric would make it happen. And like an ICBM on a nuclear submarine, no amount of research on my part could accurately prepare me for, or predict the magnitude of the destruction to come.

He plopped down next to me. His arm wormed under my shoulders. He drew me close. The mouthwash hadn’t completely removed the cigarette smell. He said, “nobody has ever been willing to go as far with me, or for me, as you.”

“Once you come into your kingdom, then you’ll remember me. Is that it?”

“You might not ever work in this town again.”

“There’s always California.”

“You may never get to pay for another wedding.”

“I’m out of sisters.”

“Do one more thing for me?”

There was a slight swelling in my crotch.

“Make love to me.”

My nose met his.

“I want you inside me.”

I rolled away from him and sat up on my side of the bed.

“Hallie,” he said, “being with you would be better than anything I’ve ever known. I’ve got condoms. I’ve got the *best* condoms, in case you’re wondering. They’re imported from Atlantic City.” His arms embraced me. I felt his breath down my neck as he unbuttoned my shirt and his hands crept onto my chest. He peeled off my shirt and undid my belt. I thought of all the events that had led up to this moment. Maybe our lives together were just meant to be. Maybe that first look so many years ago was all it took. We had dropped everything right then for each other and, except for my bullheaded hiatus, we had ridden the same horse together right up to this moment. Officially to myself and to the universe, I had truly come out!I craved being naked with him.

“Body and soul,” he whispered.

More body than soul, I thought. Yet as I stroked my hands up his thighs, I buried my face into his groin. His pecs were firmly in the palms of my hands. Suddenly I understood for the first time how much his body was key to my soul. With every hair follicle of mine brushing against every one of his, like sparks in a wet candle, like clicks in a vault combination, he opened and opened, and drew me in. Was this what it was really about: the total and complete immersion of flesh and spirit? If so, what kind of a fucked-up life had I lived so far that I had failed achieve this sexual nirvana with anybody else? Had I lived so self-centered, jejune, and impoverished existence that God might ever forgive me for wasting half of it in pursuit of appetites and bank accounts, paying attention to nothing important and ignoring everything that was? Since it had taken so long to get here, having failed miserably making the connection between the two pylons of existence, was there enough life left for me that I would be able to sustain a relationship with him? Or was I just vermin in the trenches, in a unique moment that I would spend eternity hopelessly looking for again, like a grail? Fuck it! I arched over him. He guided me. We embraced and kissed each other until our flesh, pressed and bound together tightly, could go no further. It was then I felt my ‘unseen,’ if you will, take hold of his and mingle wantonly, abundantly, and completely until we made each other whole. Body and soul. Naked and complete. I would stay that way as long as I could hold back. I would never want to forget it. What a classroom for an epiphany!

We bought Felice new sheets and comforter before the week was out. In between work, we were like honeymooners. Except for work, we didn’t wear anything. We even cooked naked (we never fried anything). Morning, sometimes noon, and all night, we spent wrapped in each other’s arms. Once, in the heat of passion, he called me “Wynn.” I didn’t care. I was glad he felt what he felt. It was more than anyone had ever felt for me. It was more than I had ever felt for anybody else. The hell with rules! The hell with schedule! The hell with Malcolm’s spies! I was in love.

*Ravage!* invited him to jump start his dance act with Minnie Van Lake, which got him some fast cash. *Splash Bar* sent out thousands of erotic four-color notices announcing his return, and threw a party for him. But then, as Bud explained, *Splash* throws parties for garbage strikes.

Also, he finally went to my doctor. For now, he was HIV negative.

Felice returned from Nebraska. Relieved to be back in the city, she liked the new bedclothes. She took them as a nice “thanks” from Ric for letting him stay there and never asked why. Meantime, we rented a short term apartment on East 51st called The Briton. Except for the view into the next building’s bedrooms, it was comfortable, even upscale for the disowned heir to Madison Avenue advertising. Felice and I split the cost of a small telescope as a housewarming gift. We shared the plan for Malcolm’s tribute. She jumped at the idea of finally getting a part in “HAMLET THE SECOND.”

The next day, Ric took me to the Village to get a pot pipe. He was pensive, distant, and ready for a fight.

“What difference will it make if I bring him down?” Ric said as he fingered a black leather jockstrap in a head shop. “Will it bring peace to the Middle East? Build a homeless shelter? Bring back Uncle Terry?”

“Revenge is your reason,” I said.

“Revenge isn’t enough of a reason,” he said, glancing at his diamond pinkie ring.

“What’s that on your finger?” I asked.

“What about it?” He asked, pondering the heirloom from Wynn.

“Why is that ring there,” I said, “and not on Wynn? How come he’s not standing here next to you right now? Why is it me, instead?”

“Fuck you,” he seethed, “don’t play games; I’m not in the mood.”

“There may be lots of reasons why Wynn died, but there was one prime mover.”

“Malcolm didn’t give him AIDS.”

“If Malcolm had let you live your life, Wynn might not have been drinking contaminated tap water in that cesspool railroad apartment. He’d be in your condo, or in a hospital, where he might have survived.”

“I did what I could.”

“It’s just too fucking bad that diamond pinkie ring’s not walking around with an actor inside of it, instead of the egocentric, pouting, procrastinator that is. If revenge isn’t good enough reason, what about Grams, your sister, or your mom? What about Wynn? What about Uncle Terry? Why do you need a reason? Why not just do it, if you can find a jock inside that panicked, sissy, undersized hypothalamus?” I tossed the black jockstrap at him. He grabbed hold of it before it hit him in the face, and dropped it onto a table of discounted cotton harnesses. He hustled out of the shop, elbowing customers, and rattling assorted chains and leather vests which hung on the wall.

I chased him across the street to a park.

“You mule!” he said, turning on me and grinding up his words like coffee beans, steaming them at me, “until you spend a day in my shorts, don’t tell me how to live my life! Who do you think you are, judging me? What have you gone through? Coming out? That’s nothing. You haven’t watched somebody you love slip away and die in your arms, or listen to how they were hated by their own family and treated like some space alien. You’re just another one of them.”

True.

He whipped around a bench and grabbed hold of it. “Are you honest?” He said.

“Huh?”

“Does that pretty brain seek truth?”

“What?” I said.

“‘They say it’s a paradox: beauty turns truth into a satyr sooner than truth turns beauty into its likeness. But looking at you, I can see there’s some proof to it.’”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“You think I love you. You know what my family’s made of. No doctor ever came up with a vaccine for virtue that could have had the least effect on any one of us. I never loved you.”

My heart sank.

“Be a priest!” he said. “You don’t want to be gay. If you’re going to be straight, be a priest, since why would you want to breed more freaks like me who’ll turn this world into a bigger swamp than it already is? I could care less. With me, the genetic perversity stops. I’m the end of the line and it’s a good thing too. I’m guilty of as much crap as the guiltiest felon on death row, with neither the time left nor the will to act on it. It would be better if I wasn’t ever born. I’m proud, ambitious, and believe it or not, revenge drenches my mouth!”

I looked around to see who could hear.

“If you’re going to be straight, then here’s my wedding gift: may impotence strike early, may your prostate get cancer, and may you marry Elena Bobbitt. I hear she’s available.”

A homeless guy fed birds fifty feet away.

“Be a priest,” Ric said, “don’t waste time, join today! You waffle, you ditz, you want your cake and eat it too. But here’s a newsflash: neither side is going to want you. Bisexual! It makes me nuts. Don’t be a sideshow clown, Hallie, be a priest! Since God only knows what assholes you make of us.” Then he dropped to his knees, wrapped his arms around a fire hydrant, and buried his head in his hands.

Like a pony at a birthday party, my gift was hard to conceal. I tackled him with both hands and got him into a choke-hold. We fell onto the grass in hysterics.

“Elena Bobbitt?”

“Get off!”

“I don’t know much ‘HAMLET,’ asshole, but the line is, ‘Get thee to a nunnery,’ not ‘be a priest.’”

He squirreled from underneath me, pulled my legs under him and mounted my waist.

“How long did you think you could play that scene?” I said.

“The hell with the scene, did you get the message?”

“Fuck the message. As long as we’re together, what do you care what my preferences are? I’m with you and that’s what matters.”

“My psyche says, ‘get out while you can.’ I warned you years ago nobody does any good having me for a friend.”

With him on my stomach, there was not much maneuverability. I got hold of his nuts and squeezed. “I’m living my life,” I said, “I got you where I want you, and as far as I’m concerned, you and your half-baked psyche don’t have an opinion. Now, get off.”

I heaved up my groin and he lost his balance. I squirmed on top of him and steadied him until we were nose to nose. His body’s warmth told me he was back.

“I’m ready,” he said.

*“Be ‘Two,’ or be ‘Two’ NOT!”* I said and helped him up. “That is the question!”

“Let’s go, asshole!” He said. “Is that in the script? If it isn’t, it should be!”

Bud’s and Ric’s friends at *Splash* said that a lot of gay people burn out early: some brilliant, some memorable, some shadows. They told me “in gay years, 30 is like 60.” The month that followed was, from an early burn-out point of view, brilliant and memorable. We ruined dinners due to sex. Discalced, we walked in the park. We did the museums and clawed at each other over minimalist art. On weekends, I waited for the strip act to end at *Ravage!* Then, we’d dance at *Roxy* until four and fuck until dawn. I paid for his workouts with my trainer, Duke, who weaned him off steroids and onto a diet that replaced them naturally. He lost some of the bulk, and his body was lither. We did movies, concerts, plays, and started some dumb game collecting autographs from talk show hosts. Kathie Lee hated us: “Not *you* again!” We shopped endlessly for butt-floss. We’d appoint a time to meet at the top of the Empire State Building and *be there.* We hitchhiked to Paramus to buy clothes with no sales tax. We rented bikes and rode Henry Hudson Parkway.

I was still a novice in the particular enjoyment of the ultimate forbidden zone until one Monday night when we sprawled out watching TV at his place. He was undressed, except for a pair of silk boxers. Suddenly, he rolled me onto the floor and propped me up on all fours. He ripped off my tank top with his teeth and split open my favorite old pair of jeans. I looked like I was about to be photographed for one of those Times Square billboards. He grabbed hold of my groin, wrapped his hand around the base of my scrotum, as if it was meant to steady me, and gently began to bite, lick, and massage with his tongue. The intoxicating, carnal heat rolled my eyeballs into my brain and expelled the oxygen from my lungs. I reached behind to take hold of him as he kicked off his boxers, but he nudged me forward out of reach and fully extended his tongue into my reluctant self. The harder he pressed into me, the more I knew why he kept a tight hold, since instinctively I tried to get away. He yanked me back onto it again and again. His tongue, this hot flame of an organ, transfixed me and jabbed into me with a wet virtuosity, a lubricious, all-devouring tenderness, and orgasmic regaling never before known to me so far in nature. He was gluttonous chef who had lovingly prepared a gourmet meal, only to devour the succulent main entree before I ever had an appetizer. He was a wild jackal who had seized an anxious prey; the carnivorous jaws emasculating and ingesting the tender meat of his victim. He was a sexual deity, a naked, moonstruck Pan, lapping up a mythical feast in a thicket of sexual pleasures. “Ric! You’re making me insane!” I said.

He urged me as if in an instructional video. “You’re already insane!” He said. He slid the palm of his hand over my pulsating self and spread drips everywhere down there. He stroked it easily, repetitively, and tightly in his palm. I wanted him in front of me so I could see him, but his arms kept me the delighted prisoner. With one last, intrusive thrust, with one cataclysmic lick, my whole body contorted. From the buff side of my exculpated soul, with all of my seminal desires conquering the tormented, unholy doubts of youth, I shot all over the *WSJ*. My head hit the floor, exhausted, drained, and educated.

I looked around and saw he had shot, too. On his left thigh, one of his many attributes and objects of admiration by his customers oozed the evidence, unchecked. Here was pyroclastic flow. Had it happened all by itself? He placed his hand lovingly between my naked legs. I fell onto him, kissed him, and pressed it between us. It spread across our embraced torsos and puddled into our navels. What I didn’t know was that this was a vain attempt to introduce me, to perhaps “train me,” into liking what he liked. Starting with the tongue, he figured we might eventually get to other body parts. Surely, he thought, once I had discovered it, I would never go back. But I wasn’t a great student. No matter how willing I may have been (or let on to be), no matter how far I let his tongue penetrate that place, there was absolutely nothing in my wildest dreams, nothing in 99 years of my jail term, nothing after all the women had been abducted into space, nothing so fabulous in the entire universe besides the tongue, that I would ever, *ever* welcome down there. Never.

On the other hand, when you’re still in school, you just never say never; and as Ric pointed out later, “just because you’re on the bottom doesn’t necessarily mean you’re the one that’s getting fucked.”

The next Sunday afternoon we rode bikes through the Village past a piano bar on West 10th called *Eighty-Eights*. About 4:30pm, the bar was jammed. A hundred or so people milled out front. Everybody held little yellow tickets. As we went past, I heard his brakes squeal. He pointed inside. Piano bars don’t make my hit list, but there was a strange look on his face. So I coasted towards him.

“Listen,” he said. He got off his bike and walked towards the door. “Do you hear that?” Still, I didn’t recognize anything. Suddenly, a piano fanfare echoed onto the street, followed by huge applause. From the stage inside, the next voice we heard was more than music to our ears, it was like hitting the lotto: “Ladies and gentlemen!” roared an announcer: “Live! And back home where she belongs, *Ms. Bonnie Shears*!”

**XII. FIRST STRIKE**

The audience erupted. We craned our necks, listening through outside speakers. The doorman said they were sold out.

“What about these yellow tickets?”

“Yellow tickets are SRO, but they’re sold out too.”

So for the next hour, we sat under a canopy, listening to Bonnie Shears trash L.A.

“Someone who shall remain nameless got me to move to the City of Angels,” she said.

“Had to be Lenore,” he said.

Had to be!

“After two Tony Awards,” she said, “and God-only-knows how many concerts, benefits, and everything else, I did a play at a theatre on Sunset Boulevard. Nice place, but hon, let me tell you, sometimes it’s hard to believe that God pays attention when so many of his faces in the audience clearly don’t. We closed after the first run-through. Then I get this offer to guest star in this after-hours erotica crap. Since my career was constipated and L.A. isn’t cheap, I decided that instead of waitressing, maybe I’d do the gig. I lasted two episodes before they killed my off. The producer thought he was Cameron MacIntosh, the director wanted to be Spielberg, the writer quoted Gore Vidal, the caterer stole Wolfgang Puck’s accent, the script supervisor wanted to be the producer, the camera operator wanted to be the director, the salad girl wanted to be the chef, and the best boy thought he really was!”

I had my hand on Ric’s thigh. He breathed into my ear, “stop it or I won’t be able to stand up.”

So here was the great Bonnie Shears, the object of so much promise, cut down in her prime, and sent packing to L.A. in search of what was always in her own backyard. Ric knew he wasn’t the only one whose ship had left at the dock.

We waited for her backstage. She was thrilled to see him, if not me, since she

forgot my name again. She bravely wore three years of California sun and Trousdale egos on her face, and didn’t balk at her regrets. But she was different. The brassy bitch that had percolated our dreams three years before was tarnished.

“Boys! It’s fabulous to see you,” she said, wiping makeup, “we should have had your show up and running, and maybe I wouldn’t have had to go through all those Sig Alerts. I tried to start a fire, which is pretty easy in some of those canyons, but *nothing* clicked.”

“What about Lenore?” Ric said.

“Lenore?” she said, “that manic depressive! The way she’s fucked up my career, I could’ve been Dumbo and nobody would have looked up.”

“She’s not your agent now?” I asked.

“We’re not speaking,” she said, “and this time, it’s for keeps. I don’t care how big an agency she’s got. Here!” She flipped Ric a business card.

“C.A. Benoit?” he said.

“‘Benoit’ as in ‘balls,’” Bonnie confirmed, “which is what I need most right now.”

“*Creeper* Benoit?”

“‘Creeper’ is a nickname. It’s Crandall.”

“Creeper’s your agent?” I said.

“I hope he breaks the bitch!”

Ric pinched the corners of the business card.

“What’s happening with ‘HAMLET THE SECOND?’” She asked.

“When we let you go,” he said, “the project went with you.”

“Don’t cry over spilt vermouth, hon,” she said, “we know better now. We’ll rebuild our careers based on experience that nobody else can give us. At least that’s what my analyst says. Tell me what you have in mind, and I’ll call The Creep tomorrow.”

“Dude-skeez!” he boomed. Creeper flung open his office door. He’d kept us waiting 45 minutes, but it was worth it. Still ugly enough to empty a circus, his hair was coifed, but exploded upwards to the ceiling. He was dressed impeccably in a white silk suit and animated necktie.

“Creeper!” Ric grinned. “You’ve changed.”

“That a-hole Commerce tugs at me for respectability,” he snickered

He led us into his sprawling office. The walls were crammed with Broadway poster art. “I gave up weed,” he said, rummaging through a drawer, “but with you here, I’ll make an exception.” He lit up a crooked joint and shared it with us.”

“So!” He wheezed, “the B-as-in-Bonnie tells me you want to fork over your pop. From what she said, he must be a bad dude. Tell me, what ever happened to that ‘HAMLET’ we were supposed to do? And what’s it got to do with your dad?”

“We need to videotape a scene. Two, three minutes tops, for the old man’s tribute.”

“Daddy likes your play?”

Ric hacked. “No!” He said. “That’s just it! But we’re going to catch his conscience.”

“He thinks he’s getting a career retrospective,” I said, “but instead, we’re going to switch out *his* tape with *our* tape.”

“Creepy,” he said, “I like it.”

“We’ll use our tape to raise money for the show later.”

“Ok, so down to biz,” said Creeper, “want my theatre?”

“Is it available?” Ric asked.

“Nope. I got Bonnie in there for six weeks on a direct-to-video version of ‘TAMING OF THE SHREW’ where Bonnie’s the head of a movie studio and Petruchio’s the head of marketing. For a 500 year-old play, you’d think it was written yesterday. Anyway, we’ll find you something.” He shoved trifocals over his hook nose and scrutinized a daily planner.

“We’ll need Bonnie,” I said.

“When?” He lifted the glasses onto his forehead and they stuck there.

“The tribute’s on the 23rd.”

“Of *this* month?”

“And we have to post it, meaning it has to be edited, scored, narrated, and mixed.”

“I know what post production is, Messrs. Autuers!” Creeper said. “Post it at my place. I picked up a little video/audio boutique last year. It’s digital!”

“What about Bonnie?” I asked.

“Can you work midnight to six?” he said.

“You tell us when we can have her and what she wants, we’ll work around her schedule.”

His red, bugged-out eyeballs rolled over the paperwork like two disco lights across a dance floor. “All she wants is first-refusal,” he said, “when and if the show ever gets produced. That means Off-Off-Broadway, Off-Broadway, Broadway, bus ‘n trucks to L.A., Denver, Dallas, Chi, Atlanta, Beantown, and pretty much everywhere stateside. First refusal on video and film productions, dramatic readings, radio broadcasts, audio cassettes, CD-roms, the girl wants it all, pay or play, in exchange for doing the clip reel absolutely *free*. Christ, you better be nice to her, she’ll shave your scrotums.”

“Like that’s bad?” I said.

Ric elbowed me.

“For the first time in her life,” Creeper said, “she doesn’t want to get fucked. Guys got an agent?”

“We need one.”

“Who else but me?” He said. “Wouldn’t the whole thing just melt in your mouths like warm hash brownies if I looked after everybody like family?” His glasses clunked back down onto his nose. “I take eight and a half percent first year. When you’re up to speed and making the bucks, the price jumps to ten. It’s like an adjustable mortgage. Only I’m a much better human than Fannie and Freddie. I take care of you.”

“We’ll need a cameraman,” said Ric.

“I’ll shoot it,” Creeper said, without missing a beat, “I do everything. I got camera, lights, and sound gear. I won’t charge you for the package, but you have to come up with five hundred bucks for me and an assistant for the shifts, plus the tape stock, plus dinner, plus breakfast. Did I mention I’m a vegetarian?”

“We need your theatre with that turntable,” Ric said.

Creeper hesitated, wondering how he could parlay the deal. “Let me ruminate,” he said. Got to check in with Bonnie. Three, four minutes plus some rehearsal time can’t be bad. I’ll let you know.” We shook on it. He bear-hugged us, heaved us out of the office, and slammed the door.

The first stop after locking Bonnie was getting Ric to finish a script for his pretty poison: the scene or scenes from “HAMLET THE SECOND” that would bury King Malcolm. Bonnie Shears, Felice, and everyone else would need a script. I fed him chicken Caesar salads and saltine crackers for the next two weeks and only let him out for his strip act.

That strip act, by the way, was working my last ambi-sexual nerve. I had taken it for granted that when he came home from the job, he was unlike everybody else, tired and ready for bed. Stripping for a living is different than being, for example, a bank teller. Ric came home grabbed, groped, and stroked by the drunken paws of horny customers of every sex from every scummy corner of the planet. I hated it. Usually, it took him two hours to shower and chill.

So one night I decided I’d go down to the bar to see for myself. Without his noticing, I watched as an obese white guy in businessman’s drag, with hungry eyes and lecherous grin wouldn’t leave him alone. One after another, he crumpled bills into Ric’s crotch, which bumped, rolled, and grinded on a pedestal stage near the back. As I watched the fat man lean his belly on the bar, his arms stretched up, he reached between Ric’s legs, yanked on the butt-floss, wiggled his fingers at the back, grabbed hold of his ass, and jabbed more tens and twenties inside. Then, the fat man hiked his right hand between Ric’s legs and ripped the thong. He shredded it down and around Ric’s ankles. Ric tripped and fell. The fat man jumped him and started to nibble, like Ric was a chicken leg. I flew off my bar stool and rammed my knee into fat man’s kidneys. Everyone must have heard the howl out the front door and down the street to the meatpacking district, where, as far as I was concerned, this prick belonged. Bud charged out and pulled me off the guy. Fatboy’s potbelly heaved and he gasped for air.

Dazed, Ric covered his groin with cocktail napkins. Blood dripped from his forehead.

“It happens,” Bud said, “get out.”

Ric and I made our way through the crowd which ogled, whistled, and groped, until we got to where the staff lockers were.

Angrily, he banged open his locker. “I need a vacation,” he said. I dabbed his left eye with gauze from a first aid kit.

“How many times has that happened?” I said.

He shrugged and pulled on a tank top. “Forget it,” he said.

“You have to quit.”

“I need the money!”

“You can bartend!”

“They won’t give me enough shifts.”

“I don’t care, that was the last dance. I’ll float you a loan.”

“You already floated me a loan.”

“I’ll float you one more.”

“Eat me.”

“You drive a hard bargain!” I dropped to my knees and fellated him. With his cheeks firmly in hand, I pressed his hips to my face. It was kind of like a gay adult movie: us in a locker room! As my right hand slipped around his left thigh and up the back, I felt something crispy. I fingered it and pulled out five tens, ten twenties, six fifties, and two Bens. “You don’t need a loan,” I said, “you need a 401k!”

His face contorted as he reached into to his butt crack and pulled a third, fourth and fifth bill. “It’s a living,” he said.

I re-hung the first aid kit, and said, “I’ll make you a deal. Give it up until the tribute. Bartend when they’ll let you. We’re talking three weeks.”

He studied my obstinate body language. Gently, he cradled my hands in his and pulled me close. We held each other. His breath burned my earlobe. We pressed our bodies together. The moment was not meant to be carnal, but the erections had minds of their own. I licked his chin. He buried his nose into my collarbone. Then he gazed into my eyes. “I love you, Henry David Michael Burke,” he said.

I squeezed his waist. “That was my Grandpa’s name,” I said. “What about me?”

“I love anybody with that name!” He said. “The name lives inside a big box wrapped up with holiday paper. It’s all the love I ever asked for, with a big bow, and a tag that says, ‘To Ric.’”

I took him home and we fell into bed.

Next morning, Ranisa and Cesar assembled the King’s tribute. Ranisa, the new doyenne of digital, had cajoled the King and had convinced him that his tribute was far too complicated to complete on time and within budget using our existing equipment. Between her eyelashes and her will, the King had given in. New equipment arrived with her name on the packing slip. I had to give her credit. She’d wanted upgrades to the upgrades of our digital equipment. Our systems were now even better than everybody else’s in town. But I kept my eye on her. She had the potential of being not a nice person.

Trish never got mad at anybody, but as I entered the edit bay, I saw her pounce on the two interns. “Quiet down, you’ll get us fired!” She said.

We had been in the weeds before; long hours and fast food fray nerves. Turns out, they had been up all night. “What’s up?” I asked.

Ranisa pointed to Cesar. “Will somebody please tell this dumbass that we’re assembling the tribute reel by the fucking *decade*. Commercials from the 1960s go in the ‘60s section! It doesn’t flow if you’re mixing up ‘80’s, 60’s, 90’s, ‘70’s, then the ‘50’s!”

“It’s boring if it’s structured like that,” Cesar defended. Then, they went off on each other again.

I told them to go home, get some sleep, and come back later. I explained it wasn’t their job to make it good. The job was to 1). Assemble the material and *I* would make it good; and 2). Make King Malcolm and his minions happy. I explained that only Trish and I could do that.

After they huffed out, Trish sulked. “Cesar’s right,” she said, “it *is* boring. But Mr. Nussbaum wants to see something soon no matter what it looks like.”

“Let’s work on it.”

Trish pulled up a chair and for the next six hours, fed me commercials from the company’s past. We took out a mic, wrote narration copy and recorded it. I cut opening and closing montages to upbeat music. At 6:30pm, the interns sulked back in. They sat down, and slack jawed, watched what Trish and I had assembled. King Malcolm’s tribute reel was ready.

The next thing was screening it for the bosses. Nussie was first. He made changes. Six account execs under him made changes. Versions three and four went to the legal department. Legal made changes. Creative had their say. Two staff directors pissed all over it. Archives sent up 56 more TV spots which the interns had missed. Those had to be included and they caused the montages to be re-cut. In four days, the reel had been submitted to more surgeries than Joan Rivers.

Finally, the doors of the King’s chamber parted and we were invited into the throne room to hear his verdict. By the time it had reached him, the show reel had been bastardized beyond belief. It was laden with content and short on interest. It was an overlong, unfunny, bilious, un-sculptured piece of shit. I hated it.

“Fantastic!”

Who said that?

“Unbelievable!” murmured the King. He leaned back into the desk chair.

My heart soared like the USPS logo.

“Hal Burke,” he said, “I don’t know who’s responsible for this, whether you guided your interns or whether you cut the thing yourself, but this is wonderful.”

“It was a group effort, sir.”

“There are just one or two points which I’ll discuss with Lloyd; minor ones that I want incorporated, little fixes; shouldn’t take long.”

Poker face in place, I thanked him and turned to leave.

“And Hal,” he said, “one thing more.” He leaned his elbows onto the desk. His hands formed a church-and-steeple through which he allowed the baby-greens to penetrate mine. Contemplation dripped from them like pond scum. It was scary, like looking at Ric 40 years in the future. I melted. The King said, “Your love of advertising, your faith in the company, the loyalty you have shown is abundant.”

The rambling remark confused me.

“Frankly,” the King continued, “what I see in your tribute reel is beyond what I have ever experienced from an employee. I have, as you know, no son to call my heir. Yet as I look upon you now, how ironic it is that I might consider you, Hal Burke, my son’s college roommate and his onetime best friend, as everything I could have wanted Ric to be. It’s as if you are the surrogate of the one that got away.”

It shattered me. What was his point? After all of the emotional blood-letting, after the final estrangement, what was the King’s message? Was he serious? Was he nuts? Or could he be asking me in some twisted way to arrange a settlement between Ric and him? I wanted to drop the façade and tell the truth. The destruction to come could be avoided *if only* if I could be honest. If the King listened, if I admitted everything, I might be able to get through! In the most sci-fi of scenarios, what might happen if I blazed through the facts and he caved? What if he did and he allowed me to bring him back to the condo? I would open the door, pour three shots of scotch and light up three Cuban cigars. Ric would breeze out to greet me, only to have his father waiting with open arms. I would stand to the side, and grandly puff away while the two of them embraced, sat down, clinked glasses, and made peace. Nah! *Too unbelievable!* I could drop that one in a urinal and pee on it. And what about the “surrogate son” crap? Did he mean that I was to inherit his kingdom? Suddenly, I saw marble halls, illegal boots, credit cards with no limits, and two-seater Italian cars. Then that led me full circle to the one abiding truth which, innately, I knew about this man: I remembered Quebec. This was not a loving father for Ric, for me, or anybody. This was the Serpent, the Tempter, and the Beast. I would have better luck winning an Oscar than I would getting the old man to share the same airspace with a son, real or invented. I shivered. One careless word now, one notion, one suggestion of feelings, any implication that he might be able to have Ric back regardless of what had happened, no matter what my intentions were, any smacking of my lips or drooling over the prospect of an unexpected inheritance, would depth-charge the submarine meant to destroy him; the one that Ric and I now ran silent and deep beneath the surface. I smiled and shut up.

“Lloyd will be with you shortly,” he said.

I turned and left.

The old man’s smirk was telling. He knew I was no son, but he had amused himself with the trifle. Aside from slight angina, I hadn’t collapsed. Blood rushed to my head. I was exhilarated. I had behaved. I had done exactly as Ric would have wanted. At last, I had successfully maneuvered around life’s most nefarious arcana, and I had survived. I found a bathroom and threw up.

Trish and I finished the very last, final, final, final version of the King’s tribute sixteen hours before the event. I had left Ric on his own brewing the fatal dose of “HAMLET THE SECOND.” I felt like Moses shut out of the Promised Land. As usual, I had let my dreams get stolen by my job.

With three hours of sleep on a couch at the office, I dragged home to Ric’s place at The Briton on the morning of August 23rd, and walked in on the wrap party. Ric hugged me. I was told that they too had been up the past three nights prepping the “other” show. The cast and crew welcomed me with champagne, crackers, and cheese-food. I was told that my worries were over. The taping could not have gone better. Creeper and Bonnie had come through. He had videotaped the production in his theatre. She had chewed up the scenery. He had used every visual lighting effect, every fog machine, every sound effect, every possible music cue which would heighten it. Bonnie had assembled a great cast, which included Felice, Jo Berwick, her friend Shirley, and other assorted talents from the Village. Wynn would have been proud. I asked to see the reel.

“It’s not ready,” Ric said.

“We’re editing this morning at my place,” wheezed the Creep.

“The tribute’s tonight!” I said.

Creeper shoved a joint in my mouth. “Don’t bring me down, dude.”

I sobered up by noon and left for the office to hand out instructions for the tribute. I still had to pick up my tux, get the keys to the ballroom, and supervise the delivery of equipment. It had been a while since I’d spoken to Ric. I had to know exactly how we were going to do this. Ric had always kept everything in his head. He was a genius for most of the detail and knew exactly how it would go. But he’d forgotten to tell me the details. I had phoned him from the office, from the edit bay, from the limousine and from the tux shop, but suddenly, he was nowhere to be found.

At 6:14pm, I flew into the hotel, tux over my shoulder, and videocassette under my arm. I was accosted by an officious Manager of Events who had a thick French accent: “’Allo! May I assist?”

“I’m your event tonight,” I said, and gave him my name.

“In that case, I have a suite for you, courtesy Mr. Smythe-Bigge of the Bigge Advertising Agency. He has arranged the room for two nights with a note of *merci* for your hard work.” His smile lubed my psyche. A bellman took hold of my tux and the manager handed him my key. We hurried to the elevator bank. The bellman inserted my key into the top floor button. But where the hell *was* he?

The bellman escorted me down a short hall, opened the door, and I entered a lavish, decadent suite with burning fireplace that dominated the living room. Silver candelabra crowned the mantel. Mozart dripped from speakers discreetly placed throughout handcrafted ceilings. On the walls hung original artworks with small brass plaques marked “on loan from.” A dining room, wet bar, two bedrooms, and two sunken-tub bathrooms begged for a banana peel. The bellman apologized for a maid who was still tidying up.

“That’s fine,” I said, and tipped him. Then he left.

I gazed out the window and thought about the city and my place here. From the kitchen, I heard ice clinking into glasses. I couldn’t question the service in this five-star hotel. Then I felt another presence. On the dining room table behind me, sitting on ornate lace doilies, on a silver serving tray, were two glasses of scotch on ice. A bottle nestled in behind them. I thought this maid knew a lot. I picked up a glass and drank.

The maid’s head popped out from the kitchen. “Will there be anything else?” She asked.

I gagged as Ric-in-drag faced me. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “What do you think?” he said. “The carpet’s new. Don’t spit up!”

“What are you doing?” I said. *“Dressed like that!”*

Ric frowned. “Doing? We’re putting on a show!” he said.

“Where’d you get the the – ?”

“Costume?” Ric said, “I got it from Bud!”

“Bud moonlights as a maid at the Waldorf?”

“No, but his mom does,” he said, and sucked down his scotch. “She copped the biggest maid’s uniform she could and sewed it up to my specs. I think she did a pretty good job.” Knees together, he thrust his hips forward, picked up the silver tray, balanced it on his right hand, and said, “Champagne? Caviar? Colonoscopy?”

It was your basic dark dress cut to just above the knees, with collar, and apron at the waist. Black leggings slimmed his legs. He had accessorized a red Tina Turner wig with a white maid’s cap. The eyebrows were plucked, eyelashes thickened, and “All-Day-Starlet” pink lipstick spread over the lips. Marine-blue, half-moon plastic earrings hung from each ear. Thoughtfully, he had stuck a pencil over the left one. He’d finished it off with horn-rimmed glasses.

“Meet Consuela!” He said. “It says so here on my name tag. Also, I’m in low heels because I don’t want to be too tall. What do you think of the digs? I gave them your credit card number. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t have, but I have to change later and we’ll need a place to escape to when all hell breaks loose.” Then, he got serious. “Listen Hal,” he said, “I need the keys to the projection booth. Bring them to me in ten minutes at the utility closet to the right of the podium. I’ll take care of everything else. I’ve already placed everybody that needs to be placed. We’ll have an army of allies out there in the best spots. You babysit Nussie and the King, and try to act as surprised as everybody else. There’s a good chance, love-of-my-life, that you could make it through this without the least bit of harm coming to your pretty little career. What’s the matter?”

“I’m cold.”

He put down the silver tray and turned off the air conditioning. He took me in his arms and touched his forehead to mine. The smell of some cheap perfume made me sneeze. I grabbed his hands.

“Watch it, my nails aren’t dry.” He poured two more glasses of scotch. We toasted the suite which, if we were lucky, we might see later. There was less than an hour before the cocktail bars opened upstairs.

“Where’s ‘HAMLET THE SECOND?’” I said.

He handed me his videocassette. “The label looks the same as yours,” he said, “but they’re actually different. Our logo says, ‘Swag’s Stage and Opera Company.’ Yours says ‘Vidpost.’ Whatever you do, don’t mix them up.”

I said I wouldn’t.

“Just remember,” he said, “it’s happened before. And watch the cocktailing.”

He left and I showered. I got into the tux, and shot up to the scene-of-the-crime-to-be one floor above, tapes in hand.

Inside the ballroom, workers finished prepping the lights and testing the sound. Service people filled water glasses and folded napkins. I found Trish as she hopped off the stage from behind a 40 foot projection screen opposite the dais.

“They can’t get the screen back up for some reason. It’s jammed.”

“Leave it down,” I said.

“Holly says it looks ‘unsightly.’ It needs to be up during the dinner and then down for the screening.”

“I’ll talk to Holly.” What the hell did Holly care? With her feelings about the sale to the Germans, why was she here at all anyway?

“Is that the tape?” Trish said, pointing to the cassettes in my hand. “Why two?”

“One’s a safety.”

“They’re different.” She said, studying the labels. “You made dubs at two different places?”

“A precaution,” I improvised.

“Why?”

“You never make ‘show’ dubs at the same facility. It’s like putting a master and a safety dub on the same plane! If the plane goes down, they’re both lost. So what have I always told you: we send ‘separate flights, separate air bills.’ Remember?”

“Okay, fine!” She said. “I still don’t get why!”

“Because I’m anal, okay?”

“Really? Have you checked them?”

“Just about to,” I said.

Just then, Lenore Shears strutted in with a little boy in tow. She looked stunning in a formal yellow satin gown and angora wrap. I wanted to go to her, but I had to get up to the projection booth.

I hustled upstairs to the booth and knocked. The projectionist opened the door. “It’s open, dude! Didn’t you hear me?”

“I thought it’d be locked,” I said.

“It’s never locked. Why would you lock a projection door? This is a hotel. Who’re you?”

“I’m Hal. I have your show reel.”

“I’m Ollie,” he said, and grabbed both tapes. “Two reels?” he complained, “what the hell’s this? They told me ten minutes.”

“There’s only one show reel,” I said. “The other’s a back-up.”

“So it makes no difference which one I use?”

“Use this one,” I said, indicating the cassette with the “Vidpost” label.

Instantly, he grabbed the *other* cassette with the Swag’s Dubs label.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“We’re going to run a rehearsal, if that’s okay with the brass.”

“Sure, but use this one!” I said, and shoved the Vidpost-labeled tape at him.

“Make up your mind. You said the tapes are the same.”

“I don’t want you to run the actual show reel until it’s time,” I said.

“Pick the tape I’m going to run and leave it parked in the *playback* machine there!”

I told him to rehearse with the tape with the Vidpost logo. Then, I left.

Downstairs via intercom, I ordered Ollie to run the rehearsal. I watched as King Malcolm’s tribute reel played while I did sound and video checks.

“All good,” I said into the intercom.

A double click from his end indicated that he had heard me.

“Now, Ollie,” I said, “put in the other tape, and don’t touch anything until you get the cue from me and nobody else!”

A second double click signaled his acknowledgement.

I located Ric-as-Consuela in the utility closet and jumped in with him.

“I hope we’re not going to have any problems with that projectionist,” I said.

“Why?”

“He doesn’t like to take orders.”

“Did you get the keys?”

“I didn’t have to. The projection room door is unlocked. It’s always unlocked.”

“I *need* the keys! The plan’s not going to work unless you follow instructions.”

“Christ! Maybe if -- ”

“I want the keys! I have to keep him *out* of the booth while ‘HAMLET’ is playing.”

“But?”

“Do as I say!”

“Goddamn it, you never let me in on the plans! If it hadn’t been for me working 60 hours --”

He took hold of my shoulders. “Hallie!” he said, “go get the keys to that projection booth.”

“I thought you needed a key to get in, *not keep him out!”* I only had to look into those eyes. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll try. By the way, the projection screen’s broken. I don’t suppose you know about that?”

He sat down onto a package of paper towels, took off his shoes, and straightened the stockings which had bunched up at the toes. “Do you have to know everything?” he asked. “Can’t I have one or two surprises without everybody shooting off their mouths?”

“When Holly Hedlunden grabs my boutonniere and tells me to put the fucking projection screen up during the ceremonies, I’m going to *have to put the projection screen up during the ceremonies!*”

“What does she care?”

“She says it looks ‘unsightly.’“

“Figure it out!” he said. He stopped playing with the stockings and stared at me. “You can thank whatever advertising god you pray to that you only had a few years with the King. The rest of us weren’t so lucky.”

“Can I have the screen raised or not?”

“No, you can’t!” Ric stood up. He stumbled in the heels as he yanked a chrome pocket flask out from inside a lacy pink garter belt hidden under his skirt. “The screen stays *down*!” he said. “If there’s a problem with Holly, give her this since the cocktail bars don’t open for another 17 minutes.” He shoved the flask into my coat pocket and patted it gently. “It’s all working fine.” He kissed me on the cheek. “Who loves you?” He said. His Caribbean Sea-colored irises sank me.

So, I hightailed back up to the projection booth. The door was wide open and Ollie was nowhere. The tapes, the equipment, everything was out in the open. I crept in, spotted his keys on a big key ring sitting next to a vodka bottle, and grabbed them. Out of breath, I flew back downstairs and handed them to Ric. He tossed them in the trash.

“What did you do that for?”

“Why would I need keys?”

*“You just fucking said that you wanted the projection room keys so you can lock out the projectionist!”*

He shook his head. He knew my deed was the most heroic, most mutinous act I had ever committed. He pronounced every word slowly: “Honey, I’m locking the projection room door from the *inside*, okay? I don’t want him to be able to get in, or have any keys on him that might interrupt us. Okay?”

“Oh. Well. You didn’t say that,” I said, sheepishly.

He patted my head.

Rumpled, sweating, and dealing with the word “honey,” I returned to the ballroom. Holly spotted me and threw out her arms. *“Hal!”* She said.

“Holly! Hi!” I said as she threw her arms around my waist. She melted. It was probably the first decent physical contact she’d had since the Bicentennial. “Boy, do I need you tonight,” I oozed. “I am *so* stressed. Here, have one with me?” I took out the flask and poured two neat drinks into the nearest empty wine glasses.

“I wanted to ask you about that ugly screen,” she said.

“You wouldn’t believe everything that’s gone wrong,” I interrupted. “Christ! They get you into a position of trust, and then they throw everything else at you like you’re a Laker girl! I can’t deal with any more crises. Cheers!”

She downed her drink. An inner glow emerged. “You’re on the dais, aren’t?” She said. “Let’s sit together.”

“But the seats are assigned,” I replied.

“Just switch them. What difference does it make?”

“You organize that.”

“Why Hal,” she said, taking my wrist, “that’s about the nicest invitation. I’ll do just that.” She grinned and hoofed away with the stateliness of a pre-lawsuit Leona Helmsley.

Momentarily, the ballroom erupted. Guests arrived. Bartenders opened their bars. Hors d’oeuvres parted the crowd like Brando parted his critics. By 7pm, 1500 of New York’s wealthiest, swankiesthaut monde arrived. Politicians, city planners, real estate moguls, lawyers, doctors, writers, celebs, celeb siblings of actors, you name it, all gathered and greeted each other with kiss-kiss, hug-hug.

Lloyd Nussbaum tapped me on the shoulder. He was with two dour-looking German guys who could have been Helmut Kohl’s first cousins. “Hal,” Nussie said, “you have done quite the job pulling this together tonight.”

“Thanks, Lloyd,” I said.

“I want you to meet our friends!” he said. He stepped back and placed a friendly arm on the back of the first German. “Hal Burke, I’d like you to meet Klaus and Heinrich Sonnenschein.”

“How do you do?” I said, and shook hands.

“Hal’s our in-house producer,” Lloyd gushed. “He’s quite the talent. He produced and single-handedly edited Malcolm’s tribute reel for tonight.”

“We are very excited,” Klaus said in a thick Berliner accent.

“Yes,” Heinrich said, “we believe the success of the Bigge Agency is attributed to the people like you who have made it great. ‘People’ are always the most important asset at any company.”

“Optimists,” said Nussie.

“They don’t call us ‘das Sonnenschein Bubes!’ for nothing,” Klaus chuckled. His moon-shaped abdomen bounced with delight. At least Heidi, our Bavarian nurse, had job security with the Sunshine Boys.

“Hal!” An all too familiar voice chirped. “Oh, Hal!” As I turned from them, I stared into the plastic nose and the lustrous eyes of none other than Bonnie Shears’s sister, Lenore. Her little boy in tow was three. “Hi, doll,” she chimed, “my darling Hal! It’s so good to see you.” She laid a wet one on my chin. The sweat from her glass dampened my elbow as she held onto me. The white angora wrap draped from her arm. It left little hairs on my tux. “I want you to meet someone” she said. She took the little boy’s hand and placed it in mine. “Henry,” she said, “meet an old friend!”

I imploded slightly, but maintained. “Hello, Henry,” I said, “and what’s your last name?”

“It’s ‘Shears,’ asshole!”

The little boy had auburn hair, brown eyes, some freckles, and a smirk which looked familiar.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“He’s mine,” she replied. “I couldn’t find a sitter tonight. We’re on the dais, of course! I was going to invite you to join. I thought you might like to spend some time with us.”

“Wow!” I said, “sorry, Lenore*.* I’m running the show, so I have to be down here.”

She squeezed my forearm and glared at me playfully. “It’s only right I should be up there, don’t you think? Even if you don’t use my agency as much as you used to.”

I glanced around to see if Holly was watching. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a maid’s outfit bumping through the crowd carrying drinks. Only this server was not Ric. It was Felice. She eyed me like a traitor. She brought up a tray of Cosmos and stuck it under my chin.

“Cosmopolitan?” She asked.

“Sure,” I said. I grabbed one and shooed her away with the hand that *wasn’t* being crushed in Lenore’s death grip.

“You *are* mad,” Lenore squeaked, “just because I’m successful now. Aren’t I the reason you got your job back in the first place?”

“I don’t know, Lenore. Are you?”

“Well,” she said, sucking her straw, “I only wanted the best for you, my little straight arrow.”

“You wanted Malcolm’s account.”

“We both got what we wanted.”

“At whose expense?”

She threw back her free hand, and guffawed that embarrassing guffaw which had made her so forgettable in the beginning. “If you’re talking about Ric,” she said, “he did it to himself.”

Her time was up not only for then, but in the grander scheme. “Can I ask you a personal question?” I said.

“If you want to have dinner, check with Nivea, my assistant.”

“Why did you lie?”

“Lie?”

“What did Ric ever do to you, besides the Black Forest Cake incident at Gallagher’s that would make you want to ruin him?”

She pouted. She shook the ice in her glass, tipped it up to her mouth, and drained the drink. “He rejected me.”

*“What?”* I said. “Ric couldn’t blow your dress up with an air hose.”

“It’s the truth!” She defended, “I had a crush on him from the start. You don’t believe me? I found out what a cad he was! Even though I’m not sorry, I should probably say ‘I *am* sorry,’ since you were involved too. I didn’t mean to get you fired along with him. It just happened. That’s why I went to such extremes to get you your job back.”

“So you’re the one that screwed us with the cow commercial?”

“I did a favor. That’s all. That I got some revenge out of it was dumb luck.”

“You didn’t know anything about video masters and black and white work prints.”

She bit into her lower lip.

“Whoever helped you,” I said, “and he had to have been working in the traffic department, or had to have been some network switcher or something, he didn’t have to have an engineering degree. I hope you made it worth his while.”

“That was years ago. My alliances have only gone up.”

“With your prices.”

“We grow.”

“Some get cut off early.”

“Like Ric?”

“Especially Ric.”

“He’s a fag!”

I emptied my drink into her cleavage. It was involuntary and surprised me to see all that red stuff seep down through all that yellow silk. That Cosmo was bigger than I thought. Even weirder, she acted as if nothing had happened. Her eyes darted back and forth. She craned her head to see if anyone had seen. Casually, she flung the angora wrap around her shoulders and let it hang down her middle to cover the mess. She grabbed little Henry’s hand and shook the back of her head. She jutted her plastic nose into the ballroom air. “You’re probably still his friend?” she said. “Is that possible? Otherwise, why would you take such offense? How else could you know?”

“That you lied to me?”

“You’re finished,” she said, “I’m going make sure you’re finished. By the time I’m through with you, Hal Burke, you’ll be cutting mass-market ‘How to Drive a Truck’ videos in Montana!”

“To paraphrase Tallulah Bankhead,” I said, “’that’s what I love about you, Lenore! You have absolutely nothing to say and you go right ahead and say it!’”

She put her hand up to her mouth and gasped. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” she said. “Are you *sleeping* with the enemy, Hal? You don’t have any of the usual bimbos with on your arms, and everybody knows what a cunt hound you are!”

“The only enemy I ever slept with was you.”

“Better me, than Ric.”

“Better Ric, than his father.”

She dumped the rest of her ice onto my shoes and spun away. She took hold of little Henry’s hand and they left.

“Mummy?” Henry said, “why did he throw his drink on your boobs?”

“Shush! It’s what people do!”

Off flounced the smartest blonde I ever knew.

The next arrivals caused my mouth to drop. It was like I had zoom-lenses in my eyes. Entering were my mom and dad. “Fuck!” I bumped and nudged to get to them. Mom had had her hair done and was wearing a formal. Dad wore a tux. Right away, they noticed me and waved.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hallie!” Mom said, “good Lord, we haven’t seen you in a tux since prom night!”

“You look like a movie star, son,” said Dad.

“Who invited you?” I gulped.

“Ric,” Mom said.

“He called us to say that we should be here for the festivities, not to mention the free chicken, not to mention the open bar. He put us up in the Helmsley Palace. Nice place!” Dad said.

Then, Mom showed me their invitation. “I think we’re at table 47.”

I looked around. Table 47 was away from the stage and in back. “Good. That’s a great vantage point. Follow me.”

In the next moment, a giant cheer burst within the room, and the guests took to the sides to make way for the power, the pageantry, the sanctimony, the divinity of His Royal Highness, Malcolm the First, King of Madison Avenue Advertising. A 16 piece orchestra played *“Fanfare for the Common Man”* as he paraded in and took his seat on the dais.

After I seated Mom and Dad, and made sure they had drinks, I spotted Lenore whispering in Holly’s ear. Holly caught my eye. With due appreciation, I grinned as she shoved Lenore off.

Nussie was the first speaker and MC. He stood at the podium with a jocular demeanor. From my perch, I could see at least two state senators, the governor, the mayor, and sea of luminaries. “Ladies and gentlemen,” Nussie said. “Senators, Governor, Honorable Mayor, distinguished guests, clients, and colleagues: it is with uncompromised gratitude that I am here tonight to share with you this tribute to a man who not only can be considered the epitome of success in his chosen field, but who is a walking testament to the American Dream, as we shall see in a brilliant display of the audio/visual arts.”

I gulped again.

“The man I speak of is a man of incalculable genius. A war hero in his native country, a shining beacon throughout a remarkable career here, a loving father, a true philanthropist, indeed a man who stands above us all with no equal, yet who is also, which is no surprise for those of us who know him, a humble man. He is someone that I have been fortunate enough to call ‘my friend’ for over 45 years. With unfathomable appreciation and the warmth of a lifetime, it is only fitting that tonight we honor you, Sir Malcolm Anthony Smythe-Bigge!”

Applause, applause. The audience rose in admiration. It was about that time that I took a longer look at the orchestra conductor. From the back, I would not have suspected, but as he stood there clasping his baton in the dimmed light, hands crossed elegantly in front of him, I saw that it was Crandall (Creeper) Benoit!

As the spotlight hit him, King Malcolm stood and waved. No smile or hint of Nussie’s characterization was evident. He was the same stiff, formal, elegant stone of a man with the look of someone who might just as well say, “lick my boots!”

I looked past the King to the Sunshine Boys who waited patiently, but I could see they were ready to eat. As the applause continued, they seized the opportunity and tackled the salads.

“And now, before we continue, I would like to invite everyone to dine with us, have a drink, sit back, relax, enjoy the music, and I will be back with you in a bit.”

As Nussie sat down next to the King, Creeper began an orchestral tribute to Bob Marley.

**XIII. WAR**

For the next 45 minutes, the sounds of flatware, dishes, and clinking glasses reverberated, but I was too nervous to eat. I had grabbed a seat near my folks, but not at their table. An obese waitress squirreled in behind me and poured more wine. Violently, she plowed my seatback with such force, the palm of my right hand splashed into my garlic mashed potatoes. “Excuse moi!” A familiar voice boomed. I looked up as I wiped my cufflinks. “How ‘bout some more grape juice, honey?” Jo Berwick winked at me. I didn’t dare let on that I knew her.

“No! Thanks!” I said. Jo tugged affectionately at the back of my hair. Then, she continued to part the aisle, splashing wine. She went to the dais and served Klaus Sonnenshein while Klaus flirted with Lenore, who sat next to him. Then Jo reached down and surreptitiously pinched Lenore’s butt. Lenore popped up and peeped. She slapped her napkin to her mouth. Klaus nuzzled his shoulder and winked at her. Unsurprisingly, she winked back.

As tables were cleared and coffee was poured, I couldn’t control the sinking feeling. I started to tremble.

Nussie rose. He tapped his wineglass with a spoon. His gesture was mimicked throughout the ballroom. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “thank you. I was thinking the other day that there are many ways to tribute someone: long speeches, gold watches, great quotes, and sometimes awards. While each of these established venues is worthy in its own right, we felt that tonight we wanted to try something new, something that has not before been experienced quite this way. Tonight, we have reinvented what it means to pay tribute to someone. Tonight, we bring you a presentation so spectacular in concept, so pointed in truth, so colorful its prisms, that we believe you will be awed, and even ‘*blown away*’ by its inventiveness. We invite you to experience our gratitude for the unmatched career and remarkable life of our colleague and friend, Sir Malcolm Anthony Smythe-Bigge!”

Applause thundered, spotlights caromed, and Nussie nodded at me. It was time to tell the projectionist to *roll tape!* So I stood and approached the little intercom button. As I glanced at Table 47 and Mom and Dad, Mom coyly waved her nappy from the side of her cheek. I replied with a little wave from under my armpit. I was drunk and out of control. The distance between my chair and that intercom button seemed farther away than the moon. Mine alone was the finger of fingers. I might as well have pointed it at a big red button somewhere inside the Pentagon, signaling Armageddon. What had I been thinking? How could I have allowed myself to approach this ridiculous brink? Was this what God had in mind when he created this finger and attached it to the innocent baby’s hand while still inside the womb? But God doesn’t destroy. This was *my* choice. I was man: weak, confused, fractious, and a bully with ego and bile, eager to trounce, hungry to feed, horny past redemption. I heard the cackles of creepy, ooky, horned, and lapping devils. Earthbound, my future was about to be eclipsed by Ric’s revenge on his father, a revenge that wasn’t even *mine!* Yet I had embraced it. I was no longer Heaven’s child. I had re-created myself through Ric. It was his fault! He had forced me out of my closet where I had always been safe and warm! He had turned me into a zombie, and that zombie had a finger, the instrument of destruction which now, inches away from that intercom button, would damn my corporate soul to the far side of Madison Avenue Hell forever. I hesitated. “Wait a darn minute!” I said to myself. I had *not* been born for a blanket of corporate security. I had been born for *show business!* And if the audience wanted anything tonight, it wanted a *show!* So then I thought, “*What the fuck? There’s always California!”*

“Roll tape!” I blurted into the intercom.

Creeper threw up his baton, tapped the stand, and ominous music and sound effects, like those from a horror film, echoed into the ballroom. I backed away like the Judas that I was, and slinked into the shadows. Mom and Dad looked like they were enthralled. The lights dimmed. A pallid fog crept from beneath the curtains and screen. It swirled ghoulishly, wafted into the audience, and clung to the ballroom floor. The curtains parted from behind the projection screen and revealed two 35 foot wind machines which began to spin, spewing more fog into the ballroom.

The “HAMLET THE SECOND” video began. The first shot set the scene: a rocky coastline on a stormy, foggy night. Spooky lighting effects hurled around. The sound effects boomed. Lightning flashed. Thunder crackled. Three horrific-looking witches danced and chanted around a bubbling, frothy pot of God-knows-what as the following title appeared over the scene: *“PLACE: A promontory in Denmark, four and twenty years AFTER the death of Prince Hamlet”*

The title card faded out. The first character appeared. It was an ugly witch called Witch #1. She hobbled into a close-up and spoke in breathy, eerie squeaks. *“The three of us again now meet, in thunder, lightning, fog, and sleet!”*

Someone in the audience pointed to the screen. “Look! That’s Bonnie Shears!”

Lenore’s face flushed.

Witch #2 joined Witch #1 and spoke: *“Eyes, eyes, transmute thy sight, through the ooze of witches’ night!”*

Witch #3 wheezed, *“Nose, affix thy fleeting sense, to smell the blood of past offense!”*

Witch #1 knocked Witch #2 and #3 away. Then, she said, *“Ears, drink the sound of madman’s cries, who knows not whence his brother dies!”* She was joined, in unison, by her weird sisters, *“Double, double, toil and trouble! Fire burn and cauldron bubble!”*

They cackled hysterically and cavorted like down-home country hags at a demonic square dance, accompanied by Creeper’s fiddle.

The King stirred in his chair. Crassly, he slapped Nussie on the arm with the back of his hand. Unbelievably, Nussie made no move to stop it, but only placed a firm grip on the King’s arm. Was he thinking that this was part of it? The dais was stunned. Everyone’s jaws, with the possible exception of the Sunshine Boys, who seemed to enjoy it, hung limp. Overhead lights strobed. The wind machines kicked up a small cyclone. They blew up tablecloths and hurled carnations out of their centerpieces. Flowers whizzed across the governor’s table, to the mayor, to the two state senators, and on into the laps of wives. Creeper’s dark, musical opus grew loud and foreboding as the witches spoke in unison:

*“From a swarthy dead monk’s cloister, add a Rocky Mountain oyster!*

*Eye of lizard, horse’s blinker, claw of rat, and chicken sphincter!*

*A name of old is a name to reckon, so mix it well, and have him beckoned!”*

*Thy name of old is now anew! Appear before us, Hamlet Second!”*

Somebody, can’t say who, turned up the wind machines. Dresses shot up the legs of models. Men forgot their wives and held down hairpieces. One woman in a pearly turquoise gown tried to get up and leave, but was blown back onto a dessert cart. Malcolm threw himself into the fray. Nussie tried to restrain him, but the King said, “Get away from me! What the hell is this?” the King railed at no one in particular. He grappled with the podium microphone. His voice boomed. The microphone squealed and hissed. “Where’s my tribute reel? Who’s in charge in this goddamned place?”

He might as well have shot himself in the foot. Reaction was bad enough, but when the audience heard this, women covered their ears and politicians broiled with indignation.

“Malcolm! This is outrageous!” The mayor protested. An errant sterno can bonked him on the back of the head.

The Sunshine Boys threw down their napkins, still chewing chicken legs. Heinrich pounded his fist on the table. “Enough! I say, enough!” A buttered green bean slid down one of his many chins.

Creeper silenced the music. The busboys turned down the wind machines. On the projection screen, the image of the Three Witches gave way to the sepia photo of Uncle Terry, which Grams had given to Ric.

An ever-calm voice drowned the protests. Unmistakably, it was Ric’s voice, yet it sounded unearthly: *“Malcolm!”* It was eerie and worthy of Ric. It captured the undivided interest of the battered audience. A pall fell over the room as the stage fog belched. *“Malcolm!”* it repeated, *“where is my King?”*

The witches’ howling, like the sound of mad dogs, echoed from the wings.

The King grasped the mic. The sound of his wheezing over the loud speakers only added to the freakishness as the wind machines subsided.

*“Malcolm! Thy beloved brother has come to visit thee this night, the night of thy most deserv’d tribute!”*

Creeper’s violins quivered.

*“Malcolm, King Malcolm,”* said the voice, *“thy friends have given this evening generously. These are thy loved ones! Could they discourage such a momentous discourse ‘twixt thee and he who hath loved thee at least as much as they and for so long?”* The voice turned to a growl. Its obstinate conceit defeated all other sounds in the ballroom. Its timbre underscored Malcolm’s disaster and fanned the fires of his rage.

Malcolm was stuck. Shaking, he squeezed the podium microphone. “What is this?” he pleaded, furtively.

“What do you think a ghost desires most? Might he be hungry that you would offer him food to stuff in a belly he has naught of? Might he be cold that you would give of thy coat to warm his skin long eaten away? Might he need coin to purchase his way into a heaven that has shut its gates upon his stained soul, a soul cut down within

budding appetites and juvenile quirks, misdeeds mewling at him, pawing at the backside of his conscience, eternally prompting him that he has no redemptive years to spend, no apologies, no chance of rapprochement with friends, family, God? What think ye a ghost desires most, beloved brother?”

Somebody said too loudly, “I didn’t know Malcolm had a brother!”

The room watched the King. If eyesight had form, little daggers, like miniature heat-seeking missiles, would have launched from every table.

*“Captain, my Captain!” Said the voice, “all present here look to thee! Steer not for the reef, on whose barbed, distended lies destruction waits. But grasp thy tiller, and with thine eyes on thy wake, press on towards the truth!”*

A bead of sweat dribbled over Malcolm’s right ear and cascaded down his jaw. He fished into his coat pocket for notes like a politician whose prompter had gone out. “This country, my dear *friends,*” he said, sardonically, “like our agency, was built by men of purpose!” He struggled with his reading glasses.

*“Strange, coming from an Englishman who sells out to Germans,”* the ghost accused. *“You could care less about this country.”*

Malcolm said, “How can I know who tries to embarrass me or browbeat you, dear friends and colleagues.” A host of hisses and protests rose up.

“Let him speak!” the governor enjoined with raised arm.

Malcolm stumbled on, tripping over his own rhetoric. “We are all foreigners in this country,” he said. “The Nazis, once our enemies, are now our friends.”

Klaus and Heinrich were in the dark, so I couldn’t make out their reactions.

*“Germans!”* Nussie said.

“Excuse me, Germans!” Malcolm said, and reeled from the podium angrily.

*“What destiny, Malcolm, is worthy born of fratricide?”Said the voice.*

Antic protests shot through the ballroom like New England hail. Malcolm’s red-faced presentiment strangled him. He stuttered. The governor’s face tightened.

*“What becomes a dead man most?”*

The projection screen rose up revealing Ric in a pool of light. No longer hotel maid or male stripper, but as Prince Hamlet: in white shirt and black trousers. He approached the audience. Calmly, his eyes drifted past the 1500 stares and across to the podium. “Hello, Father!” As in a farce, the faces of the audience swiveled en masse from one side of the room to the other. Upon seeing him, Malcolm stiffened. He threw his glasses down with a 6-channel stereo clunk.

Ric strolled to the edge of the stage, staying in his key light. “I may be wrong,” he said. “If I am, in front of this assembly I will fall to my knees, give you the fealty you have been denied, and say I’m willing to return to my exile. But before that happens, I’m here one last time to plead for the truth, not in my name, but in the name of your brother.”

There was the sound of an upright piano. A little bell tinkled. Ric stepped to the side, the stage lights morphed to a greenish hue, which lit up more fog. Felice emerged. She was dressed like Uncle Terry: green plaid suit, matching vest, and bowler hat, which she tipped to the music. She held the original, hand-written, plastic-protected manuscript of Terry’s “HAMLET THE SECOND.” Bravely, she danced across the stage, using the manuscript as her partner. As the music wound down, she sidled up to Ric and shared his key light. There, she slammed the script on the stage. The amplified *boom* startled everyone.

I hid in the shadows behind Mom and Dad. With their attention totally fixed on Ric and Malcolm, Mom nodded her head.

“This evening is over!” The King said.

“The evening,” Ric said, “is over when your friends leave, which they are free to do at any time. But something tells me they might like to stay and bear witness.” Not a chair rustled. “Your statute of limitations is up. Nobody is going to arrest you for being a bad father*,* husband, or son. But before God, your friends, colleagues, and your family, we think that you should reveal the truth.”

“What *family?*” the King scowled, “a dowager mother? An indolent ex-wife who bleeds my company with her binges and her hustlers! An ingrate daughter who only wants to hand over her bequest to a convent! A pagan son who wields his rebellion in my face like pink underwear at gay pride on Christopher Street! You call that a *family?*”

Ric grinned, “you love us so much.”

Malcolm withdrew into a half-shadow.

“This is your family,” Ric said, “your retard, your whore, your nun, and your fag. By the way, your daughter, the nun, would have been here, but she’s busy building an AIDS hospice.”

Apprehensive giggles echoed.

“This is your life, your tribute, your moment in time,” Ric said, and stepped aside. The big screen descended again. Creeper’s music started. High on the 40 foot projection screen, appeared the faces of Queen Barbara and Princess Bips. Their testimonials began:

“Malcolm, you *shit,*” said the Queen, “I want a divorce.”

“Father, I’m sorry to say this,” added the Princess, “but I may be a lesbian, too.”

The tapes had been edited in such a way that their statements were not heard in their entirety, but only with certain key words like *malice, irreconcilable differences, spousal abuse,* and on and on. It may not have been totally fair, but this was the moment that Malcolm, for me, became human. After all the versions, the meetings and editing, through all of Ric’s planning, and with the King’s execution at hand, I never once disbelieved that Malcolm was guilty. I had always *known* the he was guilty. But, I was beginning to think the most heinous crime committed by the most impenitent criminal on death row deserved less of a punishment than this sad old guy who stood, publicly sweating like Nixon, behind that podium.

Volume was lowered while the images continued to play. Ric’s key light rose so that he could be seen, and he addressed the crowd. “Honorable guests,” he said, “ladies and gentlemen, an ‘accident’ happened many years ago to his brother, my uncle. It may or may not have been an accident.”

With the fury of a Southern politician, Malcolm pounded his fist on the podium. “I refuse to recant the vilification of my brother. The very thought of his soul in Hell warms me nightly. For all I have done to make life better for you on this, my night of nights, I am punished beyond remedy.”

Felice picked up the manuscript and held it over her head.

Ric said, “Everybody knows your son is gay. I can tell you with great pride what I know about gay people: we have a talent for the truth. We *appreciate* it because most of us are forced to live a lie for so long in our lives that it explodes out into the middle of dinners, and churches, and eighth grade math classes! I denied myself my whole life to you, to my friends, to myself. I promised myself I would never live like that again. If I’m wrong, I will beg your forgiveness, but now I want *you* to face it like I did.”

The heads of the audience swerved to see Malcolm.

“Say this, Father: I, Sir Malcolm Anthony Smythe-Bigge, swear on my brother’s funny play, to you, my friends, colleagues and family, that I had no hand in his death.”

The king faltered. His body gave in to a slight spasm, his head dropped and swayed from side to side. Then, he looked up at Ric. His crimson eyes gushed. “You

sanctimonious prick!” he hissed.”You have done what no other competitor or lifelong enemy could have ever done. You have earned a special place in my estimation of humanity. You have, with my ship, brought me down! So be it! To the employees of my agency, many of whom I have no doubt, *no doubt,* that they allowed this show to go on, I say, ‘fuck you!’ As of this moment, I terminate you! To the Nazis, the Misters Sonnenshein, who have bloated themselves on food and drink at my expense, I say, ‘fuck you!’ The sale is off! To my ‘loving’ family, including a mother whose constitution rivals that of Medea herself, I will not damn myself by allowing the words to escape my lips, no matter how fitfully they ring in my heart! To the rest of you, those I might have mistakenly called ‘friends,’ since you have been such a willing audience, I say, ‘fuck you!’ I am destroyed!” Malcolm strutted from the dais, out of the ballroom, and down exit stairs. Pandemonium burst inside with confusion and chaos in tow. His outraged audience was on its feet, stampeding to the door.

I chased Ric as Ric chased the King. I grabbed hold of his wrist. He panicked. “What’s going on?” I said.

“I fucked up.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Something’s off!” His eyes darted everywhere but into mine, as the mayor and his wife brushed past us.

“C’mon, you got what you wanted.”

Ric screamed at me, “I was wrong, Hallie!”

I tried to hold him back as he charged through the crowd. “You showed everybody who he really is!” I said. “Stop running!”

He turned on me. What I saw in his eyes, I never wanted to see again! “Hal, I don’t think he did it!”

“How do you know?”

“He just said it.”

“Said what?”

“Medea, you ass! He called her Medea. Don’t you get it? Somehow -- I don’t know how -- Grams caused Terry’s accident, and Malcolm’s probably been protecting her all this time!”

I guess I got it. I wasn’t sure. “Why would the old lady kill her favorite son? How could she if she loved him as much as she said? What about Medea? Who the fuck is Medea?”

“Medea,” Ric sighed, “killed her own children in a jealous rage! Christ, you filmmakers! *If you don’t start reading books soon, there aren’t going to be any movies worth seeing!* Didn’t you read Greek mythology?

“I saw ‘CLASH OF THE TITANS.’ Why would Grams kill her own kid?”

“I don’t know! Obviously, it’s a family secret and I stumbled into the wrong closet. It was war. How can I know what people are capable of in war? I’ve never been in a war!” He ran.

I charged the elevators and caught up with him just as the doors closed. Two nameless dignitaries stood silently alongside their wives and their wives’ wigs. Nobody spoke as we reached the first floor. The doors parted. He dashed into the lobby and flew past photographers, camera crews, and itchy, screaming reporters, all waiting for comment on what they had heard was a corporate atrocity upstairs. In three minutes, we were in a cab.

“LaGuardia!” Ric said.

He slumped into the seat. “We’re in a war now!” I said. “Is murder the worst thing you can do to somebody? What about torture, mayhem, disowning, and making your life unlivable unless you lived it his way? He hired Lenore to manipulate the end of your career. He caused you to lose Wynn!”

Ric shook his head. “All those years,” he said, “the hiding, the exile. He didn’t exile me. I did it to myself! Do you know why I didn’t try to get a job with a competitor in the same industry? I actually thought that since he’d killed Terry, he was going to try to kill me too! He could always find me. Only he didn’t kill Terry! My fucking grandmother did!”

“You’re serious!”

“Don’t be stupid. She was the one who knew the mechanics of cars and motorcycles! She loved speed! Also, she just said to us the other day, ‘they would have killed each other eventually! She did it all right! I think she knew how to sabotage Terry’s brakes and she did it in order to keep the two of them from killing each other! In her mind, one son was better than none!” He threw up his arms. “I hope Terry’s resting comfortably.” This was one of those times when Ric was simply Ric. He felt what he felt, he knew what he knew, and there was no changing his mind. We headed forward as fast as he could to Malcolm’s pride and joy, “Bigge Brother.”

After 48 minutes and three near-misses, we screeched to a stop at Ajet, a private airport terminal. I paid the driver and Ric slammed the door in my face: “Wait here!” he said in a tone too much like Malcolm’s.

Outside the gate, beyond a glass door, I could see Malcolm chew on a lit cigar. He stood on the wing of his plane as two mechanics fueled the tank. The King waved his arms maniacally. I moved in, but kept out of sight.

“Godammit!” Malcolm bellowed to the mechanics. But they couldn’t hear with their headphones. “This is not prepared!”

Ric went to him.

“Fuck your souls!” Malcolm reached down to unscrew the fuel hose himself. With a heave like a wild animal, or an addict on PCP, he flung the spewing hose to the asphalt and capped the tank himself. The jet fuel frothed across Ric’s feet until

it came to a stop just below the wing. In seconds, one of the mechanics spotted it and instantly shut off the valve. It was at that moment that Malcolm finally saw Ric. Malcolm sneered. He shoved the abused cigar from the left corner of his mouth to the right. “It’s a good thing I stand here,” Malcolm warned. “If I was there in the gutter with you, boy, you would be dead.”

Ric didn’t recall his eyes from his father, but knelt down. Oblivious to the fuel, he said, “sir, I am sorry!”

Malcolm reveled in the morsel. He removed the cigar from his lips, licked it, and fondled it. “Is this what you do to your boyfriend’s penis? Do you play with it like this? Coddle it in your mouth? You trash! Your name’s not worthy of breath. From this moment, when I refer to you, you shall be known as ‘Trash.’ By that endearment, you shall be known wherever you go, be it the dirtiest little hole in any city you choose! But then, you’re no stranger to dirty little holes!” The King puffed. “How could I have thought you were worthy?” he said, “I gave you everything from the day you were born.”

I showed myself. The King’s gaze fell upon me like hot tar.

“Mister Burke! I might have known!”

Ric saw me.

“So it was you,” Malcolm groaned.

“I’m sorry, sir!” I said.

Malcolm spat a piece of tobacco at Ric. “I will note one thing in your favor: you keep coming back. Ordinarily, that might be worth something. But, it smacks of sadomasochism and frankly, turns my stomach! This is the second time you force me to deal with you faggots! It’s my last!”

“Sir.”

“Here is a life-lesson: when one commits an act as heinous as the one you committed on me, one commits it and accepts the consequences. Never should he open his black heart to remorse for such remorse is wasted, and grins at its victim in contempt. It makes that man worse than the trash I see here. It makes him a coward! So, rise up from your gutter if you can, you fucking coward.”

I watched as fuel soaked into Ric’s pants. He wrapped his arms around himself, as if he was cold, but he wasn’t cold. He drew one foot under him, then the other, and stood. His shadow towered over his father like Gulliver over Lilliput. Even though the opponent was above him, positioned as he was on the wing, Ric’s figure ascended like a colossus. He had had it: “You are one mean son of a bitch!”

The King’s eyes sagged.

“I didn’t come here to apologize for what I *did*, asshole!” Ric said. “I came to say I’m sorry I couldn’t love you as much as I loved my dream. That’s the source of our issue, isn’t it? It wasn’t that I never shared your enthusiasm for advertising, or that I screwed up so many jobs. You could probably care less what I do in bed! The real reason you damned me, the reason we’re here right now, is because I slighted you. I allowed my dream to take precedence over you.”

Out of Malcolm’s downcast mouth, cigar smoke wafted and swirled.

“I wanted to call you ‘father.’ I had you on a pedestal. Now, facing you man-to-man, I realize I must love you unconditionally. You are no longer my leviathan. You’re my father. I’m your son. Neither of us can kill that. I may never have made you proud. But, I got a life-lesson of my own. Like some cruel joke, a man so much like his dad, as I am, given the choice between dad’s way and his own, that man’s a coward if he denies himself. Forgive me, too, for *not* being a coward!”

Malcolm listened. For a second, he looked as though he might climb down and compromise. But, it was not meant to be. Some aggressive, spiteful nerve bit him and took hold. “Get the hell off my runway!” he said.

Ric’s lips parted.

“Get the hell away from my aero plane!”

Ric stepped back.

“For as much as I care, get the hell off this *planet!”* Malcolm yanked the cigar from his mouth, placed it between his forefinger and his thumb, and pitched it at Ric. The jet fuel ignited. I caught a glimpse of surprise in Malcolm’s eyes, as if he didn’t realize what he’d done.

*“Fuck!”* I screamed and rushed to Ric. Helplessly, he squirmed inside a lapping inferno. I threw off my jacket and wrapped him in it. A mechanic took hold of a fire extinguisher and blasted us. But, one extinguisher was one short needed to put out the licking, crawling, white-hot threat that snaked beneath the plane. I dragged Ric to the building, and then went after Malcolm.

Ignoring the warnings of an airport fire marshal, and the squealing sirens of airport police, Malcolm climbed into the jet. In the confusion, I charged past them to get to Malcolm, through the foam and dripping fuel to the plane, as the door was about to be latched. What was Malcolm going to do, taxi through a flash fire? I flung open the hatch. I felt his hand at my throat. The fires’ shadows climbed the inside of the cabin. Orange light from the tarmac lit up the crazed, demonic face that I was now nose to nose with. “He doesn’t know,” Malcolm said, “no one knows! No one was supposed to ever know!”

Horrifically, his eyes became Ric’s. Maybe in fear, I made believe that he *was* Ric.

“What are you talking about?”

“Faggot!” He said, “Terry was a faggot! That little old lady in Connecticut killed Terry because she found out somehow, and wouldn’t stand for it. She knew machinery. It was war. Women knew those things then. She disabled his motorcycle brakes, his master cylinder. She caused him to wreck and be killed! Yes, I hated him for who he was. But, I didn’t kill him. I carried that secret through my entire life. Just like your lover was supposed to keep *his* secret to himself! It’s what *men* do!”

“Not this man!” I said.

Violently, he yanked me to him, ripping open my shirt. “I’m rich!” He said. “I’ll lay the world at your feet. Tonight wasn’t your fault. I will make *you* the next king!”

I threw him backwards into the aisle and tackled him at the knees. He tumbled and clawed at the seatbacks. I grasped his legs and pulled myself on top of him. The best of South Boston street fighting took over. My hands went for his throat, but he hit me. In Southie, when you get hit in the face, it’s not like in the movies where a stuntman instantly falls back. You take it and pound the opponent again, like you haven’t been hit at all. Instead, I doubled up in pain. He slithered out from under me and stumbled into the cockpit. I was about to get up when I stared down the barrel of his .22 caliber pistol. “End of the line, Mister Burke,” he wheezed. “How’s it feel? And from a senior citizen?”

“You wouldn’t!”

His silver fox’s matted hair drooped into his forehead. “I have a life-lesson for you, Henry ‘Hal’ Burke: never dare a man who has nothing left to lose.”

I got up. There was some absurd glimmer in his eyes. I spat in his face. The spittle glommed on and dripped down his cheek. “That’s for using the word, *‘faggot!’* “I said, “I’ll think of something better, later, for what you did to Ric.”

Two firemen burst into the plane. I backed away towards them. “*Get the gun! Get the gun!”* I said.

The first fireman beckoned Malcolm. “Sir! This way.”

Malcolm ignored them. He edged away towards the cockpit, the gun at his side.

“Put it down, sir!” The second fireman clasped my arm and dragged me out. Then, we heard it. King Malcolm had put the pistol to his head and pulled the trigger.

Paramedics, fire engines, police cars, and two helicopters swarmed the terminal. When I got back to Ric, he was on oxygen. He was alive and lucky, but burned and unconscious. They wheeled his gurney towards an ambulance. I was not allowed to ride to the hospital; no gay lovers are. Instead, I was taken to the airport police station and grilled for two hours.

Malcolm had survived. Evidently, he was not as good a shot as he was a pilot or ad-man.

I located Ric at New York Hospital Queens. He was still in the ER. I had to talk my way in, since again, gay lovers at that time had no visiting privileges, especially in the ER. But the sight of my ruined tux and the shock on my face, must have bought me some leverage. I had only a few minutes with him. He was unconscious but in good hands, a cool, understanding lesbian nurse made sure I knew. She coaxed me to go home and come back tomorrow. I kissed him on the forehead and left for the city.

At 1:30am, I stopped at the Helmsley Palace to see Mom and Dad. They opened the door and I fell into Mom’s arms. Dad made nightcaps. I told them everything about Ric and me.

“Dad said, “We wondered how long it would take for you to tell us! We’ve known for a long time,” Dad said, “a very long time. Ever since we met him! But, you left us out of the loop. You edited out the most important part about you!”

I slouched on the sofa, and cradled my drink. “So, you know now,” I said. “I didn’t tell you because really, *I* wasn’t sure! I guess you’ll say it’s my fault since I didn’t fish the right lake. But how does one know where the right lake is?” I put up ten fingers in the air. “Don’t say anything!”

“Ah, c’mon, Hal!” Mom said.

I also told them about Grams the Murderess, and how Malcolm had kept that bad little secret his whole life.”

Dad said, “’He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind; and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart.’”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mom said as she took the last sip of her cocktail, “when the cows come home!”

**APPEASEMENT**

The hospital was freezing. It was Labor Day about a week after the tribute, and I was staying by Ric’s bed. He was going to be fine but there were times I wasn’t sure how fine, since he drifted in and out of consciousness. One day when he was awake, I said, “Did your father ever molest you?”

He picked at the bandage on his head, smirked, opened his eyes, and turned to me. He grinned. “When could my father molest me?” he said. “He was never home!”

You’d think that after everything that had gone down, it might be time for Ric and Malcolm to make their peace. I thought so. Personally, I wished they had chosen more redeemable corners of the boxing ring, since they had pretty much destroyed each other’s lives, and taken down a few careers with them.

With the sale to the Germans off and Malcolm partially brain damaged at his own hand, Nussie was the one everyone looked to. Strange, but as the company attorney, he had no “power of attorney.” But Grams did. She took it upon herself, under separate agreements with Queen Barbara, Ric, and Mother Superior of the Chicago Sisters of Mercy, to “adjust” King Malcolm’s will. I think Nussie decided to agree for the good of the company and his six months left to retirement. Ultimately, Grams retained her home, Queen Barbara buttressed her lifestyle in St. Tropez, and the nuns pretty much did the right thing, citing Ric’s request: they financed the Wynn Keckley AIDS hospice in Soho.

As for Ric’s sister, Sister Barbara Jr., after admitting on tape that she “might” be a lesbian in front of 1500 people that night at the Waldorf, she realized that she couldn’t go through with the additional stress of trying to become “Discalced Sister Barbara Smythe-Bigg” at the Baltimore Carmel. She knew instead she was destined for something else. So Ric put her in charge of caregivers at the Wynn Keckley hospice. She’s really good at what she does, and sometimes you can see her rounding up her day at the bar at Black Sheep Restaurant.

As for the agency, it’s funny when floodgates burst. In this case, truth threatened to drown every dog, including me. We scrambled to higher ground to grab the first hand we saw. The company was in chaos. Nobody knew who was fired and who wasn’t. Ric was still in the hospital, and anyway, he hadn’t been part of the office in three years, so he was a real lame duck. None of us knew what was coming. Opinion circulated for weeks, fanned by the media. This was not a bad thing, since all press is good press. Soon, fewer and fewer calls came in for remarks or comments on the disaster until one day we all woke up and realized we were “old news.” As for our regulars, Lenore and Holly and their teams had greased the domestic and international phone lines 12 hours a day for days on end to maintain the existing client base. They still like to think that it was their work that saved the company. But, there were too many other stories in that audience the night of the King’s tribute which so compellingly paralleled Malcolm’s and Ric’s. Too many identified with one side or the other. To yank business away from us based solely on the events of that night would have been stupid. We held out hope that most of them would come back. Some did.

Ric got better. His body was scarred, but the great face was still there, as was I. (Gay marriage wouldn’t come to New York State until July 24, 2011. But the fact that we had a pretty cool commitment ceremony to each other in 1995 trumped the wait). Then, he took care of business. It was as if, at least with regards to his father, he had become the son Malcolm had always wanted. He took hold of the company and revitalized it. It’s now publicly traded and he’s as rich as ever. We continued to use Lenore’s agency, and added Creeper to the list of vendors. Bonnie and the rest of the “HAMLET THE SECOND” cast got endless jobs. We diversified, producing talk shows and movies of the week. Ric and I found ways to tie-in our clients’ products within the structure of the dramatic stuff. Trifles or not, I was writing and directing, just like he’d promised. We finally produced “HAMLET THE SECOND,” but nobody came to see it. If only Ric had listened three years before.

Then one day, I bumped into Lenore drinking coffee in our cafeteria. She was by herself reading *Variety*, so I poured a decaf and said hello.

“Why, Hal,” she said, “you’re not going to pour that down my cleavage are you?”

There was something playful in her eyes, but I wasn’t sure. “As long as you don’t ruin another pair of my shoes,” I said.

“What do you want?” She said, matter-of-factly.

“This is kind of delicate,” I replied, “but we’ve know each other a long time.”

“Too long!”

“Can I ask you a very personal question?”

She crumpled *Variety* at the corners, expressing pointed frustration. “What?”

“Is there, uh, is there a reason you named your son ‘Henry?’ I mean something that I should know about?”

“Why do you want to know anything about my son?”

I retreated. Here was a Mama Bear! “Oh nothing,” I said, and coughed, “it’s all in my name. Why would you choose Henry?”

She said, “Excuse me, if you don’t mind I’m checking a double truck ad for Ric. I’d like to be alone to concentrate.”

“But!”

*“Alone!”* She said.

So I left her there with her head in the trade magazine, but I was in no mood to let it go. It was all about that night when she said I didn’t need a condom. Knowing Lenore, I smelled entrapment. On the other hand, the thought of my son, if he *was* my son, without a father really upset me. Then, later that day when I told Ric, he laughed out loud. “We’ve been through this! We’ll adopt him! You *know* he’s yours!”

I said, “I *don’t* know he’s mine! We need proof, like a DNA test!”

“Then, get it!” He said.

“How do I get it? She won’t let me near him; especially now, since I’ve shown interest.”

“Oh please, as if you’re a stalker! She takes him to Alfonso, our barber on the fourth floor. Talk to him!”

I hung my head low.

“What’s wrong now?” he said.

“If I get a DNA test and it’s positive,” I said, “it means Lenore wins! She’s proven what an idiot I’ve been. The truth was in my face, I didn’t see it, and I’ll be her little joke for eternity. Frankly, if I was a woman and I’d had sex with some dude named Leon, and then I had a baby named Leon, and Leon himself never asked why the kid was named Leon, then I’d think he was pretty much the dumb ass that I always thought he was, and I wouldn’t let him anywhere near my Leon!”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Now that you’ve gotten completely in touch with your feminine side, I’d like to remind you that this isn’t win/lose. *This is your kid!”*

“I don’t want to lose to Lenore!”

“Let it go, Hal!” He said, “You had your life with her. If you have a DNA test and it’s positive, it means you have a son, and *that’s* a win! Who cares about Lenore?”

“I do!” I said.

“Why?” Ric asked, crawling slowly up the wall.

“Because, she’s his mom,” I said, “and if he *is* mine, I want him to have *a mom* that can get along with his dad!” Ric put his arms on my shoulders. I said, “I’d love him enough that I would do anything, even litigate her, to have him in my life!”

“You sure got a lot of scruples,” he said.

“Scruples are all I got!”

“See Alfonso!” He said.

Then there was King Malcolm. On Ric’s birthday in October, Ric took me to the assisted living facility where the King was recuperating. We drove to Long Island to a secluded, scrubbed, Victorian structure facing the beach. Malcolm was out at the pier. We found him wrapped in a blanket and seated in a beat-up, Adirondack chair. A male nurse sat behind him a few feet away with his head in a book, but with an eye on Malcolm. Ric leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

As I faced the old man, I watched as he looked up into Ric’s eyes. There was a silence cold as the air.

“How are you?” Ric said.

The old man tried to speak, but post-bullet and post-stroke, he stammered, “You did this to me!”

“We did it to each other,” Ric said.

“I have no son!”

“Yes, you do. I’ll always be here for you!”

“Where were you when I was building your empire? Where were you when I was paying for your education? Where were you when you allowed me to be destroyed?”

“And where were you when I was growing up?” Said Ric. “Where were you when I got bullied? Where were you when I fell in love and didn’t know what to do about it? Where were you when I graduated high school? Where were you when my heart was breaking?”

“Please! I taught you better. Everybody finds his own way,” Malcolm said, most somberly.

Ric replied, “Why couldn’t you help me? I could’ve made you proud! Were you afraid I might be good?”

At that, the old man looked up at the gray sky. A storm was coming which might make hail later on.

“How are you doing?” Ric asked.

“How am I?” Malcolm said. “Question is: where am I?” The booming voice had become a forced whisper.

“You’re on vacation,” Ric said.

“Some vacation!” said the King. “No newspapers, no magazines, I got a warden, and I eat with the oatmeal crowd.”

Ric pulled out a Cuban cigar. He checked with the nurse for approval. The nurse brought his book up close to his face, pretending not to see. Ric struck a match, lit up, puffed, and placed the cigar between Malcolm’s fingers.

“If this is appeasement, I spit on it!” the King said.

“It’s okay. I spit on it first!” Ric replied. Then he sat down in the sand next to the King. They shared the smoke. I backed off, strolled to the pier, and didn’t look back.

I litigated about my son and won since the DNA test was positive. Turns out, Lenore was actually waiting for me to take responsibility. When the judge said, “Who is the father of this child?” I said, “I am, your honor!” Then the judge said, “Who is the mother of this child?” And Lenore said, “I am, your honor!” Then, when the judge asked who would be the primary care person of the child, she said, “No contest!” That said, Ric and I got custody and raised him. Then we paid for his school and his camera equipment. Truthfully, we actually raised him with Lenore, competing with her to build his museum experiences, his books, his movie history, his sports equipment, his skateboards, his sneakers, his suits and ties, and his ultimately, his family.

That’s how we came out. What’s amazing is how long it took a bull like me to get to his own private truth, since Life had to drag me, screaming and kicking, from the closet. But once the door opened, I hardly remembered it any other way. The ancient Greeks, I read once, believed in a place where truth is beauty and beauty, truth. I visit that place every night in my lover’s eyes. I’m lucky. Not everybody gets that. We tend to act so disharmoniously with each other. It’s weird that even some pairs of us can get there. Ultimately, I think most people are good. Just like I believe most movies are good. If you look close enough, there’s bound to be something to fall in love with -- if at first you don’t walk out. Of course, you have to be smart enough to pick the right ones in the beginning.