

MAY

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Mostly we talked about who the best songwriter was, because months had passed since John Lennon's *Playboy* interview came out, in which he revealed who actually wrote different parts of different songs, and we had a lot to discuss. I said it had been obvious all along who wrote the songs by who would (as a rule) take the lead vocal on any particular track. You could tell "Eleanor Rigby" was written by Paul, right? "Ob-La-Dee Ob-La-Da." Bouncy, unmistakably Paul. And then Ripley, a huge Lennon-is-better-than-McCartney guy, said the main issue he had with Paul is that his songs were too lightweight, unsubstantial. McCartney always writes about other people, Ripley said. Lennon's songs are all personal. Even dating back to "This Boy." Listen to the pathos. McCartney wrote pop, Lennon wrote songs that revealed how human he was. Maybe, I said, but who can deny the grooves, the creativity McCartney displayed in his work? Can you possibly disregard the infectiousness of "Penny Lane"? And so we went around on this for a hundred miles, and I have to admit, it burned up a lot of the boring stuff between Sacramento and Fresno.

Because the bus is, let's face it, a horrible sweat-soaked naugahyde nightmare of

coughing fits, airborne filth, crazy people talking too loud, gum wads and questionable stains. If I'd had to make the trip alone, I would have left a few days earlier and hitchhiked. But Ripley's companionship made the bus ride tolerable. Even though Ripley could be a clueless ass about most of life, he was an opinionated and intelligent conversationalist.

Ripley and I had caught the bus outside the Sac State commons on a Saturday evening a day or so after classes had ended and our final show had closed. We had both been in graduate acting school there, along with Sue Henley, some skinny fornicator named Mark Sanders, six or seven other people, and Gina. More about her later. Ripley liked to say that after three years of dressing in sweat pants and lying on the floor and *finding our cores*, they gave us our MFA degrees. I figured I would have been far worse off for it, after spending three years of my mid-twenties finding my core but being no further along on a career path, if I hadn't landed this summer job with a major repertory theatre. Ripley had scored the job too, and that's why we were headed down to Santa Maria, to be in the acting company there for the summer. We considered ourselves extremely fortunate to have the work, *any* work, in our line of study. My contract paid me \$1000 for the summer, and I would have been riding an extreme high and lording my fortunes above all else if it hadn't been for the Gina stuff.

Gina and I had met in college back in that decade of wonderment known as the seventies. But now it was all over, college, grad school, the seventies *and* the marriage. We had some good years, Gina and I. I could tell myself I didn't miss her or anything, but I guess I'd be lying. I suppose I was pretty hurt. Everything hurt that last year. I think I hurt because Gina had been so miserable those last few months.

Ripley looked over at me with his eyes lowered. "How you doing?" he asked.

"You've asked me nineteen times," I said.

"You getting nostalgic or anything? Need to talk?"

"Nah."

"Like about why she got the car and you didn't?"

"Because it was hers to begin with."

"Yeah, but... now you don't have a car."

What could I say?

"If you had the car we wouldn't be taking the bus," he said.

"Change the subject," I said. "I don't want to talk about Gina."

Ripley had the seat at the window and he turned his head toward it.

“Do you think she had an affair with Mark Sanders?” I asked.

Ripley looked like he got hit in the head with a football. I swear, his hair stood on end and swayed to the right.

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I think she did,” I said.

Ripley turned to the window again. “There was a rumor I guess.”

I leaned back, depleted. “People were talking about it?”

“Well, just a few people. You knew, didn’t you? Everybody knew. You didn’t know?”

Maybe I had known. I thought of Gina gyrating beneath Mark Sanders’ white, skinny body. I had run the scene over in my head a million times and it brought a familiar lump to my throat.

“Sorry, man. I didn’t think this was new information,” Ripley said.

“No. It’s not. Not new.”

“I don’t know why you want to dredge this up. You’re here. She’s in Minnesota. Your marriage is over. Why don’t you just take that wedding ring off. Let’s put it on a train track or something.”

“Yeah.”

“Huh?”

“You’re right,” I said.

It was a long time before either of us spoke after that, and I knew that thought priorities had shifted, and Ripley was undoubtedly running over the lines of his audition pieces in his head. The auditions the next morning were important. They were for the benefit of the individual directors so they could cast the seven shows that PCPA mounted in repertory over the summer. We had endured two rounds of auditions already just to get into the company. But we had never set foot in Santa Maria, as the audition wagon came to our campus for preliminaries, and the callbacks had been in San Francisco.

PCPA was short for *Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts*, an uncomfortable mouthful of a name worthy of reducing to initial caps for convenience:

Pacific was in the title because that’s where it was: near, at least, to the Pacific Ocean.

Conservatory was the catchall term for the masses of people PCPA recruited over the summer to stoke the fires of their impressive machine. PCPA was headquartered at Allan Hancock College, a community college that allowed its theatre department to balloon into

a producing juggernaut that employed about 150 people during the summer. If you were among the chosen, like Ripley and I were, being a part of the acting company, you had it made, because that's all you did – you acted. But PCPA also needed lots and lots of less fortunate souls to build sets, make costumes, hang lights and do all the behind-the-scenes work so we actors could get all the credit. There was a built-in romance to being a part, any part, of a theatre company. Tech kids clamored for the jobs. PCPA could offer someone a contract of \$600 for the summer and call it a scholarship, and that kid would be happy to throw down a sleeping bag in somebody's garage, live on Top Ramen and weld sets together at 3:00 in the morning. Funny thing is, the same kid would be back the next year, working for \$650.

Performing Arts was another phrase for “crowd-pleasing shows amenable to a wide demographic with the occasional risky artistic gamble.” The menu every year would include two or three venerable workhorse musicals like *The King and I* or *South Pacific*, interspersed with a couple offerings from the eponymous Shakespeare canon, and one or two others which might or might not be contemporary, like *Picnic* or *A View From the Bridge*, or a Shaw, or maybe an Ibsen, and whose inclusion in the lineup would lend a sense of daring and credibility to it all. The musicals were sold out months in advance, and even though the acting company included a plethora of singing talent, the raspy-throated Ripley and I had definitely not been hired to fill hearts with the sound of music. PCPA cast its *lead* roles from a very well-known company in San Francisco called the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), whose actors, at least some of them, summer-vacationed at the farm team in Santa Maria. PCPA offered a way for those actors to stay employed year-round. So all the big roles, the Willy Lomans and the Hedda Gablers and the Stanley Kowalskis, were pre-cast from the ACT company. Ripley and I knew we were hired as ballast, to fill in the chorus, to carry the spear, to fill out the stage picture, maybe to score one or two decent scenes as a featured supporting player if we truly impressed one of the directors. But it didn't matter. For the next four months, we were high up in the food chain. We were working and living among our peers and we were being paid for acting. And that was a great thing.

Santa Maria, it turned out, was a flat, nondescript clearing in a corn patch off the freeway. Squat houses and buildings could gradually be discerned from the greasy bus windows as we headed into the center of town. From what I could see, the place was not radiating as the cultural hub of the Central Coast.

Tire stores, five-and-dimes, places where you could get your tv fixed, Denny's, Sprouse-Reitz...

"Maybe this is just the slummy part of town," Ripley said, hopefully.

But as we collected our backpacks and started hoofing it south to the college, it became evident that each unremarkable single-story block was indistinguishable from the next.

The sun was slanting and casting an oblique orange glow on the olive trees, the ranch-style houses, the oleander bushes; the light getting weaker each block we walked. After twenty minutes we found the college. It was practically deserted. It was summer on the academic calendar, so normal classes had let out, leaving the campus vulnerable to takeover by the actors and technicians, who, apparently, had checked in and dispersed hours before. The theatre building squatted before us, beige and cylindrical, resembling a flying saucer that had landed and burrowed partway into the ground. It was dark and underwhelming. Ripley lit a cigarette. A light wind blew from the west, cool from the ocean and unimpeded by geography or buildings of any considerable size. To the north, sprinklers chirped and whirred and sprayed birdlike plumes of water over quads of green grass. To the south, the manicured lawn gave way abruptly to much higher brown grass, acres of it, that stretched as far as we could see. To the east, we could hear the freeway roar past an embankment. Somewhere on the lawn in front of us, a skinny guy in a camouflage coat and long hair whirled around, karate-chopping an imaginary enemy while screaming: Kick! Mother! Your! Ass!

"You suppose he's the check-in guy?" Ripley asked.

I smiled and looked at Ripley full on, like you look at somebody before you jump out of an airplane. He didn't look back. The smell of onions, still in the ground, wafted in on the breeze. It was the moment of change, the tipping point. I knew, and Ripley knew that I knew, that this was the moment we left our little cocoon of family behind. We had held on to the camaraderie we had felt at State all the time we had been on the bus. But it was over now. Grad school was over, my fucked-up marriage with Gina and the little life we had tried to build in our funky apartment with the lime green bathroom and the walnut-stained cupboards was over. The coffee shop was gone, the classes were gone, even the seventies, those terrible years of enlightenment that had brought us screaming into adulthood, were gone. All the bitching we had done that bonded us close against the outside world had no relevance here, in this corn patch at the end of the continent.

Ripley stepped on his cigarette, as if in acknowledgement of the era's finality. We both hefted our backpacks and walked silently toward our new lives.

The admin office was not in one of the institutional beige buildings of the Allan Hancock ilk but rather was situated in a whitewashed quonset hut stuck like an afterthought behind the security and maintenance facilities. Some stragglers were still getting checked in. There were other actors I could have met, socialized with, and maybe dispelled some tension about the morning auditions, but I didn't feel like doing anything but finding my living quarters and getting some sleep. Ripley and I emerged from check-in about the same time, papers and maps in hand. We were heading in different directions.

"Make me a tape of that Cars album," I said.

"Okay," he said.

"And that Tom Petty one too." *Damn the Torpedoes*. The new one.

"Okay," he said, cocked his chin, and headed off.

It was, according to the route the woman had drawn in blue on the xeroxed street map, a sixteen block walk to the garage apartment I was to share with a married couple. Apparently, as I understood it, the apartment was actually built on *top* of the garage, which surely would have distinguished the structure as being one of the only two-story buildings in town. Santa Maria was subdued in an after-dinner stupor. The sun had set in a cold, white blanket of fog, which was beginning to waft inland. I stopped after eight blocks or so, got my sweatshirt out of my pack and put it on. Every house was a mid-century stucco rambler with a fake brick or slumpstone skirt, blocks and blocks of them, their pastel colors nothing but grey and shadow in the darkening remains of the day. Through just about every picture window I could see the blurry blue rectangle of a tv set through the curtains, or see the cathode ray light bouncing off the dining room walls, or even hear the familiar intonations of Walter Cronkite. I turned down the correct alley and found the correct stairway above the correct two-car garage. Midway up the stairs, a blonde woman was sitting on the landing.

"Yikes," she said. "Hello."

Apparently I startled her. "Hello," I said. "Sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she said.

"Sorry to scare you like that."

"Never be sorry. Sorry is a terrible thing to be. You only scared me because I thought you might have been the landlady and I was about to roll this joint."