



A CHANGE IN FACE

A NOVEL BY MICHAEL CURNES

A C H A N G E I N F A C E

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"IT IS SAID
THAT ALL MEN WEAR A MASK,
AND THAT ALL MEN
PLAY A ROLE IN THIS DRAMA
THAT IS LIFE.
THIS MAY BE.

SOCIAL HARMONY REQUIRES
THAT EVERYONE ASSUME SOME ROLE
THAT MORE OFTEN THAN NOT
DOES VIOLENCE TO HIS INNERMOST
IDENTITY.

ONLY THE RARE EXCEPTION
WHO IS WILLING TO FACE
THE CRITICISM WITH WHICH
HE IS BOUND TO MEET,
WILL REJECT THE MASK
AND INSIST UPON
MAINTAINING
HIS INDEPENDENCE
AS A UNIQUE
INDIVIDUAL."

-Wainright Churchill

For Nathan, **FOR JOEY.**

CHAPTER ONE

Mom always caught me by surprise when she began to cry. No matter how much I prepared against it, she could instantly impose an emotional knot deep within me. -You know, the kind that tugs at your pumping heart leaving you speechless and feeling guilty.

Now my father, as most fathers go, was a different character altogether. I could have waged good money on the hunch that he wouldn't be seized by emotion.

"We're awfully fond of you," he said three days earlier on Christmas Eve. 'Awfully?' I wondered. It would have been a sure-fire bet with unbeatable odds. Sentimentality simply wasn't his style, though in all my childhood years dedicated to understanding the man, I never quite discovered what his style really was.

Krista and Jeff smiled, choking back make believe tears and trying desperately to conceal the horrid fact they had

argued all morning over who was to inherit the coveted guest house bedroom I had just vacated. Something told me, in spite of the heart stains on their sleeves, it wouldn't be too long before they began to miss their older brother. Of course, this sense of loss would most certainly have to follow the untold elation of achieving guest house domain. This I understood though I may have found it somewhat disheartening to accept. What I didn't understand was the enormous expanse of energy diverted to a bedroom, that for all practical argument, should have depreciated considerably when both siblings entered separate state universities the weekend prior. But the twins had always been pampered beyond fathomable rationale and it was best to bow to their whims and assorted tantrums rather than submit to the scorn of the responsible tribunal. Twins were, after all, the pennant of parenthood and I learned long ago that I, though the first, was indeed the lesser novelty.

As for Nebraska, if one last moment of reflection might be extracted, the state seemed little bothered by my impromptu exodus. The heartless January wind begged life from the brittle and crumbling cornstalks as the snow drifted insanely about the barren fields. Farmer McIntosh, our next field neighbor, would have been wise to place his entire acreage in fallow for the long winter season. But the snow came earlier than expected this year, in September, catching everyone unprepared and frankly unwilling to face the predicted eight month offensive. Still,

for what I knew or cared to know about Farmer McIntosh, his crop experience probably didn't much transcend his family plot of potatoes in Northern Ireland. But he'd survive. They all survived, or rather they all existed, however minimal that existence happened to seem to me now.

And so I left the Cornhusker State, with its usual bountiful yield masked by superficial desolation and with all its people shackled by the solitary will to exist.

I waved to giant tinted windows of the airport just as I'm sure my family, well, everyone but my father who couldn't tear his bureaucratic butt out of Washington D.C. long enough to wish me well, waved to the faceless windows of the 737 as it readied for takeoff. The wheels of the industrial bird hesitated to separate from the runway, almost as if deep in secondary thought over my allowance to be finally paroled from Nebraskan Citizenry.

A sense of uncertainty enveloped me as I pondered my destination for the zillionth time. It seemed all my life long friends, family and the security they represented, demanded an explanation for my spontaneous abandonment. I had nothing to say that might offer any comprehension. My customary response of "having found definite direction for the first time in my life," seemed to evaporate before my eyes. I had been so certain that I needed this change and now the only thing of which I

was truly certain, was my own indecision with the matter.

"The University of South Florida...The Great Academic Escape!" I had read, reread and finally memorized the literature a thousand times, but I felt strangely alienated by it now. After all, the only institution I could think of with lesser notoriety had to be the University of Nebraska, from which I had just transferred. Three and a half years, seven semesters and God knows how many credits later, I found myself sitting on a 737 bound for Tampa Florida and some "Great Academic Diversion!" All right. I'll admit it isn't the most noble of ambitions, but let's face it, unless I can pull off the dramatic role of the century and portray a convincing hijacker without an accent, without demands and without untamed facial hair high on my cheeks, I'm afraid we really have no choice but to see this venture manifest.

The flight attendant's name tag came within a foot of my nose as he bent courageously over two vacant seats to place a cocktail napkin on my flight tray next to the window.

"What'll it be, partner?"

"Partner?" I asked him, a little surprised to hear such vernacular after the passing of John Wayne.

"Yeah, -partner. I assume that's the way folks talk in the Midwest."

"Your perception is a bit misguided and I'll have a Virgin Mary."

"No vodka?"

"No thanks."

He held the Snappy Tom juice can and opened the stubborn foil with one hand and filled a plastic cup with ice using the other. "You know, what's perception anyway, when you really thing about it, I mean?"

"Are you kidding?" Who was this joker? "When I really think about it," I mimicked, "I think the way we perceive things is what makes them what they will be."

"That's deep."

"Yeah, I imagine it is, but don't get carried away with my theory because I'm pretty sure some astronaut said that before I did."

His eyebrows raised into coarse bangs and a half-smile broke on his face revealing milk white teeth. "My name is Tony," he said putting a celery stalk in my drink.

"Joseph. Well, -Joey actually, but my friends just call me 'Sky.'"

"Tell me, Joseph-Joey-Sky, what exactly is your perception of friends?"

What was this character up to? I thought for a moment and then gave him the answer I'll assume he wanted to hear eventhough his motives remained a mystery. "You can call me Sky." I smiled, a little embarrassed by our junior high dialogue.

"Fantastic! Now I can add 'philosopher' to my corps of friends."

"A collector, are you?"

"Of sorts," he volleyed while serving drinks to a couple across the aisle. He winked and moved the beverage cart a little further.

I really needed to ditch the nickname. It was painfully adolescent, not to mention cumbersome. I decided that instant to leave the nickname behind with the bulk of my past. If this Tony-on-the-Wing chose to make the inquiry, he would be the last person to ever receive the silly explanation of this throwback to my earlier days on the state champion high school basketball team. It was during my high school career that the guys started calling me 'Sky.' To many, I suppose, it seemed I spent most of the game there, -in the sky, that is. And when the local press gave more than ample coverage to 'the legend in his own time,' it wasn't long before the reputation and appellation went statewide. True, I did have the highest record of rebounds in the state's history and I didn't exactly rebuke the attention it provided me. The nickname carried me to college where it shared the bench with me for all be a few games. With my height of six feet, three inches, people seemed to expect me to play basketball. My father expected me to launch professional, but things were different in the big league and

I was relegated to crowd watching. I suppose it was then, and God Bless the enthusiasts, I discovered men. Thousands of men assembled for the express purpose of watching other men and, for the most part, all but ignoring the women that had brought with them. I had never experienced any hardship attracting females and so, by the wayside went all challenge. But men, men were different somehow. Men were rugged, almost primitive and undomesticated, not to mention surprisingly frustrated. But above all, and especially to someone of my rearing, men were absolutely forbidden. All I have to say at this point is how many of you have stuck your finger in the cake frosting? -Precisely. So imagine this new challenge buttressed with a sexual awakening that made the sleep seem well invested! If it hadn't have been for the other celebrity in the family, whom I'll expose a little later on, I might have lashed out with a vengeful and far reaching campaign to make up for lost time. As it was, I reveled in being the most tempting tease on campus. I suppose it was only shortly after this revelation when I lay claim to a decidedly marketable edge: the letterman's jacket! Without contest, I devoted more time to donning that capital 'N' than Hester Prynne ever spent sporting her capital and very scarlet 'A.' And I vowed to be every bit as provocative and deserving, even if I only managed to engage in head games.

So, with my theoretical homosexuality established, it should no longer stretch your imagination to see how desperately I

needed to apply theory and significant awareness to a more pragmatic, hands on approach. Which brings us back to Tony and my flight of resolution. It didn't take Superman X-ray vision to detect the enormously defined body that scratched and rubbed the cotton simulated polyester of his outfit. Likewise, there was no ignoring the great expanses of cheek that disappeared inside matched dimples every time he smiled. and he smiled a lot. I dare say years of elementary education and the foiled points of several number two pencils painstakingly pressed into my own cheeks, produced nothing more than the assurance that I would never be able to resist someone who actually had dimples, and Tony, unmistakably, had them all right.

He smiled, then sat on the arm of the aisle seat. "Sky, huh? There's got to be a story behind that."

I gave him a calculated grin. "There's no story, really. 'Mostly legend, I suppose."

"Lover?"

"College Basketball."

"College?" he prompted with his Southern drawl.

"The University of Nebraska."

"Oh, so you're a Cornhusker?"

"From ear to ear. I'm sorry, bad joke. Well, I was a Cornhusker, but I guess I'm nothing more than a Snowbird now, heading South for the winter."

He looked up the aisle. "Are you headed for Atlanta?"

"Tampa, eventually. But I have a layover in Atlanta."

"Then how about a drink when we land? -My treat. What do ya say?" He smiled again, almost making my attendance seem rather compulsory.

"Sure. Why not?"

"How about dinner then?"

"Oh, I'm not quite that easy."

"Then a drink it is. I actually was counting on a bigger argument from a philosopher."

"And you have a great deal to learn about philosophers," I said in my own defense. "I can think of several in the all time top ten who would have beat you to the invitation."

"But they would have forewent integrity," he beamed with assumed intellectual arrogance. "We land in about twenty-five minutes and I've got to begin lock down and crosscheck. You know, you didn't say how long that layover is."

"I think I've got a good couple of hours but I'm not positive without looking at my ticket and that's up front in my bag."

"Let me put it this way. How long do you want your layover to last and I'll make all the arrangements?"

"Thanks anyway but I'd better adhere to the original FAA flight plan." I was getting real warm.

"Flights are canceled all the time. 'Could happen tonight and there's nothing you could do about it."

It was my turn to smile. "We all take chances. Being occasionally defenseless can be humbling."

"I could take care of everything," Tony persisted.

"Taking care of everything would include calling my parents so they don't fear my abduction."

"Not a problem." He started up the aisle and looked back. "What would I call them?" He smiled.

What would Tony call them? Let's see. Protocol would insist on formality while the abbreviated 'Carole' and 'Robert' would be taking a hasty risk with assumption. 'Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker' might be a little more conducive, depending on the response or consent one wished to solicit. Now with those perfect teeth, Tony could probably anticipate a hug and induction into the immediate family by calling mom, 'mom.' Mothers seem to notice teeth about as readily as truckers stop for neon. But he'd invite fugitive exile by calling my father, 'dad.' Hell, I've never called him 'dad.' 'Dad' has pleasant connotations of family and home, of playing catch and whittling pine wood derby cars. 'Father' implies little more than genes and chromosomes, and there's not much one can do about that. No, Tony should refer to my parents respectfully and properly by their acquired titles of Senator and Mrs. Robert Tucker. Because, unless I chose to keep it from Tony, it was no secret that the Nation's Senate Republican Majority Leader and Doctor

Spock's worst case history personified, were indeed one in the same creature. Then again, and now that I think about it, why shouldn't this remain my little secret? Certainly, I reserved the right to anonymity after all these public years. Let me tell you, it's no Boy Scout Jamboree being the son of a politician. It seems their parental arm is twice as long and ten times as authoritative. My life has been dictated by enough political platforms to build a skyscraper and ruined by enough political campaigns to encourage me to swan dive from the top! So, metaphor withstanding, it was high time for me to be Joey Tucker, 'Individual at Large.'

The last four years have certainly been a preamble to this emancipation. Somebody hum The Star Spangled Banner as I labor through this testimonial of celebrity suffering. After high school and much to the dismay of the Senator, I announced our interests no longer paralleled, (as if they ever had,) and I began at once to deviate from his Master Plan. Pursuing a Theatre Arts Degree was the first straw to strain the camel's back. Refusing to register for the draft most assuredly cracked several ribs and finally, by design, my transferring out of the state of constituency to finish college, nearly put the ol camel away! I can't begin to imagine nor wait to celebrate the reaction of his opponents and voting public when they learn the Senator has raised a gay son. Because you can be assured that on Academy Award Night in a year in the not so distant

future, with my fingers clearly gripping Oscar by the crotch on national television, I'll loudly accredit all my acting genius to the man who first insisted I perfect being someone I'm not.

But for tonight, I am content in being Joey Tucker first and genes and chromosomes second, that is if they don't get ambushed by renegade hormones.

"Mom, for Heaven's sake, stop crying already."

CHAPTER TWO

"The captain told me in passing it was suppose to dump buckets tonight in Atlanta and it looks as though it's winding up." Tony squinted into a defeated sun just beyond the concrete walls of the parking garage outside the airport terminal.

"What's a little rain?" I reasoned. "Right now the rain is probably drifting in Nebraska!"

"Homesick already?"

"Let it rain!" I watched Tony fumble for his car keys inside his flight bag. He was exciting to watch. So much man lurked inside that body it was frightening. I mean, what in the hell was I doing. Me, the lame veteran of one summer's sexual exposure at age sixteen, validated in a corn field, I might add, with Greg Kinzer and his older brother Vince, about to take on Atlanta's largest single source of virility without so much as a premise to lay on. Clearly, Tony would be into

more than corncob to penis comparisons. I guess I was learning I had to face the music even when I pressed the wrong buttons on the juke box. But look, it wasn't as though I was going up against Kitty Carlisle and the rest of the panel. The truth could be whatever I wanted it to be. If things happened to escalate beyond a cocktail, I'd resort to acting. Actors act, right? Then again, actors have scripts and direction. I didn't have a cue. Would you listen to me? It's only a layover and so far, no one's taking that literally.

"What's waiting for you in Florida, anyway?" Tony asked starting the engine of his vintage Triumph.

"An Honors Program in Theatre Arts at the University of South Florida."

"Honors? You must be pretty good."

"In theatre, yes," I felt obligated to clarify lest I raise his hopes beyond reach.

"You know, I just thought if you didn't mind, we could swing by my place so I can change out of these clothes before we hit the restaurant."

I said "I don't mind at all," and then wondered, almost prayed he'd have an efficiency apartment. You see, voyeurism doesn't bother me in the least. I certainly wouldn't volunteer to take part in an orgiastic brawl, but promise me reserved seating and I'll charge tickets by phone. "Wait a minute. I thought we ruled dinner out."

"I'm only thinking of you. You shouldn't drink on an empty stomach and I saw you refuse lunch from the other flight attendants. You must be starved.

"I'd better call my folks from your place." Could my father activate the Georgia National Guard, I wondered?

"Oh, about your flight? While you were in the bathroom at the airport, I booked you out on the first flight tomorrow. I hope that doesn't play havoc with your schedule."

"Ah to hell with my schedule. I'm sure seasoned business travelers drop their plans for you all the time."

"I assure you, it's not their plans they're dropping."

Wonderful, isn't it? Just when I learn to face the music, the goddamned button sticks and I get to listen to the same tune over and over again. Tony smiled at me as he pulled out of the parking garage. I smiled back with closed teeth to prevent the sacrificial heart from escaping through my throat before Tony had a chance to cut it out of my chest in bed.

The Triumph snaked its way through post rush hour traffic. On the horizon, skyscraping thunderheads billowed patiently. Atlanta was in for a soaker but it didn't seem to worry Tony. And so we left the grounds of Hartsfield International on the South Expressway heading for the skyline of downtown Atlanta. My hair was held back and my eyes watered with the convertible top retracted. Tony had one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the stick shift between us. He had great hands

with black wisps of Italian hair on every knuckle. The sports car vibrated beneath me jarring the memory of my youth riding twenty bumpy, rural miles to school and being the last to get off the bus with my three ring binder flattened against my protruding crotch. I've always been rather inclined to stimulus. This sensation was no different. He looked at me. We smiled.

The day was cooling rapidly to meet a rainy Georgia night. Ironically, I had extended my sense of adventure like a beach umbrella oblivious to the metro forecast. Tony challenged a yellow Lincoln for the right lane off ramp and we descended into a grove of leafless Maples. He explained we were nearing his neighborhood in the Lakewood Park area of the city. I made a clumsy comment on the obvious affluence of the estates we began passing.

"These days," Tony explained, "property values seem to increase progressively the further away you get from Atlanta's Center for Disease Control. The Center's not far from here so the neighborhood seems affordable. I just like being close to downtown." Tony shifted down and pulled into a red bricked driveway. "Here we are."

"What about the top? It looks like rain."

"This is Georgia. It always looks like rain. Come on."

I followed his semi-precious butt along the landscaped sidewalk and between two white columns on an airy veranda. The front doors opened into a stately entry nearly consumed

by vegetation. Further inside, a baby grand piano prowled the living room like a Mahogany Cheetah and the warm wood floors stretched beneath it like the bleached Sahara for as far as the eye could see.

"Make yourself at home. There are phones practically everywhere." He disappeared down the hall.

The house reeked of tradition and despite Tony's lesson on depreciation, it had to have packed a hefty price tag. I walked around the piano and couldn't resist lifting the lid on the polished cabinet. It had been several years since my last piano lesson in fifth grade, but I had toyed around some in college and managed to memorize a few impressive accomplishments. I stretched my fingers and began to play. Tony crossed the hall buttoning a new shirt. "That's nice, Joey." He popped into the bathroom leaving the door open.

"Your house is incredible, Tony."

"Thank you, -and nearly paid for at that."

"They must be paying flight attendants better than I had imagined or are your parents no longer living?"

"They're alive and well in Austin."

"Oh." He was in the hallway fastening his 501's and I struggled to concentrate on my piano fingering. He went back into the bedroom. "Roommates?" I inquired.

"What was that?"

I stopped playing momentarily. "Do you have roommates?"

"Not anymore. When I first came to flight school and Atlanta four years ago from Austin, Texas, some other attendant friends and I decided to rent a house, -this house. There were six of us altogether. I liked the property so much I decided to buy it behind their backs. I converted their rent into loan payments and I spent money on practically nothing else. "Keep playing will you? I think it's good for the piano to see use." He crossed from the bedroom to the bathroom and closed the door. I played a while longer and then made the best of his silence and dialed my parents.

"Hello. This is Jeffrey in the guest house."

"So you won out, did you? Everything moved?"

"Just about."

"Listen. Tell mama that I made it, will ya?"

"Sure. Hey, does that outlet work in the bathroom by the mirror?"

"No. And neither does the light socket in the closet. But tell mama, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. What about the garbage disposal in the kitchen?"

"Look. It backs up, all right?"

Jeff sighed on the other end of the line. "I guess. Well, see ya."

"Bye." I hung up the phone swearing the little shit expected indemnification. But I adored Jeff. If it hadn't

been for the mishap of being brothers, we would have been the best of friends. We were indeed victims of common parenting, more specifically of a conventional father who vowed to extract every link of heredity from Jeff that he accounted missing or hopeless in me. For the most part we overcame the rivalry imposed upon us. It helped to have a middle sister who carried the brunt of the offspring from time to time. As she spun around the living room in a four hundred dollar prom dress for the Senator and his immediate cabinet, I stood on a piano bench in the basement lipsyncing Karen Carpenter while Jeff spotlighted my every move with his electric viewmaster. We Tuckers were quite a bunch; -not quite like the Cleavers but we had our aspirations all the same.

I leaned back on the maroon sectional and stretched my back until it popped. Water ran in the bathroom sink, then a blowdryer. I tried to relax but it wasn't easy just knowing he was in there becoming undoubtedly more attractive as I waited. A sitting duck comes to mind. I guess I couldn't blame anyone but myself for this predicament, and perhaps Hester Prynne for her divine inspiration.

"Ready?" Tony emerged from the hallway and leaned against the piano. He couldn't have looked any more perfect had he been straddling the monthly grid of a Chippendale Calendar and quite honestly, what he did to a faded pair of Levi's would have swayed the Pope. A long sleeved red shirt was unbuttoned

dangerously low revealing a muscular reef that evenly bisected his hairless chest. That and his infectious smile evicted all restraint I could ever hope to detain.

"What are you grinning at, Joey?" he asked.

Was I grinning? God, how lecherous. "I suppose it's the embodiment of temptation that I find so amusing."

"There are dinner reservations. We are expected," he countered strategically, not necessarily denying our options but more or less promoting our immediate obligation.

"Reservations. My deliverance," I deducted out loud.

"Reservations, deliverance and homemade lasagna."

"Then what are we waiting for?" I jumped off the couch. Hypocritically, he didn't move a muscle. I froze, stalked at the closed end of a ravine, prey, I'm afraid, of my own trapping. I uttered a short laugh. "Reservations," I prompted. He just continued to stare at me. "Look, Tony, if this is meant to be patronizing, fine. But if you're trying to resurrect some Stephen King dramatization, I'm not buying." I shifted the weight on my legs and broke into another smile. He shook his head implausibly, then said, and I will never forget,

"You are one fucking doll." Okay. I didn't say it was profound. I said I'd never forget.

It had started to sprinkle as we pulled under the green awning of the restaurant. CINZANO'S glared at us in red neon

and slid across the wet street to reflect in the department store window on the opposite side. The restaurant bathed in the thick aroma of oregano and freshly baked bread sticks and my eyes indulged in an over done kaleidoscope of drippy wine bottle candle holders, red and white checks and plastic grape arrangements hanging from every rafter of the establishment. A graying, overweight man with a dense mustache and bushy eyebrows met us eagerly inside the door. Tony threw his arms about him and they exchanged European courtesies.

"Aye, Bambino! You look-a so skinny to me lately."

Tony smiled. "Joey, this is Tio. As you can see, Tio prescribes a recommended daily allowance of pasta for everybody." Tony patted Tio's stomach. "Tio, this is my friend, Joey."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Tio." I extended my hand and shook his firmly.

"Is he Italian, Tony? He looks Italian."

"I'm afraid the only Italian in this Anglo will be the pan of lasagna we're about to order." Tony laughed at his joke.

"I don't see what'sa so funny about being something 'sides Italiano." Tio snagged two menus from the holder at the cashier stand and led us to a booth in the absolute darkest corner of the restaurant. Tony put an overdue hand on my shoulder and told me not to pay any attention to Tio's regular identity crisis with motherhood. I removed the leather jacket I had borrowed from Tony and sat down.

"You know, Joey, that jacket looks pretty good on you."

"Thank you." I knew it too. All those years of working out after practice had certainly paid off if I could wear one of Tony's jackets and look good. I'd almost started to wonder if I were as big as Tony through the chest and shoulders until he said,

"It's really too small for me. I'd rather you just kept it as a memento."

"Tony, I couldn't. It's leather and obviously expensive. I just wouldn't feel right about taking it from you."

"Then I'll sell it to you, -for a buck," he added. "That way it is a cash transaction and non-binding."

I reached for my billfold, slapped a dollar on the table and announced it "sold." Tony seemed satisfied. I patted the jacket. I was a shrewd business man. He tucked the dollar bill into his shirt pocket.

"I'd like to order for you if you trust my judgment."

"I think it's probably too late to hold back trust at this point, don't you."

"I would hope so." Just then Tio returned to the table with a bottle of Lambrusco. "Let's see my dear friend. We'll start with a side of Gnocci followed by your largest cut of Lasagna for Joey and I'll have the fresh Veal Parmigiana."

It's funny, you know. I had trusted Tony more than the average stranger. Then again, in this day and age, what's

average and what's strange? -'Notchy' sounds strange.

"Oh, and Tio? Bring us a bottle of that special Chianti I tried last week."

"Che piu?" Tio imposed his forked mother tongue to reinforce my ethnic abnormality."

"That's all, Tio. Thanks." The Manicotti walked away from the table. "It just takes him a while to warm up to a new boyfriend, that's all," Tony struggled to assure me.

"And even longer to defrost," I added. "And who said anything about a boyfriend?"

"I meant it figuratively."

"Of course you did." The candle flame seemed to leap magically into his dark eyes. I didn't look away. His fiery stare reminded me how long it had been since I had last updated my own appearance in any mirror. Without hesitating, I excused myself and walked in the direction of Tony's extended finger. I sensed his eyes following me as I traversed the restaurant. I paused a moment at the bathroom doors to encounter another of Tio's tests. RAGAZZO or RAGAZZA? I took a gamble with the romance language masculine 'O' and could have embraced the urinal on the inside wall for my good deduction. I tossed my head from side to side and watched my hair fall into place. This had to be the longest I had ever allowed my hair to grow, undoubtedly to defy another of my father's mandates. I flashed my seven year orthodontically enhanced smile into the mirror.

It's truly amazing how quickly insecurities fled my conscience.

"That was quick." Tony snickered as he raised his glass to toast.

"That's because I knew what I was doing." My glass met his with a delicate ring. "What exactly are we toasting?"

"You just missed your plane." He was right. It was already eight o'clock and my last chance for a clean break from Atlanta had just left the runway five minutes ago.

"I guess I've crossed The Rubicon now."

"The Rubicon?" He looked perplexed. "What do you mean by that?"

"You'd think for the eternal damnation I've received from Tio for being un-Italian, this might strike a point in my favor. The Rubicon's a river in Northern Italy that Caesar crossed with his army in 49 B.C. It was considered an illegal entry into Italy and it provoked a civil war. Once he crossed The Rubicon, he couldn't very well turn back." I sipped my wine giving Tony time to consider my effort.

"A philosopher and an historian. This must be my 'blue light special.'

"History was my minor with Political Science before I bailed out into Theatre in college."

"Is there anything you don't know something about?" Tony took an extra large drink of his wine.

"I suppose that possibility exists." I smiled.

"I'll bet you a dollar you don't know about 'Lo Stivale' of Italy." He sat back and folded his arms across that glorious chest.

I thought about it and honestly tried to resist, but..."You mean the boot? Italy is shaped like a boot, if that's what you're getting at."

"Learn that in History, too?" he asked throwing my dollar back onto the table.

"Actually, it was a line from a play I did my sophomore year at Lincoln." I replaced the dollar bill in my billfold. "It was this classic whodunnit about an Italian clan on Philadelphia's East Side in the 1940's. The husband and bread winner gets killed, see, and the murder weapon just happens to be 'Lo Stivale,' the wife's boot. Now isn't it funny how these silly things stick in your head?" I knew I was getting to him but that was half the fun.

"Uncanny, really. Eat your Lasagna, brain child."

Having never seen high rise Lasagna before, I'm afraid I dove in with the appetite of an African Poster Child. The wine acted like a sedative and even Tio eventually softened to the consistency of Ricotta Cheese as the night eased along. He and Tony spoke Italian in whispers as we prepared to leave the restaurant. I caught bits and pieces, but it made little sense under the influence of the evening. Tony had become

gradually more attractive with every sip I took and I found myself longing to be completely alone with him. Every time he touched me I slipped deeper into concession. I wish you could have seen him as I did. I wonder if my teeth had turned red from the wine. That happens sometimes.

The white sports car bolted over the wet streets of Atlanta just ahead of the thunderstorm. For a while it looked as though this convertible would out run the fury, but by the time we reached the interstate, it had started raining again. I thought to reach behind and pull the roof over us, but like most things inside the car, I was already soaked. Tony laughed out loud as the rain grew stronger. I shook out my hair and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Tony came to a stop at the bottom of the Ridge Street Ramp. He yelled over the pounding of the rain on the pavement, "seems the injuns have danced up quite a rainstorm, Butch." -Butch. I liked that. He touched my chin and guided my head to his where we engaged in the most impressive docking since Skylab and Soyuz. Lightning trimmed the night sky in a super natural display and the rain built to an orgasmic climax releasing its entire load on the Ridge Street Ramp where we sat. Tony and I remained adhered, rain trickling between our lips. A car came down the ramp behind us and honked to gain passage through the intersection. Tony waved it past without interrupting his crusade in seduction.

Water was pooling inside the car and my Levi's seemed to exceed their shrink to fit feature by several sizes. I put a wet hand to Tony's shimmering cheek and slicked back his drenched black hair. I backed my face away from his a few inches to look at him but my eyelashes were rain laden and tangled together. We just laughed at each other. His white teeth were ambushed by lightning and my eyelashes imprisoned the falling rain. We were lousy ducks. I shook my head again and pretended to look attractive despite those forces of nature determined to strip me of my superficiality. I attempted to separate the cotton shirt from my chest but Tony wrapped his fingers around my wrist and pulled my hand away and held it on the gear shift. I stared down at the dark circles of my nipples just visible and rock hard beneath the weave of the material. Tony craned his head and kissed me between the pecs. My own head crashed back unyieldingly onto the headrest and the rain slammed into my face. Another car pulled beside us and slowed to a stop. The male driver yelled through the opening passenger window.

"Y'all need a hand?" My head pivoted to face their car as did Tony's. The female passenger gasped aloud, then screamed directions at the driver as she rolled up the window.

"They don't need a damn thi..." The car struggled to grip the rain soaked surface and squealed away from us. Tony just smiled and resumed his position on my lips. I watched their brake lights drown in the distance. The thunderstorm steadily

gained momentum and a fierce wind joined the commotion from the East. My skin turned instantly numb once the car picked up speed and we headed for Tony's house. The jagged bite of the wind gnawed cannibalistically at my dripping body. Several minutes closer to death by exposure, Tony pulled the car in front of his house. The persistent zephyr tugged at the vinyl car top as if it wanted to detain us as playmates a moment longer, but the two of us, under the brute influence of adrenalin, snapped the cover to the frame of the car and dashed into the house.

Tony was sporting Calvin Klein underwear by the time we reached the master bathroom and he turned the shower knob. He threw me an oversize gray towel which I caught in my teeth since my arms were bound in the wet sleeves of a shirt loyally committed to my upper body. The button down finally separated from my chest but not before it ripped along the seam of the right sleeve. How I hated to waste a perfectly decent Oxford shirt, but this was clearly a matter of survival and no longer a question of fashion. My body was red and itchy but the towel soothed much of the irritation. Tony kicked his Levi's across the bathroom floor and his underwear and one sock leapt into the air before landing to the left of the double basined sink. I battled with the buttons of my own 501's. Each of the silver discs waged its own warfare in defense of the eyelet it strategically occupied. At the same time, one foot tried to

liberate the other from denim shackles, but it became quickly obvious that nothing would give until the crotch was freed. Funny how that was becoming the theme of my tour. My arms cramped in desperation but finally succeeded.

Hot steam barreled out of the dark gray tiled shower. Tony's bronzed ass vanished into the dense fog bank. I didn't have to be told twice to follow the Yellow Brick Road. In fact, you didn't even have to promise me a major bodily organ from Oz, but I had a feeling if I followed that Italian kid into the shower, that's exactly what I'd get.

I leaned on the wall next to him and took steam deep into my lungs. The nerve endings under my skin took a few moments to adjust to the new thermal conditions that confused them. I closed my eyes and inhaled again allowing the medicinal vapor to thaw my frosted muscles. Tony expelled an occasional groan when the boiling puddle swirled about his feet before escaping down the drain. A bold clap of thunder shook the house and all things in it. The light vanished from the hallway and I stood, eyes wide open in the steamy darkness. I felt for Tony's hand along the wall. It was there, wet and receptive. He lead me further into the giant walk in stall. I wanted to tell him I had had a wonderful time, and I didn't want to say anything at all. Eventually he dried me and towed me to a cushioned bay window off the living room and we sat naked there, he behind me.

It was raining much harder now, almost as if to douse any remaining light in the universe. I felt the rain carry me as the storm persevered throughout the night. And despite my desire to stay awake, I finally fell fast asleep in Tony's bulky arms.

Outside, the thunder played tag with the lightning but never quite seemed to catch up and the rain, well, -the rain was.

CHAPTER THREE

God. What time was it? Sun spewed through the three skylights above the bed and I had begun to sweat beneath the heavy down comforter. Tony's hairy leg was laying across my knee. I stretched my neck to see the alarm clock when it dawned on me the electricity had been out much of the night. I reached for the phone on the carpeted platform at the end of the bed and dialed the operator who confirmed the time at a quarter past eight. A quick call to the airlines provided me with a ticket out of this indiscretion. The bad taste in my mouth definitely paralleled the mood of the morning. So this is what it was like to feel cheap and violated? The 'morning after' sucked! I didn't want to be there any longer and I certainly didn't want to face Tony. I felt stark naked on a struck stage. All the props, the rain and the wine had been cleared during the night to leave me exposed and accountable. I eased myself

off the bed and hobbled to the bathroom. My head spun and my insides felt like a macrame plant hanger. The goddamn butterflies had mutinied and I looked absolutely Gothic. I stared in the mirror above the toilet as the balance of my water composition seemed to rush from my strained kidneys. There was no reasoning with that face. It seemed to scoff at worldly morals and it wasn't about to concede to higher discipline. No. That twisted face already looked forward to new conquests. Just hours ago, my eyes could not have foreseen the suicide of becoming closer to this man who was destined to be forever distant and my lips would have no more pressed the issue of leaving him than they would have pressed against the bowl of this toilet. I was hopeless and I had a great deal to learn. I'd often wondered what it would be like to be sexually impulsive. I wondered. I could have never imagined.

I called a cab and took a shower. Tony would slip away and I would allow it. I accepted my denial of control rather gracefully, I suppose. I knew I didn't understand the ramifications of our union but facing the immediate future when he woke up was an exercise from which I desired no toning. I scribbled an elusive message on the side of the steamed mirror and came to terms with the realization that all these jumbled feelings must be a part of my induction into what seemed to be a painfully and drastically overrated lifestyle.

Good-byes have never really come easy to me so avoiding this one and putting those from yesterday behind me, seemed to lessen the personal trauma. And so I sat on another plane, even more confused than before, with Tony's leather jacket tucked on my lap. It was very apparent the stakes were getting higher with each person I left behind. There was a lump in my throat and a pang in my groin and not surprisingly, they both answered to the name of Tony.

Those of you who have ventured down this road, some with worn soles, I imagine, could tell me not to appraise my time with Tony so highly. Maybe for you it was simple to categorize him on the 'trick side' of my ledger. But I was wearing brand new Reeboks and the road happened to look just a bit more promising. If the contents of my underwear didn't ache so, I'd confront it more aggressively. I supposed I was rightfully suffering from technicolor blue balls.

The plane rolled to a sudden stop on the tarmac of Tampa's International Airport and I wandered into the gate area. Inside the main terminal, tanned temples milled about me practically insisting that I waste no time in taking advantage of Florida's solar hospitality. I'll admit, I must have stood out like a Polar Bear in Yellowstone, and priorities reassigned, finding a beach was job one.

The cab driver generously pointed out various landmarks along the route and though the gesture was appreciated, the finer points, I'm afraid, were dismissed and replaced by a less historical interrogation for directions to the nearest beach. The Cabby was friendly, blonde and attractive and though I didn't have the energy to place designs on him, I don't think I would have encountered him uncooperative.

He cleared his throat each time before he spoke. "You know, if I didn't have to log another hour on the clock, I'd run you out there myself. -To the beach, that is. I live in St. Petersburg," he volunteered.

"That's nice of you to offer, but even though my skin tone is no indicator, I'm not all that desperate. Besides, I'd probably get stuck out there without a way back into the city. Thanks, though."

"Well, it's on my way. You know USF's having their 'Back to Spring Fling Barbecue' out there this afternoon. They have busses running back and forth all day until ten o'clock tonight. I was actually thinking about checking it out myself. You're more that welcome to pal around with me." He watched me carefully through his rear view mirror.

"Well, I guess that would be great. My name is Joey, by the way."

"I'm sorry. I'm Chris. I attend USF at the St. Petersburg Campus. I reached over the seat to shake his hand. "Well,

here we are, -The University of South Florida."

"This is it? I thought it would be bigger for some reason."

"I'm not sure what you expected but this ain't no Harvard.

-Mostly cause we can't grow ivy in this humidity."

"No, of course not. I just imagined it differently, that's all."

"Which dorm did you say, Joey?"

"Delta Hall." I watched his green eyes scan both sides of the road.

"Okay. You're right next door to the 'Virgin Vault.' IOTA Hall, otherwise known as the 'Igloo Orgasm and Thunder Ass Dormitory.'"

I thought about Tony's blue light special and wondered which was the better bargain. "Igloo Orgasm? Is this indicative of the entire campus?"

"Fortunately it's not. Otherwise, what would a fellow do?"

Well, if you don't know, I'm certainly not going to tell you, I thought quietly to myself. We smiled. The taxi hugged the yellow curb and I got out. Chris pulled my suitcases out of the trunk and I paid the fare on the meter though Chris hesitated to take it from me.

"I guess I'll drop back by in an hour."

"I'll keep an eye out for you and thanks."

"My pleasure." He tipped his baseball cap grinning.

The sidewalk was narrow and the building at the end of it was architecturally intimidating, Built in true penitentiary style, it was hard to retain a student's perspective when every line and curve of the structure brought the phrase 'maximum security' to mind. It was indeed a dormitory, though, and I would adjust to the change. I wasn't about to adopt some pretentious disappointment when I learned the University of South Florida didn't charter the Delta Tau Delta Fraternity. Three years at the University of Nebraska's home for the potentially disturbed was more than enough for me. Imagine sharing one big house with fifty of your peers with pictures of your own Senator father on every wall. Then embrace the horrifying realization that you had just spent the last three years walking the precise footsteps of your father. It was enough to make me cut off my feet in self mortification. It may not frighten some of you to be more like your fathers but it scared the living piss out of me! So I welcomed the break with tradition, accepted the fact I wouldn't graduate Delt Magna Cum Laude, and entered, of all things, a dormitory.

Well, at least I tried to enter a dormitory. The door seemed to be wedged stuck from the inside. Perhaps there was no room at the inn after all and I could slum it in the Marriott downtown. I pulled and tugged at the door. Tony's leather jacket slipped from under my arm and I dropped a suitcase.

Somebody's muffled voice squeezed through the crack between the glass doors.

"Stand back!" His foot kicked the panic bar and the door swung open snagging the leather jacket.

"Thanks." I picked up the jacket and surprised myself by actually being relieved it wasn't torn. I should have cared less about it if there were any truth in my conviction to leave Tony behind. Now, who was this?

"Give you a hand," he offered.

"Yeah, thanks." I handed him my hanging bag and the jacket. I know what you're thinking and I imagine you'd be surprised if I came across someone I wasn't actually attracted to based on my seemingly unspoken objective to make every male south of the Mason Dixon Line. But this boy was something else and besides, the men we've encountered up to this point haven't exactly encouraged me to stick to head games. "My name's Joey, and you're..."

"Mark. You're new this semester aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." Boy did he have blue eyes.

"I thought so. Not to sound like Julie McCoy, but I've worked the registration desk for the last two years and sooner or later, I get to know everyone. I thought you might be new."

"I am new."

"That's what I thought." We looked at each other a moment then burst out laughing once we realized we had more than

established my status. "Come on. I'll help you get settled."
Mark put an arm around my neck and patted my shoulder. "Do
you have a preference in roommates?"

"Well, I suppose I do. Why?"

"Because I'm the hall director and I can be persuaded to
offer preferential treatment."

I could think of nothing at the moment I wouldn't do for
or to him but I asked out of curiosity, "What'll it cost me?"

"Well, I've got to take Math 104 this term and I'm lousy
at arithmetic." Mark raised his eyebrows waiting for my
acceptance of terms.

"No problem. I'm a whiz with numbers," which wasn't exactly
the whole truth. I took a trip on long division and never quite
returned.

"We're going to be infamous roommates."

"Roommates? Us?" Whistle Dixie! I've conquered the slave
states!

"-Unless you'd rather take your chances with someone else,
but I warn you the field is 80% nerds and 15% freshman nerds.
The choice is yours."

"Does the deal include long division?"

"No. Long division I can handle. It's the story problems
that throw me for a loop. And I don't do flash cards."

"I stretched out my hand and we shook on it. He grabbed
behind the desk for an extra key and he scribbled the mailbox

combination on a slip of paper. We were about to leave when an attractive girl entered through the door behind the front desk. She checked her eye make-up in a mirror and had picked up the phone and started to dial before she ever noticed us standing there. "Joey, this is Dianne. She helps out at the desk. Joey's our new suite mate."

"Hi," I said most disinterested.

"Hel-lo," she said with at least two southern syllables. "You are adorable, aren't you?" I struggled to overcome my gag reflexes and I fought the sensation of blushing since any color on my face would be instantly detected in the absence of a tan, and it was. "Oh, you're turning red. Isn't that cute?" She was so sweet my teeth hurt. "Don't a one of you tell Paul I said this, but I can tell I'm gonna be spending lots of time in your suite this semester."

I turned to cough in Mark's direction. "I'll take my chances with the nerds," I mumbled. Mark smiled and tried to recover.

"We'll see you around, then." Mark patted his hand on the desk, grabbed my bag and joined me by the elevator. "I'm going to help Joey get settled. Watch the desk for me?" he hollered back to Dianne.

"No problem. Hey! Maybe we'll see y'all at the beach this afternoon. You packed your Speedo didn't you Joseph?"

I hated being called Joseph. Scars didn't seem to heal

after being type cast for ten years in the annual Catechism Christmas Pageant. "I'll have to check my suitcase, Dianne." I waved goodbye and followed Mark's white 501 cheeks into the elevator. He hesitated but once the elevator door closed he spoke again.

"I know we don't know each other that well and I shouldn't be passing along advice of this nature, but as much as I like working with Dianne, she's dumber than dirt and not to be trusted. She's also Paul's girlfriend. This duality makes her the most dangerous girl on campus."

"Just who is Paul?"

"Our other suite mate and star quarter back of the University Brahmas. Paul is like, well, a Marlon Brando with shoulder pads. He's big, he's unforgiving and he doesn't take well to Dianne's philanthropy. Besides, he's a jock so he's not smart enough to blame Dianne for provoking every penis on campus. He goes straight for the penis!"

-My kind of guy, I thought to myself. "Advice taken, Mark. And I know we don't know each other yet, but Dianne isn't my type. She does nothing for me."

"Well, she sorts your mail and for that you can be thankful. Where does your mail come from?"

"Nebraska, and you?"

"Hazlet, New Jersey." He unlocked the door. "Only room on the hall with a bay view and a balcony."

It took roughly forty minutes to unpack and settle into my new habitat. For the most part, Mark watched and made small talk. I didn't want to be alone and I think he somehow sensed that and maybe he felt the same way. I had almost forgotten that Chris planned to return and at the last minute asked Mark to go with us. At the beach, the three of us talked and walked for hours. I suppose I was teetering on the verge of emotional collapse. Anxiety had taken on a nasty face and the time I spent with Tony had already soured. I was ready to move on but the pit in my stomach wasn't about to be upstaged by some front of newborn initiative. Speaking of Mark, I looked forward to sharing a common bedroom, even if we shared it with two football players.

Still, this coming out hoopla wasn't what it's been cracked up to be. Something told me you couldn't be a lodge member without paying the dues and if this rotten emotional hangover was part of the initiation, I'd take mine standing up. You're thinking, that's a switch, compared to his recent track record of taking it laying down. You're probably right. But there was no sense hibernating in a dingy closet when the rest of the world operates on six hours of sleep, if you know what I mean. I'd already slept too much.

It was time for Joey to wake up.

CHAPTER FOUR

After passing the first night in the preliminary rounds of the local burping trials, where I might add, somewhat reluctantly, I emerged victorious over my belching roommates, I hurried across campus to the Sports Arena for registration.

I nudged my way through the 'T' gate, receiving my personalized registration cards and a receipt for tuition paid. There must have been five thousand people there and each of their last names apparently began with the letter 'T.' The ten minute coaching I had received from Mark that morning while we shaved, was paying off as I moved freely from one table to the next. Across the arena floor I spotted the Theatre Arts section. At the senior end of a long table, a distinguished, somewhat older looking man sat alone. He was attractive in a middle age sort of way and needless to say, he was aging well. He sported a meticulously sculptured beard and had dark hair

with a slight patch of gray just to the left of his center part. He put on a pair of glasses to read the 'Tucker' on my registration folder.

"Ah, Mr. Tucker. It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to The University of South Florida. I am Professor Hughes."

"The pleasure is mine to be here, sir and thank you. I've found our correspondence to be most encouraging these past weeks."

"Well, you have a lot of potential, Tucker. It is my job to encourage potential. I imagine my colleagues in Nebraska are a little green now that you are here with us."

"Thank you, sir." I looked away, still no tan and all.

"I would like to show you around the facilities first thing in the morning. Let us meet at eight of the clock."

That was it! The man spoke without using contractions. I knew there was something about him that I found odd. I hadn't quite decided whether or not I found this habit irritating. I did, however, find it quite unnecessary and as a result, found myself using twice as many contractions to compensate for him. "I'll be there sir and I won't be late. It's been a pleasure meeting you."

"Tell me, Mr. Tucker. Are you in such a great hurry that you must rape the tongue of your mother?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. Rape the tongue of my mother?"
Okay. He had taken this contraction thing too far.

"It seems clear to me that you cannot speak without prostituting every verb you come upon."

I turned to face him squarely. "I'm sorry you find that offensive, professor, but I'm under the persuasion of my time conscious contemporaries with whom I converse on a regular and practical basis."

"I see. Tomorrow, then."

My tete-a-tete with the professor had allowed time for the 'T's' to be joined by the 'S's' on the arena floor which brought locomotion to a standstill. Station Four had bottlenecked and it was just enough deterrence for me to bypass the photo I.D. booth for now. I moved past the crowd and snatched a mint green campus map from the information table. I glanced at it briefly and had started to strike off on my own when a brilliant red banner caught my attention. It was draped over a table near the exit. The letters G-L-S-U were sewn there in gold lamé and sparkled like the gold foil on a lunar module. I had always seen their meeting notices in the "Daily Husker" back home but I knew it would be undesirable publicity for my father should I choose to entertain such company. It was more than well known that The Gay and Lesbian Student Union was pressing my father to propose more favorable gay legislation. Objectively, they had solid points that did nothing more than parallel basic human rights, yet I knew my

father opposed their existence, much less their sissy demands. About the time I joined the ranks of UNGLSU, my father would have concurrently staged a press conference on the steps of the Capitol, where he would verify his favorite story of genetic severance by confirming my adoption at birth from a small band of Iranian Gypsies. But those four lame letters possessed incredible drawing powers now that my father and his press secretary were more than a thousand miles away.

My feet moved toward the table; -a table that no one attended. There, in a small, undisturbed pile of mimeographed look alikes, a red flier announced the first meeting of the semester. Modestly, it invited new students to stand up and be counted, to "disregard societal adversity," and the table had been deserted. I filed a copy into my shift pocket for later directional reference, though I can't say I was impressed by their initial display of ambition. I turned to leave and walked straight into Mark.

"Hey, Joey! I thought that was you." He glanced at the table as he spoke. "So tell me. How did everything go?" He leaned to pick up a flier off the table.

I had to jump start my heart and it was a few seconds before I was convinced my mouth could utter something intelligent. "It went all right, coach. For such a primitive form of mass enrollment, I sailed through it. I'm just killing time waiting for the line at the photo booth to shorten."

Mark placed the flier back on the table, seemingly without having looked at it. I took a deep breath. "It's not going to happen today my friend. You'd be better off waiting 'til later in the week and stop by the administration building for that business. Before I forget, Paul wanted me to remind you about Busch Gardens this afternoon. He was able to pick up two extra tickets at the athletic office. Do you feel like checking it out?"

"Sure. Paul's a sore loser but even I find it hard to gauge his entire personality on the merit of one lost burping contest. I guess I could spend an afternoon with him. It'll be good for my image to hang out with a jock."

"Don't be too quick to dismiss your first impressions. I find it best to be a miser and only extend credit to the point of verification." Mark led me out the arena floor exit.

"You're probably right. Are you hungry?"

"I guess it is time to eat something. I was going to sneak a bowl of your Lucky Charms, but I hadn't been given Carte Blanche yet, even though we did spend the entire night together." I batted my eyelashes at him.

"Consider them yours providing you buy the next box. That's the embarrassing part but you've gotta have 'em, right?"

We changed direction and headed to the center of campus. Without considering options we both agreed on the Student Union

since the meals were part of our dormitory tuition. In the food line at the cafeteria, Mark picked up the conversation. "You know, the other guys wouldn't consider going, but USF's Winter Showcase Theatre is doing it's final show of "Little Mary Sunshine," tonight in the Experimental Theatre. It's supposed to be a corny musical if you wanted to pick up tickets."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. It would give me a chance to preview the caliber of the Department."

We downed our cheeseburgers at the SUB and ran to the theatre to buy tickets for the show later that evening. Coincidentally, only two seats were left for the final show and they happened to be front row, off center. That was sure to be taboo. Nobody bought front row by choice.

Busch Gardens proved to be a worth while investment in the afternoon. Hawaiian Tropic baked to a golden brown on my cheeks and nose, and Doris, the elephant, seemed to get quite a kick out of the handful of speed Paul slipped her among the peanuts. But most notably, it was another afternoon spent with Mark and our friendship grew. The more I got to know him, the more I realized he had no requirements of me. I was, and that seemed to be the extent of his expectations.

We shared the bathroom before going to the theatre. I pulled a white cable knit over my head even though he said I

was being obvious in flaunting my premier tan. "It's fading anyway," he countered. I didn't change. I was at my best when I was obvious, which prompted the dilemma of whether or not to wear my letterman jacket. I involved Mark in the decision making which accomplished his introduction to my own jock side. I was then free to dress up the occasion with Tony's black leather jacket.

It was a breezy evening which lent function to my sweater, and even Mark opted for a jacket at the last moment. We cut across campus to the Theatre Center. Mark politely presented the Hartung Performing Arts Complex just before we ducked into Stage II housing the experimental theatre.

We took our seats just in time for the lights of Act I. We were situated less than a foot away from the apron line on the floor. The pre-set lights revealed a suggestive set with the front porch of a lodge and a short balcony overlooking a makeshift and later pantomimed garden. The lavender program announced the scene to be somewhere in the Colorado Rockies early in the century. The lights dimmed in the scaled down auditorium and the piano prologue began. The theatre was cool and the stage glowed pregnantly in the dim lights. Chief Brown Bear walked toward us. "Kadota!" he announced.

Forest rangers in red uniforms and high black boots were heard whistling off stage just before they appeared, marching in time to the first musical number of the show. They were

all the splitting image of Dudley Do-Right. Well, I am forced to retract that comment. All but one looked like that famous Canadian Mounty and he stood alone as perhaps the most beautiful man I had ever laid eyes on. I looked again to be sure he was worthy of that description and his perfection begged a spot light, if not my devotion. He marched in place with the rest of the troop. His eyes were fixed on an imaginary point just above my shoulder and I stared back at him unable to move, unable to look away. His eyes were brilliant blue, not like the sky but more like shallow gulf water washing over white sand and his hair was the color of sand higher up on the beach. I shifted uneasily in my front row seat as he smiled on cue when Little Mary Sunshine entered the stage. Oh, mother, his teeth could hold back the waters of Hoover Dam. I began to perspire lightly inside my cable knit. The piano pounded dully in my ears and lyrics lost coherence when he moved around the stage. Now, when he focused, it was no longer on my shoulder but with my eyes and the very root of my passion. My head locked in paralytic trance and my mind dared not stray a brain cell. I believe he perceived my helplessness and he pinned me there. My heart thumped foolishly inside my chest, frustrated by its detention, intrigued by its bondage. A muscle of his did not move beyond my total awareness and for a moment it seemed as though he too might have been trapped by our secret awareness. At the point when the situation could grow no more intense

without detonating, my detour of concentration fled the stage and I was released by intermission. I followed Mark to the lobby rest rooms. He faced a urinal. I took off my sweater, revealing a white T-shirt, and splashed water on my face.

"Who's your friend?" Mark asked, shaking himself.

"You noticed?"

"Helen Keller would have noticed. So who is he?" Mark zipped his pants and joined me by the mirror.

"Honestly, I can't tell you, Mark." I lowered my head and flipped my hair back. I patted my damp face with the sweater before pulling it back over my head. We left the rest room. Walking back to our seats, an attractive and well dressed woman stared at me as though we had something in common. I dismissed the thought since Mark failed to pick up on it. Mark thumbed through the program.

"If he plays Pete, then he is Nathan Evans, and if he plays the role of Tex, well, then he is Stephen Brockett. Either of those names ring a note in your belfry?"

"I told you Mark. I've been in town less than 48 hours. I don't know who he is." I practically snapped at him. I laughed at his determination to solve my mystery. I laughed to mask my secret hope and prayer that he would succeed. The second act started. Mark whispered in my ear,

"The way the cast seems to be singling us out kinda makes you feel like Ron and Nancy in the East Room, doesn't it?"

The ranger was watching me again and I was relieved to smile at Mark's comment. The mystery player had been joined in the second act by 'Mabel' who I pinpointed to be Heather Matheson. The two of them had obviously conferred and note compared during intermission. Mark was beginning to extract the biggest thrill from teasing me about it. I had begun to wonder if it wasn't all some cruel joke being played on the 'moonlighting faggot.' I would have taken offense had he not been quite so unbelievably perfect. But for good measure and a small pinch of disinterest, which had to be feigned, I forced myself to monitor the actions of other characters. Within fractions of a second, my eyes always seemed to return to him. Even this late into the story line, I wanted to catch him looking elsewhere so I could write off the attraction, but not once did he break character nor did he release me to doubt his interest. I sat there uncontrollably mesmerized by his performance and by his existence. When the play ended, my heart leapt to a standing ovation high in my chest. For the first time, that I'd admit anyway, he looked away and smiled at the lady from the lobby at intermission. He bowed and then he smiled at me. I looked at the lady. She looked at me. He smiled. He bowed again and was gone.

"Come on," Mark said. "I know Heather from Design Workshop last summer. I want to get to the bottom of this."

I felt I should object, but God, I hoped to reach bottom

as well. The confirmation of his name alone, would be pay dirt. We walked to the lobby where all the actors had assembled to greet their audience. He was there. He was hugging the woman from behind me in the theatre. He followed me with his eyes over her shoulder. I stopped by the grand staircase while Mark hugged Heather on the other side of the spacious room. The Forest Ranger stood there with his legs apart and hands behind his back. He talked to the woman without taking his eyes off me. She turned to see what he was staring at, perhaps in reference to their conversation, I imagined. I was thankful when Mark approached me in clear view so I didn't look quite like the jilted groupie I was, and we left.

"I knew Nathan Evans sounded familiar and that's who he is. -An ex-gymnast from the 1984 Summer Olympic Trials," Mark added.

"And Heather?" I asked, to throw Mark off the path which he had no intention of leaving.

"Heather didn't realize Nathan was gay until this evening."

"Oh."

It was an exceptionally long walk back to the dormitory. The night was cool and detached from reality. I took no comfort in the universe and the stars seemed to twinkle in hopeless contempt. Mark said nothing more and they had held the burping finals without us.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nathan. He had stayed on my mind and slept by my side all night and now, as the sun tapped me on the shoulder as I looked over the bay from the balcony of Mark's and my room, I imagined him out there somewhere. I knew he had felt it like I did last night. The two of us had shared a great deal more than the clever lines of a C grade musical. We had tapped a common voltage and filled our lungs with the same oxygen. And this morning he had to be out there somewhere, thinking of me out there too; to send a flare of revelation skyward so that he might be as certain as I am. To see it, to feel it and to know.

I was late into the shower but I made up time on the way to the theatre. I bounded up the lobby staircase taking the steps two at a time, paused a moment to envision Nathan standing

where he had stood last evening and rapped on the professor's door frame.

"Ah, a minute early, Master Tucker," he commended.

"Good morning, sir."

"Punctuality is everything in the theatre, is it not?"

"Yes sir, along with acting, sir." He shot me a horrified glare at which I smiled cynically. It was obvious to me he didn't actually care to be stoic, but he rather promoted this character in the great tradition of acting. He was faking an authoritative rasp deep in his throat. It struck me as an undirected hit somewhere between Bruce Willis and Lauren Bacall. I sat in the chair across from his and admired his makeshift museum which looked as though it longed for a more permanent archives. Degrees, scripts and showbills were individually framed and occupied every square inch of space in his large office.

"I am going to arrive at the point, if it suits you, Mr. Tucker." He paused for my approval.

"Of course. Proceed," I humored him. If I were standing, I might have curtsied, the man commanded such arrogance.

"Grand." What did he say? -Grand? Please! "Mr. Tucker, you have but one assignment for all three of your classes this final semester. I am extremely pleased and proud to christen this program at The University of South Florida. It is a project designed to extract and provide the highest requirements of

theatrical study and discipline. Only four students were accepted to receive the assignment and grading will likely be the most competitive you have ever experienced. You are in the program by complete accident you know, and I will not keep this from you."

"No. I didn't know," I interjected, just a little put off by his comment.

"I am dead against out of state students nosing natives out of academic consideration. And if it would not have been for another student transferring before term, you would still be in Nebraska. But you are talented and qualified and I am not about to provoke a discrimination suit in my tenth year at this institution. At least you have my tenure in your favor." He stopped to light a pipe. I could have spit, he sounded so much like my father. It wasn't like me to sit still when someone was so into the degradation of others, but this asshole was so far out on the ice, spring thaw would get him before his conscience ever would. I could wait and I would be there to provoke the first crack. He continued. "The assignment, by description, is relatively basic, but in execution you should expect difficulty and welcome the experience of hardship."

-Dear God. I'd wandered into the Marine Recruiting Office.

"You are to write, direct, promote, stage, and act in your own original play." He took several puffs on the pipe stem and two separate columns of smoke took the room by the throat.

"This semester will test your knowledge of acting technique, staging and public relations. You are not likely to come across another academic challenge of this magnitude and concentration again. Rest assured you will be measured by the advantage you take of this extraordinary opportunity. Every facet of a polished final production is now your responsibility and you have relatively no limitations in achieving these ends. The four of you will each receive a production budget of five hundred dollars which will be returned to the department through your ticket sales. You will each draw a different performance facility from a hat tonight, when we will meet for the first time at seven of the clock. You are encouraged to hold auditions for your play keeping in mind to pull talent from within the department as these four productions will be the only acting outlets available to underclass majors this semester. Let us not waste anymore time talking and I shall show you around the Hartung. Some lucky student is going to secure this fine facility tonight. Therein lies all advantage."

I hoarded fresh air as I walked in front of him down the hall to the staircase. I was genuinely overwhelmed with the prospects of theatrical tyranny. It's what every actor dreams of. I would have my own company. And if I had to search the Kingdom of South Florida to find the Nathan of my glass script, I would do so. We would live passionately ever after.

I walked through the open door Hughes was holding and into the theatre auditorium. "The Hartung Memorial was constructed in 1975 with the gracious donation of the late William S. Hartung, past president and visionary of the university. It is certainly one of the most modern and technically advanced theatre complexes in the South and it houses one of the largest stage lighting networks this side of the Mississippi and Hudson Rivers. It is totally computerized. And this could be your home room for the next five months, though I prefer to see it go to one of our in state candidates, but I feel I have made this clear. My heart pounded as I surveyed all I could see by the work light center stage. Truly it was the most beautiful theatre I had ever seen and the lines were bold and cavernous. Brilliant reds blended into gigantic shadows and miles of fabric rippled in velvet simplicity. Hughes continued. "You are leaning on one of 1300 seats. In eight performances, that adds up to a total house capacity of over ten thousand." I nodded, forgetting for the moment what an asshole Hughes had been. I honestly could not find the words to speak, -to acknowledge the vastness of the space. "I think it is time you demonstrate the validity of your repertoire, if for nothing more than to set my mind at ease." Hughes coughed, undoubtedly from pipe lung.

"Pardon me, sir?" I cleared my own throat.

"If you are capable of taking direction, take center stage. I would like to be entertained by one of your character interpretations."

"Right now?" I clarified.

"I regret I have not the time to sell tickets, Mr. Tucker. Now would be splendid."

I walked down the aisle and up the steps to the stage. My palms were sweating when I took up position in front of the work light. The stage jutted out before me and disappeared behind me. I could easily do twenty-seven cartwheels across the width of the stage, if I could move my feet from where they were now fixed. "Sir, I'm drawing a blank. Perhaps if you could suggest something I might be familiar with, it would simplify the exercise." I squinted into the auditorium but saw nothing.

"I am a very busy man, Mr. Tucker. Now, you have held several classic leads over your years, at least according to your references. Give me Othello or Cyrano. Yes. Cyranno," he decided. "I would like to hear from our dear friend, Monsieur de Bergerac."

I was afraid of that. The only monologue worth an encore performance from 'Cyrano' was probably the single most difficult monologue known to any actor. But it just so happened, the piece was a personal favorite, if not my own testimonial, and I took my cue. Fortunately, I played the part as recently as

last semester in Lincoln, so the lines were freshly tucked away and easily retrieved. Hughes coughed impatiently from the back of the house. I was ready.

"One moment, Mr. Tucker. Nathan? Nathan, are you in the booth? Give Mr. Tucker a spot and cut the work light," he growled into the darkness.

Nathan? Nathan! My God, was it possible? The work light went out behind me and a trace dot of light found its way to my chest and suddenly burst into a full spot. I grinned toward the light booth. Though it seemed inconceivable, Nathan was there and it felt good. The tables had definitely been turned since the night previous and it was time to get a taste for each other's perspective. I began at once.

"You are too simple!" I warbled and waited for the smallest echo to settle and make itself comfortable in the velvet folds of my surroundings. "Why you might have said, -oh, a great many things. Mon Dieu, why waste your opportunity. For example, thus: AGGRESSIVE!" I walked to the right and down stage. Nathan hugged me with his spot. "I sir, if that nose were mine, I'd have it amputated on the spot! -Or FRIENDLY: How do you drink with such a nose? DESCRIPTIVE: 'Tis a rock, a crag, a cape. A cape? Say rather a peninsula!" I drifted left before affecting my next accent. "INQUISITIVE: What is that receptacle? A razor case or a portfolio? KINDLY: Ah, do you love the little birds so much that when they come to sing to

you, you give them this to perch upon? INSOLENT: Sir, when you smoke, the neighbors must suppose your chimney is on fire. CAUTIOUS: Take care. A weight like that might make you top heavy. THOUGHTFUL: Somebody fetch my parasol. Those delicate colors fade so in the sun. PEDANTIC: Does not Aristophanes mention a mythological monster called Hippocampelephantocamelos? Surely, we have here the original! FAMILIAR: Well old torch light, hang your hat over that chandelier. It hurts my eyes. ELOQUENT: When it blows, the typhoon howls and the clouds darken. DRAMATIC: When it bleeds, the Red Sea! ENTERPRISING: What a sign for some perfumer. LYRICAL: Hark the horn of Roland calls to summon Charlemagne! SIMPLE: When do they unveil the monument? RESPECTFUL: Sir, I recognize in you a man of parts, a man of prominence. RUSTIC: Hey, call that a nose? Na, na. I be no fool like you think I be. That there's a blue cucumber. MILITARY: Point against Cavalry! PRACTICAL: Why not a lottery with this for the grand prize? Or parodying Faustus in the play: Was this the ship that launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Illium?"

"You see my dear sir, these are things you might have said had you some tinge of letters. You need but three to write you down: an ASS!" I sat down on the edge of the stage in the warmth of Nathan's spotlight. My feet dangled off the edge and hung in space. "Moreover," I roared. The spotlight jiggled. "if you had the invention here before these folks to make jest

of me, be sure you would not then articulate the twentieth part of half a syllable of the beginning. For I say these things lightly enough myself, about myself, but I allow no one else to utter them." I fixed a stare into the light booth and paused dead still. After a short moment, I stood up and brushed off the back of my Levi's. "Anything more, professor?"

"Not bad, Mr. Tucker. Your use of different world accents and speech patters for the different adjectives was most entertaining and an approach I have not seen before today. Thank you." He joined me on stage. The house lights went up and I realized the light booth was on the other side of one way glass. "It promises to be an interesting semester, does it not, Mr. Tucker?"

"I certainly hope so, sir." He put an arm on my shoulder and led me to the back tech shop, prop and costume rooms and to the make-up and dressing rooms. The complex was larger than anything I had ever worked in and I was thankful for the guided tour as I would have easily become turned around on my own. We walked across the catwalk that led to the light booth. My heart increased its cadence one beat for every step that took me closer to Nathan.

"And now, for the Houston Control of The Hartung, I present to you the computer control center." He held the door open for me and I walked into the darkened room, my heart, spastic with the anticipation of meeting Nathan Evans. My legs moved

slowly as if in the pursuit sequence of a dream. There, in front of me were the flashing lights of a gigantic audio mixer, easily the size of an upright piano. Adjacent to it was a computer monitored light board. The elevation of the booth high above the house floor offered a dignitary box view of the illuminated stage below. "This is the state of the art, Mr. Tucker."

"It's just a bunch of flashing lights and colored buttons to me." -The new voice startled me and I wheeled around to confront the deep baritone it belonged to. Once again, our eyes locked.

"Do not let his comment fool you, Mr. Tucker. May I present Nathan Evans. He is our student stage manager here at The Hartung and he is a technical genius and an actor."

Nathan was wearing plaid shorts in festive pastels with barely enough material to do the job and a matching polo shirt in baby blue that seemed to draw his eyes out of their sockets. "Nathan, please meet Joey Tucker, our newest student director."

We finally shook hands and my arm seemed to fragment with sensation as our grip slowly dissolved the audience/performer barriers.

"Your Cyrano leaves quite an impression," Nathan grinned sincerely.

"Thank you, Nathan. And let me return the compliment by saying I enjoyed last night's performance."

"Little Mary Sunshine? I don't remember seeing you in the audience." Nathan acted confused, 'acted' being the pivotal term.

"I recovered my careless fumble. "Well, yes I was there but I sat toward the back."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Huey says it was a waste of my energy to get involved with a ridiculous musical."

"I said it was a waste of your talents," Hughes clarified. "Nathan has yet to make a commitment to act in one of the four productions this semester."

"Well, from what I observed last night, I'm sure Nathan will be an asset to any of the four," I said with faked patronage. It was easier to look away from him now that he had betrayed my innocence. I wanted desperately to leave.

"It must of course depend of the script. I will not tolerate another diversion of Nathan's talents." Hughes began to re-light his pipe when Nathan reminded him of the no smoking policy in the theatre. I decided I had had quite enough of both of them.

"Well, if that's all for this morning, I'll return tonight for the organizational meeting." I turned to show myself out.

"It was nice meeting you, Joey," Nathan managed to remember my name in spite of his apparent overnight lobotomy.

"Likewise," I mumbled walking out the door.

Go to Hell, Nathan!

CHAPTER SIX

I could not remember ever wanting to scream as badly as I needed to scream now. I suppose it was bound to happen. After five days of storing every conceivable tributary of emotion, all restraints were just about to give. I hurried down the theatre steps and rushed toward a dense grove of trees. Crouching by a trunk, it happened. My mother, Tony, Mark and now Nathan, each seemed intent to physically squeeze through my tear ducts to provoke, if not guilt, then at least a strong sense of irreproachable consideration. I submitted to the full ritual. I had it coming.

The sun broke through the clouds and invaded the clump of trunks and branches with a burning insurgence. It reminded me of Nathan's spotlight and I retreated further into the brush.

I moped all the way to the bookstore where I gathered notebooks, clipboards and other assorted supplies that I thought

an actor/playwright/director ought to have. Perhaps if I buried myself in my work...well, perhaps nothing. I couldn't hide and I wouldn't deny my feelings for Nathan. I know you're thinking, what happened to his feelings for Tony and Mark? Well, I had feelings for all of them. I'll admit there was a lot I didn't understand. Pretending I did, just made things worse. For now, anger was about as tangible as I could get without double-crossing my standards.

Back in my room, I sat at my desk and half expected the drama of the semester to unfold before my eyes. Instead, I spent forty-five minutes staring blankly onto a white college ruled page. Equally barren was my train of commitment. All those years on the other side of the curtain, made this director adjustment a little rough to swallow whole. On top of everything, an aggressive ball of depression could have choked all determination, but I persevered.

With the first official meeting only two hours away, I found little resistance in dwelling on thoughts of Nathan. I had supposed he would attend this meeting but I couldn't decide whether or not to saddle anymore expectations. It was entirely possible I had encountered somebody as polished at game playing as I had prided myself. Suddenly, it made perfect sense. Nathan had thrown a glove in the dirt this afternoon and I could accept or deny his challenge. How sporting of him. I spent the next

twenty minutes staring at the glove.

I took advantage of the rare seclusion I was entertaining in the absence of my three roommates who evidently had more taxing class schedules than I had at the moment. Climbing into the shower, I thought of Tony and how I hoped his memory would not be resurrected every time I took a shower, as showers, generally were something I could not avoid. I smiled in spite of this hope. Normally, the grooming regiment rated little conscious effort except on those special occasions, like tonight, when the routine became nothing short of a nervous display of overwhelming self critique. Instantly, my sandy brown hair, parted on the right side and layered over my ears to the shoulder, would appear to be a boyish cut revealing a streak of immaturity. And that classic sixteenth of an inch gap between my two front teeth, would now take on the dimensional characteristics of The Grand Canyon. As I attended to those details I could alter anyway, my confidence was slowly gaining the upper hand on the grip I wrenched on my appearance. In all honesty, I wasn't even sure I could compete in Nathan's category of perfection, but I wasn't about to quit before I'd been formally disqualified. I stole one last quality check in the bathroom mirror before darting out the door and heading for the cafeteria. I walked across the mall and arrived promptly behind the USF football team which would undoubtedly render

the campus food supply dwindling, but I somehow managed to secure a salad and a Pepsi. I was about to sit at a vacant table when Paul's voice sailed over the crowd from the other side of the eating plaza where my three suite-mates occupied a table next to the water fountain. Paul motioned me to join them.

I hoped my extra efforts in sprucing wouldn't be detected by my humorously hetero co-inhabitants but as I neared their table, it became clear that my arrival did not escape the roving eyes of Mark who engaged a concealed stare from behind a raised water glass. I suppose I was flattered as well as intrigued by Mark's assumed interest. It certainly didn't damage my confidence.

I hated to generalize and geographical generalizations were the worst kind, but Mark's usually open mind and his roots from the upper eastern seaboard, as compared to Paul and Randy, my other roommates, with their closed mind, limited brain cell configuration, from Brandon, a Tampa suburb, lent walloping credence to geographical influence shaping awareness. But not even that gave Mark and I what we had in common, and with that bookmark, I retired all further assumptions.

I had barely touched my salad when I noticed the time on the cafeteria wall. I excused myself and dashed back to the room, brushed my teeth, flossed and Scoped, grabbed a notebook and hurried across campus to the Performing Arts Center.

On the front sidewalk leading to the theatre, I caught

up with a beautiful woman with long, straight auburn hair. I jumped ahead of her to catch the door to the complex.

"Thank you," she said coldly. I stood there holding the door open as she crossed the lobby to the auditorium doors. I raced ahead again and grabbed the next door in her path.

"Allow me."

"Thanks again."

"Are you in the senior program, too?" I walked quickly beside her. She took one look at me and picked up her pace.

"To answer your question, yes. I'm Mardell Armstrong." She flipped her red hair off a shoulder and kept walking. "I suppose you're the out of state actor Huey has spoken about."

"Joey Tucker. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm sure." She was a taunt prima donna type; -the kind of actor that thrived on placing herself high above all others on the list of theatrical achievements. I was to learn in time that she was Hughes' ace in the hole, or hole in the ace. She had been his singular leading lady for the past seven semesters and was sought by at least five summer stock repertory companies around the country for the upcoming summer season. Whether she could truly act or not, remained a question unanswered, I had a feeling, even by those who had been in her audience. But it was certain that Hughes pulled every string in her favor. I was so taken by her mask of aristocracy that I had paid no attention to the object of her destination and we walked right

up to Nathan who was sitting on the stage and had watched our entrance. I veered off at the last second hoping to avoid his eyes. I didn't.

"Nathaniel. Isn't it splendid to be working together again?"

Nathan hopped off the stage. "What's it been, Mardell? Maybe five minutes since our last production?" He smiled over at me.

"Well, it was before Christmas break, I'll concede. But we are like family aren't we?" Mardell searched through her bag for some lipstick. Nathan nonverbally agreed with her shaking his head, but he hadn't stopped watching me. He looked comfortable in his faded Levi's and a gold tank top. A black cardigan was bunched up on the stage at his side. I knew I must have looked anxious. Mardell suddenly looked up to catch us staring at each other and apologized for not introducing us.

"That's okay. Joey and I have already met. Tucker, isn't it?" Nathan smiled adjusting his tank top so it lay more evenly across that Great Wall of a chest. I raised an eyebrow and confirmed his inquiry with a nod of my head.

"Well, then, I'll leave you two alone. I do have to find Huey before he fears I've accepted some scholarship elsewhere." With that she caught a draft and sailed onto the stage.

I had hoped to match Nathan's elusiveness but I was thankful

to Mardell nonetheless for arranging the encounter I had indeed prepared for all afternoon.

"Hello, Joey." Nathan lifted himself back onto the stage where he sat.

"Nathan," I acknowledged.

"Are you getting around campus all right?" His eyes were a choppy gulf blue this evening and they saw right through me.

"No problems so far. It's going to take a while to figure out my way around the city, especially if I end up drawing an off campus location, but I think I'm doing just fine when it comes to the university." I couldn't help but smile at him. It relieved some of the tension and added reassurance to my campaign.

"I can give you a hand around town if you have any questions. I was going to ask you if you'd found a place to work-out yet."

"What makes you think I work-out?"

"Some things are obvious to me." Nathan smiled.

"You'll understand if I tell you I find that hard to believe."

"What are you saying?"

"There. -A perfect example, Nathan." I laughed. "The audience wasn't the only one in the dark last night, was it?"

"Okay. I apologize for playing the whole incident down this morning. I just didn't see the harm in all of it last

night, but that was before you had a name or any connection with me. Things are different now, and I suppose I find it somewhat embarrassing."

"Hold on a minute and back up, will you? Harm? You spend an hour and a half jacking off someone's emotions and you don't see the harm in it?"

"I know it got out of hand but quite frankly, my intentions were honorable aside from being slightly prospecting. The instant I saw you-" he cut himself short. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter. I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable but I had a ball last night and I can't bring myself to regret a minute of it."

"So you would have been content to leave things as they were last night, -to write them off, so to speak, as cheap grade entertainment?"

"Are you kidding? Heather was dispatched on reconnaissance last night and your friend Mark told her everything I needed to know."

"But Mark didn't know anything."

"Mark knew plenty." Nathan smiled and looked beyond me to greet the newest face making its way to the stage.

"Nathan. It's good to see you again. How was your break?"

"Fine, Davey. And yours?"

"Well, you must know how hectic Christmas productions can be and doing 'The Nutcracker' in the round has its added hang

ups." Davey started to light a cigarette.

"Save it for the lobby, McCutchan." Nathan almost delighted in his role of the enforcer. "As a matter of fact, I was in a production here over Christmas, so it wasn't much of a break." Nathan was obvious about his small talk. It was equally clear in his voice, that Nathan didn't much care for this Davey character. -Just something I noticed now and would appreciate later, I was picking up strange signals from these two. If I didn't know better, and I didn't at the time, I would have placed my finger smack dab on top of some lesser indiscretion from their common past. Davey was passively attractive, I suppose, in an L.L. Beene sort of way. He wore a blue and white striped oxford over a white turtle neck, 501's and those funny boot shoes you see a lot of in Massachusetts and Maine. But it would have been a long shot. Nathan is clearly perfect and Davey, well, Davey was a Marlboro Man factory second, at best.

"Joey, this is Davey McCutchan, another of Huey's Four Musketeers." We shook hands.

Davey fashioned a stare across stage as he spoke. "What brings you here, Tucker?"

"If you know my last name without full introduction, I'll assume you know what brings me here."

"You're right, I do, but it doesn't mean I understand it, does it?" Just then Mardell spotted Davey and they met center stage in an embrace.

"Just what was that all about?" Nathan asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me. I have a feeling it has to do with my advance man, Professor Hughes. I detect similar animosities."

"I can assure you that whatever you're detecting, Hughes holds more contempt for Davey than for anyone else on the planet. Davey's peer relationship and infatuation with Mardell, stand directly in the way of any extracurricular designs Huey might have on Mardell."

"It will be very interesting to see who ends up working in The Hartung this semester, then," I half claimed, half asked. "I have a feeling I should start becoming more comfortable with an off campus location." The mere thought ripped into my heart.

Nathan just smiled. "Don't give it another thought until the lots have been drawn. And don't worry about Davey. You're going to find him par for the course as far as actors are concerned around here. It's a small university with very big egos, Joey. The stage can get pretty crowded even during a monologue. Now that black fellow over there is Carson Bishop. He's the last of The Musketeers. Hey, Carse!" Carson spun around on his heels to match the voice with Nathan and immediately walked over to greet him.

"Nate, how was your Christmas? God, I almost forgot! How was Europe, I should ask?" Carson and Nathan did what you'd call a soul handshake, I guess.

"Christmas was busy but I didn't make it to Belgium after all. I ended up accepting a part in a musical production here at the last minute so I stayed in the Bay Area all alone." Nathan stuck out his lower lip in self pity making me wish I'd arrived before the holidays.

"Sounds tragic. I imagine your folks were pretty disappointed."

"Yeah, I guess so. And what about your family? How was Chicago?"

"Nasty weather and nasty relatives. It's good to be back. And who might this be?"

"I'm sorry, Carson. I want you to meet Joey Tucker from Lincoln, Nebraska."

"The basketball player! I've been waiting weeks for some decent one on one. Huey told me you played for Nebraska. It's nice to meet you."

"Thanks, the same, but I really only modeled their letterman jacket for three years. I didn't see a whole lot of court action."

"Still, Nebraska's one of the best and you have to be pretty accomplished to even sit on their bench, from what I hear."

"Well, thanks," I said. "We will have to play sometime soon. I'd like that."

Nathan broke into the conversation. "Carse, here, is probably the most down to earth actor in the community. He's

really got his talent together which is pretty unique on this campus."

Carson smiled. "I deduct from that set up that Joey has already met Mardell and Davey?" We both nodded.

He and Nathan wandered off on some tangent reminiscing about the politics surrounding the casting of last season's production. Carson was a lanky, semi-awkward looking black kid who couldn't have looked more intimidating if he carried a stick. He looked tough, all right, but the fact that he was a performer in theatrical arts smoothed out his rough exterior by several layers. He went on to tell Nathan how fed up he'd become playing grocery boys and bartenders, piano players and 'Death' and how he looked creatively forward to this newest challenge.

Huey cleared his throat and everyone moved to take seats in the first row of the auditorium. "Okay. Let us begin." Nathan sat next to me with Carson on his other side. "I trust everyone has met each other by now so I will skirt formalities and arrive at the point straight away. Each of you should know why you are here but more importantly you need to be aware of what it took to get you here." I relaxed in my seat in preparation for the martyred speech certain to follow. "After hours of deliberation and departmental analysis, we were able to push this project through the regents of this university.

It is not without risk. It is not without personal sacrifice. Let it not be without gratitude and respect." Huey paused to look around the auditorium hoping someone had captured his well chosen words on paper. Nathan's and my shoulders touched where we sat. I concentrated all my energy to flow to him through this point of contact. It gave me goose bumps under my sweater. "You will each receive individual production budgets of five hundred dollars. We will operate these funds on a requisition basis, either through myself or Nathan. In addition and recently, we have secured the use of the Municipal Theatre downtown, the Convention Center and the Civic Auditorium during the entire months of April and May. This means that four productions will run simultaneously for four weeks rather than alternating performances in one theatre as we originally discussed. Fortunately, the Broadway tour of 'CATS' has canceled it's Tampa engagement which had the 'Muni' booked solid for those months. At any rate, drawing for these facilities is the first item on our agenda tonight. But before we draw, I want to assure everyone of the overall equality of the four theatres."

"Bullshit." Nathan muttered for my benefit.

"...As for The Hartung," Hughes continued, "well, her capabilities speak for her. Whomever of you chooses The Hartung will have the home court advantage and naturally we, in the Theatre Arts Department, will bend over backwards to accommodate

you." Hughes' line of vision did not wander a bra size away from Mardell as he spoke. "Of course, this can't be promised or even expected from the other venues, but this potential challenge will be countered by larger seat capacities and bigger stages. Working in different facilities and under varying circumstances, not to mention working against stiff competition, are all factors of the real world and therefore work quite effectively in this assignment. The other three locations do operate in accordance with the various stage unions which could erect a brick wall in your path unless you discover ways around it." Hughes motioned to another staff member not yet introduced. "Stand up Daniel. Daniel Fleur is the department technical professor and he will work directly with these union sites based on your needs. Nathan will work with The Hartung Production and may elect to act in it as well." Nathan shrugged his shoulders to reinforce his indecision. Hughes paced himself to trot his message home. "These productions carry the highest of expectations, not only from the university regents but from the acting community on campus and the theatre attending public of Tampa." Hughes, or Huey, as everyone seemed to relish calling him, reached for the baseball cap that Daniel was extending him, and dropped four slips of paper into it.

I took a deep breath and wondered if I was merely imagining pressure dispatched from Nathan's shoulder. The random uncertainty of this process forced air out of my chest and

optimism out of the question. One wrong draw could leave in its wake the eminent separation between us. The rest was manageable. The play, the direction and the acting I could handle. Losing Nathan before I had achieved the satisfaction of knowing Nathan carried more disappointment than I had capacity to process at this point.

Mardell drew first, possibly because of her sex but more likely because of her over abundance thereof. She elected to hog-tie my anxiety by withholding her announcement until everyone had drawn. After Davey, Carson reached his hand into the cap, opened his little white slip of fate and smiled. Davey slowly unwrapped his note and rifled a "yes!" into the auditorium silence.

"Try your hand, Mr. Tucker." Hughes made me reach for the hat and since I was the last to draw, trying my hand was not going to hold any significance unless my lot was masturbation and celibacy for the remainder of the semester. I took the final piece of paper. "What is it, Mr. Tucker?" I looked at Nathan and then at Hughes.

"The Convention Center." The words left a nasty taste in my mouth. I tried to swallow but found I couldn't.

"And you, Davey?" Hughes prompted.

"Wait a minute!" Mardell protested. "I've got the Convention Center, too." Hughes inspected Mardell's claim and I held my paper up for verification. My heart had been

encouraged to pump again.

"Evidently, I have made an error and we will have to draw again." Hughes clearly hated to admit error.

"Hold on a minute," Davey objected. "I'm happy with The Municipal. Let the rematch be between the other three."

Carson shrugged his lanky shoulders. "Actually, The Civic is good for me. I hate to say it, but it's in the part of town where I stand to get most of my audience. It's fine by me if Joey and Mardell have a tie breaker."

With these concessions, which I likened to manna from heaven, it was down to fifty-fifty. Huey scribbled on two new pieces of paper, folded them in two and placed them behind his back. He stood over Mardell with what appeared to be a strategic stare down the front of Mardell's loose fitting peasant dress, and offered her first choice for the second time.

"Make it the left hand, Huey." Hughes extended his left hand and handed me the slip not chosen.

"It's The Hartung!" I gasped, feeling like a balloon that had been inflated to its physical limitations and then released to rocket haphazardly in the confines of space. I sensed Nathan's relief as it rushed through our shoulders, though I had to doubt he felt like a balloon. He was too collected for all that nonsense. Mardell smiled at Hughes, though I didn't know why.

Hughes continued for twenty-five more minutes reviewing

requirements, deadlines and stipulations. Couldn't he see how pointless it all was now that Nathan and I would spend the semester together? It wasn't important that together, from a shared sense of commitment and destiny, Nathan and I would produce the play of the season. Role models like Alexander the Great who had recognized the potential of gay lovers in battle and conquest, failed to inspire me.

Results and consequences reduced to a single, elated thought: Nathan and I would spend the semester together. Without making a sound, my balloon landed on the stage of The Hartung. I closed my eyes and mentally screamed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"This is it," Nathan announced.

"This is what? -The center of Florida?" I laughed aloud. Nathan looked across the roof of a bright red and immaculately waxed Porsche 944S and broke into a smile as he turned the key and pulled up on the handle. The lock jumped on the passenger side and I opened it reluctantly. "Okay. Independent wealth?" I conceded.

"Channeled wealth, actually. I am significantly spoiled." He reached under the steering column and the sun roof retracted automatically. "My father is the Lieutenant Commander General of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe. -S.H.A.P.E. You may have heard of it."

"As a matter of fact, I have. So why isn't Nathan studying abroad?"

"The accommodations my folks made for me here were to sweet to pass up. Sometimes I think it may have been by design. I mean, the car, a hefty monthly allowance plus the new beach house out in Clearwater. Europe just sounded like slumming it by comparison."

"Sounds to me like your parents bought you off."

"There's dignity in my price, Joey. Besides, you just have to know my father, that's all. But I don't wish that on you or anybody."

"Don't worry. I understand more than you know."

"Why? What does your dad do?" Nathan left campus heading west. I had never been asked what my father did. As a rule, everyone already knew.

"Public Administration, sort of." I hoped he'd leave it at that.

He didn't. "Public Administration sort of? How do you abbreviate that? -P.A.S.O. And if he is the chief, do we call him 'El Paso?' What do you mean, sort of?"

"It's kind of complicated and I've never really been all that interested in his work. We never got along and I never gave him the consideration of being involved with what he was doing. My parents are basically good people, I suppose. I was raised on strict grass roots morals." (Now, you and I both know my father would rather take credit for the entire Holocaust than admit any responsibility for my morality background, but

with Nathan and for now, that was beside the point.)

"You make it sound like 'Little House on the Prairie.'"

"Yeah. I suppose I do."

"Well, my father is a drill sergeant shithead. So much authority packed in such a small body. I mean, I'm bigger than he is and have been since I was five, but he's a helluva lot meaner. I love him as my father but he's probably on my hit list as a human being. But in this position, it's not the first time he's been on a hit list so it doesn't phase him much. He figures keeping me in money is what fatherhood is all about. I don't have the heart or the alternate resources to argue with him." Nathan maneuvered the Porsche between a semi truck and the curb and edged into the intersection. "My mom? -She's submissive; -okay, pathetically so. She really has no life of her own. She lives entirely off the I.V. connected to the root of my father's passion, -the military. She exists solely to raise his children, which she's basically accomplished, though to varying degrees of success. I've got a long hair brother on some Greenpeace boat off the coast of Russia trying to save the whales while smoking dope, an older sister who's raising a three year old without the foggiest idea of his paternal origin, and my younger brother, well, he's privately schooled all over Europe." Nathan clenched his teeth on his lower lip as he turned the corner. "But what about the rest of your family? I'm still unclear what your father does, exactly."

"So am I. Listen, I'd rather not talk about him if you don't mind. I thought our objective was to find ice cream."

"It is. Getting to know each other better isn't a toxic by-product though. I don't want you to be afraid to talk to me." Nathan wrinkled his forehead.

I would have to learn not to let this topic catch me off guard. As Dorothy would be inclined to say, 'we're not in Nebraska anymore.' People were bound to inquire. In the future, I decided that moment, my father would be deceased for all practical purposes. "I'm afraid of very few things. Talking to you and getting to know you intimately does not frighten me, Nathan. It's just that talking about my father doesn't interest me and until I know you better, I have to assume it wouldn't interest you either. Now, where's my ice-cream?"

"It should be right around this corner." The street onto which we turned, was completely dark. I could scarcely make out the vague outline of the parlor that seemed to merge indiscriminately on either side with a law office and a McDonalds, also closed. We drove by slowly, almost somber. "I'm afraid this city slips into a coma after ten o'clock. 'Any suggestions?"

"This is your town, dear." I smiled at him.

"We could drive to the beach if you feel like it. It's just another twenty minute drive."

"That sounds perfect."

I was beginning to loosen up but I still couldn't help longing for the moment when all moments that followed could be free of the sting of awkwardness that prodded us now. I had to realize that nothing was going to bring about anything instantly.

We came to a stoplight and Nathan caught me staring at him. "What are you looking at?" I adjusted my gaze just slightly out the window and immediately spotted the street sign.

"That's really Nebraska Avenue? In downtown Tampa?"

"It really is. Makes you homesick I bet."

"Then you lose." His profile was outlined in pale shades of red and green. It was a beautiful silhouette that gave conflicting signals as diverse as the stop and go lights that lent themselves to the uncertain shadows of the car.

"We're on Kennedy Boulevard now and we're heading due west. The river we're about to cross is the Hillsborough River which runs through the city north to south. It's not one of your more wild or scenic rivers, but it kinda classes up the neighborhood." Nathan was stimulating in the way he acted, in the way he looked but especially in the subtle way he took ownership over my well being. In 48 hours we had gone from being anonymously intimate to sharing all the sensitivity of two defensive linebackers. It wasn't even frustrating, really. It was stimulating. That's all.

The city lights started retreating in the side mirrors and water appeared in large bodies on either side of the elevated road. I was twenty-one days into the new year and couldn't be happier. Knowing Nathan unconditionally would transpire in time but for now, the conquest was half the adventure and my keen sense of fantasy completed the bill. For the first time in my life, I was far enough away from my father that an act of Congress couldn't retrieve me, which is not to say my father couldn't sway congress. This, he did on a regular basis.

Tony had already joined the harvest hues of a sun slowly sinking in the West and I had laid out before me all of Greater Metropolitan Tampa Bay. I wasn't sure what to do with it just yet but the possibilities being endless only added to my sensation. The closet door had not only been thrown wide open but intentionally wrenched from its hinges as well. There wasn't a Fred Astaire floor diagram and no yellow brick road to follow. But I had the suppressed determination of twenty three years unharnessed and on my side. This and the realization that I could fall no lower than I'd already been forced to climb down, inspirited me. I counted on Nathan to provide my first boost.

We came to a junction in the road that required either a right or left option as the Gulf stalked directly ahead of us on the other side of a metallic green directional sign. Nathan turned right. The reflection of the moon off the water leapt into Nathan's blond hair blowing vibrantly in the breeze

generated by the car's velocity. His tank top rippled loosely over his chest affording an occasional revealing of his massive pectorals. The definition of his arms appeared wildly animated as his biceps danced mastering the winding line of the road. "Find the garage door opener, will you?" I fumbled between the seats when I didn't notice it on the sun visor and, from under an odd assortment of empty granola bar wrappers, I produced the device.

"God, how can you eat raisins?" I asked him taking content inventory of the health food wrapper. I was fooling with the door opener as I listed the remaining eight syllable ingredients on the wrapper. Suddenly, about a block away on the Gulf side, brilliant blue runway lights illuminated both sides of a long asphalt driveway. Towering palm trees stood in formal protocol. Nathan dimmed his headlights and I watched them disappear into the shiny red hood of the Porsche. Once inside a garage, Nathan instructed me to depress the button again. My action was answered with a motor cranking the door down behind us as another garage door opened at the same time in front of us exposing a precisely landscaped backyard with a separate regiment of lights in magnificent shades of blue and red shimmying up the trunks of more palm trees and other native vegetation. Nathan stepped out of the car and I followed him with my mouth hanging wide open, I'm afraid.

The first maverick outriders of the cool evening breeze

lassoed my hot intentions and hog-tied them to an immediate future of involuntary passivity. I took a few more steps to better survey the property and the splashing gulf that lay only feet beyond the grass covered lot. Redwood decking stretched its weather worn boards out from the two story timber and glass monstrosity, framing a jacuzzi sunken in the platform on the house's western cul-de-sac.

"I'll be right back. I'm going to grab some heavier jackets." Nathan ran into the house and I monitored his movement by the lights that consecutively lit up around the redwood deck and then, with a graceful leap, onto the second story room closest to the gulf, which I deducted to be Nathan's bedroom. Sure as I stood there shivering, a minute later he walked out of the french doors on to the balcony above me holding an armful of jackets. "What color?" he asked like a clown with a fistful of balloons. I shrugged my shoulders. He reached into the pile and tossed a jacket over the railing that opened, swallowing air as it drifted, slowly, into my hands. I slipped it on and it fit perfectly. Nathan disappeared and the lighting sequence played in reverse as room by room, the house grew dark again. I walked to the edge of the yard where the grass gave way to the encroaching sands.

The breeze launched a pungent smell of fish and the path of light hurled by the moon onto the choppy water begged me to leave reality and chase its descent behind the horizon where

we could become immortal playmates. If it weren't for the mortal relationship I was fostering with Nathan, I would have sought the companionship of the sinking moon. The final light vanished from the house and Nathan emerged from the kitchen's sliding glass door humming a familiar tune.

"Times like these were made for Tasters Choice," he sang with perfect voice. He held out a cup of instant coffee whose vapors rose from the rim to mingle with the gulf mist. "I had the microwave on high so be careful." I took a small sip. "You know," he added, "that jacket has never once looked good on me and it looks fantastic on you, Joey."

Another city, another boyfriend and another jacket. At least there was consistency in my world conquest, I thought quietly to myself before I muttered a "thank you," and continued sipping my coffee. Nathan had pulled a teal green jacket over his head and his blond hair fell down on top of his forehead. The shadows of the diminished moon on his face revealed his deep set eyes and dimpled cheeks. Big hands held his coffee cup. He walked to the water and then turned south down the beach. His bronzed skin tones drank the moon beams like a cactus thirsty for rain whereas my skin brilliantly reflected the night light back into the universe. I needed to secure a tan. We strolled a few yards in silence. It was though I had strapped two conch shells to my head only to find the roar reassuring. I kept Nathan's pace in the wet sand.

"I wouldn't mind hearing more about this Nathan Evans character."

"Nathan is a spoiled little rich kid who was born twenty-four years ago in Manila. His Porsche is his hometown since he has no claim to any roots that felt the security of solid earth for a period greater than four months at a time. But it's really not as tragic as I make it sound and frankly I don't expect Sally Struthers to mount some extensive campaign for my benefit. When I was five years old, my father landed a position as a United Nations Military advisor and we moved to New York and I attended an elementary school in Scarsdale, where we had a house. You probably will never hear me refer to a home during my childhood years; always a house and never quite a home. I resent that. Anyway, I don't have time to dwell on a past over which I had no control. On the contrary, I make time to ward off paternal intervention at this point in my life." Nathan kicked up sand with his right foot.

"You sound bitter."

"Maybe I am bitter but don't take that wrong. I'm not obsessed by it. It's just my father controlled my boundaries for too long and it won't happen again. That's how I direct my vengeance, I guess."

"But you're living in his home."

"HOUSE! But it's nothing more than a spring board that will someday vault me into higher personal achievement."

"And speaking of gymnastics," I prompted him.

"How did you know about that?"

"Mark told me everything I needed to know." I mimicked his earlier informational edge.

"Well, this is where the story gets real involved so you'll want to pay attention." Nathan sighed. "I had just enrolled in the High School for the Performing Arts when father went to work for Navy Intelligence in Longbeach, California. I was drafted to carry his luggage across country. I ended up in Prep School where I cultivated an interest in gymnastics. My high school coach dubbed me a 'natural' and I took most California State Titles by the time I was a sophomore. Anyway, my coach tipped a scout from UCLA who snatched me up with a full ride scholarship in exchange for the exploitation rights of my talents. I trained nine hours a day for two years in the shadows of Vidmar and Connors. I worked out with all of them and I was good; and I'm not just saying that. They all said it too. Even then, my coach feared I was going to be too young and too new for the Olympics, but I was making an aggressive showing in the collegiate competitions so I went to Nationals in Colorado Springs. In the preliminaries, I surprised everyone by moving into third position and going onto the final apparatus, I was only three quarters of a point under qualifying for the United States Olympic Team. The highbar was my ticket. I either bought it there or I didn't. Mitch

Gaylord was a good friend of mine and we had trained closely together in preparation for Nationals. He was playing with this stunt called 'The Gaylord II,' which he finally managed to incorporate at the L.A. Games. I had apprenticed the maneuver and spotted him in practice, but our accomplished averages of execution were remarkably different. He almost never missed. I couldn't say that." It was obvious that Nathan was beginning to have trouble with this story but I knew I couldn't stop him now that he was this invested in disclosure. I continued to watch him as we walked. It wasn't nearly as cold now and I had become quite comfortable inside the borrowed jacket.

"Mitch was up in the scoring and had elected to leave the Gaylord II out of his routine due, in part, to the high risk factor and to the unconsoling fact that he could to a pratfall for a dismount and still qualify for the U.S. Team. I grabbed the bar and knew instantly that I would have to put the Gaylord II in my routine if I were to have any chance at all for the team. I sailed through the requirements flawlessly and I was solid on the bar. My heart skipped a beat as I entered my first back flip, revolved into a tuck, entered the second flip and reached for the bar that had almost always been there in practice, and grabbed air. I somehow managed to arch and straighten vertically before I hit the mat but it was awkward and obviously my last ditch effort to come down holding a star with my name on it. -Am I getting to you yet?" I smiled

reassuringly and he continued. "Mitch ran up to me and patted my ass and said of all things, 'nice recovery.' He mounted the bar, executed his requirements, went into the Gaylord II and landed feet first on the Olympic Team."

"That's a sad story, but I'm glad you told me."

"I did get over it, you know, but it was hell being in Los Angeles that summer and it took a while to recover, especially after I had swallowed all that 'natural' P.R. hype. I was blond, pumped up and a prime candidate for some post games Loveboat Episode. The only problem was, I knew it. It was just after all this letdown that Dad was given the number two appointment in Europe. He decided to build a retirement house in the States and they bought this stretch of beach and built the house. I think he knew better than to expect me to carry his Samsonites a second time. Congenially, he bought me the car and offered me the house until they returned. I entered USF as a humbling exercise, I guess. Sort of a removal from the outer most edge of a certain spot light and into the dark shadows of anonymity. I haven't competed since, but it's not the self-inflicted punishment my analyst would love to conveniently label. It's just another round with reality, that's all."

We turned around and started back toward the house. The moon was gone by now and it was a cloudless evening. Each star

was out for our personal inspection and as I gazed upward, Nathan shouted suddenly.

"Joey! Watch out!" He grabbed my arm and tugged me away from an incoming wave that dared to surpass the wet sand mark left by its predecessor. He continued to hold my arm as we watched the wave break unusually high on the sand. His grip was firm as though I might break away and voluntarily race toward the water if it weren't for his clear restraint. The surf retreated cowardly back to its larger contingent and Nathan turned his body into mine. "You okay?" he asked a bit too seriously.

"Of course I'm okay. I didn't realize I was in any real danger." I punctuated his foolishness with a smile as detaining as parenthesis.

"Really?" Nathan tightened his hand on my forearm and started to forcefully drag me toward the water. "Let me know when that realization comes to you." He tossed his coffee cup on the sand and in the struggle, I let mine fall.

"Nathan! None of this is necessary. I'm sorry for making fun of your concern."

"Concern to the wind and assholes to the Gulf!" he yelled.

"Nathan," I begged, "I'm completely afraid of the water. I'm sorry. I just can't play." Both of our feet were wet and I nearly fell in the struggle. My heart raced. Nathan's back was to the surf when I spotted the wave that was going to

defeat both of us if I didn't act quickly. At the last possible moment, I jumped and locked my legs around Nathan's stomach just as the water broke high on his thigh. He swayed and I laughed above the crash of the wave. Nathan growled and began to wade deeper into the water. The Gulf no longer lapped at his legs but now seemed intent to dance around his waist where they threatened my ass. I tried to reason with him. "Nathan, I am being completely honest and as calm as I can be when I tell you that I am deathly afraid of water. I am seconds away from going berserk, I warn you. Besides, we must look absolutely ridiculous wading in the middle of January."

"Ridiculous to whom, Joey? There will be no witnesses and you're wading days are just about over." Laughter rumbled inside his chest as he trudged further and deeper into the Gulf. I had to admit my position straddling his waist was indeed the most compromising of all and yes, I did feel a little foolish. I unlocked my ankles and lowered my legs into the chilly water until we stood facing each other in the cool currents of the Gulf. I started to pull away when I felt his hand touch my side and hold me steady. We watched each other closely for several minutes. I couldn't seem to relax nipple deep when it felt like my manhood was suspended in a sub-polar glacier. I shook off the bite and Nathan tightened his hold on me and sort of chuckled.

"See," he said, "it's not so bad, Joey. There is nothing

to be afraid of."

"I don't think I'll ever be honored on Father's Day."

"Let's be honest. Was there ever really a chance of that, anyway? Besides, you deserve everything you get." He pulled me a little closer.

"I hope so, Nathan. I'd like to deserve you." Nathan looked back at the beach, then out to sea finally bringing his attention back to me. "Do you want to know a secret, Nathan Evans?"

"What's that," he whispered.

"I find you and that gymnast's body of yours absolutely irresistible."

"Irresistible, Mr. Tucker? Ah no young sir. You are too simple. Why you could have said a great many things. Why waste your opportunity?" He smiled.

"My hasty observation shames me and I beg your forgiveness." I lowered my head in pretentious subordination. Nathan took a finger to my chin and raised my head.

"You want to know a secret, Joey Tucker?" I nodded. "This water is freezing." Nathan broke a smile. "And I find you irresistible too."

The sand was shifting under my feet and I felt I was going to lose all balance. Nathan grabbed my jacket to steady me. Our heads collided gently and I felt his lips brush mine. My eyes closed instinctively as I allowed my mouth to open just

enough to receive his tongue. My hands moved to grip his arms above the biceps. He was trembling. We kissed again and he bit my lip as a wave slammed into his back.

"We should head back. This can't be healthy."

I kissed his forehead and agreed with him. My jeans felt like lead and my legs were so numb they didn't feel at all. Nathan put his arm around my neck as we walked out of the Gulf's icy grip.

Back in the house, I had to beg my heart to slow its labored pace. I could taste the salt on my lips and I smelled the fragrance of 'Midnight Marine' on my jeans. I stepped into the shower not only to rid myself of these characteristics but also to restore my body to a Fahrenheit temperature that didn't resemble a Celsius figure. I turned the shower on as hot as I could stand it and the pulsating stream shot through me like red hot arrows. My head was spinning with anticipation and my heart was more heavy than I ever remember it. My brain felt like seaweed and my mouth tasted like my brain. Though these were not necessarily the signs I would have looked for, I knew these were unmistakably the first signs of love. I felt it with every cell in my body. But I wondered how I could be this sure and how long I could sustain the confidence that Nathan would eventually love me back. I had known him but three days and now, as we showered in separate bathrooms after coming into

this arrangement from separate worlds, that union seemed just out of reach. But I had basketball rebounding arms and I had already touched the possibility with my fingertips. Nathan and I would know love.

I shook the water from my hair and reached for the Nexxus Shampoo. 'Work into a lather.' Nathan was showering somewhere in the house and I couldn't help my overwhelming desire to be with him. 'Rinse and repeat.' I think more than anything I wanted to see him wet. 'Work conditioner into shampooed hair.' I mean dripping wet, above the waist too and without clothes. 'Wait sixty seconds.' And waiting would be the clincher. 'Rinse with warm water.' Come to think of it, I should have rinsed with ice cold water; -the feeling was coming back to my lower extremities. The bathroom smelled like one giant cherry coke. I reached blindly for the towel rack. What would happen next, I wondered? I rubbed a porthole in the steamy mirror. Was he being a gentleman by showering separately or was he just being honest? God help me if I failed to 'Beach-Blanket-Bingo' on our first and most critical date. My hair dried slowly in the humid bathroom. I finally worked in some gel and brushed it straight back. My hair could wait. It was becoming clear that I couldn't.

I snatched the red and white striped bathrobe from the hook that held it on the backside of the door. Outside the

bathroom, I paused briefly to recover my sense of direction and turned for the stairs. My eyes called my body to a halt mid-flight when I spied Nathan propped unevenly on some throw pillows in front of the raging fireplace. Preciously he slept.

The flames from the fire cast dancing shadows all about the living room and it looked like a mass turnout at a local jitterbug contest. I listened just a moment for the sound of waves breaking outside but I heard nothing but the unsteady and random crackling of the blaze.

My heart was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. It bounced across the living room and slid under the welcoming arms of Nathan where it slept long after the last embers retired the sock hop.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that this was positively 'it.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

I was running. At first it was not clear why. Suddenly my sub-conscience spots a brightly colored kite high in the air. My eyes strain to trace the string down to its holder. I wonder why Tony is at the beach. In another few seconds it clearly doesn't matter. The kite begins to plunge from the sky faster than my legs can run in this sequence. Tony screams at me. "Get the kite, Joey. You must get the kite." The kite bobs playfully in the water several yards out and water begins to swell about my chest. I can't venture any further. I am so afraid of the water. Without even moving, the water gradually deepens to my shoulders, to my chin. I begin to scream. "You can make it, Joey. Get the kite!" Tony yells. I begin to yell back that I can go no further and the water rushes into my mouth and I choke on the salty foam. I spit as a wave hits me and

holds me on the sea floor for several seconds. I find the strength to push off the bottom of Poseidon's Belly. He is amused by my diligence and pulls me under again with giant arms. "You can make it, Joey!" Poseidon roars as bubbles of laughter escape from his gaping mouth. I wriggled free a second time and gasped for help above the surface. Tony swims toward me as lightning and thunder announce Poseidon's intentions. His strokes are deliberate and graceful as he slices a path from the shore. "Joey!" he yells between breaths. He knows my name, but he's not Tony. Poseidon grabs my foot with his webbed hands and I shake it loose. "Joey!" the stranger yells again. I reach for his hand.

"Joey! Joey, wake up. You're having a bad dream."

"What?" I mumble, forcing my eyes open.

"It's just a dream." Nathan holds me tightly.

"Nathan! Nathan, it was you!"

"What was me?" Nathan smiled.

"In my dream. You were...never mind. You were in my dream, that's all."

Nathan squeezed me again. "Are you okay, now?" he whispered kissing my ear. I shook my head and nuzzled his neck.

The full impact of the nightmare slammed into my brain and I shut my eyes. My sub-conscience had overdosed on symbolism. For another hour, Nathan did not let go of me. I could hear the waves now as he rocked me in the morning shadows

of the house.

For several minutes, I continued to shake. I had been mortally afraid of water ever since 'The Poseidon Adventure,' which the Senator, once again defining parental guidance, took me to see at age six. From that horrifying feature forward, I refused swimming lessons, baths and most water fights. When Shelly Winters said she could make it and she didn't, I signed a life contract with my libido and vowed never to get in over my head. Shelly Winters had been the Ladies Underwater Swimming Champion of New York for three years running, and she could hold her breath for two minutes and forty-seven seconds. Even though she saves Gene Hackman before she dies, the loss of Shelly Winters in 'The Poseidon Adventure' was as tangibly deep as I would ever get.

It didn't help that the Senator's wife was as large as Shelly Winters in 1972. When Shelly said "a fat woman like me can't climb," I knew my mother wouldn't have made it either. Losing Shelly was like losing my mother and that was too much potential grief for a six year old's comprehension. Though I should have been able to deal with these issues separately as an adult, water and death remained synonymous.

Of course, father's campaigns dictated dramatic weight loss for his wife. It seemed she became a public image overnight. Washington had to be held accountable for the transformation that robbed me of the mother I had known. She

would drop us off at school, head for Elizabeth Arden's on Connecticut Avenue, and emerge from the red door to pick us up seven hours later, sizes smaller. It's not to say she became completely unrecognizable but there were occasions, had it not been for the make of the car, the driver under a cucumber and apricot facial would not have provided any resemblance to a blood relative. And with the weight went the familiar softness and warmth of a body I had sought for comfort and reassurance everytime the world threw me a curve or out and out hit me with a pitch. I missed Shelly.

"Orange juice?"

"Thank you." I reached for the glass Nathan offered me. He sort of nodded his head and wandered outside onto the deck. The breeze blew his robe open and his hair flew back. For a moment I forgot the S.S. Poseidon, my mother and Washington, and just watched him, terrified now by his silence. My heart pounded high in my throat. I had never seen the water as blue as it was today and yet I watched it cautiously guarding every perception until it could be validated by emotions I could trust. It was another 'morning-after' and I wanted desperately for it to be different somehow. I walked outside and the waves grew louder. Sea gulls cried in the surf and I wanted to quiet the universe so I could speak and be heard.

"Good morning, Nathan." He smiled. "Did I drool, snore,

talk in my sleep?"

He turned to face me. "No. Why do you ask?" He gazed back at the Gulf giving in to the distraction, I had to admit, was a bit bigger than I was.

"I'm just fishing for feedback, I suppose. I don't like feeling this distant from you when we struggled for so long to become as close as we got last night."

"Struggled for so long? We've known each other two days."

I misread him. "Then you do recognize the distance this morning?" I couldn't look at him now. I knew I had it coming. I fought the urge to run away. He turned into me and his arms locked behind my back.

"No distance, Joey." I hugged him and laid my head on his shoulder. "I'm just having a problem justifying some of these feelings after such a short time."

"I know! Me too. I feel I have no right to be this certain..." I stared into his wonderful eyes, "...but I am, Nathan."

"I'm glad," he whispered.

The sun popped over the roof of the house to catch us in each other's arms. I wanted to spend the entire day playing, but Nathan imposed an agenda I really couldn't ignore any longer. We were a production team without a production.

"If I have to drive this blasted car, I have to see a shifting diagram." I'd never driven a manual.

"I guess it was an oversight by Porsche, Joey. You know, for as much as you drop on one of these gadgets, you'd think they would at least draw you a picture of how it works." Nathan tried to suppress smiling.

"Don't patronize me, Nathan!" I snapped. "Just tell me whether reverse is left or right, up or down."

"Right and down." I promptly grinded into reverse. "I think I should interject that you're not very pleasant to be around in the morning."

"Is that right? And driving this car happens to make me nervous as hell. You want out?"

"No," he pouted sticking out a lower lip that brought my self-pity parade to a screeching stop.

"Then buckle up. It's the law." I tried not to grin but couldn't help myself. That damn lip was batting a thousand. Making conversation to focus on something other than my driving education, I asked what his plans were at the theatre.

"It's got to be cleaned up and prepped for a new show, or hadn't you heard?"

"So clean it up and get the lights ready. That's the extent of your obligation since you won't commit to act."

"I won't commit to act because there isn't a script to commit to. It would be like, uh, -competing on the vault without

a spring board."

"That's a fascinating analogy, Nathan. I'll do my best to get you a spring board before I ask you to jump."

"Thank you." He seemed satisfied. I didn't know why he couldn't trust me to be all the spring he'd ever need. He moved to clarify his mission at the theatre. "Aside from cleaning the place up, I wanted to feed the computer a new lighting program I dreamed about the other day."

"If you can't see well enough to drive your own car, how do you plan to function over a computer terminal?"

"My glasses are at the theatre and I'm only going to explain this one more time. You can't wear your contacts when you've left them in all night. It's part of getting old."

"I'll tell you what: you experience that for both of us because, frankly, I intend to uncover Dick Clark's fountain of youth."

"Don't count your crow's feet, Dick, until they've marched across your face. I have a strong feeling this semester's going to age both of us." He put a conciliatory hand on my leg and I merged into causeway traffic.

"Speaking of the play, as I'll assume you were, what do you think would have happened to us if I hadn't picked The Hartung?"

"I don't know what's going to happen to us now, but there was never a whole lot to worry about as far as The Hartung was

concerned."

"I had less than a twenty-five percent chance!"

"You had more than a seventy-five percent chance but there's no point in examining probabilities now. You got The Hartung and everybody's happy."

"Granted, I'm relieved, -even happy, but your odds don't compute in my book, Nathan. Seventy-five percent?"

"All right. Fair's fair. I suppose you should know. I told Huey I wouldn't work with Davey or Mardell and knowing what a committed racist he truly is, I figured I could swing a deal with the new kid."

"But what about that out-of-state number Hughes tried to pull on me?"

"No doubt he meant every word he said. But I refused to work with Punch and Judy. Hughes wouldn't tolerate a certain Black Revival in The Hartung, so that left you. Hughes intentionally kept The Hartung out of the first round draft pick. We banked on Davey's greed to secure him the largest seating capacity at the Municipal Theatre, so we marked the cards. The Municipal was the largest piece of paper in the hat. Everything's relevant in the theatre, as you know. You have to hand it to Huey, though. He's quite a showman. And besides, if this is the semester he decides to hit on Mardell, it's obvious he'd prefer her to be off campus, tenure and all. You see? The odds couldn't have been more stacked in your favor,

pal."

"Well, thanks for everything you did, but I can't help thinking you stacked the odds in our favor. There wouldn't have been a chance for us in separate venues."

"You're probably right." He thought for a moment. "I would have wound up taking Davey home last night."

Now you know I wanted to make a casual inference to reruns but I bit my lip. Davey was a sleeping dog and as long as he continued to sleep elsewhere, I could keep theories to myself.

I walked Nathan to the light booth where we kissed and said our good-bys before separating for the remainder of the morning. Outside the tech room, I readjusted my crotch and counted to ten before heading for Hughes' office.

"It is fortunate you should happen by this morning, Joey. I have something to show you. Follow me." The old fart was wearing Calvin Klein jeans and wearing them adequately. He led me down the gray carpeted corridor and unlocked a door at the end of the hall.

"What's this?" I asked walking into the near empty room.

"This is your office for the semester. You are a visiting director and this office exists for that purpose." I walked to the desk and picked up a ring of keys. I lifted my eyebrows in inquiry. "They unlock every lockable door in the complex. You will find them labeled for your convenience."

"Thank you, Mr. Hughes. There's no doubt I'll put some long hours of good use into this office."

"Just as long as those long hours produce two short hours on the stage below. I do not have to tell you that you enjoy free run of this theatre complex. The keys make that obvious. Act responsibly and break a leg."

"Thank you, sir. I hope to," I added. The professor left the room and coughed most of the way back to his office at the far end of the hall. Breaking a leg would guarantee a cast. I couldn't speak so confidently about my play. I sat at the desk leaning far back in the gray cushioned chair. The wall to my left was entirely of glass which I assumed was mirrored on the theatre side. Nathan was fading the house lights from his position in the light booth a few rooms away and I watched the entire theatre turn to black. I buried my face in my hands. In just a few months those same lights would be dimming for the opening night of my very own production. I shuttered fearing they might go out only to re-illuminate exposing a half-constructed stage and half-costumed actors performing a half-written script that I had already spent half of this day not writing. God, how that scenario sounded like 'Caligula.' For the first time, the project solicited black and white nerves.

I jerked my head from my hands at the sound of a baritone scream which burst into the theatre below. The theatre looked like a Manhattan discoteque. Lights were flashing everywhere.

It was Nathan's voice that shook the walls and I ran to the light booth. Nathan was hanging out the window into the auditorium. I grabbed a belt loop of his 501's to keep him from falling, though there was actually little danger in that. I had matched his dramatized concern of last evening. How silly that seemed.

"Can you believe it? That box of bolts actually swallowed my program." He was yelling into the theatre while I stood beside him. The booth was alive with clicks and beeps and I had the sensation that it may have been infested. "Let's run downstairs." Nathan pressed himself off the window ledge.

"Right behind you." It was funny watching him behave this way. I have to admit, I had never gotten off on technical wizardry but I had to respect the perversion in those who did. Technical aspects in theatre were nearly always constant. It was the actor who tended to vary. Inside the house, Nathan spun around staring up at the ceiling.

"The computer even took control of the house lights! Would you look at that?"

"I see that."

Nathan took the glasses from his nose and propped them high on his head. "You see, it's this function of individual circuitry. I spent three hours yesterday inputting information that finally convinced the computer to believe it was an open system."

"It's actually a closed system. That's the beauty of it."

"Nathan. Nathan! Save the explanation. I'm afraid it is miserably lost in my mind."

"It's so simple though. It's randomly triggering circuits to act independently of the closed system and that's what makes it open."

"Oh," I patronized him. "What happens if you short out the whole system?"

"You sound like Hughes."

"Dear God, please let that be impossible," I implored.

"Well, it can't short out the system. The computer will shut itself off before it endangers any of the circuits, and besides, the program is only eight minutes long now." There was no way I could keep up with him so I stopped and watched him. He leapt onto the stage. You know, I have to say for the purpose of this journalistic record, he had one helluva gymnast's ass. Huge muscles caught the shock of his legs beneath him and I had this incredible urge to sink my teeth deep into his thigh. And I'm the one labeling perversion in others? Then again, I'd do just about anything to command all of his attention at any given moment.

"Joey, I hope you know you've got to come up with a play that has this program in it."

"I'll see what I can do. Any chance your computer can act if you stand me up?"

"Not yet, but I suppose...well, not yet anyway."

I put my arms on the stage and rested my chin there. The colors bombing the hard-wood surface were absolute and brilliant. It was almost as if the computer was spilling paint with one hand and wiping it up with the other. I imagined the display with sound effecting music. Nathan lowered himself Indian style in front of me.

"By the way, did I mention we have an invitation to dinner?"

"No, by the way, you didn't." I looked up at him.

"Well, we do."

"When did this come about?"

"About ten minutes ago when I returned Ramona's phone call."

"Ramona, huh? Whom might she be?"

"Ramona is the woman from the theatre the other night.

I don't know if you noticed me talking to her," Nathan deadpanned.

"I noticed." I returned his challenge.

"Well, she's sacrificing her Wednesday night bingo game for you. Now, you might not understand nor appreciate the ramifications of such a sacrifice so let me preface it by saying that having her heart carved out of her prominent chest atop some pyramid by savage Aztec Warriors, would be small league for Ramona. -Something she could actually have done between bingo cards. But to be real honest, other than the Budweiser Clydesdales getting accidentally hitched to her bra strap, on

a day she happened to be wearing one, I can think of nothing that could successfully drag her away from Wednesday night bingo, and yet she practically insists on meeting you formally tonight."

"I can't begin to tell you how infamously Ramona and I almost got on when she hogged you all to herself after your performance the other night. And I won't say that an Aztec Sacrifice didn't actually come to mind. I desperately wanted to tap her on the shoulder, with a crowbar, and ask to cut in. I certainly sensed some protective hostilities coming from her."

"Believe me, she sensed it too. Well, that and the fact she had watched me direct the entire performance to a strange man in the front row. I imagine we both did quite a number on her curiosity."

"So, is she an aunt, an advisor, what?"

"Ramona Simpson is Tampa's official welcome wagon working at the mayor's office as his appointed liaison to anything that walks, crawls or slithers. She meets the planes of traveling dignitaries, movie and rock stars, and basically shows them the town, so to speak. She arranges all the hotels and restaurants and is probably the best wine and dine man in the South. She knows absolutely everyone there is to know in Tampa and according to her latest volume of stories, her reputation has just spread internationally. And I use the term 'spread,' loosely. Did I mention the slithering variety? -Ramona's favorite. It's not that she's a whore mind you. She just loves

sex and happens to view those career related opportunities as perks. In short, there is little and few Ramona wouldn't do." Nathan wrinkled his forehead and his eyebrows disappeared behind thick blond strands.

"She hardly seems your type, Nathan. How did you meet?" I wasn't entirely sure I wanted answers to all of my questions at the moment."

"I guess it was at the dedication ceremony for the new University Hospital wing, here on campus. The Mayoral Ball was the following weekend and she came right up to me and offered me money to be her escort for the event. I had never done it for money before and it was obvious she was a class act from the first moment I saw her. Well, we showed up downtown and were instantly the buzz of the ballroom. I made a hundred bucks and we've been the best of friends ever since."

"I don't think I want to know what was on her receipt."

"I know what you're thinking and she did try making the moves on me. Hell, she tried for the first six months after I told her I was gay, but it's finally sinking in. I imagine she'll mentally rape you once or twice when she sees you. But don't worry. You'll be completely safe. She has been warned that if a single one of her hormones gets bent out of shape tonight, her business will be permanently ziplocked, if you know what I mean. The Dow Sandwich Bag Company has been placed on emergency standby. What do you say, Joey?"

"I don't know Nathan. It sounds pretty tense to me."
I knew I could turn on the charm if it were important enough to him. I just didn't relish the thought of spending an evening with a third party. Not when Nathan and I had so much qualifying ahead of us.

"It will be almost worth your while to see Ramona exhibit self restraint. It happens about as often as a total lunar eclipse of the sun, and frankly, isn't expected again in this century."

"All right. What time are we expected?"

"According to Ramona, the Hamilton Beach Carving Knife revs up at eight o'clock sharp."

The lights stopped blinking and the theatre dimmed to black.
"Wow," I exclaimed.

"Just wait," Nathan whispered in the darkness. "And presto!" The work light flashed on seemingly at Nathan's command.

"Nice trick," I congratulated him. "Now, make it go out again." I inserted my hand into the leg of his Levi's and grabbed his ankle. He reached far behind him for the electrical cord and gave it a yank. In the darkness he leaned over and kissed my lips. I would have lost complete balance in the moment had it not been for the stage into which I had pressed the lower trunk of my body. You know, school bus syndrome, and all.

For those few minutes in the dark, I wished I had been more insistent that morning in establishing a play day with Nathan.

The requirements of the blasted institution were beginning to drain me of every ounce of optimism I had once held. I could make use of some time dedicated to the proposition that Nathan and I were created for each others pleasure. Unfortunately, I had the burden of an unalienable obligation weighing heavily on my conscience and personal Bill of Rights. Though it didn't remedy every symptom that a pail of cold water achieved, the mere threat of this production would most likely keep these dogs apart for the time being.

My entire life I had escaped commitment by running. And even now, when every voice in my head and heart advised me to stop and just be loved by Nathan, "I've gotta run." And I didn't know why.

CHAPTER NINE

I desperately need to write in something other than this journal of mine which I maintain for a couple reasons now. I suppose I could call it a diary but 'diary' is too Ramona Quimbly or Ann Frank for words. Journal, on the other slightly more bravado hand, reeks of Lewis and Clark. So, my journal, if you will, is an old friend who patiently listens and is willing to receive my every thought. It is becoming clearer each day that it is time to divert some of these thoughts to another page. How I dread the idea of writing a script. My journal is different. It doesn't impose deadlines and has very few requirements. Aside from entertaining you, (which at this point I take as my highest obligation,) in case Nathan and I should ever advance to 'item' status, this courting record will keep us ever humble, and assuming I indeed come up with a play

to rock this theatre, there's bound to be a documentary on PBS if not '60 Minutes,' -my father's forum of choice. Oh and how he hated 'Face The Nation.' The Senator couldn't face his family much more his country.

I punched the intercom button on my desktop so the activity in the theatre outside my window could be monitored inside my office. Nathan was singing along with a soundtrack I immediately identified as 'Les Miserables.' Nathan had a great voice to my astonishment. My mind resigned its temporary writing block to concentrate on developing a script that would introduce this voice to an audience. I watched his muscle groups toil in preparation for my reign of the theatre. My administration would favor his talent. If God would save the Queen and deliver a script. So far, I had decided to use Nathan's disco light computer sequence and Nathan's voice. I prayed that wouldn't limit me to producing 'The Life of Tom Jones.'

Only an hour remained in the afternoon and I used it to make a quick search and rescue mission at the dormitory. I passed all three cars belonging to my roommates and double parked the Porsche in front of the building. I didn't look forward to explaining my sleeping arrangements for the past few evenings, or fudging them, rather. Nor did I care to venture a public estimate of my next night of dorm occupation. I climbed in the elevator and pressed the fifth floor, but there must have

been a crossed wire because I landed in 1840 during The Spanish Inquisition.

"I didn't hear Joey come in last night, did you, Randy?"

"Not a peep, Paul. In fact I haven't seen Joey all week," they jeered provoking raw Catholic guilt.

Paul wouldn't retire the game. "And where do you suppose Thesbian Tucker passed the evenings past?"

"Me thinks he stole a poke with Lady Dianne, Sir Paul."

Well that would certainly bring proceedings to a halt. The game would surely be over and my case dismissed to pursue Randy's poorly chosen statement. "You guys auditioning for the Ecumenical Council, or what?" They looked at me like I'd just spouted Greek. "Never mind," I said. "Have you seen Mark?"

"I'm in here, Joey." I tipped my head and retreated out of the room backwards to my own suite and closed the door behind me. Mark sat at his desk writing a letter to his mom. I slapped him on the shoulder and straddled the chair next to him.

"You will never guess everything that has happened to me since I last saw you, Mark." He put his pen down and scooted his chair to face me.

"You're probably right unless the answer has already been surmised by some member of our immediate living area." Mark raised his eyebrows.

"Come on, Mark. You don't buy into that shit farm, do you? Dianne isn't my type. I'm not certain she's even a member

of my species."

"Well, where in the hell have you been? I've been sitting here worrying, wondering whether or not to involve the campus police or call your folks. You could have called you know. And yes, you're probably right. I couldn't guess all that's happened to you because I would have to make a selection from any number of tragic scenarios I've already imagined in the past several days." I stared at him with full eyes. "Well?" he prompted pushing me in the shoulder.

"Mark, I'm sorry. I should have called. Things just happened so quickly, it didn't dawn on me that you might be worried."

"Well, I was dammit. So go on. What's happened to you. I give up."

"Okay. They gave me my own office for the whole semester, right?"

"It's your story. -Go on."

"And get this, the semester project is producing my own play!" I waited for his reaction but grew impatient if he was going to have it gift wrapped and delivered by Santa. "Well? What do you think about that?"

"You have your own play?"

"Anybody home?" I knocked on his head. "I don't have a play yet. I have to write one. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"So you have to write a play, then produce it and you've been sleeping in your brand new office."

"No, silly. Here's the wild card. Remember Nathan Evans from the other night?"

"The gymnast?"

"Yeah. He's been assigned to my production as the stage manager. Is that a crazy twist of fate?"

"It's right down spooky, if you ask me." Mark scratched his head. "So where have you been sleeping?" he blurted out.

"Of course, he played down the other night as I should have expected he might, but we've spent some time together and I think we're going to get along great."

Mark grabbed my nipple under the 1988 Olympics sweat shirt on loan from Nathan. "There. I've changed from the Disney Channel and it's past prime time. Now where have you been sleeping?"

"Mark Simmons, what are you insinuating?"

"If the mask fits, where it. I'm just letting you know that I can still see the color of your eyes behind it. So, what's he really like?"

I paused and thought for a moment. "I can't satisfy your craving for the real dirt but I doubt if events to date would pass a white glove test either. I've spent the past few nights at Nathan's beach house." I smiled at Mark knowing the smell of the carrot alone was enough to drive him to kill.

"He has his own beach house," he repeated rather than asked.

"It's out in Clearwater, yeah." Opportunities for dramatic punctuation could not be rushed. I waited for his next question.

"Well?" He fidgeted in his chair.

"After class the other night, he asked me out to his place. We took a long walk on the beach and I fell asleep in front of the fireplace in his arms."

"I just want you to know that you will go straight to hell if you pull a Pamela Ewing and claim you've dreamed this whole episode," he snapped.

"But that's it," I insisted. "We just fell asleep."

"And you've been asleep ever since?"

"Well, no."

"Joey! You're not telling me a goddamn thing here. Do you like him?"

"Oh, Mark. Without one cell of uncertainty, yes!"

"And does this mean we won't be sleeping together? I mean, in this room, this semester, of course," he rushed to clarify. I couldn't answer his question conclusively. It was easier to hug him where he sat and discourage further discussion of probability. "You've got my blessing, Joey and as far as I'm concerned that's as proven as a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. He's quite a catch."

"Thanks for understanding, Mark. Now give me a hand carrying some of these school supplies out to the car."

"They gave you a car, too?"

"No. It's Nathan's."

"And I suppose you're going to tell me there's a matching Porsche to go with the beach house," Mark kidded.

"No, Mark. I'm not going to tell you that." He followed me out the door.

Back at the beach house, Nathan and I divided into our separate bathrooms to prepare for the dinner party at Ramona's house. Later, on the winding sidewalk leading up to her contemporary styled New England home, separate bathrooms became the issue.

"Don't start with me, Nathan. I was the one who advocated showering with a buddy," I reminded him.

"We were short on time. That's all I'm saying."

"No. I believe you're implying that I am avoiding the issue of sex."

"Joey, I didn't say you were avoiding it. I casually mentioned the uniqueness of our relationship in not having to rely on sex for perpetuation from one moment to the next."

"Perpetuation? I think you are the one who made the point that five days did not lend itself to longevous analogy, if I'm not mistaken."

"A guy casually mentions sex and look who flies off the handle? I think what we're dealing with here is severe

deprivation."

"The day you mention sex rather than dissect it, is the day I'll consider the possibility. So let's drop this until we are better prepared to do something about it," I suggested. Nathan knocked on the wooden door and kissed me on the forehead. All I could do was smile. I was as horny as he was and we both knew it. It's just that sex had ruined everything with Tony and I wasn't about to trade Nathan in for what I knew lurked behind Door Number Three, regardless of the great time I also knew we would eventually have behind that door.

Now, the adrenalin drove my blood sugar to caramelize as I prepared to confront Ramona. Just hold your breath, I coached myself. Don't allow yourself to be bulldozed by this overbearing fag-hag. Nathan knocked a second time. I shifted my weight to the other leg. How desperate could I be for her positive appraisal anyway? Her influence in Nathan's life was obvious, but I wondered if his adherence to her opinion was all that unswaying.

"Hold on. I'm coming."

I stood up straight, weight evenly distributed and began a long inhalation that would eventually result in an inflated chest and hopefully a heeded reminder of self confidence. Nathan smiled unevenly in an evident ploy of reassurance. It failed. I shifted again. The door rattled, then suddenly opened. A puff of warm air rushed through the doorway.

"Hello, boys. Come in. You'll have to excuse me for a minute. Marijo is on the phone with the first round of bingo results. Make yourself at home."

I shut the door behind me and followed Nathan into the living room where we sat together on the couch. Ramona returned to the first steps of a semi-circular staircase wide enough to yield passage to a Volkswagon Beattle. It reminded me of the governor's mansion back home on which my father kept a very possessive eye from time to time, flirting with the idea of gubernatorial retirement, as he saw it.

"You mean to tell me that frauline Erika is raking it in with the tips? Damn German Immigrant! You know she doesn't have the tits it takes for the big money. Yeah. Okay. Get back to the table, but you call me if that kraut wins one more goddamn Yankee penny, you hear me? I just may have to abbreviate this little dinner party if things get much more out of hand down there. Yeah. You too. Bye Marijo." She hung up the phone indignantly and rose to greet us on a more formal premise. "Well," she sighed. "Please do pardon my manners. -Business, you know. And this must be Joey. It is a pleasure to finally meet you." She approached me from across the room picking up a pair of glasses from an end table in route. She seemed to float on a cushion of air and her Linda Evans hairdo bobbed animatedly on her pad enhanced shoulders. Even I could appreciate the fine lines of her figure accentuated by a crimson

red dress and white nylons. She'd look great in my gray office, I thought to myself. She stopped just out of reach of my extended hand as she fitted the glasses on her nose. "Yes, a pleasure indeed." She gave me a corrected lens once over, then reached gracefully for my hand.

Nathan cleared his throat. "Down Lady. Need I mention saran wrap?"

"Oh, hush! Joey let me show you the rest of the house. We can start upstairs." Ramona's voice seemed to be traveling over rolling hills by the expression she packed into her quaint Southern drawl. "Nathan, make yourself useful and check the Wellington." She grasped my arm below the biceps and linked her arm through mine. I shot Nathan a you-leave-me-alone-with-this-woman-and-I'll-be-sure-to-withhold-sex-for-a-decade glare. Nathan shrugged his shoulders but what else could he do?

Ramona showed me the house, the back yard and the swimming pool maintenance shed. In fact, the only landmark she failed to point out during the estate tour was the fire hydrant by the street light out front, which I took initiative to note for myself in fear of a later recall exam. In all, we spent twenty minutes going from room to room and yard to yard. When we finally made it back to the living room, Nathan looked like a puppy who had just been punished for wetting the floccatti rug. I was relieved to be rejoined with him at the dinner table minutes later. Dinner itself, was a culinary delight. And

in spite of the fact I had missed another night of play-storming, Ramona had missed Bingo and Nathan had missed all opportunity for sexual gratification in the next decade, all amends were made with the serving of Baked Alaska for dessert made with Haagen-dazs Chocolate Chocolate Chip ice cream and mounds of meringue.

"Did you enjoy Nathan's performance the other evening, Joey?" Ramona twirled fudge chocolate about her spoon and licked it seductively with a pointed tongue.

"Very much so. In fact, Nathan is actually considering to act in my production this semester." I squeezed his hand tightly under the table to remind him he still had not committed. But it wasn't as though parts were being handed out left and right so I understood his reluctance.

"Yes, I understand congratulations are in order. You must be quite excited about the project."

"Yes, I am. I-" The telephone rang and Ramona jumped from the table.

"Let it ring, Ramona. Take a night off," Nathan encouraged her. "If it's important, she'll call back tomorrow."

"If it's important," Ramona took time to lecture Nathan, "and you cause me to miss this call, you'll need correctional therapy, dear. -Hello? Marijo! She what? She cleaned house? Give me the damage. I'm sitting down for Christ's sake. Tell me how much. You have got to be kidding! Now you know that

money was as good as mine, Marijo. Has she already left? Okay. I'll tell you what you've gotta do. You have Johnny call her house and have him do it right now before she gets home. That's right. The last name is Baumgartner. They live out in West Shore, I think. Shut up and listen to me! Have Johnny tell Erika's husband that she left ten dollars at the table tonight. Yes, I'll front the ten dollars. If we can convince Heir Baumgartner that his little strudel maker won big at Bingo Palace when she was supposed to be at a prayer meeting, there'll be one nasty wife-beating report filed at City Hall in the morning." Ramona snickered devilishly. "Yes, I'll call you the moment the report crosses my desk. Oh, don't start, Marijo. She's outplayed us before and suffered the consequences. It's time she learned a lesson. Well she can't very well play in traction, now can she. You too, honey. Good night." Ramona took a deep breath and exhaled too dramatically. "Well, that certainly should take care of that. I don't care what people say. Politics can get right down nasty."

"Politics?" Nathan nearly choked on his ice cream.

"Don't you lecture me, Nathaniel. We're still at the dinner table," she announced sitting down. "Joey, I do hope through it all you've managed to retain a healthy impression of me. What I do is really harmless, actually. Harmless, but verifiable nonetheless. I can't wait to get to work tomorrow and check the domestic violence reports from West Shore. And you know

the amazing part of all this? That Nazi bitch will drive the thirty-five miles in the morning for that ten bucks." We all laughed. "Bingo is dog eat dog, boys," Ramona reminded us.

"Ramona, don't we have something for Joey?"

"I almost forgot. It's in the den. I'll just clear these dishes while you run in there and bring it out."

"What are you two up to now?" I asked.

"You sit tight, Sugar and finish your coffee." Ramona cleared the dishes from the table announcing that she intended to leave the whole mess for the service tomorrow. The service, as it turns out, is a small fleet of elderly ladies who flunked-out as volunteer candy strippers at St. Luke's Hospital. "They come mostly to watch the soaps and drink coffee. If they happen to tackle a room during commercial break, I leave the television out for the following day. If not, well, I hate to talk about the if-nots. They know what's expected and get paid accordingly" Ramona explained.

Nathan entered the dining room with a huge, flat and gift wrapped package. Covered in metallic silver paper and fastened with a giant red bow, the object resembled the size of an elementary school chalk board. At Ramona's insistence, I ripped into the wrapping paper. As the foil tore away, a green street sign was uncovered that spelled 'Nebraska Avenue' in white reflective letters nearly four inches high.

"I can't believe this. How did you get a hold of this?"

"I had my secretary type a requisition on the Mayor's stationery this afternoon. The Mayor signed it without a second thought when I explained that Nebraska's Governor was addressing a convention here Saturday."

"Isn't she incredible, Joey? I told you there isn't a string left she hasn't pulled in this city." I hugged Nathan and gave Ramona a kiss on the cheek.

"Nor a rope I haven't yanked," Ramona smiled. "Keep that in mind, boys. I always get precisely what I want no matter what I have to do with the rope." She sipped her coffee.

"I think she's telling us to watch our ropes, Joey!" We laughed at Nathan's paraphrasing. Ramona's hands seemed to quiver at the mere reference.

"Well, thank you both. It will go on my office wall first thing tomorrow. Is Bob Kerrey actually going to be here Saturday?"

"Who, Honey?" Ramona asked.

"Nebraska's governor. You had mentioned he was going to be here this weekend."

"Oh, no. It was just a line. I knew the Mayor would seize the opportunity to give a gift so he wouldn't have to venture off the golf course to meet someone in person. But why do you ask? Do you know the governor?"

"Well, I've seen him on TV." And on the couch and at the dinner table, I thought silently, relieved he wouldn't be in

Tampa. Ramona directed us to the living room where Nathan and I sat on the couch facing her.

"Can you make any sense from this," Ramona asked. "Here I sit entertaining a couple of homosexuals while foreigners rape the city. I need to realign my priorities."

"Dinner was wonderful, Ramona, if that's any consolation. Maybe I could take you to lunch sometime this week. You name the place and time." I had a feeling Nathan would be a lot more comfortable if I took a liking to Ramona, which I did. She smiled her consent in such a way that I knew I would have to call my father in his Dirksen Building Office and passionately beg for an allowance increase on the American Express Card. "You are invited too, Nathan."

"Thanks, but I don't want to be responsible for your personal debt if Ramona is selecting the venue."

"Don't be silly. Ramona recognizes the fact that I'm a struggling undergraduate on parental budget. Don't you, Ramona?" I clarified sternly.

"From a woman who has never acknowledged limitations before in her life, I wouldn't count on a straight answer." Nathan played me against her. "She's never even been inside a fast food restaurant, Joey. She prides herself on that fact. That should tell you something."

"You know that's not fair Nathan. I was raised in Vermont where they don't have fast food restaurants. Don't listen to

him, Joey. I'm free on Friday, let's say noon?" She turned her body in the chair to face me which closed Nathan out of the conversation. I brushed his leg. "In fact, let's plan on making an afternoon of it, Joey."

Nathan choked. "Ramona's free on Friday? Ramona hasn't been free a day in her..."

"Darling? Why don't you pour after dinner drinks for everyone. Couvoissier for me, thanks." Ramona cut him off with a smile.

"I'll just have another cup of coffee, thank you."
Nathan looked at both of us and then got up.

"So, tell me about the play, Joey. Nathan has not said one word about it." Nathan stopped half way to the bar and turned around, most likely anticipating the explanation by which we all needed reassuring. I cleared my throat.

"The play? Good question. I have thought a lot about what I would like to do." Nathan rolled his eyes, already familiar with my procrastination speech. "I would like to write a play about us, -about homosexuals," I clarified. "It's been a while now since the last gay production in New York and I suppose a lot of that has to do with the AIDS problem, though some good dramatic pieces have focused on that issue. Too, a gay play on this campus would run into quite a bit of controversy, I imagine."

"No. Why not stage a gay play? I think it's a wonderful

idea." Nathan's endorsement surprised me. "You're absolutely right about it being time for another 'Torch Song Trilogy' or 'La Cage aux Folles' for that matter. This AIDS scare has run our dicks into the ground as far as acceptance is concerned."

Nathan poured from a bottle as he spoke.

"And you'd act in my gay play, Nathan? -No qualms?"

"Sure I would. Wouldn't you?" he returned the dare.

"What's your forecast, Ramona? Should we expect a partly cloudy response from Tampa or all out hail and brimstone?"

"I think if you feel strongly enough about this, that you and Nathan would be the production duo to pull it off. You would certainly have my support."

"So, let's have a show of hands." Nathan called for a vote and counted our hands. "It looks unanimous, Tucker. What do ya say?"

"A show of hands?" I muttered to myself. There was something in that. "Yeah. I think I'd like to give it a shot." Nathan refilled my coffee cup.

"Then write, Baby. Write it down!"

CHAPTER TEN

I did write. For nearly three weeks, I sat alone in my quaint office and composed. Wads of paper began piling up around my desk like Nebraska snow in January, and I left it there somehow perpetuating the myth that a genius was hard at work and making progress. After spending years in my closet that my father's career guarded like Buckingham Palace, I wrote to make up for wasted time. I quickly discovered I had a great deal to say and had already wasted too much of my life not saying it.

Nathan managed to occupy his time so that it seldom paralleled mine. I knew what he was up to and I grew to love him for it. I needed significant blocks of time alone even though it wasn't what I desired at all. We were growing, the two of us, but the physical achievements weren't nearly as marked

as those subtle mutual understandings that stood alone, almost surrogated, without physical consummation. Those realizations were precious and, fortunate for us, plentiful as well. Still, I craved a closeness not yet tested but rumored to be the ultimate in compatibility. Love was there all right. -Mute thus far, but definitely present.

There is one thing I should tell you. I moved out of the dormitory and into Nathan's beach house. It was a tough decision to make. I tell you it was tough because that's what you expect to hear from a morally, disciplined, young adult, but just between you and me, the decision was a cinch. In fact, when Nathan made the proposal, I didn't even think to think before accepting. And you know, for once, I'm proud to have acted out of impulsiveness. You're probably wondering why someone, such as me, having been burned by the flames of romance, as I have, would place himself in the 24 hour jaws of the tiger, so to speak. Well, whether you are gay or straight and whether you understand or don't, I think I'm in love with Nathan Evans. He is a first, the new leaf in a series of misguided attempts. I say misguided and mean misunderstood. Before now, in all my coming out bewilderment, I couldn't possibly conceive what, precisely, the ideal man should be. Now I realize my belated fascination is carried by the unprecedented fact that the ideal man should be Nathan; information invaluable before and priceless hereafter.

So I write. It both fills time and tends to an anxiety that unchecked could quickly turn into qualified terror. My desk calendar announces every glance, on the glance, that a hideous deadline is twenty days away from life as I know it, and Hughes breathes down my neck with the inconspicuous grace of a Kansas tornado. All this uncertainty, for which I have thrown an intensive month long celebration, is sure to get the very best of me.

Huey drops by the office sometimes four occasions in a day insisently seeking the plot line and gladly volunteering the monumental progresses of my peers. "Mardell has nearly completed her piece researching on location in her native Tallahassee home. 'A Cracker Trilogy,' she calls it." It sounds like the other side of an Alex Hailey long playing record. And Carson, "Well, Carson is convinced he will be the first playwright to present Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life in a three act tableau." I have to question its stageability as must Huey by the tone in his voice, but I also have to admire his determination all the same. "Davey has submitted his final script and has requested early auditions and staging to begin immediately." Hughes went on to proudly hype Davey's work as a surrealistic look at the Vietnam Era and how it was strategically offset by the music of The Beatles. In my opinion, that's about all our warring egos need; -another rock opera justifying our noble exploits through music. It's bound to

pay off at the box office. But everything considered, the best kept secret of the semester is what ol Joey Tucker's got up his shirt sleeve. The irony of it all is that my play is wearing what most would deem a blouse, at best, and not a shirt at all. I strategized obscurity with my work until it was too late in the semester to abort the mission. And that mission? -To boldly write where no gay playwright has written before...to write on the frontal lobe of society! 'Torch Song' and 'La Cage' hit close to this mark. Don't get me wrong. It's just that there were differences between those stories and mine and mostly in context. Their messages were trendfully received by the public for the most part because they seemed to present isolated situations that were contained and conveniently and clinically labeled as entertainment. They certainly didn't answer questions or suggest any theories that the audience might take with them once they left the theatre. Both pieces revolved around a central theme of drag queens, the symbolic minority of a much larger stereotype. Delving into the lives of these drag queens conformed to society's expectations of the stereotype. My play presents a homosexual penetration that will have the all powerful screaming for a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. Society is easily choked which plays in my work's favor. Of course, we gay homosexuals, having courted evolution, have completely eliminated the gag reflex, but that's a theory in and of itself.

I suppose I shouldn't joke, but it's been a long day. And by the way, my play is called "A Show of Hands," and for all practical purposes, if indeed pleading the gay cause can still be termed practical, my play braves that uncertain step beyond the strides of its predecessors and calls for unconditional acceptance. The bumper stickers were right. "We are Everywhere!" Swallow hard, Society. Swallow hard.

The telephone rang which was the first audible intrusion I had had in hours. "Yes," I answered.

"Joey, Professor Hughes. I hope I am not interrupting the flow."

"Actually, I'm right on the crest of a wave." I shuffled my journal under a stack of papers out of guilt. I was stalling with a ploy that was nothing less than obvious.

"I will take but a moment of your time. I have The Tampa Tribune on line two and they are doing a write up on the four of you and they want titles of all productions. As you are aware..." here we go again, "Davey has submitted 'All You Need is Love,' Mardell has nearly completed 'A Cracker Trilogy,' and Carson is working on 'Martin.' Now I have already given The Trib your bio and media release statements, but I need a title, Joey."

"I could have spared you the five minute all expense paid guilt trip, Huey. The play's called 'A Show of Hands.'"

"Care to elaborate?"

"You said a title, Huey. I still have twenty days."

"Ah, but you meet with the theatre board in seven. Did you not receive the memorandum?"

I held the phone away from my head for a moment before cradling it on my shoulder. "Don't jerk me around, Hughes. What goddamn memo? I don't know anything about this."

"The Hartung Theatre Board is assembling on the fourteenth to meet with all of you individually to both review and approve your productions. The Regents of the University will also have representatives on the board."

"That's Valentine's Day for Christ's sake, Huey. Why the sudden change of plan?"

"Everyone appears to be working ahead of schedule so we felt it in the best interest of the program to accommodate our fine selection of over-achievers."

"That's bullshit, Hughes! Davey is working ahead of schedule. The rest of us are on schedule if not behind it. Give us a break, will you?"

"Nathan is sitting here with me, Joey. Shall I have him bring you a copy of the memorandum?"

"As long as that would be in the program's best interest," I mocked him.

"Certainly, and Mr. Tucker, have a pleasant afternoon."

I slammed the phone down on my desk top and the crash was

most likely heard down the hall in Hughes' office. That man infuriated me and it wasn't just his contraction avoidance. I was sure that Nathan was already half way down the hall so I tried to calm down. I turned to re-establish my most frequented pose of the past month, staring out the window at the bare stage. Things definitely needed to start happening down there before my sense of direction became irretrievable. Nathan had the entire theatre cleaned two weeks ago and we hadn't done a thing with it since. There were definite stage modifications that could be started if I could somehow get Hughes to override the absence of a rough draft proposal. I could get things past Nathan but Hughes had already established that he only swam in formal channels.

"Hi," I welcomed Nathan.

"Is the coast clear? I'd been forewarned by the lighthouse three doors down that the shore might be a little rocky."

"No. Everything's fine." Nathan crossed the room, placed his tawny hands on my shoulders and began working the muscle into a relaxed state. I waited a few extra seconds to assure myself I had calmed down before getting all wound up again.

"Can you believe that man, Nathan?"

"Relax, Joey. I'm sure he's just trying to keep you aware of deadlines, that's all."

"Don't candy coat it, Nathan. My entire professional reputation hinges on the success of this project and he feels

it his duty to keep me aware of deadlines? Why then does he keep changing them?"

"Well, you have to admit, Joey, I don't even know what you're writing in that notebook. It leaves room for several warehouses of doubt."

"I'll tell you the same thing I told your mentor in there. It's called 'A Show of Hands.'"

"Yeah and I take credit for that much because I came up with it that night at Ramona's, though I've neglected to draw up my royalty contract."

"Does cockiness come with the building or is everybody in it responsible for their own?"

"Calm down. You're headed for an aneurysm. And there's more. I found out from Carson this morning, that he's known about the board review since Tuesday. Hughes evidently has had the memos out to everyone for over a week. You may have The Hartung but Hughes is going to insure you walk uphill from now until you graduate."

"I told you, the man's playing dirty, Nathan. That bastard!"

"You've gotta turn this hostility around, Joey. Make Hughes eat every word of your script on opening night. Feed the fink your success."

"I just hope he's hungry. I hope you're all hungry, because it's going to be a banquet feast!"

"In the meantime, a little appetizer might be nice for those of us waiting around for the maitre d'."

"Reassurance, Nathan? You mean something that would demonstrate my competence to all you freeloaders hitching rides on my success? All right. Fair is fair." I reached for my notes. "I need you to detach twenty Fresnel Spots and assemble them on the stage for independent use. I'm talking about the three inch lenses, now."

Nathan realized he was about to be put back in his place so he chose the route of least resistance by cooperating.

"Twenty baby spots? -No problem. We have ten in back-up."

"Fine. Are the Fresnels very directional?"

"They're used primarily for washing and throwing light. No. If you want directional your Kliegls are of higher light concentration."

"But Kliegls are also longer, more bulky. We'll stick with the baby spots for now. The revolving stage needs to be elevated to accommodate the vertical housing of all twenty spots around the perimeter. I'm guessing you'll need to build it up a good twelve inches above the stage floor. Place blue absorption filters on each of the lights. I suppose, gels is a more modern term. You'll need to finish the floor of the revolving stage with lucite over the light canons. Oh, and paint the entire stage black. Are you getting full?"

"I've still got room for a few more bites."

"I'll need to check the flying capacity. Can it support, say a man of your size?"

"Easily."

"Does The Hartung have an Effects Machine?"

"We have a 1200 watt Kodak Carousel 35mm projector capable of producing a 35mm slide at a projection distance of roughly 35 feet, I'd say. But I don't think it's ever been used here."

"Then what about video projection?"

"You'd have to bring in your own system, but it's possible."

"And in what condition is the Cyclorama?"

"The Cyc's brand new this season. What are you getting at, Joey?"

"The entree, Nathan. -A Show of Hands, It opens in forty-eight days. I like to know that I'll be ready when it does. How about you?"

"Okay. Point taken. I apologize."

"Good. Now, if you have any more questions about my credibility as a director, I'd like to address them now."

"Well, since you created the forum, there is one question I would like to t ask."

"Yes?" Nathan stopped rubbing my shoulders and walked to the window. Without facing me, he spoke.

"I couldn't help but notice the address on the letter to your parents this morning. 153 Duddington Place Southeast, Washington D.C."

"You couldn't help but memorize it either?"

"Come on, Joey. Level with me."

"All right, then. I had hoped to keep this privileged information, but my father is serving time in the Maryland State Penitentiary for a ring of mass murders he swears he didn't commit."

"Joey?"

Nathan had me between the punchbowl and a chaperone and left me no room to free dance. "Nathan, believe me, I didn't mean to keep this from you as much as I'd hoped to keep it from everyone else. This is really the first time I've ever really been me, and I suppose I took it too far where you were concerned. My celebrity father is none other than Senator Robert Tucker, Senate Majority Leader from the Great State of Nebraska."

"I know. I saw a news clip on TV last night while you were brushing your teeth. It clicked this morning when I went to the post office so when I called directory assistance in the District to find your father listed as Senator Tucker, I figured we had a problem. Why couldn't you tell me this?"

"Protecting him, I suppose. Bad habits are hard to break, you know. Nathan, I'm sorry. I should have been honest with you, of all people. I just felt I might have been more liberated to stretch the truth, that's all."

"But can't you see that I, of all people, would understand being the son of one of the most powerful military men on

European soil? I understand your sense of secrecy, but why with me, Joey? I'm hardly a columnist for the Washington Post."

"It's not The Post I'm worried about as much as somebody back home with a personal family vendetta who discovers I'm producing a queer play in Florida. I'm afraid of somebody eager to deface the Senator's profile by using his son as a sand-blasted. I'm not afraid of you, Nathan and I'm sorry I didn't get around to telling you the truth."

"Your heart really belongs to daddy, doesn't it?"

"Go to Hell, Nathan! You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I have news for you, Joey Tucker. You can't get this play and a ten thousand member audience into your goddamn cozy closet. Something's gotta give, hot shot."

I rose from my desk chair and walked to the door. "The ultimate authority on disclosure cries in the wilderness, doesn't it, Nathan?"

"At least I cry, Joey. I've faced the facts and I've moved on. But I didn't keep everything inside expecting time to dull the sharp edges. For God's sake, let go of your father. When you release him, you're not going to find that he was the one holding onto you. Stop solving his problems by living your life so that it doesn't create any for him. Look what his political existence has done to you. Do you think that it bothers him for one second that his son is barely functioning

on this side of comatose? Quit tip toeing through life on his account. Step where you want to step and plant your foot firmly."

"Oh, Nathan. I'm sorry I said those things. I'm in the process of discovering myself for the first time in my life and I guess when I panic it's only natural to resort to the only behavior I've ever known. I'm not out to protect him any longer. It's every man for himself and it's Joey for Nathan from this moment on. I love you. I've never been more sure of that than I am right now." Nathan snapped his head to look me in the eyes. "I said, I love you," I repeated.

"I heard you and now I've seen you say it. Frankly I have to admit that I wouldn't have predicted that declaration for another two weeks down the road even though my own heart was screaming it two weeks earlier. God, Joey I love you, too. What a relief to finally speak the words." Nathan pulled me into a solid hug.

There was a knock at the door. I vowed to shoot the knocker if it were Hughes. Nathan broke away to answer the door. "Hi, Nathan. I'm Mark. I remember you from 'Little Mary Sunshine' several weeks ago. I was there with Joey."

"Oh, Mark," Nathan finally acknowledged. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Here, too. Joey's told me quite a bit about you but then, so did Heather, now that I think about it."

As they made small talk, my mind attempted to unscramble the messages I had just received. Love was finally official and on the table. The security in that alone, should have freed me up to concentrate on theatre matters but I remained torn between obligations. I could either protect my father's political armada or blow it out of the water. Objectively, I could no longer accept his ideology and knowing that he would no more accept my newest terms in life, annihilation remained under consideration. Loving Nathan had to be unconditional. The play, though inevitably poised to come between us, would have to settle for second fiddle to our relationship while my duty to perfection could never allow the play to occupy anything but first chair. And Mark, the breathing challenge unconquered, would now represent all sacrifices made in the name of love.

"Joey, I'm going to run down into the theatre and work on getting those lights you asked for. I'll probably wrap it up in another 30 minutes if you're ready to call it a day."

"I'll be ready, Nathan." I smiled as he excused himself and bounded out the door. Mark gave me a raised eyebrow as if he knew he'd interrupted something greater than the discussion of the balance of our work day. "What's that look for?"

"-My flawless timing, I have a feeling."

"Don't worry about that. It was only the silly exchange of our first 'I love you's.'"

"Well if that's all it was." Mark moved to hug me.

"Congratulations, Joey. I'm happy for you both, a little personally devastated, but I'll rebound. I always do."

"Oh, Mark. I'm sorry. Were you working on Nathan, too?" I tried to side step the tension Mark insisted on placing at my feet. This was the first sign I had received regarding Mark's original intentions.

Mark abandoned the open can of worms. "I've been meaning to stop by for a while now to check on you."

"How have you been since I moved out, Mark? I've always felt badly that you wasted your one choice in roommates on me and I didn't last beyond the first burping contest."

"We all deal with disappointments, Joey." I was at a loss assigning percentages to his serious and joking natures, but perceptive enough to realize he employed both.

"How's school for you?"

"Senior year's a cake walk. But tell me about this play I'm supposed to have this wonderful lead in."

"It's really coming together now that I've been able to organize my ideas and motivations." I teetered far back in the chair and balanced the act with my head against the window.

"This office is incredible, Joey." Mark walked toward me until his crotch was eye level less than a foot away. "God, what a view." Tell me about it, I studied. I looked skyward and silently summoned anyone up there who might be listening. What happened to leading me not into temptation and deliverance

from evil? Y'all get bored with the routine or what? I was but twelve inches from total sellout when my chair collapsed sending me plummeting to the gray carpet. "Shit, Joey! Are you all right?"

"Quit laughing, dammit, and help me up." Mark knelt on one knee and grabbed me under the arms. My eyes followed his with steadfast trust as he lifted my upper body to a standing position. He tried to stop smiling still clutching my astonished body.

"You okay?" he asked biting his lip.

"Yeah, I think so." I started to smile rubbing the back of my head. "What did I hit anyway?" Mark released me as I turned to examine the fallen chair. Out my office I caught a glimpse of Nathan looking up into my window. I tried to wave but he disappeared behind the right proscenium arch. Mark was harmless and Nathan needed to know this. Hell! I needed to know this. Meanwhile my head was splitting along the cerebral cortex.

"You're bleeding, Joey." Mark rubbed my hair and presented blood on his fingertips.

"Good, because I'm going to need it as 'People's Exhibit A' when I try to convince Nathan of my injury and your assistance at the scene of the accident. I have a feeling he thinks he witnessed another scenario altogether. I'll be right back, Mark." I walked down the hall verifying the status of my still

bleeding wound. I got a little dizzy running down the stairs but seemed to recover my orientation by the time I reached the stage. Nathan wasn't in the tech room or in the shop. Finally, on the steps leading to the catwalk, I discovered him sitting with his head resting on his knees. I approached him with quiet feet. "Hey," I said. "I'm not sure what you think you saw up there, Baby, but I had an accident and Mark was helping me back to my feet. That's all it was." I touched his shoulder and lifted his chin with my finger. "Honest." I showed him the blood on my hand which he spotted for himself as it trickled down the side of my neck.

"Dear God, Joey! You're losing blood." Nathan jumped to his feet and pushed me onstage into the light. Mark entered the theatre from the lobby doors.

"I'm not losing anything, Nathan, and neither are you. Please don't perceive Mark as a threat. You guys are going to be working together the rest of this semester. If I were the least bit interested in Mark, he'd have the lead and I'd still be living in the dorms. There's only room enough on my casting couch for you, Sweetheart."

"I know. It just starts me thinking about all the publicity this play is going to bring you and how I'll have to be content to sit back and watch you handle it, -or it handle you. A lot of gays stand to idolize you for your accomplishments. I'm afraid threats are something I'm going to have to learn to live

with for a while."

"Why not learn to live with the everlasting promise that I love you, Nathan? I'm not ever going to leave and this play is not going to last forever. The wave is going to break eventually and we'll be washed back on the beach where we started." I took a giant step back to check his eyes as only they would tell me whether or not I had been understood. A giant tear tumbled from his left eye. I caught it with my thumb and kissed him.

"I love you too, Joey. I have never loved anyone before. In fact, no one has ever told me they loved me. And I'm going to make certain that you're never left with enough energy to search for something better than me."

"I've already checked, Honey, and it doesn't come any better than this. Come on. I want to show you and Mark something." Nathan reached out his hand to pull Mark up on stage and they both noticed they had my red blood on their hands. I held out my own red hand and the three of us shook commemorating our blood brotherhood. I instructed them to take seats in the first row. "Take a deep breath and pay attention. I'm going to lay the whole thing out for you. Well, the first act anyway. The next time this is presented, I'll expect the two of you to lay it out for me." I felt the back of my head wishing the pain would go away. At least the bleeding seemed to have stopped. I positioned myself in the center of the lights and cables Nathan

had gathered on the revolving stage and brought my hands to my face clearing all distractions from my throbbing mind. "Here goes." I stretched out my arms embracing the auditorium as I began to speak. "The house lights slowly dim bringing the entire theatre to black. For approximately two minutes in total darkness and without sound, the stage fills with fog from eight fog machines. One of three large video screens flashes the face of the first character who is quickly joined by characters on the remaining two screens. These characters, one played by me to fulfill the requirement that I act in this production, and the others played by males, will briefly explain their existence on the exclusively homosexual planet of 'Phallic.' They will recount 'The Great Transfer' that occurred thousands of years ago when a superior homosexual race made a stellar voyage in search of their promised land. They will explain the mishap that resulted in several of their tribe becoming ship wrecked on the hetero-domain of Planet Earth. 'Gil,' Nathan's character, has been selected to travel to Earth to obtain an accurate survivor count for the Phallic Census Bureau who is studying the possibility of creating a permanent satellite community of Phallic on Earth. With the house in continued darkness, the two characters bid farewell and deliver final instructions to Gil. The video screens fade and the special effects music graduates in volume consuming the auditorium. Nathan's light display will be coordinated with the music which

builds to the ultimate illumination of all twenty baby blue spots in the revolving stage. In the fog, the blue lights will create magnificent columns that reach high into the loft where Gil's spaceship begins its descent to the stage below. When the rocket lights blink on in preparation for landing, the revolving stage begins its first revolution and the cylinder of blue bars rotates around the special space ship. Once the rocket touches down in sync with the music, a light from inside the craft illuminates that gorgeous face of Nathan's and the ship opens. Gil emerges from the ship bewildered by his surroundings as the blue columns fade to black. A backdrop and appropriate greenery are flown down from the loft to depict the enchanted Garden of Eden. Gil is concealed behind the trunk of a large tree when the lights come up on Eve and her reluctant counterpart, Adam, whom I might add is played ingeniously by New Jersey's very own stock actor, Mark Simmons. Gil sheds his space suit to join the others in a compatible stage of undress, and peaks out from behind his hiding place. He is pulled by Adam who makes immediate and obvious anatomical comparisons between Gil and himself and between himself and Eve. In finding Gil to be most like himself, he instantly fears Eve for being remarkably different. Gil attempts to discourage such identification by escaping the scenario stage left, but Adam follows close behind. Eve gasps and dejectedly bites into a large red apple as the set begins to revolve. Gil soon

discovers he possesses a strange knack for attracting the homosexual impulses of these earthlings. The stage revolves in half revolutions the remainder of the first act to chart, in a series of set changes, the progress of Gil's mission as he ventures through actual gay history from Sodom and Gomorrah to the assassination of Harvey Milk and AIDS." I took a deep and excited breath. "How's that for writing?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"That won't be necessary, Joey."

"What do you mean it won't be necessary," I asked in disbelief. "The second act is the axis of my message but if you want to save it for later, 'fine by me.'" I closed my notebook and began to step out from behind the podium. That wasn't as hard as I 'd anticipated it to be.

"I don't think you understand, Joey. We're not saving the second act for later. We're telling you that we've read the script and the Board has decided to reject your work based on several questions of controversy."

"Hold on just one minute. You what?" I asked exasperated. "You mean, I'm out? Just like that?"

"That's what we mean, Joey," the chairman clarified.

I regained my position behind the podium. "I respect your

position as Department Chair, Mr. Steele, but you can't just sit there and tell me you've rejected my work. Don't you see that homosexuals have been rejected for too many centuries for me to stand here and admit we're making no progress?"

"Mr. Tucker," he formalized his address, "We obviously see things differently. We have consulted our legal capacities and we can indeed reject your work. I'm sorry, but you will have to withdraw from the program." Mr. Steele closed his folder and took off his glasses.

I shot an accusatory glare in Huey's general direction as he sat in arrogant alliance with the Board's decision. He attempted an explanation. "There is nothing more we can say, Joey. This can only be interpreted in one way, -as a frontal assault on our fine program here at The University of South Florida."

"Your fine program," I repeated with voiced cynicism. "That's fine bullshit, Hughes and you know it. My play deserves stage time and I'll drag your collective departmental ass through every court in this state to insure my rights. If you gentlemen were afraid my work would bring unfavorable publicity to your unblemished reputations as administrators, just wait until the campus gay and lesbian populous hears about its homophobic regents." I left the podium and stormed past the twelve demi-gods on my way to the door which I slammed violently punctuating the force of my spontaneous tantrum. The impact reverberated

monotonously in the long dark halls of the Administration Building. I blew past Nathan who had sat out the confrontation in the hall.

"Wait up! What just happened in there?"

"We got pissed on!" I paused, reversed direction and stomped back into the board room. "One last thing. I assure you, Alfred Kinsey was completely out of his trajectory when he limited us to a mere ten percent of the general population, and no one will become more keenly aware of this miscalculation in the days to come, than your precious assembly. Good day!" I repeated my exodus milking the tits of the moment for all they held. "Let's get out of here, Nathan." Dazed and mouth gaping, Nathan jogged to my side.

"Joey! Wait a minute, will you?" It was Hughes poking his two faced head out of the doorway. I ignored him. "Nathan," he tried. "I want to talk to you." I saw Nathan look over his shoulder but we left the building together.

"What's going on, Joey?"

I bit my lower lip and continued onto the grassy field that stretched between the Ad Building and the theatre complex. To my immediate right was Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza, the University's olive branch to Black Students. Carson would most assuredly find an asphalt path paved with minority suffering laid out for him. It would be in the University's best interest to promote Black Advancement in the Arts. Ten years ago, Carson

probably couldn't have gotten onto a stage either. Perhaps like the prophet, Paul, I am a man before his time. Maybe we hadn't suffered quite enough. "I need to get a lawyer, Nathan. I need one by day's end."

"Okay, Joey. Whatever you think is best. We'll go downtown right now and talk to Ramona."

Hughes and his stuffy cronies had tried to slam the closet door back in my face but my determined foot would prevent the engagement of Society's locking mechanism. My cheeks stung like the aftermath of a severe sunburn and I monitored the steady conduction of body heat within the confines of my skull. I was fueled not with optimism, but with raw determination; a precious commodity that simply refused to dwindle. Nathan ground his teeth producing dimples. I could actually live with myself if I'd just let down my country or disappointed my father, but I wouldn't be able to take the next breath if I thought for a moment I had compromised Nathan's trust in me. A tear appeared in each eye. I blinked to curtain my shame and I breathed to prove I hadn't conceded to anything.

Nathan was waved through the gate by the City Hall parking attendant who evidently recognized the Porsche. I felt strangely like Dorothy entering Emerald City and about to have audience with Oz. Either Ramona had an answer for everything or she just had this knack for portraying omnipotence. At any rate,

she was believable, trustworthy and damn well worth consulting.

Nathan leaned far over the receptionist's desk and asked for clearance into Ramona's office which was instantly granted. On the walls of the corridor that seemed to reach deep into the bowels of Tampa's City Hall, hung various proclamations and certificates that seemed to reserve a day or week for every special interest group in the city; -every group that is except one of homosexual integrity. What Ramona was about to confirm began its formal introduction to the momentum-gaining doubts of my conscience. Tampa wasn't about to don red carpets for my play or for any acknowledgment of homosexuality, for that matter. Certainly not without a miracle and certainly not without Ramona.

"Nathan and Joseph. Come in, come in." Ramona replaced the receiver on the phone. "Tell me, when are auditions? I'm just about to die from suspense poisoning."

"It's bound to be a slow agonizing death, then. They rejected my script. I have been ousted from The University of South Florida."

"Stop this nonsense and tell me what happened."

"They're preparing for a three production season as we speak," I told her.

"Joey seems to think we don't have a prayer, but we have you and I'm not so sure that you're not better connected than

prayer anyway," Nathan reasoned aloud.

Ramona examined the point of the red nail on her index finger, then tapped it loudly on the acrylic desk top. "They can't do that, Babies. You have a wonderful play. There would be no grounds to reject it."

"But you really don't know that. I haven't let any of you read it yet. Just because my modesty promotes it to be a classic doesn't necessarily mean that every critic who reads or watches it will draw the same conclusion. It might just be a lousy play for all we know, dismissed by those with better taste for this sort of thing. If so, I'll simply have to chew on that criticism a while."

"Would you listen to yourself?" Nathan yelled. "What if 'A Show of Hands' was dismissed on content and meaning rather than on technicalities and taste. Can you chew on that as well?"

"I'm afraid Nathan's right, Joey. We've known you for nearly six weeks now and 'stupid' just isn't an adjective I'd use in describing you. You know as well as I do why you got disqualified. So why chew butt when you can kick some ass?" Ramona ended her statement in a cheerleader tone of voice that made me smile.

I looked out the window of her office to the street below. "Do either of you honestly think I'd have a chance fighting this thing?" I'm an ant. And before we go any further," I caught myself, "I won't listen to some rubber tree pep talk.

From what I can tell, Tampa's tolerance for gays wouldn't fit on a postage stamp. The Jews had a better chance of preventing the Holocaust."

"We're getting no where real fast with all your optimism. You forget darling that Ramona is an ant too, -and a hybrid fire ant at that!" She pushed her intercom button with one hand as her other descended on an electronic roladex. "Joanie-dear, call the University and get John DiMenno on the the phone. Have him hold. Also, be a gem and bring me in the telephone listing for Dignity Tampa Bay." Ramona was all the courage, heart and brains this little Dorothy could have ever hoped for, but alas, we were still three ruby slipper clicks away from getting me back to The Hartung.

"Mona? -DiMenno holding on line one."

"Oooh, I smell a picnic," she snapped her finger in the air. "Johnny? -Ramona Simpson. Fine, Dear. And you? Save the hormones, honey. At your age, everyone's numbered. This is business." (And I thought when my mother called my seventh grade P.E. coach and demanded an explanation for my ripped athletic supporter, I had paid my lifelong subscription to humility,) I rolled my eyes into the bottom of my forehead and listened apprehensively. "News has reached us here at City Desk that there was quite a stir in your neck of the palm trees this afternoon. Well, I believe it involved one of your young theatre arts students. Joey Tucker, that's it! I think you

know precisely what I'm talking about, John. We just received the tip from "The Sun Times" and they feel they've got quite a story invested in this one. Care to tell Ramona all about it?" Her finger slithered across the desk top to press the speaker key on the telephone. The stern report of the Regent's husky voice sounded throughout the office.

"Oh come on, Ramona. I fail to see the significance in the Tucker dismissal and why it should concern y'all down there at City Hall. Now the other Regents and members of the theatre board reviewed Tucker's script and rejected it on the grounds that it lacked creative merit. It had no stage presence. As a matter of honesty just between you and me, his play was the antithesis of what the T.A. Department had hoped to achieve this season."

Ramona led the witness. "Stage presence, Johnny?"

"The play was dry as day old corn bread, Mona. That's all there is to it. It wouldn't attract flies, much more an audience." DiMenno laughed at his own joke. "As a non-profit institution, we have to be concerned with breaking even financially. Allowing Tucker's play to go on as scheduled would be like throwing five hundred dollars into The Bay. We can't underwrite, what we feel would have been, eminent suicide for the program, now can we? And with this explanation, I would like to stress that the University has contained the problem and removed the threat to its reputation. It's not a matter

for City Hall's intervention I jumped from my chair and walked to the window. Nathan checked my emotions with a finger to his lips. Ramona continued to chip at the ice.

"'The Sun Times' is about to blow the lid off your container, DiMenno. They make the claim that the University objects to the homosexual content of the piece and not its stage presence at all."

"That's just not so, Ramona, and let me stop it at that. Frankly the Regents are not prepared to release a statement nor do we feel a need."

"Well, you'll have to answer to someone, John. I suggest you prepare your statement and choose your words very carefully. Tampa's Gay Community has been aching for a cause to rally about for quite some time now. This stands a good chance of getting real nasty before it's over with."

"I appreciate your concern, Ramona and thanks for the warning. Now I have other business to attend to this afternoon. Good-bye." The speaker box clicked silent.

"Bastard!" I screamed pounding the window that caught the afternoon reflection of the sun off the choppy bay. The office door opened and Joanie walked in handing a slip of paper to Ramona.

"Here's the number to Dignity, Ramona."

"Thanks, dear. Now, Joey call Dignity Tampa Bay and get yourself a lawyer."

"And what's Dignity? -A legal pool?"

"It happens to be a Catholic support group for professional homosexuals," Nathan volunteered.

"Well that's all I need. -The support of organized religion." I looked out the window and realized my attitude was losing popularity. I turned around. "I'm sorry. I'll call. What's the number?"

Ramona seemed to glow with her hands wrapped tightly around the helm. A bystander might wrongly assume power could rival her enjoyment of sex but we knew this to be a gross misrepresentation of her character. The fact that Ramona derived all power from sex could stand to confuse the issue. But regardless of the assets she employed to sit where she sat, she was my trump card and it became time for me to 'show my hand.' I called Dignity Tampa Bay and to my astonishment, was quickly assigned to a gay lawyer in St. Petersburg who agreed to meet with us in Ramona's office in forty-five minutes. Nathan tracked down Greg Barstock, the President of GLSU at his office on campus and arranged to pick him up in the next half hour. Ramona conned the City Attorney, Scott St. Martin, to act as special legal advisor during this particular emergency session. We all sat for quite some time staring at the walls while Ramona skimmed through the only copy of the script other than the one still in the Regent's possession. Nathan finally cracked under the tension and ran across the street to a delicatessen. I

mentally recorded Ramona's sighs and raised eyebrows in nonverbal critique of 'A Show of Hands.' She laughed silently at one passage and seemed perplexed by the very next. I found myself smiling at her indulgence.

"Dear God, Joey," she finally broke the sound barrier as her face flashed to somber.

"What? What part, Ramona?" She read on without lifting her head from the page. "What part, dammit! Where are you reading?" She was reading me crazy.

"The German Scene in Act One. Now, hush!" 'A Show of Hands' was doing exactly what it was written to do; -enslave compassion for the persecuted.

Joanie's smoke-aggravated voice squawked over the intercom. "Scott is on his way in, Mona." Ramona's concentration refused to sway as she thanked Joanie and welcomed the City Attorney.

"Scott, meet Joey Tucker," she mumbled with her nose in the script.

We shook hands. He walked over to Ramona's desk and kissed her from behind on the nape of her neck. His bronzed hands at the end of pinstriped arms began massaging her shoulders, attention for which she seemed absolutely ravenous. I scribbled the lawyer's name on my notebook hoping to appear preoccupied and non-observing.

"This is the script you were telling me about?" Scott read over her shoulder. She nodded turning the page. Finally

Nathan returned introducing the aroma of pastrami and hot mustard into the room. I was hungry having not eaten before the Regent Review out of nervousness and having not eaten afterward out of nausea. I probed his plastic satchel.

I was relieved to have Nathan back in the office not only for the food provisions he bore but for the unselfish support he committed to the cause almost unknowingly without having been allowed to read the script himself. I couldn't help but quote ingenious passages as they flowed from the pen but Nathan, for the most part, operated on a fragmented premise, which became the truest demonstration of his love to date.

I caught a bottle of Perrier and snatched a wrapped pickle from the bag before Nathan lugged his lunch cart to Ramona's desk where he laid out the remaining lunch options for her appraisal. She reached for the salad plate and offered Scott a bite. "Bleu cheese," Ramona asked licking her fork.

"Ranch," Nathan corrected her. "I didn't think you liked bleu cheese."

"I don't."

Scott struggled to speak while Ramona maintained a steady supply of roughage to his mouth. "Is this the only copy of the script?"

"Joey says the Regents still have the other copy. From what I've just read, Joey has really outdone himself," Ramona added wiping her mouth with a corner of the napkin.

"The University says I'm done and out. Is there any connection?" I asked sarcastically.

Scott finally refused the fork and spoke uninhibited. "That really depends on the particulars of their dismissal. I'd have to see the original assignment and, of course, anything you've signed in conjunction with this project."

"I have the operations manual right here. It outlines the entire project and establishes sort of a code of production ethics. I can tell you right now that no where does it make mention of content limitations. In fact, the Regent's review came as a surprise to all of us last week when they announced it."

"You say 'we,'" Scott asked.

"Yes. The other three undergrad seniors and I all received the same assignment."

"All of whom met with the University's seal of approval?"

"That's right, sir."

Scott stood up from the corner of the desk and walked toward the window. "I'll have to see how your St. Pete lawyer wants to handle this when he gets here, but I can tell you right now that our options are restricted unless we can obtain a written statement from the University explaining the rejection. Have they prepared a statement?"

Ramona swallowed what she had in her mouth and forced a sip of Perrier before she spoke. "As of twenty minutes ago,

they had nothing on paper. I spoke directly to John DiMenno on the board. You might remember him from the celebrity tennis tournament last Spring."

"You know," I pitched in two cents, "I think they half expected me to lay down and die without questioning their supreme judgment."

"Well, we are going to need it in writing and we've got to snatch it now before they wise up and draft a legal version of their disapproval. I'd love to wait for the rest of your legal council, Joey, but time is the key player and I'd advise you to go back in there. But you'll have to play dumb. Walk into the regent's office and say that you plan to disregard their rejection until they make it official on paper. Threaten to audition a cast or something like that. Be obstinate as hell. Press them hard but don't be obvious about your intentions. Do you understand what I'm saying?

"Yeah. I'm on my way. Coming, Nathan?"

"Why don't you take the Porsche. I'll take Ramona's car and pick up Greg from GLSU."

Ramona reached into her purse. "Here are the keys to my BMW. I don't care who drives it. Scott and I will wait here for your lawyer from St. Pete. Be careful boys."

Nathan tossed his keys across the room which I caught one handed behind my back as I neared the door to leave. Though I had no room in my mind for anything but anger at the time,

thinking back now, as I jot this down in my journal, I would have loved to have driven Ramona's 'Beamer' onto campus where I could have waved to Mark and rubbed my motor connections in his face. Even now I fight the urge to be materialistic while battling the injustice at hand.

I anxiously drove the seven urban miles back to The University of South Florida Campus and turned in the main entrance from Fowler Avenue. Driving up South Palm Drive, I checked for Mark's car outside the dorms. It wasn't there. I pulled a U-turn and nearly collided head-on with a campus meter maid cart. I flashed an uncertain, but toothy smile which she eagerly returned with a condescending brow as she waved me past. I turned into the parking lot and steered the Porsche into the space allocated for Bart Steele adjacent to a silver-blue Cadillac driven by, none other than, John DiMenno. Besides our two cars, the administrative parking lot was emptying for the day. This confrontation would be one on one. I got out of the car as Mark stormed out the theatre doors of The Hartung in obvious exasperation. He yelled across the lawn.

"Joey! What in the hell's going on around here? I've been trying to reach you all day. First, you're in but you're not by a phone. Second you're in but you're meeting with the Board of Regents. Third, you're out? Bonnie says you've withdrawn from the program?" Mark was out of breath.

"I didn't withdraw. I was withdrawn. -First person

passive. They didn't approve of my play."

"You're kidding!"

"It wouldn't even make a decent joke at this point, Mark. But I'm working on reversing their decision."

"How's that?"

"I've got two attorneys down at City Hall and the President of GLSU is on his way there. I checked for your car at the dorms but it wasn't there. Do you want to help out?"

"That's a stupid question, Joey. I have a stake in this, don't I?"

"As big as any of us. Come on!" We half walked and half jogged the distance to the Administration Building. Once inside, I quickly located DiMenno's office number on a large tote board by the elevators. "Okay, Mark. It's this simple. We have to get a piece of paper out of the building. Just follow my lead."

"All right, but I'm warning you, I'm no good at this James Bond shit."

We barreled out of the elevator on the third floor and followed the arrow to room 332. A massive wooden door pompously announced the professional dwelling of J.C. DiMenno, Executive Regent Provost of The University of South Florida. I pushed it open and Mark followed me into the office where a withering old receptionist, who had to be the original graduate of the institution, seemed poised for the interception.

"I'm sorry," her voice cracked, "you'll need an appointment to be seen by Regent DiMenno, young man."

"Then pencil me in right now. The name is Joey Tucker. I believe Mr. DiMenno will see me."

"I will inform him that you are here but I strongly recommend you keep an appointment time in mind for later in the week." She picked up the phone. "J.C.? There's a Joey Tucker out here and he insists on seeing you immediately." For a split second when no verbal response was heard from behind the closed door, I thought she may have bluffed the announcement, but DiMenno's office door eventually opened revealing an exhausted and heavily perspiring man in his early fifties.

"What is it, Tucker?"

"What it is, sir, is a disregarding of your earlier ban on my piece. You have failed to cite any concrete objection as to why it is not presentable by your standards, therefore I have elected to proceed as scheduled with the auditioning of my cast. I'd like you to meet Mark Simmons, another of your students at this University. He is the second actor to be added to my play roster. I am here to tell you that I haven't stopped production work nor do I have any inclination of doing so. Until I have a formal objection from the regents on paper, you might as well count on Joey Tucker to blow the roof off The Hartung. Now, DiMenno, I know why you don't care for my play and you know I know, but others, you see, are bound to inquire

and I'd hate to see you misquoted in the press. I have a cast to answer to, sir. That's what it is, DiMenno. So, what's it going to be?"

Bart Steele stepped into the door frame. "Now, Tucker, you were instructed to cancel all plans for this play. We have a university to run and your idle threats are beginning to impede this obligation. If you'll excuse us."

"I was instructed? That's bullshit! Is that the caliber of instruction you offer at this marvelous institution? Human Rights Denial 106? I must have missed it when I registered. But my threats are hardly idle, Mr. Steele. Today I assure you but tomorrow you'll leave me no choice but to prove it to you."

Mark moved out from behind me. "If I may interject my observation here. You're not dealing with one irate playwright here. You are about to come to blows with a thirty-seven member cast who believes enough in Joey's two act expression of freedom to audition for the chance to become a part of it, all of whom happen to belong to this benevolent institution you are all so hell bent on running. If you choose to label something idle, take a good look at who's moving with the students best interests in mind and who's stalled somewhere in the homophobic traffic on the 1950's. If you ask me, gentlemen, you need to shift your operation into a contemporary gear, because as far as we, the students of The University of South Florida, are concerned,

no administrative curtain is going to keep this play from going on as scheduled." I glanced over my shoulder at Mark who was, by this time, extremely into this James Bond shit.

"Is this true, Tucker? Is the cast being auditioned?"

"Announcements are being simultaneously made in The Student Union Building and in The Student Housing Cafeteria as we speak. Not only that but the script is due back from the printer first thing tomorrow morning and rehearsals begin tomorrow evening."

Bart Steele leaned into the door obviously engulfed by frustration and consumed by our bluff. "This has gotten completely out of hand."

"Ah, out of your hands maybe, but the students of this University are about to show you their hands, and it's bound to be the biggest show this University has ever seen."

DiMenno wiped his face with a handkerchief from his back pocket. He continued to sweat and I had to admit, I found the office to be quite hot, myself. I pushed him further into his office by stepping into his personal space. "My advice to both of you is early reservations. Tickets are likely to disappear overnight with the promotion work your staff is so graciously providing." I turned and motioned Mark it was time to leave.

DiMenno cleared his throat. The bluff had worked. "All right, Tucker. You want it in writing? I'll give you three solid reasons for your play's withdrawal from this USF theatre season. Linda, take this down: Number one. Strongly implied

nudity. Number two. Pejorative language. Number three. Inappropriate and inaccurate use of established Biblical accounts. Type that up, date it and I'll gladly sign it if that's what it takes to douse Tucker's fire." He grinned facetiously and ducked into his office. Steele slammed the door behind them.

I had gotten precisely what I originally came for but it didn't make the receipt of criticism any less harsh. Of course, 'A Show of Hands' had a little implied nudity, but that was the beauty of it, it was implied. As for the pejorative language, it was society induced. I only used the words coined by homophobes like Steele and DiMenno. I couldn't honestly repudiate the Biblical accusations. It was true. I may have twisted one or two Scriptures but no more so than any heterosexual has bent them to suit their lifestyle and to justify their behavior and aggression. And who was to say my interpretation is inaccurate. DiMenno certainly wasn't there to verify it, though his receptionist could have been.

They were weak ground for dismissal and I realized in my own mind and for the first time all day, that the system could be challenged and conquered. 'A Show of Hands' would debut in USF's Hartung Theatre or Joey Tucker would set the straight jacket fashion trend just in time for the Spring line.

Mark and I quickly left the building with the signed paper in fist, and headed back downtown.

"How'd I do, Joey?"

"You were brilliant, 007!"

"Thanks. I enjoyed my part, I'll say that much." Mark paused long enough to smile before looking away. "How's Nathan?"

"He's fine."

"You two are doing all right?"

"Sure, Mark."

"That's good."

I could sense Mark needed to get something off his chest. "And you," I hoped to open Mark's spillway. "Where's your love life these days?"

"On sabbatical, I'm afraid. I'm dating Heather, sort of a cover girl to satisfy Paul's curiosity, but I don't go to the bars on Kennedy Boulevard so I don't meet any guys."

"You can't just expect somebody to walk up to you and introduce himself as the homosexual candidate of the year, Mark."

"You did, Joey, or doesn't that count?" It was clear that Mark intended that to be a silent thought and not an unharnessed confession.

"Well, that's different," was my only response.

"Yeah. I suppose you're right. No parallels."

We didn't say another word until we reached City Hall. We were joined in the elevator by a delivery man from a florist who had a dozen roses in tow. Mark spotted the card and

announced that they were for me. Mark signed the delivery register and I accepted the bundle. "They're from Nathan for Valentine's Day. Dear God! I had completely forgotten what day today is." I walked into Ramona's office and hugged Nathan. When I didn't let go, Nathan casually whispered in my ear.

"We have company, Dear." I loosened my hold and turned around slowly to face a room near capacity with people. Now there was skin color on my face! Scott began the introductions as I tried to recover my scruples scattered like marbles around the room.

"Joey, this is Christopher Banks. He's offered to represent you should this escalate to a courtroom."

"Mr. Banks, thank you for coming down here on such short notice. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your time." I reached for his hand.

"Please, call me Chris. I have a feeling it's going to be all of us thanking you for the opportunity to become involved in the gay issue of the year, as far as the city of Tampa is concerned. I had a look at your script and defeating the regents at USF is only going to scratch the surface in comparison to the achievements this play is going to make for gay people everywhere. I'm honored, Joey."

Ramona walked across the room in her white and red striped dress that clung devotedly to her figure as the spikes of her shiny red pumps depressed the weave of the carpet where she

stepped. She had clearly grown impatient. "This, Joey, is Pat Santos. She is chairperson of the mayor's Task Force on Bay Area Special Interest Groups."

"My pleasure," I made the rounds.

"All of us are shocked by the Regent's behavior, Joey." She reached for a cigarette. "We're prepared to back you one hundred percent."

"Thank you." I began to swell with pride, still holding my armful of roses like the newly crowned 'Miss America.'

Nathan walked across the room and retrieved the roses as he introduced Greg Barstock, GLSU's President.

"You can count on GLSU, Joey. We're forty-nine faggots and thirty-six lesbians-strong. You've given the organization a semester project."

I laughed on the inside remembering the club's strength and dedication at the registration table weeks ago. Perhaps this cause would finally bring GLSU out of the campus maintenance shed. It was my turn. "Ramona, everybody, this is Mark Simmons. He plays opposite Nathan in 'A Show of Hands.' We've just returned from Regent DiMenno's office where he issued his formal statement." I pulled the document from my shirt pocket and read the criterion aloud. "I think this is definitely something we can work with and something pretty easily disproved. Any suggestions on where to begin?"

Christopher tapped his pen on a legal notebook. "From

a judicial standpoint, we need to address each of the three accusations, find a flaw or disclaimer and challenge the university with our findings. Only when we've disproved these points or at least ruled them invalid or unconstitutional, can we attempt to introduce a discrimination violation."

"He's right, Joey," Scott agreed. "We don't have a chance at linking the university with discriminatory practices without first disproving their claims and then eluding to ulterior motivations for this dismissal. Now, Joey, I'm a member of the Bar and not of the Antoinette Perry Foundation. You have to tell me if you are completely convinced, without reservation, that your play has been dismissed as a result of its homosexual content and not by the points DiMenno has given you this afternoon."

"First I commend you, a heterosexual, for knowing the origin of the Tony Award." Everyone in the room laughed. "Second, until you read the play, until you all have read it, you won't be able to understand or share my conviction that I am clearly being railroaded here. 'A Show of Hands' has substantial merit and the potential to greatly benefit the gay cause here in the Bay Area, if I do say so myself. It's not a matter of personal gain or recognition. Christ! I've put everything on the line by writing this play with the intent of going public with my own sexuality. I stand to lose a great deal, especially in the normally precious realm of family affiliation. But I would

have never taken the gamble or recognized the risks if I didn't honestly believe with heart and soul that I had a worthwhile contribution to make here. All of us must know that bigotry and prejudice are born out of a severe deprivation of understanding and information. My play, as I see it, -as I envision it being performed, bridges this ever increasing gap of misinformation, hatred and intolerance between the gay and straight factions of society that have no choice but to co-exist. Already this play has gays and straights working together. Just look around this room. Imagine a cast of thirty-seven members with the same ingredients, from different backgrounds and personal philosophies, working toward the same goal. We've got a potential breeding arena for understanding. But that's only if we can counter the University's attempt to keep those of us in heat behind one fence and those who can stand to benefit, behind another." I walked across the room and picked up the manuscript from Ramona's desk. "Here it is folks. In two acts, -the branch of our lives and the root of our existence. I don't know about you, but I'm getting real tired of being told that my dreams won't be necessary.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I had wrapped myself in a towel which I tied around my waist. Nathan had walked into my bathroom just as I emerged from the shower and not one to steal thunder from the cloud that concealed our sexual awareness of each other, I took no liberties with my disguise. In the three weeks that we had slept together, eroticism had thrived within the confines of Calvin Klein underwear. In the beginning, I had refused to allow sex to become the foundation of our understanding hoping to thereby avoid the one night stand phenomenon. After spending three weeks of one nights, my hormones were sick and tired of the stand-off. The simple fact that steps had not been braved beyond the functional purpose of bedtime, left an unanswered desire that lurked, if not burned, inside each of us. This is not to say we hadn't fooled around on the doorstep of intimacy

but we had yet to see each other completely naked. I'm sure this will strike some of you as odd, if not completely insane. I'll admit that even I felt a traitor to my sexual preference from time to time. But the intrigue and anxiety and lust hadn't packed up and left our house the morning after, and for this alone, postponing my carnal knowledge had been an exercise worth the frustration.

Nathan slipped into the shower undetected in the foggy mirror. With clear motivation, we had become much more daring and provocative in our encounters. I cursed the mirror. I'm sure Nathan had counted on its telltale position just as I had. I took a towel to it unforgivingly.

"I can't believe I agreed to speak at this thing tonight."

Nathan hollered above the spray of the shower. "Just be thankful for the chance to gain support of the masses."

I spoke louder. "But you don't have a guest speaker at a Valentine Dance. It's opportunistic, that's what it is."

"I can't hear a word you're saying," Nathan poked his head over the textured glass door of the shower.

"Never mind."

"What?"

"I said, never mind." The mirror once again submitted to the steamy film that impeded its purpose. I wasn't about to risk shaving so I brushed my teeth. I was reaching for my back molars when I felt the towel begin to slip off my waist.

Just as I jerked to save it from falling off completely, it was snatched from my body. "Nathan!" I choked on the toothbrush as he grabbed my arm and tugged me into the shower stall.

"You forgot to clean behind your ears."

I rubbed furiously at my soap stung eyes and lifted my eyelids. So there we were. -Naked together for the first time in our relationship and I had toothpaste streaming from my lower lip. I had to smile as he wiped my mouth with his dripping hand. His torso felt incredible suctioned against mine as the fiery water sought every available passage between our bodies. His blond hair was slicked back and his ocean blue eyes seemed almost bottomless as if they could actually be the collection reservoirs of everything wet. Droplets gathered on his chest, quickly merged and escaped between the hairless valley between his glistening pectorals. I took in water when our lips touched. Tongues probed silently as the domesticated torrents rocketed violently from the shower head. Graceful trickles raced each other down my back and splashed softly off my buttocks. I felt heavy and weightless at the same time, -almost like a floating anvil, linked to this familiar body yet perplexed by its vault-ridden secrets. Thoughts, recognition and motor responses became hopelessly jumbled and all resistance found itself flailing helplessly in the warm spray. Nathan's determined hands slid down my back and paused to rest on the slippery breach. He diverted my defenses by rushing my neck with his

mouth just below my ear. The sensation was insupportable and I stole my balance by pressing him against the icy wall and holding him there with my body. He issued a moan and stood taut until the two temperatures of structure and flesh equalized. He laughed aloud, fueling my rage. My prey was stunned. I commenced a long awaited feast by kissing his chest which gave into my nudging like a cinder block. His body was as if white canvas had been laboriously strung on an unrelenting frame. Envy the artist who graces this medium with a brush of the tongue. His eyes placed my attention under house arrest. We kissed again with open eyes that paralyzed our fears and defined our objectives with remarkable assurance. I knew I loved this man. I knew I would love no other.

Prodded by the directed water, the soap severed its gummy ties with the soap dish and sounded its contact with the floor inches from my feet. Instinctively I bent to retrieve the bar and found myself between Nathan's giant legs which stood firmly planted evidencing the much larger trunk they struggled to support. My eyelids fluttered combating the deluge that persisted in overtaking them. My strobed vision began anatomical inventory of Nathan's nakedness, stealing the dimensions my inquisitive ego had demanded and admittedly feared all along. His calves showed the discipline of athletic vaulting. The muscles of his upper leg seemed to crowd each other like continental plates and his compact thighs bulged from years

of brutal dismounts and meticulously perfected stunt runs. (With luck, we'd come back to Nathan's high bar.) With my mind on involuntary scramble, I hastened my ascent hopefully detracting from my obvious curiosity. I rubbed my eyes, partly out of amazement and partly out of water aggravation. I focused on Nathan's facial topography. The relief from the peak of his perfect nose to the graben valley running vertically to his upper lip would lend enthusiasm to the most sluggish of climbers. His blue eyes were twin alpine lakes and his faint eyebrows managed to eke out an existence high above the timberline.

I stepped back into the jet of water and watched him as he raised the soap to my eye level and then released it allowing it to free-fall to the tiled floor below. A mischievous grin overtook his face as he offered to retrieve the bar. I returned his smile. "It is your turn," I added encouragingly. He obviously intended to act with or without my consent and knelt loyally to the task at hand. His palms skimmed the tile floor and hovered briefly over the soap before he attempted to snatch it, but the bar shot across the stall and slid to a rest over the drain. Nathan, not one to be outsmarted by a simple by-product of alkali and fat, was quick to rebound even though he lost his balance in the attempt. He hooked my right leg to steady himself and nearly brought me down on top of him. Actually, if I would have been thinking more clearly at the

time, I would have staged the fall just to help the situation along. His fingers awkwardly pantomimed the itsy-bitsy-spider who, if I'm not mistaken, had designs on my water spout. He had raised to one knee when his head leveled out at my groin. He kissed me below my pelvic bone and its sensitivity ignited bottle rockets that zipped through my body faster than lightning. My back arched in seizure and my vocal cords issued a silent scream that wailed sadistically in my cranium. I forced my mind to wander with the hope of delaying my physical admission of arousal, and you, hopefully now dependent on my every word, will wander right along.

Meanwhile, on a jagged crag in the Sawtooth Mountains of North-Central Idaho, two Bighorn Rams were about to establish the destiny of the herd; a confrontation dictated by strength and the eventual clash of two equal and non-coinhabitable powers. The terrain beneath them is as unpredictable as the outcome of the match and one misplaced hoof could decide the victor with a fatal and involuntary forfeit. Now, the jolting climax is frightfully near and except for the faint roar of the mustang river carving its swollen banks three quarters of a mile below, the thin air is unremarkable and as still as Death, itself. Each of the contenders balances himself facing the other and charting the uncertain distance to deadly impact. In each of their minds they must struggle to envision a tunnel no larger than they are wide and yielding less than inches for error.

From over the ridge the monotonous honking of Canadian Geese returning from warmer lands further south, is allowed to pass overhead as the entire herd of Bighorn Sheep grows impatient and anticipates the overdue commencement. Suddenly and without fanfare, the charge begins. The wilderness serenity is violated by the resonant sounding of eight orchestra kettle drums as their determined hooves punish the narrow sliver of monolithic rock they're willing to die for and with an amplified clap of thunder, the Ram's armored head slams into my groin hurling my body backwards. Skull and tile fuse with a stunning thud and my body collapses, sacrificing millions of silent witness to the conqueror.

Nathan rocked back on his heels.

Now, that was tasteful. I doubt my mother will ever read it aloud for dignitaries at a state dinner, but it was tasteful nonetheless and it had finally happened.

I laid out my Calvin Klein Khakis, an off white button down and a beige and white striped sport coat. My body still tingled as I eased the jocky briefs into position. I rearranged myself on both sides of the inseam and finished dressing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A new page. This, in itself, should be cause for optimism but it's hard to muster these days. Sex with Nathan was wonderful and even managed to lift my spirits, (among other things). -I hope I haven't jinxed my prospects by writing about it. I am gravely superstitious. I suppose that is why I guard my optimism over 'A Show of Hands' making it to a stage. Fighting the regents seemed elementary in theory but lest I remain weary of the windmills on my practical horizon, I could lose sight of the true enemy, that being my own ability to surrender the sword. At times it seemed Don Quixote and I shared 'The Impossible Dream.' He must have surely been superstitious, too. On that note, how many of you even noticed I intentionally skipped Chapter Thirteen? Now, page thirteen, I wrote. Honestly, how much can happen on one page?

Temptation met us at the door to the Student Union Building. I easily made out his frame leaning against the entry pillar from a block away and in street light. My nervous and unrestrained heart broke away and raced ahead to greet him while the rest of me remained behind to reinstate diplomatic relations with a protective and suddenly touchy boyfriend.

"Mark is just a friend," I told him. "A very good friend to both of us. Don't let your unwarranted insecurities jeopardize that arrangement, okay?"

"Okay. It's just that I don't get a charge out of sharing my prince with a ballroom full of queens on Valentine's Night. Call me stuffy."

"Stuffy!"

We followed Mark into the building. The entrance, adorned with red and pink crepe paper, played on the old familiar tunnel of love theme. Nathan insisted the concept was purely Freudian. He was feeling anything but patronizing and he seemed determined to announce his malcontent nonverbally to the World. I grabbed him by the jacket lapels and pulled him into a kiss in the middle of the tunnel. "I love you. Now quit pouting before I have to send you back to the car!" I led him past the dancing couples and the wall flowers on cruise alert. This event had to triple the club's closet relegated membership. Greg waved from the podium as we squeezed by the lesbian contingency standing strategically in front of the punch bowl and the heart shaped

cutout cookies. I snatched a handful of the pink frosted delights and fed one to Nathan. The predictable butterflies that had long since left their snug cocoons, began to swarm chaotically inside my stomach. I fed them another cookie.

"Punch?" A husky voice spoke from what seemed to be the middle of the lesbian barricade. I lowered the cookie destined for my mouth and reached for the extended Styrofoam cup.

"Thank you." Visual contact was made with a mustached man who in turn offered a cup to Nathan.

"The name is Sam Tischler." I juggled the remaining cookies and the punch into one hand and shook his with the other.

"Joey Tucker, and this is my boyfriend, Nathan Evans." Nathan seemed reassured by the affiliation. Sam's brown eyes peered through preppy dark rimmed glasses whose functional prescription became the topic of skepticism the more I looked at him. A Charlie Chaplin Classic mustache stretched across a beaming smile and I decided he looked like an Hispanic John Lennon.

"Actually," Sam pushed his glasses higher on his nose, "I know who you are. You're the playwright and you must be the gymnast." He eyed Nathan almost lecherously.

I reprimanded him. "No. I'm the gymnast and he's the playwright. People always get us confused."

"I see. Well, you're both practically overnight celebrities." Sam fumbled for the compliment. Mark overheard

the exchange and began to choke on a heart shaped cookie.

"Gosh," Mark cleared his throats, "-Legends in their own time."

"Sam, have you two met?" I asked him.

"It was through Mark that I first heard about the play. I'm very interested in trying out for a part."

"That's fantastic! I'll make sure you get a copy of the script and you can start looking it over. I'm convinced this dismissal-thing won't hold water too much longer. Auditions could be as early as next week." I boasted without qualification.

The DJ mixed out Tina Turner as the dancing couples shuffled off the dance floor. Greg adjusted the microphone on stage and tested it tapping it lightly on the head.

"Happy Valentine's Day USF!" The crowd roared with approval and closed in around the stage. Greg continued his welcome.

"If you haven't discovered the refreshment table, it's over along the south wall. Last I checked, the punch was still cherry kool-aid with NutraSweet Any updates?" The crowd clapped enthusiastically. What an easy audience, I thought to myself.

"Our lesbians brought the cookies. They ask that I make the announcement that they are in memory of Alice B. Toklas. I'm not sure what that means." As the crowd laughed, I stopped chewing and tried to remember how many I had ingested. Greg continued warming up the room. "Have you heard the one about

a faggot, a gorilla and a bulldozer?" The crowd boo-ed and even though I was sure I wanted to hear the punch line, Greg abandoned the joke. "Tonight, I have the added pleasure of introducing a new student at USF this semester. In a short period of four weeks, he's managed to tango with every regent on campus. In fact, I believe he's on a first name basis with several of them. They may have trouble recognizing the first name Joey is calling them, but without a doubt they'll recognize the gay and lesbian students of this university before Joey is finished with them. Ladies and gentlemen, queers and dikes, let's give a big Tampa Gay-Bay welcome to Joey Tucker!"

I walked through the ass-patting crowd to the front of the stage onto which Greg gave me a hand. I positioned myself behind the podium gripping both sides with sweaty palms. The applause began to subside.

"You know, I get real nervous when my mouth gets this close to something shaped like this." I acknowledged the microphone and the throng exploded in laughter. I searched for a familiar face in the crowd and caught Nathan staring at me with raised eyebrows. I had to smile. I looked toward the punch bowl to see Mark rubbing his hands deep into Sam's shoulders and neck. Sam lifted his head and smiled. My throat cleared sporadically as I readjusted the microphone apprehensively to better suit my height. "My name is Joey Tucker and I come to you from The University of Nebraska. The reason I unload my problem on your

dance floor this evening, is simple. I'm in a bit of a jam and I'm not one to ignore power in numbers, especially when it's gay and lesbian power moving in the direction of advancement. You may or may not be familiar with the massive undertaking of USF's Theatre Arts Department this semester, so I'll take just a moment to explain the undergraduate curriculum. Four seniors were selected to participate in a theatre project conceived, in the often twisted minds of our educators, to ultimately test our ability in all facets of the industry. Thirty days ago, the four of us were instructed to write, cast, produce, direct and act in our own original productions. These productions are going to be performed in theatres around town this semester. The project was to be policed by scheduled deadlines to insure the various requirements of production were being met. The first deadline was this morning when we presented our completed manuscripts for review. Not only was my play rejected but I was asked to leave the theatre arts program at this university. I am convinced my manuscript was dismissed on content because of the homosexual nature of my production. Of course, the regents could be expected to invent criterion for their actions and predictably the reasons they listed don't even begin to spell out the discrimination they are trying to hide. My play is called 'A Show of Hands' and it charts homosexual history throughout the ages. It applies comical plaster to an otherwise poorly promoted

and badly perceived history of gay and lesbian achievements and contributions. I realize that I am asking you to commit your support practically blindfolded, but this play offers us, the gay students of this university, an arena to set the gay record straight in the minds of those who are currently acting out of prejudice and misinformation. My play sends a message; a message of hope and a statement of arrival. We are here, Tampa!" A single pair of hands sounded in the ballroom and were eagerly joined by a multitude of applause that battered my cake pan. I took a deep breath. "This isn't just my show. It's your show, Tampa. All I'm asking you to do is to help me fight for it. Happy Valentine's Day and thank you." Again, applause rocked the podium and stilled my apprehension. I hopped off the stage and made my way through the crowd to Nathan. He hugged me proudly. I had never felt more inspired as I did that moment in his arms. Greg remounted the stage and announced our plan of attack.

"As an item of new business, I move the club backs Tucker in his fight. Is there a second to this motion?"

"I second!" Sam's voice raised above the crowd.

"All those in favor, please applaud." I thought they'd raise the roof. "All those opposed?" You could have heard a pin drop in jello. "Okay. Pre-rally meeting tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. Rally at Noon. Resume the dance, Children," Greg commanded.

"We did it, Nathan. We're in." I told him.

He patted my behind. "I think you're right."

Greg, Mark and Sam closed in around us and we talked through our plans for tomorrow morning. Gaining the support of the campus gay community was like taking candy from a baby. Taking preconceptions away from the assembled student body quickly proved to be more like taking pumps from a drag queen. The men attempted to brace me for the greater challenge.

The dance droned on and one extended play mixed into another until I craved unadulterated silence. My head was throbbing to the beat and I had the feeling the lesbian cookies had just kicked in. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I want to get some poster sketches from the theatre before they think to change the locks." I kissed Nathan on the cheek.

"Do you want some company?" Nathan seemed to hope.

"That's okay. I'll just be a second."

"Actually, I've got a seven o'clock art lab in the morning. I should get going myself. Good night everyone." Mark reached to give me a hug. "Happy Valentine's, Joey. Nathan, I'll see you tomorrow," he offered.

"I'll walk you out, Mark," Sam said. I let them leave so Nathan would not have a breakdown trying to come up with the correlation of why we all left at once.

"I'll be okay," I reassured him. "I just want to take

five minutes in the theatre to focus my energies. You won't even miss me."

"I miss you already," he whispered in my ear as I left his side. Greg asked him to dance and they wandered out onto the dance floor.

I jogged onto the asphalt path under the fluorescent night light and turned toward the theatre. The air was absolutely motionless causing the significantly high percentage of humidity to hang like first grade paste over Tampa. I had managed to retain my nervous perspiration throughout the evening but now my face felt flush and my forehead tingled as beads of sweat made their aggravating debut. I let the sport coat slide off my arms and I threw it over one shoulder, unfastening an additional shirt button for ventilation. My hands thrashed through my pant pockets for the keys to the building in front of me and I quietly unlocked the doors, securing them once again from the inside. I felt carefully along the stuccoed wall with half closed eyes that felt rather swollen, extending my arms, like a stoned zombie, in front of me. I had been in theatre too long and had heard too many outrageous ghost stories and worked in too many legitimately haunted theatre houses to discount them now. The giant air circulation unit barreled into service with great thunder and I miscalculated the first few steps of the staircase and landed on one knee. By this

time, those unsightly beads of sweat had discovered flow on the upper slopes of my face. I could not believe that my hand was actually shaking as I experimented with the different keys that might open my office door. Once inside, I hit the light switch and went directly to the locked desk drawer that contained my art portfolio. With the mission accomplished, I retraced my steps, much faster now, and raced through the lobby to the front doors. Why hadn't I insisted that Nathan accompany me? I was definitely spooked but I locked up the theatre from the outside and set about putting as much distance as possible between me and that building. Suddenly I realized my stride on the sidewalk was being governed by a childhood mandate that had something to do with sidewalk cracks and chiropractic motherhood. By ordinance I avoided the cracks to protect my mother's posture, but at the same time, I prepared to go public nationwide with my homosexuality. She'd probably opt for traction and Osteoporosis given a choice in the matter.

I wondered if mother would understand. Her suspicion had to be carried throughout my formative years in the cornfield. I'm sure there were weeks during the summer months when it seemed the Kinzer's and I were irretrievable, lost to boyhood curiosities amid the land of husk and kernel. "Just what do you boys do out there all day long?" I can hear her drilling. Winters always curbed our activity and the first weeks of snow usually produced a profound deprivation that one season actually

provoked a constructive overdose on a tasty but lethal combination of Bayer's Children Aspirin and Flintstone Chewables. But alas, bored and frustrated and with my birthday only days away, I confessed the intake and was revived by a stomach pump and the bedside dissertation titled 'If you ever try a stunt like this again...' I'm sure you know the lesson. Anyway, before too long, I remember the presents began arriving from around the rural neighborhood. It almost appeared to be a windfall year at The Tucker Ranch for Joey. Even the Senator came off Capitol Hill to make his show-stopping gift presentation.

My peers closed in around me, not unlike wolves descending on a dropped Caribou, as I savagely tore my fingers deep into the Willy Mayes gift wrap. You could never imagine the look on my face when I lifted the lid off that box. Do you have any idea what was inside? The smell of genuine rawhide rose from the tissue paper to introduce me to the wide world of sports. A five finger baseball glove and a Karl Yastremski autographed baseball bat had me heading straight back to the medicine cabinet. I knew with the very first whiff of leather that this gift could mean only one thing; -PeeWee League!

I suppose if I were to find any position agreeable on the baseball diamond, it had to be right field. Hell! This was PeeWee and nobody could carry a baseball, much less hit the damn thing out that far, with the stunning exception of Brett

Bradymeyer. Now there was a father's ejaculation paid off! Unless Brett Bradymeyer was standing in the batter's box, I had my run of the place. I was completely free to daydream and pick any one of a variety of wild flowers that grew uninhibited in right field, literally yards away from any growth impeding force.

By the ninth inning, if my fervent prayers for a torrential hurricane, (Nebraska's first,) hadn't been answered, I usually had plucked enough biological flowering specimens to accommodate a small scale Rose Parade.

My father couldn't bring himself to attend the ballpark ritual on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Mom knew I'd ditch if she didn't, so she painstakingly sat out that PeeWee Season on the hardwood bleachers above the dugout. In fact, she was often times the glorified recipient of my floral harvest from right field. For some unknown reason, she never seemed to find comfort in the fact that she was indeed the only mother in the crowded stands receiving regular flower deliveries.

I couldn't protect my parents any longer. I was moving on. I was through supporting their endeavors and I was beginning to recognize those of my own. They would have to understand or they wouldn't.

I was now within earshot of Patti LaBelle squealing boastfully of her 'New Attitude', when Sam appeared on the path

in front of me. "Hey, stranger!" I caught up with him.

"This place is crawling with homosexuals this evening. There's at least a couple of them behind every bush and tree. And I suppose you're one of them too, Tucker?"

"I suppose. And I wouldn't think by looking at you that you are without your tendencies either."

"Okay. But just don't tell my mother."

The Student Union Building came into view. "You mean to tell me your mother doesn't already know?" I asked obviously hitting a nerve.

"Yeah. She knows all right. She has waged this death grip on her rosary beads and hasn't stopped praying ever since she found out about me."

"So, how did you tell her?"

"I'm afraid that honor belonged to my ex-fiancee who went through this bizarre metamorphosis to become the first ever human megaphone. I mean she told everyone in the free world with vocal cords that shook the Iron Curtain. Of course, my mother was the first to receive the ear splitting report. As implied, things at home now bear no resemblance to life B.C. -Before Carla."

"Carla was your fiancee," I deducted the obvious. "For how long?"

"We were engaged for ten months and disengaged beyond reconciliation six days before the big day."

"What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

"She caught me in bed with the male stripper from her bachelorette party."

"You would have gone through with the wedding knowing full well that you were gay?"

"Hell, yes! Her parents own half of the Dominican Republic. -French descent. I'm afraid all that wealth and prominence wriggling on the end of a giant grappling hook, didn't look half bad. The only problem was that Carla was their intended sinker and there was no way I could swallow that much of their line without choking it all back up every time I say a pretty boy. And this male stripper was one helluva pretty boy! I was just a kid a year ago. Perceptions change."

"And standards of self worth, thankfully."

"I loved Carla and I have no doubt that I was more sensitive to her needs than any straight man could ever hope to be. But I had denied every need of my own in the sacrificial adventure. And it wasn't as though I planned to keep the stripper a secret. Hell! We made it in Carla's apartment ten minutes before she was due home from class."

"Discretion spared, I see."

"It was an address he could remember. He was pretty but he was no valedictorian. He had just been there the night before at Carla's party." Sam kicked a rock off the path. "No regrets, Joey. A lot of people can't say that much."

"What about the situation at home with your mother? Surely you must regret the strained relations with your mother."

"Hey look, Joey," he said quite frankly, "if she didn't have the basic capacity for unconditional love, she had no right being a mother in the first place."

I cleared my throat. That was pretty tough talk. We went back inside the ballroom. Nathan leaned against a ceiling support by the empty punch bowl. I wrestled with the stubborn foil clinging to my last Breath Saver. It was time to go home. I said good night to Sam and Greg.

The long drive home was most enjoyable as the full moon admired its crisp reflection in The Bay and Nathan hummed with the car radio. It had just been announced that Brian Boitano had won the gold medal in men's figure skating in Calgary. Good for Brian.

Nathan veered right for the final turn up the beach. I reached for the garage door opener which was still my grandest kick this side of the Nebraska cornfields. The runway lights flashed into service and the lanky, wind-whipped palms straightened their shabby posture in preparation for our arrival. -All at the seeming touch of a button. God how I loved the Twentieth Century.

Suddenly, like a boomerang reversing direction in mid air, Sam's words slammed back into my skull with immediate impact.

'If she didn't have the capacity for unconditional love, she had no right being a mother in the first place.' I don't think I'd ever heard a more poignant truth. Moms-to-be seem to have adjusted or at least accept the odds of birth defects, miscarriage, and mental retardation, but they can't seem to accommodate the more than fifteen percent possibility of homosexuality developing in their offspring. Parents turn their children away, for Christ's sake. Which is more devastating? Wouldn't it be refreshing to see a mother once recognize the unique and priceless exclusiveness of those uncommissioned flower deliveries to the grandstand; to embrace the rare difference independently overriding a host of carbon copied expectations and standards. Self-righteous and God-fearing parents sit in their cozy church pews and ponder what debilitating factors could have ever produced the homosexual variant. They don't preach against birth defects and still birth. At least they recognize they can't change everything, but homosexuality is a choice, a disease, and therefore changeable. That's the way Hitler saw it when he devised his solution, too. Never mind 'the stop loving them approach' or 'the ignore them, they'll go away method.' Humanity is pathetic, I thought to myself, when I can take everyday prejudice and persecution one half step further and find myself cowering between the bold faced printed lines of another page in history; -one paragraph below Adolph Hitler and always a sentence away from hope.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I know what it looks like, but pink was all they had, Joey." Mark tried to explain. "They had over ordered for Valentine's Day and all the green is spoken for with St. Paddy's coming up next month. Look on the bright side. We have tons of it and it's free!"

"How ironically appropriate. I'm sure the student body will have a hay day with the correlation. Pink posters will be just fine, Mark." It was hard to sound reassuring with the rally only hours away and the color of the posters was definitely the least of my manifested phobias. Like the Valentine Dance, I could not get beyond my presumed arrogance to think that I could just set up a microphone and be heard or that anyone even cared to listen in the first place. In the big picture, this dismissal thing must have seemed like the most insignificant

brush stroke to most, though it was the oil and canvas to me. And before I begin to sound too Stephen Sondheim for this journal, let me get back to the rally.

"Is Nathan around," Mark asked cautiously.

"Actually, he and Sam took the car to get some wooden stakes."

"Sacrificing at the rally? I should have brought my fire extinguisher." Mark sensed Nathan's jealousy and protectiveness and probably couldn't predict whether he was to be burned at one of Nathan's stakes or drilled through the heart with one.

"Relax, will you? The stakes are to anchor your posters. Nathan was really hoping you could run the errand with him. He wants to talk to you though I don't know the reason."

"He had mentioned wanting to talk sometime. I can only assume he wants to talk about you. Talk would do him good. He needs to know that I'm not after his boyfriend. That's ridiculous!" Mark spread some poster board on the stage and prepared to create.

"Wait just a minute," I objected. "Ridiculous is a very strong adjective."

"But it's an even stronger paranoia on Nathan's part. The man has every reason to be jealous and possessive even. I'll be the first to admit that if you were mine, I'd probably ground you to the yard. But let me tell you something. Being gay has taught me one very important rule of conduct. Hitting

it off with another man, I mean really hitting it off, well, it's rare and beautiful. When I come across this arrangement between two other men, it instantly commands the grandest awe and respect one gay man can pay his sexual class; I don't interfere. And when I care enough about these two men, I won't allow interference by anyone, and that's why I need to talk to Nathan."

Quite frankly, I didn't know what to say. Mark ruffled my hair and pulled me into a bear hug. "If it makes any difference," he continued, "I care about you the most. Here. I wrote this for you last night after I left the dance." He plunged his hands deep into his portfolio side pocket and withdrew a royal purple envelope. "And at first glance, I'm about to contradict everything I have just said, but it's important you understand this too. Besides, I don't think you'll have any trouble with the true meaning of my message anyway." He smiled trying to reinforce his obvious sincerity in light of his failing credibility. My thumb liberated the gummed flap and I opened the card to find his handwriting in fine point felt:

'I am calling feelings home to graze in a familiar pasture where the nourishment there can best provide those with whom I share the range. A barbed fence of consciousness detains this reckless Mustang who rather seems penned in by his own principled indecision. But if fate should ever find you alone

and needing, simply leave the gate ajar. I'll always remain just a gallop away. -Mark.'

When I looked up, Mark had run off to help Sam with the wooden stakes and I watched Nathan intercept him before he reached the car. Mark had at last provided the understanding that we would hold between us the rest of the semester. I felt a saddened relief as profound and honest as Mark's handwritten message. I had been turned loose to run with Nathan.

It was already nine-thirty and my army was due any moment with guaranteed enthusiasm. I needed to put finishing touches on my noon assembly address and posters needed to be made. Time being a factor, Mark, the only licensed artist among us, began sketching posters with thick black markers which he then passed down the assembly line for coloring by the masses.

I stole away by myself, sneaking into The Hartung, where I sat in the front row of the dark and silent theatre. I set my personal Anvil case on the edge of the stage in front of the work light. I carried the case when I traveled and when I performed. Once opened, Woolworth's had nothing on me. My theatre make-up from pancake to grease paint and from eye-liner to spirit gum, all occupied the upper tiers with the built in and fold out mirror. The vast compartment below housed the shampoos, conditioners, sprays, lotions, gel and mousse, and

not to ignore the one thousand watt blow dryer which had to be the forerunner to the General Motors wind testing tunnel, all nested in a furry cushion of false beards and mustaches. Without a hitch, this case consistently turned out a change in face. Just opening the lid put me into character. And today, without a hint of make-up or theatrical lighting, I needed the case to work its magic again. Today would be a performance, all right. I tilted the lid so I could see my face in the compact mirror from where I sat. I recalled the first rule of Nature, -blend to match your surroundings. Blend to survive. And the first requirement of society, -deny yourself, suppress yourself to emulate the greater norm. One face gets discarded after another until you're knee deep in a bloody repertoire of lost identities; at peace with the Universe but at war with yourself. And in the end, you stand with your bent but well-deserved halo, in front of a rotting heap of rejected personalities and abandoned disillusionments, and you contemplate your feeble existence as a performer. And after you've taken the bow and pleased the critics that are everywhere, the Soul breaks away and reaches into the pile to reunite with the only face smiling back at it. In this glorious moment, you undergo the final change in face. Life or Death becomes constant. But in that lies the objective of living, -to find face in your prime rather than to lose face in a lifelong search for perfect ideals that amount to nothing more than disfigured features in

the pile. The work light center stage pointed at the tear running down my cheek. I had a premonition that stripping the camouflage and venturing out of the bushes to nakedly confront my father and my world in the open, was as close to a final change in face as I could hope to get. Thank God, the case had worked again.

Back on The Green, posters had been erected in the center of campus and promised for an interesting if not controversial rally. Most posters featured 'A Show of Hands' in towering black letters on brilliant fields of hot pink. Others, more cleverly conceived, read 'GLSU ASKS USF FOR 'A SHOW OF HANDS,' and 'IF THE WORLD'S A STAGE, GAYS & LESBIANS DEMAND BETTER LIGHTING!' But by far my favorite was the banner that stretched across the front of the speaker platform, 'GIVE TUCKER BACK HIS STAGE!' We had slogans, official campaign colors, and by eleven o'clock, my two act candidate seemed almost electable by popular vote.

But High Noon was quickly approaching and I practiced my speech on deaf ears as I dangled my feet off the edge of the three foot platform secured earlier by GLSU. I looked out on the grass at Mark still turning out posters and at Nathan standing by to tack them to stakes. Sam was manipulating a helium tank as Greg held pink balloons over the nozzle. Two girls tied the balloons adding string which they anchored in

the ground with long nails all around the rally site. My heart, also filled with helium, lofted high into my throat making it terribly difficult to swallow with dry eyes.

A stocky fellow approached me from the left side of the field and I prepared for my first confrontation until I recognized him from the dance the night before. "Joey, my name is Daren and I work at The University Copy Center. After last night and working all morning, I feel I understand your purpose more than anyone here. With Greg's help and after everyone went home from the dance, he and I put together these fliers. My mom did the typesetting at four o'clock this morning. Read through them and see if you think they're appropriate for today's rally." He handed me one from the massive pile of pink copies. "Oh, and you won't hurt my feelings if you don't think they hit the mark," he added. "I just know you inspired me last night and this was the only way I could think to become tangibly involved on such short notice."

When it finally appeared that Daren might give me a chance to finally read one of the pink beauties, I stole the opportunity. The flier was divided into three graphed columns, each with a stark black heading. I read the columns in order:

'THE PROBLEM. On February 14, Joey Tucker, USF Theatre Arts Major, went before the Regents and Theatre Board of this university for a special review of his play **A Show of Hands**. Having followed the senior project's guidelines to the letter,

he ingeniously drafted a two act production charting the history of Homosexuals with a witty, yet tragic realism. Anticipating a successful run with his play this season, Joey Tucker and USF's Gay and Lesbian Community were shocked to learn that the play had been rejected and Tucker had been dismissed from the program.'

'THE CAUSE. Ignorance and bias. Had the Regents ventured beyond their scholarly homophobic prejudices and actually read Tucker's work, they would have been enlightened with a fascinating and little know historical account of homosexuality throughout the ages. Instead, with their uncontested wisdom and proven judgment, they chose to hop on that persecution bandwagon, so much a part of homosexual history, to deny Joey Tucker his constitutional rights to assemble and to speak freely.'

'THE ONLY SOLUTION. It would appear that much of the gap between gays and straights could be lessened if not completely bridged by an adequate dissemination of responsible information. Joey Tucker's play attempts just that. Making the attempt has got to be an essential step in the right direction. Why should our campus be the last to conform to a fast growing acceptance of Homosexuals worldwide? Why do our Regents stubbornly oppose gay and lesbian awareness? What are they trying to cover up? Help GLSU find out! We need your support both in the fight and at the box office. For more information on how you can

become involved, please contact the GLSU Office, Suite 2000, The Student Union Building. This publication is paid for and endorsed by The Gay and Lesbian Student Union of The University of South Florida.'

"Oh, Daren. I respect your work and I appreciate your understanding. These are incredible. By all means, Daren, distribute!"

"Thanks, Joey. Here. Read the back side." Daren flipped the page for me.

"A SHOW OF HANDS"

Opening as scheduled May 6 - 29, 1988

JOEY TUCKER, DIRECTOR/PLAYWRIGHT/LIBERATOR

"It's flattering to be right up there with Simon Bolivar! You've left me speechless, Daren."

"Let's hope not. The biggest soap box this university has ever seen has your name on it and you have to climb up there in twenty minutes." Daren pointed to the stage.

Time may not have been my friend, but it was definitely trustworthy. At a quarter of Noon it became obvious that this wasn't to be a small get together. By ten 'till, when classes officially broke, the platform looked like a country picnic attracting ants. Books and asses hit the grass as stragglers

secured their positions for the first student rally in three semesters. The last event to draw a crowd was a proposed tuition hike last year, which the student body successfully defeated. The student batting average spoke for itself if I could just get them to swing at my pitch. Though I hadn't seen it for myself until Greg showed me minutes before I addressed the crowd, 'The Oracle,' USF's campus newspaper, carried a full-page ad that announced the rally on page five in today's edition. It advertised the rally but withheld the topic which could explain the intimidating numbers in attendance. But despite the brilliant array of pink posters and balloons flying in full glory and demanding gay rights, the crowd gathered and patiently awaited the afternoon message. Sack lunches were balanced on bulky backpacks and the cart vendors peddled everything from jewelry to hamburgers around the perimeter of the field.

The sun had spent all morning climbing to the highest vantage point directly over the platform and I began to envy (and cruise) those who were able to remove their shirts in the afternoon heat. It was now five minutes before midday and Greg made his way toward the makeshift stage. I shook his hand and pulled him into a hug. "I owe you everything, Greg."

"You owe Tampa the opportunity to see 'A Show of Hands.' I'm only here to make sure that debt gets honored." For a moment we watched Daren and his helpers distribute the fliers to everyone in the crowd. It was a proud day for GLSU and it was

exciting to be a part of it. Hell, it was overwhelming being responsible for it. I walked to the other side of the platform where Nathan had positioned himself.

"You look pretty adorable in my shirt," he commented as I drew near. "And I love you no matter what happens here today." The sun spilled into his eyes giving him the power to see clear through to my soul. It was hard to imagine wanting anything more than this; to be loved by this wonderful man was far more important than anything I could hope to win on that platform today. Being granted residency in his arms was more fulfilling than rattling around a theatre all semester. But Nathan had expectations too. Was I meeting them? Not if I cashed in my tickets now.

"I love you too, Nathan. Wish me luck."

"I can do better than that. I guarantee you luck on that stage. You can't fail by me for trying, but you've gotta try."

That was it then. I gave him a giant hug and braced myself for Greg's introduction. Nathan turned on the massive public address system sending an electrical pop through the speakers. The crowd quickly hushed. Half of the student body must have assembled on the lawn today. It was truly an emotional jump to my pessimistic batteries. Greg cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Good afternoon, USF. My name is Greg Barstock. I am the president of our Gay and Lesbian Student Union." Greg paused

anticipating a chorus of wise-cracks he'd grown to expect, but the field was silent. "It is not our practice to confront the general student population, but it should be and I want to thank everyone for being here today. GLSU has recently become involved with a campaign which sooner or later will most likely affect everyone of us in some capacity. The campaign deals with a gross violation of student rights and if you've already glanced through today's rally flier, you know what I'm speaking about. Now many of you feel that gay rights is not an issue here at USF, and I'll agree we've been pretty quiet, but I assure you, if the current momentum of this campaign can be sustained, gay rights will be the issue of the semester. Those of us on this platform today and those of us in the audience who happen to be gay, aren't attending this university to be Homosexuals. We're here to obtain an education, to be students that are extended equal opportunities to learn and to excel. Classmates and professors, please welcome Joey Tucker."

Applause quickly traveled through the swarm of sunbathing students and quieted almost instantly as I ran up the backstairs of the platform. I reached into my shirt pocket for my index cards and wished that Greg would have taken another ten minutes setting me up. On top of the platform where I should have had a three foot advantage over all I could see, I felt dwarfed, almost on display, (which I was.) The crowd fanned themselves with the pink fliers creating the illusion of a magnificent

fuchsia ocean. I thought I was going to be seasick but I grabbed the microphone and walked to the edge of the stage.

The crowd's attention was momentarily diverted to the WTPA Channel 6 wagon that had just pulled up with its entourage of camera people and reporters armed with cables, mics and minicams. From out of their small army, Ramona emerged wearing a hot pink and white floral print dress and waving enthusiastically in my direction. She was flanked on either side by two men in three piece suits. As they neared, I recognized my legal council. I knew I didn't have to look any further than Ramona to know who was responsible for the press corps attendance. I smiled back at her recalling my father's political follies which had taught me early in life, one important rule of public thumb; -if you have something important to say, by all means, stall with bullshit until the media has arrived and the cameras are rolling. It would be risky to deviate from my prepared index cards, but I did just that. Improvisation had always been an attribute on the asset side of my theatrical ledger, so I played with that in my favor.

"Thank you," I began. "As an actor, I've spent the last eight years of my life role-playing situations and creating or imitating characters, but I'm going to level with you here today." I sat on the edge of the platform. "It has always been my secret fantasy to be Phil Donahue and I'm not sure when I'll command an audience this large again, so with your patience

and permission, I ask you to humor this self absorbed actor for a few minutes, here in the sunshine." I bounced off the stage, microphone in hand, and approached the nearest cluster of students. It did so happen that I idolized Donahue and I knew his every move and even his speech patterns, but I needed a pair of glasses and a sport coat. I held the mic behind my back and asked to borrow a pair of glasses from the student in front of me. He obliged. I began to reach for his jacket that lay in the grass beside him. He realized my intent and handed it to me graciously. I placed the glasses on my nose, messed up my hair and slipped the jacket on, standing to the scattered applause of maybe a half a dozen students. I raised my hand to my forehead, then quickly jerked it away in an impatient gesture so typical of the man I mimicked. "What we're talking about today is Homosexuality." The crowd became agitated by my topic and some insults, though not intelligible by the time they made it clear to the stage, were clear signs I had every right to be a nervous wreck. "Today's topic should be no surprise if you are a regular viewer of my show." This provoked some laughter and recognition with the crowd. I didn't hesitate to build on this premise. "Homosexuality guarantees my ratings as the top morning talk show host." I walked several rows into the throng. "I'm going to make a daring assumption. I'll trust that you will let me know if you disagree with my statistics." I adjusted the glasses on my nose, -an act for

which the talk show host seems to have a chronic fixation. "This audience, in fact I'd go as far as to say America in general, is blatantly uninformed when it comes to the issues of Homosexuality. I'd go even further to say you are right down ignorant!" I held the microphone out and over the heads of my audience to capture their response. The field was silent. I looked toward Nathan and Mark. Mark rolled his arms encouraging me to continue. "That's odd. My audiences usually jump at the chance to defend their ignorance. You, sir." I was so nervous I didn't actually make visual contact with the black man I had singled out until he was towering over my six foot frame. Christ! I had picked a jock, -no doubt a favorite athletic son on campus. I had no choice but to play the hand. "You look like a student. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir!" he answered with a dramatic lisp popping his hip in true feminine fashion. I paused a moment to allow for the laughter to subside. The bastard was mine. I was going to eat him alive on the local news.

"So, if you are a student, then you are certainly accustomed to exams and pop quizzes, right?"

He took a minute to think about the question. He finally answered "yes, sir" with the lisp again.

"All right then. Let's put the basketball down for just one second and try real hard to concentrate." I spoke patronizingly slow to emphasize his jock-ness. This was war!

He'd drop that lisp before I was through with him. "I'll assume you're real smart since you are probably here on full scholarship so I'll give you your choice; -true or false, fill in the blank or essay?" I was making progress with the crowd.

"True or false, Phil."

"Fifty-fifty. I figured as much." I was gaining confidence and the more Jock-o drilled that goddamn lisp, the more the crowd wished I'd make him a sacrificial black sheep. "All right. True or False, Kareem? If a person is homosexual, proper therapy and motivations can change his sexual orientation."

"Uh...that's true, I guess."

"Audience?" I held the microphone out. The response was so jumbled, but fueled nonetheless, I moved to clarify. "Okay, next question. If a person is born black, special skin pigment injections can turn him white."

"Yeah, I've heard of that."

"I would imagine you have. So, with proper therapy and motivations, you, in fact, could become a homosexual?"

"Are you kidding, Man?" The mannerisms were gone."

"Are you?" I put my arm around him affectionately. He weaseled out of my hold and sat down. The audience clapped in unison. I'd made my first point without losing my audience. Ramona had moved next to the public address mixer and was pantomiming a telephone call with her hand to her ear. I caught the cue instantly. "Hello? Is the caller there?"

"Phil?"

"Yes? Go ahead."

"Phil, I'm calling from Lincoln, Nebraska and I have to tell you, I watch your program every morning." Ramona had played up a convincing hick accent. The crowd loved it.

"Thank you. Do you have something you'd like to contribute to today's topic?"

"Why, yes Phil, I do. Something is just gnawing away at me and I had hoped you could clear things up. Now I have always heard that homosexuals try to convert or recruit real young boys into becoming ho-mo-sex-ual. Phil, I have eight boys of my own and I surely don't want some pre-vert fiddlin' with their procreating destiny."

"I see. Well that theory would have to be based on a shortage of same-age sexual outlets. I don't suppose you've ever been to San Francisco, have you?" The crowd laughed.

"Do you have any daughters, mam?"

"I have two girls, yes."

"I'd be more worried about those girls, mam. Statistics support that child molesters are three times more likely to be a straight male relative or acquaintance. While we're on that misconception, consider this: When it comes to sexual deviance, forcible rape by a heterosexual aggressor has increased three times that of murder in the last fifteen years. Last year over 90,000 cases of heterosexually forced rape were

reported and police estimate that this represents less than twenty percent of all rapes. So don't worry that your eight boys are going to be fondled in a dark theatre. Worry that your eight boys might grow up to be part of the bigger problem. It's easy to point a judgmental finger at homosexuality. Keep in mind that gays and lesbians have spent a great deal of time in their closets and things are pretty tidy in there. How about a question from our audience?" Hands shot up around The Green. I made my way to a female student in a sun dress.

"Yes?"

"This is all very entertaining but what is the point of today's rally?"

That was a fair question. "We'll address that concern right after we break for a commercial." I turned to face another imaginary camera only to find there was an actual camera pointed at my face. "When we return, Joey Tucker joins us from Tampa, Florida." Ramona, Nathan and Mark mocked the Donahue theme music into the secondary microphone that Ramona held. I jumped back onto the stage to the steady crescendo of applause and yells. I returned the glasses and jacket to the front row.

"Wow! What a rush! My name is Joey Tucker!" The audience had to be tired of applauding the gay cause but they offered one final courtesy by clapping again. I took a bow and thanked them. "Case in point," I continued. "Homosexuality usually carries with it the burden of Heterosexual impatience and

misunderstanding. But as gays and lesbians, we are just as much at fault for keeping quiet. It is from us that this information needs to originate and not from some third party clinical guesswork. Fortunately, this information is getting out. Gay liberation is in full swing in this country; -everywhere it seems, except in the sheltered halls of our administration building. There, our controlling Regents sit with their eyes focused on the horizon while waves of change erode the beach under their feet. These are our educators! Not more than two years ago, six of the twelve Regents were still professors at this institution. What did they teach us? How many of us took Philosophy 101 from John DiMenno as freshmen? Did he simply leave out all mention of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates? Of course not! Because we would have no grip on classical philosophy without the accomplishments and writings of these great thinkers and yet these great minds had very gay boyfriends. Plato shared his life with Alexis of Dion while Aristotle fell in love with one of his male students. While we're on the subject of subjects, how many music majors out there?" To my amazement, several hands answered the question. "Is Tchaikovsky banned from this university like I am? Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a homosexual who wrote ballads and cantatas for his male lovers. But I won't tell the Regents if you don't, especially since you've practiced so hard on that Sixth Symphony." The audience laughed and I stole a glance

at my index cards. When I looked up, I spotted Huey standing in the shadow of a giant oak tree. What possessed me to utter the next statement could not have been of this world.

"Classmates, I present Professor Ed Hughes, Director of USF's Theatre Arts Department." I pointed at him where he stood.

"This man's brilliance created the senior theatre project this semester. He also sided with the Regents decision to withdraw my play from the current season. What show's received your endorsement last year, Professor Hughes? I believe you had successful runs with both 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' and 'A Streetcar Named Desire.' Do you know how close Tennessee Williams lived to The French Quarter in New Orleans? I assure you he wasn't sleeping with women when he wrote those two classics. So tell me, Professor, why can that gay man get his plays on your stage at The University of South Florida and this gay man can't?" The audience came unglued and their tormenting applause forced Hughes to retreat in humiliation. Cowering right behind him were his proteges, Davey and Mardell. Mardell quickly followed behind Hughes but Davey didn't budge. For a split second, I considered dragging Davey through the same mud puddle, but I realized at that moment that I didn't blame Davey. I envied him. He had a stage and that's all I wanted. This publicity was an uncelebrated by-product by comparison, though I reveled in it now. I returned wisely to my index cards. "What we have here is not a question of theatrics. It's a

statement of absurd discrimination and a violation of our student rights. Article One of The United States Constitution says 'Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press or the right of people peaceably to assemble.' This was the very first guarantee of our Founding Fathers. The highest and most powerful government on the planet can't revoke these promises but The University of South Florida can? Your Regents are turning our school into The Great Academic Joke! Look around you. The media is here today. I hope you all share my embarrassment. Make sure our Regents share it. Don't go back to class this afternoon. Let our professors stare at empty classrooms to remind them why they're here in the first place. Enjoy the sun. Let each of our new tans be a message to our educators. Thank you for turning out today. The play is called 'A Show of Hands.' I am Joey Tucker, the director and we will open someday somewhere. Watch for us! Have a great afternoon. It's my treat!" I put the microphone back on its stand and jumped off the stage as the crowd clapped and made itself more comfortable in the afternoon rays. I threw myself into Nathan's arms.

"You were brilliant, Baby. I am so proud."

Mark and Greg tried to hug me at the same time but I hadn't let go of Nathan. I could have died full of accomplishment that afternoon. I had raised the consciousness of a student body but more importantly I had nailed another performance and

Nathan was proud.

The gang ushered me toward Ramona who was already speaking to a reporter at the edge of the platform.

"The news reached City Desk yesterday when the play was first rejected. This morning The American Civil Liberties Union became involved."

"The ACLU? In what capacity Miss Simpson?"

"They are currently filing violation charges under the First Amendment guarantees of free speech to all people and not just to Heterosexuals." The camera panned the steadfast crowd and focused briefly on a pink helium balloon sent aloft in the dark blue sky before aiming its lens back at me.

"Mr. Tucker, a few questions from the press?"

"Certainly." Nathan stepped aside but I pulled him back. A striking female reporter moved out of the crowd to pose the first question.

"What bothers you most about your play's dismissal, Tucker?"

"I think it's the fact the Regents aren't letting the public decide. With all the attention and free publicity they are bringing to 'A Show of Hands,' there won't be a citizen in The Bay Area who won't know that the play deals with the Homosexual Issue. If that offends some people, they won't buy tickets to the show. I'm not demanding compulsory attendance; -just an opportunity to be seen and heard. The Regents have no experience in theatrical critique. That capacity rests squarely

with the public. It always has."

Another reporter elbowed his way to the front of the barricade. "Is today an example of your ability to command a stage, Mr. Tucker?"

"Well, I did hold a predominantly straight audience for twenty-five minutes. This accomplishment for a Homosexual, even in 1988, speaks for itself, I think." I laughed in self amazement.

"You seem overly optimistic that you will open as scheduled on May sixth. Do you have a contingency plan if the university refuses to back down?"

"I don't see how they can hold this position when the indisputable weight of The Constitution is leaning on them, so I think there's cause for optimism. I will let it be known that Hillsboro Community College called this morning offering their theatre facility for my production."

"Is that a viable option?"

"Quite frankly, no. Gays stand to gain nothing if they settle for a closet theatre. At the same time, HCC has contributed academic support to our camp for which we are forever indebted. They understand the real issues here and our need to perform in The Hartung as originally promised."

"One last question, Tucker and we'll let you get back to your classmates." The woman reporter from Channel Four once again edged her way in front of the media assembly. "Is today's

demonstration a one man show?"

"Your question flatters me. It also gives me the opportunity to credit USF's Gay and Lesbian Student Union for the mobilization that was necessary to reach this many people this quickly. It is my play, but the profits we stand to achieve in communication and understanding will benefit every homosexual and heterosexual in this city."

"Thank you, Joey. That's a wrap folks."

I took a step back, but after immortalizing my homosexuality on video tape, I needed more air. I moved out of the mob and right into Davey McCutchan."

"Tucker."

"Davey?" It was obvious this wasn't to be a confrontation of many words so I spoke first. "Thanks for hearing me out for the entire rally."

"I only stayed so I could tell you how cheap I thought you were by slandering Huey like you did up there."

"Look, pal. Huey not only drew the battle lines but he left no doubt to which side he intended to fight on. He screwed me, McCutchan. Even your goddamn loyalty to the man can't keep you from seeing that much. Four of us were chosen for this project because of our obvious talents. I assure you I was gay when my talents were first assessed. Nothing has changed in either respect."

"You of all people should know that the industry is a

struggle. You have to learn to bend and adjust."

"Bending and adjusting is something I've done my whole life. I can do that, Davey, but I won't lay down and die."

"I'm warning you, Tucker. Don't mess with the powers that be. They'll come down on you hard."

"Haven't you noticed? The powers that be are in my favor. Students still have a say in their own education, so you can save your warning and use it on somebody who can't see through your phony delivery. But I have a warning for you. Helen Keller's dead and Stevie Wonder's booked solid."

"You may not know this, but I had looked forward to the box office competition between us so I'm just as disappointed as you are. Don't second guess me, Tucker. You queers are all alike. You second guess everything, even those things that appear to be in your favor." He flicked his cigarette butt onto the asphalt path and walked away.

I leaned back onto the stage. Bodies were sprawled all over The Green. Most had heeded my suggestion to skip class. Even I had the feeling the sun had been more convincing than I was when it came to their actions, but my speech would be remembered. The University of South Florida knows who Joey Tucker is and what he stands for. Tonight's 'Live at Five' would bestow Tampa Bay with the same knowledge. Ready or not, information was making it to the outside.

The last of the pink balloons were being released into the quiet air and a slight breeze ruffled the remaining pink fliers pushing them just ahead of the retrieving hands of the GLSU clean-up brigade. Pink was all they had and pink had worked a miracle.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

For the record, 'the waves of change eroding the beach beneath their feet,' emerged two weeks later as the most quoted statement from my rally speech. Variations appeared as headlines everywhere. And I thought I was all out of tricks, all out of rabbits. But rabbits beget rabbits and I didn't even have to be all that patient. I appeared on two regional talk shows, was interviewed by three local papers including 'The Tampa Bay Times,' 'The Sunshine Journal,' and the state gay publication, 'The Weekly News,' but I was still without a stage. I had already exceeded my original audition deadline by twelve days and I was now beginning to realize the mounting complications with only two months remaining in the semester. It had been strategic to appear firm with my demands but the stand off was costing me time. Now, more than ever, the objective wasn't

singular. It was obvious I needed command of The Hartung Theatre but with all the recent media attention, I needed to have one helluva production to put on its stage. My means were compromising my ends. I began to concentrate on the show, with all its logistical knots that needed untying and specifically on a cast that could keep the loose ends from tangling up again.

The Regents were the crux. In three weeks they had managed to decline comment to every publication, radio and television station that approached them. The real crime was the media allowing them to get away with it. The gay public demanded answers and most certainly Joey Tucker had long since run short on his supply of tolerance concerning the procrastination of what seemed inevitable. There was no doubt that the ACLU would decide the drawn out litigation in my favor, but they were tightly bound by their own bureaucratic ropes of paperwork and legal review. So, in a Tropicana Orange Crate, thirty-seven show scripts with a hundred times as many lines, were no closer to cast memorization than they had been in the playwright's original conception. This director was having labor pains, to be sure. The actual birth of the final production remained a cramping uncertainty.

Nathan passed off his daily presence in The Hartung as an independent project that would satisfy his graduation requirements, when in actuality, he was painstakingly choreographing a lighting program for 'A Show of Hands.' With

the intricate lighting bugs trapped in the theatre computer, he could be free to learn lines and to establish the lead character once the prohibition had been abolished. Mark had drawn a concise mock-up of the two act set design including the delicate series of nine quick scene changes on the revolving stage during the first act. He and Nathan spent hours each day training light on an empty stage.

At Ramona's prodding, Mark and I collaborated on the show poster, producing a quickly recognizable art scheme that had been on sale in gay bars and bookstores for the last week. Set against a magenta background, ten flesh colored hands reached for different heights from the bottom of the poster and depicted various hand gestures. They included the 'peace' and 'okay' signs, a shadow box dog, the index finger displaying a 'number one' and a hitch hiking thumb. There was a 'thumbs up' and 'an Uncle Sam I Want You' finger. But my favorite was the middle finger that defiantly flipped off the Regents. Mark and I both agreed it would only create further controversy but we also agreed to pass it off as art. Besides, controversy was working. Neither of us could have predicted the success of the poster which announced 'A Show of Hands' in hot pink contempo script above the contorting hands. At seven dollars a piece, they were selling faster than hotcakes at an I.H.O.P. All proceeds went to cover printing costs and eventual production expenses, and after one week on the market, twelve hundred dollars was

the overwhelming monetary result. Posters appeared all over Tampa with added concentrations in the Kennedy Boulevard District. GLSU added their organizational stamp to the lower right corner and saturated bulletin boards around campus. Not even the Regents could remove the posters with the GLSU 'hands off' stamp. But there were others determined to rid Tampa's store fronts of our 16 x 24 Homosexual Public Service Announcements. The so called 'spirit-filled' church movement succeeded in the removal of some of the show posters but by and large, even God's people had little recourse if the store operators chose to display the artwork in their windows. We had generated a near cult following with such a simple and captivating concept. It was pretty much assured that if we could talk one proprietor into hanging a poster, the whole block went within the week.

Meanwhile, without actually auditioning potential actors, I managed to recruit twenty-three rough and ready bar patrons from 'Spurs' to appear in full leather as extras in the first act. Ten of these men were amateur body builders by my estimation, which would function perfectly during the Greek Revolve of the play. They were placed on emergency standby and all agreed to be available to begin rehearsals at a moment's notice. Another regular at this hard-core leather bar, owned his own lumber company. The locals called him 'Junior.' But to me and the play he was a senior godsend. He had posted a

duty roster at his lumber yard for workers interested in set construction for 'A Show of Hands.' Fourteen men signed the list volunteering their expert free time evenings and weekends. Nathan, Mark and I made nightly visits to 'Junior's Lumber and Hardware' to supervise and assist in the preliminary construction. Last Wednesday at three o'clock in the morning, we daringly sneaked Junior and a couple of workers into The Hartung to obtain relevant measurements. Mark spent more time with Junior than either Nathan or I. After all, other than my original crude sketches and design input, the set belonged to Mark. He easily impressed Junior with his technical knowledge of materials and his incredible artistic ability. But the attraction was mutual and together they hammered out every aspect of the unusually complex set, -for a college production that is. Of course, we had already exceeded our original budget both in spending and in revenue. All lumber was purchased at cost or it was irregular and donated. Publicity was abundant and it was free. Nightly, a TV crew from one station or another showed up at Junior's to tape our progress in spite of the red stop light that hung over our intersection like a planet entity. We numbered well over fifty now and half of this count came from the community which was a solid lobbying tool, but it was apparent that all involved were lobbied out and fed up with the Regent's deadlock. And every night I knelt in front of my Tropicana crate alter and prayed to the heterosexual God

with the vain hope of being heard and being answered. "-God give me a stage before Junior ends up building one. Amen."

Despite the extensive underground efforts to maintain some sense of schedule, I trailed my peers who had successfully drained the university acting pool with their auditions. With the exception of Mardell, who was delayed by an 'Up with People' week long engagement, booked at the last minute at the Convention Center, my other two cohorts were already snug in their respective locations around town. I found it odd that Huey would leave The Hartung uncommitted for this university theatre season and not pull one on his prize students home to fill my announced vacancy. Perhaps the man was a double agent as Nathan had maintained, still holding a few strings he could tug in my favor with the right motivation. I decided it was time to confront the man whom I secretly hoped still harbored some degree of obligation to this hand picked student, even if I was the sour grape of the bunch.

I grabbed a Pepsi and took a short cut through the University Center on my way to Huey's office. The Coffee Plaza was wall to wall students sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. Some studied, but most visited in a collective effort to wake up before the first battery of morning classes. David was working the information booth and I stopped by to say hello remembering him from the Valentine Dance and the rally a few

weeks ago.

"Hey, Joey," he smiled.

"Good morning, David." He had jet black hair and dark Spanish eyes. I was sure he was Hispanic though he could have passed for Italian.

"Any news today, Joey," he asked unpacking a box of newly printed pamphlets.

"It's still too early to tell, but news has got to break someday soon or there's going to be a riot and I'll throw the first Molotov. Whatcha unpacking?"

"New campus maps." He handed me one from the pile he stocked. "These include the new medical facilities on the west end of campus and the University Theatre II Classroom Building." I flipped through the commentary and briefly glanced at the other four campuses of USF. Seeing the St. Petersburg map reminded me that I hadn't seen or heard from Chris the cab driver. I skipped to the bottom of the page and moved the pamphlet closer to my eyes to read the italicized fine print. My eyes sped through each sentence as though they'd been personally trained by Evelyn Wood, herself. I gripped the paper in my hand, crushing it out of pure elation.

"Oh, David, I could just kiss you!"

"Please do," he begged.

I sent a shout through the Student Union and sprinted for Huey's office.

The theatre seemed to be buzzing with kinetic energy generated by the whirlwind at my heels. With my arms extended, my body spun around gracefully in the lobby, looking I'm afraid, like Julie Andrews on an Austrian mountainside. I bolted up the stairs to the offices on the second floor. I knocked twice and threw the door open to Huey's office. The room was empty. I ran downstairs and tugged at the house doors as Huey had done on my first tour of the facility. There he was, sitting on the edge of the vast stage under the solitary work light. He looked up from some papers as I bounded down the aisle becoming airborne over the three steps to the lower level of the auditorium. "Huey!" I was out of breath and heaving deeply. His eyes looked cold and unforgiving at first, but gradually they changed and a tear seemed to accumulate in one of his ducts. Sure enough, it left the ridge that had held it back and snowballed over his right cheek disappearing in his heavy beard. He jerked to wipe the tear trail. "Huey, what is it?"

"'A Show of Hands,' Tucker." He raised the only circulated copy of my script from his lap. "It is brilliant, son." I took a step backward to reassure myself that I would still be standing in reality. I was. I tried to speak but a lynch mob of mucous held up the attempt. "I will be honest with you now, Joey. I think we have made a very serious mistake. This is the first time I have truly read your play in its entirety. I will tell you here but deny it anywhere else, the Regents

have not read it either. It is uncontested, Joey. Do you see what I am trying to tell you? We acted on scenes taken out of context. This stage belongs to you, Joey, -to 'A Show of Hands.'" He patted the stage.

My first inclination was to embrace the man but my pent up bitterness held me back. I was ripped between compassionate gratitude and destructive vindictiveness. There was no telling which torn edge would cut flesh first. I squinted my eyes constricting my own ducts that wanted to submit to tears. I held out the wrinkled map to Huey.

"I do not know what this represents," he admitted accepting the map.

"Just read starting here with 'events, activities and programs...'" I pointed. Huey stared at the fine print and read aloud.

"Events, activities, programs and facilities of The University of South Florida, are available to all without regard to race, sex, religion, national origin..." His voice picked up speed and volume until he was nearly shouting in the empty theatre. "...Vietnam or disabled veteran status, handicap or age as provided by law and in accordance with the University's respect for personal dignity." He looked into my swollen eyes. "Joey Tucker, this my friend, is your very first ticket to 'A Show of Hands!'"

"Yes!" I practically jumped into his arms as he pulled

me in tight and patted my back. He released me and ruffled my hair. "I think the Regents are expecting you, Tucker. Shall I call the media this round?"

"I think I better save that privilege for Ramona. It will help promote her involvement as a contemporary heroine. 'Got a quarter?"

"Do I have a quarter?" he corrected my grammar.

"Yeah." I tormented him still. He flipped George Washington high into the air where it caught the 120 watt brilliance of the stage work light. I made the catch.

After alerting the municipal watch tower from a pay phone in the lobby, Huey walked me to the Administration Building with his arm proudly dangling over my right shoulder, a somewhat risky gesture in lieu of my recent sexual disclosure, but it seemed to go unnoticed. -It did, but we didn't. Greg was tacking up a fallen show poster when we entered the lush greens of Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza. His face lifted in amazement when I yelled at him from forty yards away. "Greg! This is it!" He stood dead still. "I said, this is it!" I repeated. Without a word he abandoned the poster and ran to gather the troops. Nathan was pulling up to the theatre and bottomed out on a parking bumper when he saw Huey with his arm around me. He dashed to catch-up. It wasn't unusual for students to stop me on campus to talk about the play ever since the rally brought

it to their attention and today was no different. "I think today might be G-Day at USF," I told them.

"G?" they inquired.

"Victory for Gays!" I responded. They cheered me on and joined the procession. The day had finally arrived and I was full of the moment I had spent three weeks praying for. It was a battle won without the ACLU and without making charitable concessions or revisions. I was about to announce check-mate to the Regents. I was going to call their illegal move with one of their own freshly printed rules. It was going to be the most gratifying day of my life.

We met Carson on the path and he didn't even have to ask why I was smiling for the first time in a month.

"Sky!" he yelled, the only person left in the solar system who still called me by my nickname. We met in the air for a high five. You did it, Sport. You really pulled it off. I'll be goddamned." He joined the assault team closing in on the Admin Building. Nathan pointed to the left. There sat Mardell and Davey exchanging drags from a cigarette. Davey pointed and Mardell's mouth dropped below her infamous breasts.

"Don't look so like tragedians, you two," I yelled. Davey scrunched up his face. We marched past them and up the Gothic-styled steps to the building. Huey signaled the regiment to wait in the board room while he lured the unsuspecting delegation into my glorified arena. I stood at the door and greeted each

by name as they entered the ornate conference hall.

"Mr. Steele, we meet again."

"I'm not surprised, Tucker," he admitted.

"Oh, you will be," I promised. "Madame Pinkerton, good morning."

One by one they passed the door frame with their heads seemingly hung in shame. Finally eleven of the twelve occupied their respective chairs around the half circle that stretched between arched windows on either side of the room. My eager battalion and I stood in aggressive formation completing the broken circle, and Huey, pleased with his round-up, sat on the edge of the table facing me.

"DiMenno's out of town on business," Huey reported.

I struggled to cover my disappointment. "Well that's just like him to perceive his business to be out of town and not here on this campus. No matter. One of you can brief him when he gets back." The Regents cocked their heads and looked as though I was about to produce the Missing Gospels. I took a few steps out of the crowd and beginning with the Regent to my right, I visually dedicated a sentence of my opening statement to each of them in the room. "A sudden turn of events, or should I say a sudden revelation of your own Administrative Policy, has forced me to call you together here to defend yourselves. For the past four weeks, I have managed to unite the student body of this institution under a single issue. The issue is

student rights and the allegation is gay discrimination. You are responsible for this travesty; -grave mistakes in judgment that will haunt your administration for as long as students possess vocal cords and the determination to overcome bias and oppression. What each of you honestly believed would be a contained and strictly in house cover-up, has landed it's happy ass on the front page of every newspaper in the Tampa Bay Area. Even though you have no choice at this stage of the game, you have to be prepared to answer for your actions and to take responsibility for your decisions or you have no right to sit in these twelve chairs. What I am about to read to you is bound to cause a little discomfort but it will force the reversal of your earlier ban of my play on this campus. But before I detonate your very own bomb, I want you to know that I am aware that not one of you here today or DiMenno for that matter, has even read my play. Not a one of you felt the obligation to the decision you were about to make to investigate it properly and thoroughly. I commend your adulthood. It's clear to me that some of the more active residents at Busch Gardens are more qualified to run this university than you are. With that in mind, I would personally like to thank the one man who has read the play, searched his conscience and changed his mind. Professor Hughes, thank you." My contingency clapped. "And in that, dear Regents, rests the ultimate authority and power. Not in the ability to change policies and dispense half cocked

moral judgments, but in the ability to change your minds. Unfortunately, you won't be given another opportunity to read my play. You will have to buy tickets along with everyone else. The Hartung Box Office won't be accepting faculty passes. But to the point. What I'm about to read shouldn't sound foreign to you. In fact, I'm sure some of you could recite it along with me, that is, if you took the time to read it in the first place. Here it is, Ladies and Gentlemen, your very own creed and I quote, 'Events, activities, programs and facilities of The University of South Florida are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, etcetera etcetera, in accordance with the University's respect for personal dignity.' I'm afraid, your Honors, that this university and The Hartung are even available to cock-sucking, breast-licking homosexuals." My well behaved entourage couldn't hold back any longer and they exploded in support.

Huey flanked my claim. "Mr. Tucker is right. For the next two months, The Hartung belongs to this city's gay community and to Joey Tucker."

"Now you see here, Hughes. You and some kid can't storm in here and start demanding changes." Steele stood up.

"Don't you see, Bart? I've got you by the balls and that couldn't please a faggot more." I sat on the table inches from where he stood. "You're mine, baby until you hand me my diploma on graduation day." Mrs. Pinkerton put a hand over her mouth

to conceal the smile that broke there. "Listen closely, all of you. It's my turn to change the rules."

Bart Steele couldn't stand it any longer. "All right, all right, Tucker. We'll give you the damn go ahead on this project. What else can we do?" he asked his peers. "He's got our bloody hands tied."

"Balls and bondage, Bart. We're going to have a great time." I reclaimed my position in front of them. Mrs. Pinkerton was able to convert outright laughter into a short series of coughs.

"Enough! You've got your green light, Tucker. I want to make it clear that nothing leaves this room. We give Tucker our reversal and nothing more is said. Is that understood, Tucker?"

"You don't get it, do you?" I stammered. I looked back at my supporters who rather collectively agreed that I should take the pie and run, but that was leaving too many leftovers for the Regents. "If nothing is learned from this, USF's Regents are still compulsive homophobes lurking around to crush the ambitions of the next homosexual to enroll in this institution, and we've gained nothing. I most certainly will not keep silent and the University's gay populous won't remain sedated another minute." Even Huey seemed taken back by my insistence. I could tell Nathan didn't know what to expect next, but I had been given the furlough to think about it and it was time to return

to active duty. "This is my revision. As outlined in the original project handbook, I will utilize five hundred dollars for my performance budget. This five hundred dollars will be paid back to The Theatre Arts Department from the first five hundred dollars of ticket sales. Any penny raised beyond this amount will automatically be channeled into a Trust Fund which will be presented by The University of South Florida to the National AIDS Foundation to be used for the research and development of a cure. A healthy percentage of this grant will go directly to the assistance program for victims of the disease right here in the Tampa Metropolitan Area. That's the deal. You agree to this and I'll announce to the press that..."

"...After much deliberation, the University's Regents have realized the potential of my work and have authorized their support of my endeavors on campus and in Tampa's gay community."

"Tucker, -Tim Bradly, 'Sun Times.' Are you surprised by today's sudden announcement?"

"There is nothing sudden about it and I'm not surprised at all. We've worked long and hard for this reversal and I believe we have maintained a strong confidence throughout this unfortunate ordeal. It was a shared optimism."

"Amanda Randolph, WJTB, Joey. Was compromise a component of today's arbitration?"

"No. I think it was simply a matter of fairness and equal

opportunity extended to all students at USF regardless of their sexual preference. I didn't get a tuition break for being gay. I expect the same opportunities. But to answer your question, not one word in one scene in one act of 'A Show of Hands' has been altered to bring about today's decision."

"One last unrelated question, Tucker. -Michael Bray of 'The Advocate.' Is there any validity to the rumors that your father is Senator Robert Tucker?"

"Oh, shit!"

"Is that on or off the record, Tucker?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I'm sorry. I have a feeling I'm going to have to do a lot of apologizing before this thing is over. You have to know that I never intended to make such a big deal of this. But 'The Advocate,' for Jesus' sake. A three column interview and photo essay on page two of next month's issue. You know how long it's going to take for some D.C. Queen to sprint up Capitol Hill in her three inch pumps and slap that magazine on my father's desk demanding gay legislation. Nathan, can't you see it? 'Senator Tucker, if not for the nameless and faceless homosexuals of America, do it for your son.'" I faced a different direction and buttoned the top button of my shirt. "'Oh, but he's not really my son. Didn't I mention that? No. You see when he was eleven years old, a band of Gypsies...'"

"You're far too dramatic about this, Joey."

"I'm afraid Nathan's got a point. The TV stations didn't even pick up on that tip about your father yet. This whole thing is going to mellow and then just drop out of the public eye." Mark was quick to take Nathan's side.

"Oh," I said. "You mean it's going to drop out like, say, the cornea? Sure, that happens all the time. I've stood in front of the public eye since I was knee high to a cornstalk," (again with that size comparison,) and it doesn't look away. In fact, the more gory it gets, the better. We're all so very sick when you think about it. Trust me. It's not about to mellow. You don't know my father."

"Well we know you and we know you're tough enough to face your father." Nathan seemed intent straddling the fence not putting a solid foot on either side.

"You're absolutely right, Nathan."

"Of course I am." He smiled.

"That's why I'm flying to Washington this afternoon to face my father."

"You're doing what?" they both asked in disbelief.

"You heard me. I'll fly back here on Sunday after I have conditioned my parents and they have filed all pertinent adoption papers. We can hold auditions Monday night. I'll call Greg right now and you three can spread the word and make the arrangements."

"The boy's gone mad!" Mark tossed his arms in the air.

"You can't be serious, Joey. What do you expect to accomplish?"

"Nathan, I love you, but I've already sat through your closet sermon once this month and I swear I'll smash the pulpit if I have to hear it again. I just want to visit one more time while it is still a demilitarized zone. Once April First lands 'The Advocate' on newsstands and kiosks around the country, I have a feeling my freedom of movement will become a restricted liberty."

The two of them had no choice but to shrug their shoulders having witnessed my unswaying determination in the past. They set about fortifying the citadel in preparation for my absence.

The thought rocketed across my mind to intentionally fly through Atlanta in route to Washington, but I simply lacked the energy for Tony. Dear God, I'd become completely sedentary for my age! Still, the unresolved thought of Tony working the aisle on a similar flight bound somewhere disturbed me. I had a feeling he was probably better at rebounding than I was. It was too bad there wasn't a letterman jacket for Tony; -no doubt he'd earned one.

The plane lumbered through the cloud cover hanging over the Nation's Capital. Out my window I could suddenly make out

the Washington Monument through the gray veil of an afternoon shower. The Potomac River guided the pilot along its tamed banks to National Airport. Everything under me used to be swamp until Pierre Charles L'Enfant birthed a city plan which would eventually lead to reclaiming the land and floodlighting everything that would hold still. By and large, Washington D.C. was a pretty city if you steered clear of Anacostia and confined yourself to the over landscaped track extending from Capitol Hill to the River. Unfortunately, 98% of all visitors take this advice returning the District to its original state of swampiness, choked by exploiting tourists rather than by native grasses and reeds. If I sound like the antithesis of the District's Chamber of Commerce, there's just cause. Washington D.C. was my father's stronghold and unless I went to Anacostia, there was no escaping that fact and in Anacostia, I wouldn't escape that fact alive.

I couldn't put a finger on it but she looked older somehow. It could have been the gray recruits that had finally achieved a clear majority over her once ink black hair, but something told me that living the life of a politician's wife had brutally collected its wretched tax. God knew my self-centered father hadn't taken a step out of his calculated way to make it any easier on her.

She was an intelligent woman. I don't imply past tense.

I merely suggest it. With a Ph. D. in Political Theory and her undergrad emphasis in International Finance, it remained a puzzling entry in the analog of romance, why she ever settled for a struggling five year law student who barely passed the Bar on his second attempt.

She directed his first two campaigns, carefully writing a conservative Republican platform that wouldn't ruffle the predominantly preened Democratic feathers of the state's voting public. She swears to have read 'Atlas Shrugged' three times during grad school which in itself emphatically punctuates the incredible accomplishment of writing conservatively and for a Republican cause. And then in 1972, when father was feeling the pinch of Nebraska's encroaching borders, she convinced him to go national and they took a dark horse gallop for The United States Senate. Once again, irony cast its ballot and landed him in the marble rotunda on Capitol Hill. The true irony lay in the fact that my mother was the only truly electable candidate. Her charisma and striking Slavic beauty won the heart of Nebraska and later the admiration of a Nation. Undeniably, she was the cotton swab that attended to the lacerations of my father's double edged sword wielding politics. My mother stood for strength and honesty so those periods in my father's career when she was forced to sit out his bouts of weakness and deception, stripped her of any self-worth and drained her of any excess energy to find something better.

Each campaign found a new and more degrading way to rape her of any life she could call her own. My last year in college, I noticed the numbing takeover of her resistance. She was submitting to the national pressures of a political marriage and once addicted, it became one social event after another. And now she had a regret for every cocktail and a gray hair for every hors d'oeuvre.

By now she had spotted me watching her and I picked up my pace. The two hour flight to Washington had me riding bareback on a porcupine, but seeing her face at the end of the terminal in National Airport made all the discomfort seem like a noble sacrifice. I threw my arms around her busty torso and squeezed heartily. Her Jane Russell figure assured me that my mother, the living epitome of resilience, would never be reduced to total frailty.

"You look thinner, Joseph."

"I know, mama. I know."

We spent most of the afternoon in and out of department stores where she outfitted her wayward son for the fast approaching Floridian summer season. She dropped three hundred dollars at Garfinckel's and another hundred at Woodies before we headed for Georgetown and Lower Connecticut Avenue. Plastic slapped the counter for a new coat at Georgetown Leather, for

sportcoats at Arthur Adler's, for ties and belts at Joseph A. Bank Clothiers, and at Brooks Brothers, I landed two new pairs of shoes.

During lunch at 'Nora,' she discretely reached into her purse and handed me a platinum American Express Card.

"We haven't even ordered yet. What am I supposed to do with this?"

She smiled knowing that I knew precisely what to do with it. She'd been coaching me all afternoon. "Just tuck it into your billfold for an emergency. Last month when the statement arrived, I checked the little box for a duplicate card for each of my children. And by the way, I've discovered that credit card emergencies generally occur on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and following every major holiday. So use it. Your father will never know the difference. You know I manage that sort of thing." She giggled.

A camera suddenly exploded from five feet away, catching us at the height of our laughter. My mother instinctively smiled, most assuredly after the fact, and then snapped her head to scold the photographer. "Really, Harry. Don't you have anything better to do? Can't 'The Post' come up with a more challenging assignment than tailing this housewife?"

"You, Mrs. Tucker, are hardly a housewife and I'm not tailing you. I always have lunch at 'Nora's.'"

"Doesn't everybody, Harry?" She looked at him cynically.

"Since we happened to bump into each other, would you like to comment on your husbands designs for the presidency in '92?" Harry moved closer to our table.

Designs for the presidency, I thought to myself? My father couldn't find the White House with a map! "Do you know what's on your father's mind, Joey?" she asked me ducking the question directed to her.

Oh, medical science has finally determined he has one, I wanted to ask. I tried not to smile and the look from my mother warned me not to deviate from my media training of earlier years. "My father is honored by his Majority Leader appointment and for the time being, I'm sure he's dedicated to the successful execution of this office. I don't think he's had time to consider the presidential race. He's got to be more concerned about holding onto a Republican Majority in a few more months." Mom patted my leg under the table. As always, I'd said enough.

"And this is the oldest boy?" Harry moved to qualify his source.

"Yes he is, Harry. Now if you'll excuse us? We'll be getting back to our eggplant if you can clear that with 'The Post.'"

"Certainly, Mrs. Tucker and thank you. By the way, I just thought I'd say, Washington polls show you'd be a lovely first lady."

"Mother nodded graciously and the press scurried out of

the cafe. "Like hell I would," she mumbled under her breath.

"I thought the Senator was eyeing the governor's seat."

"He damn well better have his butt planted in it. I don't think our marriage would last another full scale campaign. I know I wouldn't! Your father can certainly read what's written down for him by somebody else, but the man has no political sense. Well, he never did," she said abruptly looking a little astonished by her remark. "Nebraska's prepared to give him the governorship but he'd have to sell out for The White House and I'm not weathering well as it is. You finish that eggplant," she ordered.

We were late getting home and it was already dark when we pulled into the driveway of the Victorian Row House on Duddington Place. The rain persisted and the house was initially cold. The thermostat soon sprang to action but there was little it could do in the house of my father.

"Joey, your father might actually make it home tonight in time for a late dinner. Now 'Dinner with Julia' runs forty-five minutes. Pick a tape and stick it in the VCR." She opened the kitchen cupboard and extended her arm in true Carol Merrill style. "Main courses are on the side label."

"When in the world did you get a VCR for the kitchen?"

"The minute Julia Childs went syndicate on PBS. I needed

to revamp my recipe file anyway. I record a different episode every Wednesday night, label the main dish and then I alphabetize the cassettes in this cupboard. It keeps me ahead of the everyday housewives. In Washington, women would murder for my cutting edge."

There must have been fifty tapes in her culinary library and after significant deliberation, I chose 'Veal avec Coeur de Palm.'

"Splendid. Are we ready?" Mom lowered her voice to imitate Julia with dialectic perfection. "Hit play," she commanded. Soon Julia's trademark voice rolled through the list of ingredients as mother canvassed the oversized kitchen for supplies. She didn't take her eyes off the color monitor as she assembled the requirements on the giant wood cutting block.

"How do you know that you'll have all the things you need for a particular tape in a given night?"

"When I record the shows, I keep a running list and Barbara picks up things I need at the store three times a week. Oh, but then you've never met Barbara. She's the new housekeeper and that also keeps me ahead of the everyday housewives. When I'm in Nebraska, she house sits the Senator and watches 'Julia' for me."

"You know, mom, I really came to Washington to talk."

"Sh, sh. Hundreds of people come to Washington to talk everyday and do you think anything gets said? Now this is where

I can really fall behind. Hand me the remote!" She punched the VCR pause button buying time to microwave thaw her veal and tenderize her twelve portions to Julia's one demonstration model. I started to talk again, but I was no match for the pounding on the block and before I knew it, Julia was once again commanding the speaking floor. I just listened.

'Meanwhile, as the veal simmers delectably in sweet butter, take an adjacent skillet and begin to slowly sautee your hearts of palm...'

"Joey! Quick, grab me an adjacent skillet!" I reached overhead and lowered a copper pan from the hanging galley as mother frantically peeled the outer layer from the palm hearts.

'Sautee until golden brown and keep them on low heat until you're ready to serve...'

"School has been very interesting this semester, mom."

'Now, when the veal is fork tender...'

"Mine is more like spoon solid!" I glared at her. "Yes, dear. How do you mean, -interesting?"

"Controversial is probably a better word."

"Oh! I remember this part. Pass me the rum from the liquor cabinet."

'Now stir three-fourths of a cup of Jamaican Rum into the veal drippings in the large skillet to loosen the tasty brown bits...'

"She means to scrape the baked-on crap from the bottom

shelf in the pantry, Joseph. Avocados should be in a brown paper bag. Toss them here."

I lobbed the bag across the kitchen. "Nice catch, mother."

Mother took the wooden spoon from her mouth. "Is it a tragedy, dear?"

'...Not if the avocado has been allowed to properly ripen,' Julia butted in. 'You can mash the fruit with a teaspoon of lemon juice, some salt and seasoned pepper...'

"The university thinks so." I straddled the barstool next to the cooking island.

'...Stir in some minced onion...'

"Now there's the tragedy, Joey. -Julia Childs cooking with instant onion."

"She said 'minced' not instant. It's a Gay Anthology."

"How can you tell? She talks so damn fast and with that cleft pallet of hers."

"It's not cleft, mother. It's just her dialect."

"The play's Gay?"

"And the playwright, mama."

"Queen Mary, Mother of God! The veal's cooked over!"

"Mom!" I jumped off the barstool and turned her shoulders until we stood facing each other. She kept her head turned away with eyes intently fixed on the large skillet. "Look at me, dammit! Do you think this is easy for me?" She raised her head to expose a giant tear that leapt from her cheek onto

her silk blouse. "Mother, I am Gay."

"I heard you the first time, sweetheart. Don't force yourself to say it again." She struggled with the veal lowering the heat and stirring the lumpy mixture. She reached for the remote which I daringly confiscated. My thumb pressed the power button and the screen flashed black. She exhaled.

"It really upsets you, doesn't it? I mean I knew it would come as a shock, but I didn't think it would be insurmountable."

She placed the wooden spoon on the Corian counter top and attempted some degree of composure. "Yes, I'm upset. I don't know whether its due to the fact I'm to wing the rest of this dinner without Julia or due to the fact my son has just announced the improbability of his contribution to Tucker offspring. It disgusts your father, so it upsets me, yes."

"Because it disgusts him or because I'm a Homosexual?"

"Well, both I suppose. There's really a direct causal relationship the way I see it."

"Of course there is, mother. You burn the veal on Duddington Place and they'll smell it in Nebraska. So what do I do in the meantime? Do I wait for the voters of Nebraska to realize the gross stupidity they exercise every November when they vote to keep him in power?"

"He represents those people, Joey."

"Not 'this' people, and who is more important to the Senator? -His son or his constituency? For that matter, his

marriage of his Senate seat?"

"Joseph!"

"Come on, mom. You said it yourself. 'Your marriage will not last another campaign,' -and why? Because the campaign replaces the family, it replaces you and we become the victims of this racking surrogate. We're nothing more than ornaments to him. Well this ornament just did a pike and double twist off the family tree."

"It's only an issue if you decide to tell him or if it happened to go public, but even then, it wouldn't necessarily be good press."

"You're right, mom. Being gay isn't newsworthy anymore unless you're dying because of it and Dad lacks the compassion and decency to confront that for Christ's sake! But if you can command credibility and some degree of prestige within the Gay community, you'll get pushed right to the very top and there won't be a newspaper in this country that won't take issue."

"People aren't dying in Nebraska. Your father will address it when it affects Nebraska."

"Oh, they're dying, mother. They're just not dying fast enough to suit the Senator."

"What a hateful thing to say, Joey. What are you getting at?"

"It's liable to be the first of many hateful things. I have a lot building up inside. And I'm getting to the very

top, mom. Why should I not be allowed the recognition in my lifetime that father achieved in his?"

"But that's not the kind of recognition you want, Joey. You have to be respected."

"Who on this planet, with the exception of the Nebraska voter, who we've already established must be brain dead, is going to respect a self-denied hero wasting away in some closet? This is going to sound so much like the man I despise, but I've got to be who I believe I am."

"So be it. Just don't step all over your family to get that view at the top. There are still going to be overcast days even up there. And you're still going to need me from time to time."

"I know that. But your son is Gay, Carole Tucker."

"No. My son's my son. Being Gay doesn't change that. Now can Julia come back into the kitchen?"

"I love you, mama."

"I love you too, honey." I tossed my arms around her and we just stood there for a minute. She had begun to rock back and forth and suddenly, I heard a click behind my back.

'...Next we take the freshly cut sprigs of scallion and arrange them artistically on a serving platter...'

"Jerry, I've decided to leave Nicaragua and The Contra Affair out of my speech at the veteran's convention on Saturday.

The public wasn't behind the boys in Viet Nam and there are just too many doggone similarities." My father licked his fork.

"That's fine, Bob, but you're forgetting that you're not addressing the general public on Saturday. You're speaking before those boys who were in Viet Nam. These guys are tired of long winded politicians who skirt the issues. No dessert for me. Thanks, Carole."

"Maybe you're right, Jerry. I don't know anymore." My father helped himself to dessert.

"Really, Bobby, I'm telling you, eleven years have gone by and it's just not that sensitive of an issue anymore. Joey here, probably doesn't even know what went on over there and neither does the G.P."

I spoke up for a couple of reasons. Number one, I'd read a copy of Davey's script that Nathan managed to weasle from Huey and number two, I hated when Jerry eluded to the popularity of the Kennedy's by calling my father 'Bobby.' "If we don't know what really went on over there, it's because we were blatantly lied to and misled by our entrusted politicians."

"Joey, this is shop talk and we'll take care of it." My father delighted in reprimanding me in public.

"If he's going to make a wise-ass crack like that, let the kid defend it." Jerry wanted egg on my face as much as my father did. "Why don't you qualify that accusation, Joey if you're so knowledgeable of the situation that occurred when

you were, what? -five, maybe six."

"I will qualify. I know that in 1945, Colonel Peter Dewey was the first American 'military advisor' to die in the Indo-Chinese conflict and sixteen years, four administrations, countless cover-ups and denials, one hundred and twenty billion dollars and fifty-eight thousand dead 'military advisors' later, the last American troops left Viet Nam defeated by the enemy and defeated by Washington. Now you can't sit there and tell me that your G.P. knew even a third of this at the time."

"Where are you getting this Indo-Chinese conflict thing? Did you understand the question, Joey?" Jerry tried to recover his challenge.

"Did you understand Viet Nam History, Jerry? After all you would not have been much older than I was at the time, what, maybe twelve or thirteen? Nobody could beat the Vietnamese. A century before the birth of Christ, Vietnamese had been fighting and dying to defend their land and their beliefs? They had driven out the Chinese not once but several times, evicted the French, turned away the Japanese. They had protected themselves with unprecedented success for two thousand years and all of a sudden, America arrives to arbitrate differences between factions of the same unbeatable power. What could we have expected to accomplish given this history of intolerance toward outsiders? Military Advisors? You might as well have called them bullet catchers."

My father was livid.

You were pretty opinionated for a four year old, Joey. Anyway, Bob, why don't we stick to Super Tuesday and the '88 elections. We can talk about Viet Nam at the NOW Conference in April. Carole, I've still got to swing back by the office on my way to Georgetown, but as always, dinner was spectacular." My father's right hand man and top political advisor rose from the table and kissed my mother on the cheek. The Senator walked him to the front door and I started to clear the dishes.

"Julia and I can clear the table. You go into the library and make your father a drink. He's going to need one. I'll send him down when he gets back inside."

I scrambled down the hall and slipped into the large oak paneled room. I poured a brandy and lit a candle to melt the the sugar stick watching carefully as the sucrose drippings plunged into the clear, auburn pool of alcohol. My hands were sweating and my heart scampered excitedly in my chest. I sat the drink on the lamp table next to his favorite high back leather reading chair and I quickly positioned myself conveniently across the room. I watched two beams of light bounce away from the house and steer into the rainy and cold Washington night. The front door creaked and I counted the seconds with a time delaying one-thousand-prefix as if anticipating a crash of thunder after a flash of lightning. One-thousand nineteen and the burly shadow of my father paused

in the doorway before entering the room.

"Your mother seems to think we should talk."

"What do you think?" I asked him clearing my throat.

"A father and son should talk I think. Are you going to tell me you've finally left theatre for a major in Viet Nam History? You know, I really can't say I appreciate being made the fool at the dinner table."

"You're self-made father. No one else has anything to do with it. Besides, Jerry was asking for it."

"You watch that mouth, son."

"I'm an adult who watches his mouth say whatever he wants it to say. I'm not that different from you except I commit thought before I speak."

He sipped from the glass. "Was it worth flying home on my credit card to tell me this?"

"I came home to see mother, but now that I'm here, we might as well talk." I reached for the brandy decanter. "Do you mind if I..."

"Not if you think you're old enough to handle it. Help yourself."

"Tell me father, what's your stand on Homosexuality these days?"

"I think I'd rather sit."

"Is that your answer?" I pressed him.

"That's my remedy."

"Then you still believe after all this time that Homosexuality is treatable?"

"I believe it's unnecessary and unnatural and I believe it's removable."

"Like a mole on your skin, father? Is it that easy?"

"Like a pain in the ass! What's this all about?"

"That's a nice analogy, father, considering sodomy."

"Look. Either you reach a point in this conversation or we'll talk about something else. The whole thing makes me absolutely queasy."

"Then you'd better get a grip on groceries, pa, because I'm here to tell you that I'm Gay." He shot the significant remainder of his brandy to the back of his throat and dug his nails deep into the leather upholstery where he sat. "You see, father, it is real easy to conceive solutions to problems that don't affect you, isn't it? To sit in your spacious office on the Hill and condemn undesirables of the world to a living closet or worse. It must take quite a man to commit that much compassion, you know?"

"Shut up!" he bellowed.

"I remember when I was in high school and even in college. I used to be so proud to parade my peers into the Senate Chamber and point out my father in that grand assembly on the high platform. Now I'd only go to point out the freak who keeps getting elected year after year to serve no one. That's a mighty

job description there."

"I won't tolerate this in my house!" His face turned red and his voice got louder.

"Not in your house. Not in your city. Not in your fucked-up universe! Well, I'll leave first thing in the morning. Clean house old man!" I headed for the door which was much too far away for a convenient exit. He jerked my arm as I passed in front of him. My body jolted to a stop and he pushed me backwards into a chair. I bounced back to my feet to meet him on my terms.

"You've got your heart set on ruining me."

"Why waste my vital organs? I'm content to sit back and watch you do it all by yourself, Senator."

"You're a disgrace to this family and have been since the day you were born." He ground his words between his teeth.

"I never made the claim to have come wrapped in swaddling clothes. That was your miserable P.R."

"If I had this much disrespect for my father, he would have hanged me from the Elm outback."

"At least you had a father. I'm a political bastard!" His arm moved too quickly for me to avoid the stinging blow of his backhand as it slammed into my cheek and nose. My head flopped lifelessly onto my right shoulder and laid there. I lifted it slowly, pulling the hair from my face. I dabbed gently at my lip. I lowered my fist to examine the blood that pooled

in the crevice between my clenched thumb and forefinger. Fascinated with my own issuance of blood, I tilted my hand allowing the sample to catch the dim light as it trickled over my wrist. He just stood there breathing heavily and wringing the hand he had used to strike me. I slowly raised my head until my eyes looked him straight in the red face. His teeth were grinding nervously and his eyes had become larger than Frisbees. His temples seemed to throb just under the thick silver hair. I shook my head.

"You're pathetic, Senator. Even as a queer, I'm more of a man than you'll ever amount to."

"The people of Nebraska don't seem to share your view."

"I'm not surprised looking at their team captain."

"I'd almost think I'd failed as a parent if it weren't for your sister and brother. I just thank God they're both away at school and don't have to watch this feeble attempt to discredit me."

"Oh, but you have failed as a parent and Krista and Jeffrey don't have to be Gay before they realize that the Senator stands for no one but himself. You have failed as a father and you've failed as a husband. If it weren't for your wife and children and the fact that all of Nebraska has their head blowing smoke up your ass, you would have failed miserably as a politician too. You only raised a faggot. We're responsible for creating the real monster!" I sniffed but blood was already streaming

into my mouth. It tasted metallic and warm.

"I suggest you drop out of public view until this whole thing straightens out."

"Oh, you do, do you? There's no straightening where I'm concerned. I'm Gay and no one can do anything to change that. As for public view? I go on display when the news goes national next week. I didn't choose to make an issue out of this, but you can bet your opponents on the Hill and Gay leaders in this town, will choose to make an issue out of me. And Senator, when I'm asked for a statement, I'll remember the repulsive look on your face at this moment, and I'll happily counter any stand you've ever taken against us. The sewer lines to Capitol Hill are going to be plugged when the credibility you thought you commanded with the American Public follows the credibility they thought you had with your family. Your ship's taking on water fast, Captain. I'm afraid you're fucked!" I used my bloody hand to push him out of my way as I left the room. I tugged at my shirt tail and wiped my hand as I stumbled into the kitchen where mom was nervously loading dishes into the dishwasher. She turned, dropping a plate and rushed to hold me. I buried my face in her aproned bosom.

"God, mom. I'm so sorry."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was a shame that all the historical mystique of Washington was shattered by my father's renewed residency every six years. There were parts of that great city I could grow to love if it weren't for his proximate dominion. And if sectors within the District had actually managed a claim to autonomy, escaped his annoying public harassment or survived his legislative blight, it was to these sectors I felt drawn. If I could find peace within the Citadel, peace would surely be mine without.

It was barely five in the morning when I found I could stay in his house no longer. 'Always a house, never a home' I recalled Nathan's distinction between the two. I had been unable to sleep as rest seemed purely counter-productive to the war declared just hours ago by the fling of my father's hand.

I eased out of bed, took a shower, and slipped out of the house leaving a note for my mother to have all my baggage sent to National Airport. I explained that I couldn't face her husband and provide him an opportunity to apologize. I preferred to guard my resentment and let him rot with his. I knew she'd understand if anyone would.

I made a beeline for the 'Bagel Place' on Capitol Hill. I don't think it's actually called the 'Bagel Place,' but I've never heard anyone refer to it by anything else. Black coffee secured my stake in the day as I ambled down The Mall. The Hill was alive not only with joggers but with the hushed memory of those spirits who had gone before us. This epicenter of world focus, always managed to amaze me. That is, until I found myself standing before the 'nucleus of power' formed by the sweat and lies of those chosen to think they propagate the collective good, all lashed together by miles and miles of electrifying media cable which blasts their critically massed ignorance, now converted into authority, to the rest of us around the Washington-dependent globe. And standing here, you realize the President of this superheated conglomeration, is only blocks away taking his first crap of the day trying to make sense out of the whole thing, himself. So what's the big deal? Everyone's in it for themselves, no one knows more than anyone else, and everyone shits the game. Suddenly, the elegant image of Washington D.C. pops a few sequins. With my flight not until

later that afternoon, I dedicated the day to seeking out those shiny strongholds hanging by a worn thread of determination to this tattered gown they call the Nation's Capital.

The sun poked over the Senate Dome of the Capitol Building tossing a pink wash on the monuments before me. White blossomed Yoshino Cherry Trees choked the banks of the Tidal Basin and the White House appeared around the corner of the Department of Commerce Building. It was another day on my father's playground. I aimed my gait toward Dupont Circle where his reprimanding whistle was sure to lodge in his throat. I cut across The Ellipse to 17th Street hoping to find The Renwick Gallery open next to the Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue but I was three hours early. Up Mass. Avenue past the Embassies I spilled into Dupont Circle a little before nine o'clock. I waited by the fountain for nearby Phillips Gallery to open as it was usually a little more interesting than Renwick anyway. It was comforting to revisit these discoveries from earlier forays on the lam seeking refuge from the trappings of The Hill.

When I emerged from the gallery an hour later, The Circle was teeming with male activity in various poses of sun worship. Tans betrayed those who had them as devout salon regulars since the sun in April had not mustered the power to burn off the chill of Spring much less a layer or two of skin. I popped into the bookstore on Connecticut to grab an 'Advocate' and a copy of 'The Blade' so as not to appear entirely relaxed and

devoid of purpose when I joined the boys at the fountain. At the counter, the clerk smiled as though he thought he might have recognized my face. I'd put in some hours around Dupont Circle on previous visits but certainly not enough to claim benefits or on-the-street-recognition. He processed the order still occupied with the puzzle I presented. He began to solicit clues.

"Most people in this neighborhood subscribe to 'The Advocate.' We don't sell a lot of issues through the store."

"Well I'm not from the neighborhood so that might explain this sudden boost in sales." I smiled.

"Damned if you don't look familiar somehow. Where are you from?" It was all out interrogation by this point.

"Tampa, Florida," I answered somewhat automatically.

"Now that's real strange. I just heard something recently about Tampa. This is going to drive me crazy." I smiled as he put my magazine in the paper. "It's your smile," he announced. "You wouldn't be that Tucker boy, would you?"

I went from warm-fuzzy and entertained to clammy and put off. I had not tunneled into the Washington underground far enough to bury my identity and my father had scored again. "Yes, I am," I admitted.

"That's why you're buying extra copies of 'The Advocate.' And that's where I remember coming across Tampa. You're the playwright!"

"Finally," I gasped, "I'm not recognized as the Senator's son! I have arrived! Thank you." I took my bag from the clerk and left the store dazed. Let's see L'Enfant flood light that monument.

Back at the fountain, I regained my earlier curiosity to see how I had fared in 'The Advocate.' Sure as the humidity, even in April, there I was on page two. Pictured between Nathan and Ramona at the student rally, the headline read 'Tucker Steals Stage From Father.' I buy that.

Twenty till Noon and the crowd at the fountain seemed to get restless. Whispers circulated around The Circle. "Follow the Yellow Brick Road. Follow the Yellow Brick Road." I leaned over to the man on my left.

"What's the Yellow Brick Road," I asked.

"'P' Street."

"Oh," I tried to sound satisfied with his answer.

"Get it? Yellow?" he prodded. "Pee Street? Follow the Yellow Brick Road."

"Oh, that's clever. Where does 'P' Street lead to?"

"'P' Street Beach! Come on."

"I'm not going to get pissed on, am I?" -As always, I had taken the metaphor one step too far.

"Not unless you request it. Are you coming or staying?" He was nice enough aside from his mounting impatience so I joined him in the impromptu parade heading down 'P' Street. Past a

record store, beyond a Broadway Theatre Shop and by the Omni Georgetown Hotel, we marched down both sides of the street until the procession bottlenecked at the intersection of 'P' and 22nd. I recognized 'Mr. P's' on my right and 'Badlands' on my left but I'd never been to 'P' Street Beach. The crowd squeezed between the traffic light pole and some tall bushes to emerge on the other side of a steep-sloped grassy field. I'd missed the "poppies" but this was definitely the Emerald City. Scantly clad bodies were strewn up and down the slope, shimmering in the April sun. My guide and I planted ourselves on a patch of earth among some of his friends. I was eagerly introduced and connections were soon made to my father and the play, (not necessarily in that order.) As the afternoon slipped away it became practically apparent that as far as I was concerned, this was the only 'hill' in the District that amounted to anything. My new friends were disappointed to learn I had to leave for National Airport but we managed a quick lunch at 'Annie's Paramount Steak House' before they walked me to the 'Q' Street Entrance to the 'Metro.'

I switched to the Blue Line at 'Metro Center.' I was excited to get home to Nathan, but it would have been nice to have salvaged Friday night in Dupont Circle. It was a shame my father hadn't hit me earlier last evening.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I didn't leave behind leftovers. Every emotion I had served over the weekend in Washington was packed and loaded on that jet back to Tampa. The 'Piece of Mind' tour was over and accomplishments pending, I had reached the three people in the world, aside from Nathan, who had most recently influenced my coming of age, -my parents and myself.

And as justice would have it, Nathan had never looked so good to me. I spotted him a terminal away. His body pressed into a lean against the wall with those bulky arms crossed in front and resting below his chest. His aqua blue shorts, cut just below the knee, exposed enough calve to turn the most devout Hindu into a ravenous meat eater. He smiled and destroyed any inclination I might have to leave him again.

"How was your weekend, Rudolph?" Nathan lightly touched my nose.

"It still smarts a little."

"I can tell. What happened?"

"The Senator dealt with my Homosexuality."

"And did he resolve the issue?"

"I suppose in his pea-size mind, he thinks he did."

Outside the airport, not more than fifty feet away from the front entrance, sat a gray, double parked University of South Florida van with professional black letters painted in contempo script on the side panels, spelling out 'A Show of Hands.' Greg and Sam were playing with a Frisbee and Mark sat shirtless on the back bumper of the van using what appeared to be a show script to reflect the sun onto his face. The Frisbee suddenly veered our direction and Nathan and I both jumped, shouting in unison, "Mine!" The disc was tipped out of its intended path by our fingers and eventually scooted to a stop under a stationary taxi cab. Nathan made the recovery as I received hugs from Greg and Sam. I commissioned each of them to carry a suitcase. Nathan grabbed a third bag and I carried a fourth and pulled the fifth. I was serious when I said my mother and I had done a little shopping.

Mark had evidently sold out to some solar deity and had no intention of serving the mortal cause of toting my

acquisitions. I tapped the script.

"I hope you get a chance to memorize these lines before they fade in the sun."

"Joey, you're back!" he exclaimed.

"Yes and so is Amelia Earhart. Thanks for the big welcome." Mark braced himself for a hug. I ran my fingers over the paint job on the van. "I have to presume this is your work."

Mark polished his sunglasses on the cuff of his shorts and answered with qualified arrogance. "Of course it's mine."

"And the van? Will somebody please tell me how our little drag show rated a passenger van?" Nathan pressed the suitcases, one at a time, through the open side door.

"It's a loaner. -Courtesy of Huey." Nathan explained. "Since the University Rep Theatre Company is not on tour this semester on account of this special project, he'd rather have the three vans running instead of sitting out the semester in some dusty garage."

"That's great but who didn't get one?" I asked.

"Huey, that's who. He gave up his family wagon with tape deck to Mardell."

"What did she give up?" I wondered.

We all tumbled into the new traveling billboard and headed for Clearwater Beach. The sun had blazed a spectacular hole right through the powder blue cyclorama that was stretched

without wrinkle from horizon to horizon and the sequined breakers of the Gulf seemed unusually playful this day. Sea gulls danced a bungling sky ballet as they went about the haphazard chore of collecting the ill-fated jelly fish who found themselves stranded high on the beach like ice cubes on the Serengetti. And so a sordid feast lay glistening in the cruel late afternoon sun while the Gulf pounded out one last benediction.

Long legged sandpipers played hide and seek in the tall dune grass and local sunbathers dotted the shore like a Braille manuscript. The indigo blue of the sky was only rivaled in brilliance by its own vain reflection in the Gulf and by an occasional beach umbrella or iridescent sail slicing through the salty spray. How privileged the voyeur, I thought, who should come across such a marvelous tie-died orgy of color. I squinted respectfully into the sun and slipped into peaceful repose.

Nathan and Mark struck up an interesting conversation in the front seats of the van as Nathan steered his way down the familiar stretch of two lane pavement. I sat behind him to the left of Greg and Sam who were engaged in an electronic football game. I plopped my arms over the back of the driver's seat and my hands dove down the front of the driver's shirt. I eavesdropped contentedly Mark lifted his sunglasses from his nose and glided them to the top of his head. He propped both of his bare legs out the window on the side mirror gripping

the straps of his flapping thongs with his big toes.

"Nathan, do you remember that German boy you introduced me to yesterday on campus?"

"You mean Patrick?"

"Yeah."

"He's Swiss."

"Whatever." He snatched the glasses from his head and stuck one of the plastic tipped rims in the corner of his mouth.

"Do you think he might be...you know...like us?"

"He might swing."

"Tarzan swings for Christ's sake. What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I don't know. I just met him once before at the Presidential Luncheon for Amateur Athletes in D.C. last year. I didn't obtain the man's CIA file."

"But you had to have seen the way he kept looking at me yesterday. The man left no doubt, Nathan."

"Ah, the ego is easily convinced."

"And just as quickly verified. You'll see when he shows up at auditions tomorrow." Mark confidently closed his eyes in preparation for a quick nap.

"What if I told you, you could see him before tomorrow?"

"You can't be serious." Mark almost slipped a thong.

"You asked him to the party tonight?" He looked back at me.

"Oh, shit! I goofed didn't I?"

Nathan laughed and attempted to recover Mark's fumble but I took quick possession. "All right. What party tonight?" I clamped my fingers tightly on the driver's nipple. Nathan whimpered and struggled to speak.

"All I meant to imply was that Patrick was on the Swiss Ski Team at Sarajevo in 1984. I have the Winter Olympics on video at the house."

"In color?" Mark asked.

"Living."

"Sam, is there a party tonight?" I inquired.

Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"God! Do you know what this means?" Mark retracted his thongs for fear of losing them in the excitement. "He skis!"

Nathan laughed. "And they say the entrance requirements for college are too easy."

"Will somebody talk to me?" I persisted.

"Well, I ski too!" Mark bounced in his seat.

"So much in common," Greg volunteered. I banged my head on the window.

"The tapes, Nathan. Do they show his face? Don't tell me he's behind a ski mask. God, I bet he fills out those racing tights."

"I thing Cathleen Sullivan might have done an 'Up Close and Personal' profile, but I can't be sure. He took the bronze in the Men's Downhill, you know."

"That's my Patrick," Mark thought out loud.

"Is it somebody's birthday or something?" I was growing impatient to the delight of the passengers. Nathan cracked a smile detectable in the rear view mirror. And even if they could have managed their charades a few minutes longer, the driveway in front of the beach house was about to wreck their credibility.

The 'Flamingo Tent and Catering Company' had a small fleet of gray and pink trucks and panel vans on the Evan's property. Nathan parked our van as close to the house as he could get and we spilled out the doors and into the yard. Predictably, Ramona couldn't be far from the action and soon she emerged from the backyard dressed in a billowing yellow Halston dress with a loose white belt at the waist. She clutched a Lucite clipboard in one hand and a white floppy hat in the other.

"Oh, Nathan. Thank God you're finally back." She pivoted abruptly to greet me and anchored a yellow spike in the grass. Losing her balance, she grabbed my arm for support. Mark plucked the shoe from its mooring and offered it back to Ramona. "Thank you dear," she told him. "I'd wear flats, you know, if they weren't so damned chaste." She drew her leg behind her, bending at the knee and slipped the shoe in place. "Joseph. Welcome home, sweetheart. How's the President?"

"He's not the President, -yet," I maintained before she cut me off.

"Nathan, I've just about taken all one woman can be expected to take. These characters may work dirt cheap but they are none too eager to take my advice and direction. Now I figure I've laid out a significant amount of money for the chin-dig, and I'm not exactly a newcomer to the entertaining circuit..."

"There, there." Nathan put his hands on her shoulders consoling the living stress out of her tense muscles. "We're here to back you up, Mona. Now what exactly seems to be the matter?"

She ruffled through the papers and receipts on the clipboard. "Great! Now I've lost my master list, of all things. I'll have to wing it! -And speaking of wings," she adjusted her sunglasses, "here comes the Grand Flamingo now." She referred to the larger of three gray clad men who had just appeared from behind the house. The other two walked to the truck but the big one evidently had it out for Ramona. As he got closer, I read the name 'Monroe' neatly embroidered in bright pink on the gray canvas material. A pink polo collar poked out of the open neck jump suit and I began to make several inferences.

"So, what's it going to be lady?" Deduction resolved. When he pronounced that apostrophe 's' with a Greek theta, I knew he wasn't here to rotate the tires on the Porsche.

"The name happens to be Ramona Simpson and it's an easy name to remember if you ever expect to see it on the bottom

resolve with our friend here." She was tapping her foot on the ground. "Monroe can tell you about the one hundred and seventy-five lawn flamingos. But I want it on the record as the woman who holds the purse, that I personally think one hundred and seventy-five skewered water fowl on the property at tonight's particular gala, would grossly defy decorum. Now, I don't think anything else needs to be said on the matter."

"I'll see what I can do, Mona. Now try and relax will you?" He turned to kiss her on the cheek. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

He gave me another hug and then followed Monroe's lead to the beach.

"Relax he says. Enjoy a tall glass of lemonade on the porch, he says. Nathan can be so detached from reality sometimes I worry about that boy. I have a small gathering only hours away, I'm up to my eyeliner in protocol and he say's 'relax.'"

"Small gathering?" I hinted for an explanation.

"Four maybe five hundred. I land a reputable catering company who agrees to work at product cost in exchange for reasonable in-house advertising. I ask you, Joey. Does one hundred and seventy-five flamingos sound reasonable?" She threw her hands into the air.

"What's the occasion, Ramona?" I blurted out.

"Why you of course, silly. It's a benefit, honey, to raise money for the play." Sam stepped onto the front porch.

"Ramona, telephone's for you."

"But I've already made enough money for production." I hustled behind her as she walked to the house.

"But have we made enough for AIDS? I don't want you to have to cut corners with production so that you have a respectable contribution when it's all over. I want the money to be up front and available for you."

"You've got a point, but how does this benefit work?" I held the screen door open for her.

"Strictly cash bar and donations. Drink prices are hiked to kick back one hundred percent." She grabbed the phone from Sam. "This is Ramona Simpson...I'm sorry? Sir, you'll have to hold the line, please. Mark, you've got to turn down Jim McKay. I can't hear a word over that Olympic fanfare. Now, who did you say you were? Yes...Byron from Flamingo Tent...I do remember talking with you before...yes...yes...LUMPFISH?" She screamed and we all jumped. "I specifically ordered beluga caviar. No, I am not interested in your last minute substitutes. Now you listen young man, some of Tampa's finest are going to attend this event and I assure you they can tell the difference between sturgeon and tuna! You promised me forty-eight ounces of Beluga Malossol by six. Brian, Byron or whatever your name is...I'm aware that Iran was a leading producer before the revolution, but unless you have the Ayatollah holding on line two, I could give a miner's piss about the Middle East. You

just find me quality Russian caviar by six tonight or the next benefit you cater will be your own!" She slammed the phone on the receiver. For a minute she didn't move a muscle and a captive living room stared at her sure to be eyewitnesses to her breakdown. Her hair was even stressed. She looked up at all of us looking at her and tried to pull herself together. "Joey, hand me my purse." She plunged her hand to the bottom of the white leather bag. "God, let there be a valium," she chanted over and over again. "Now, Nathan must not know Ramona took this little pill. Does the living room understand this instruction?" We nodded our heads yes. "Good. Now will somebody please get me a glass of water?" Sam was closest to the kitchen.

"I don't know what the big deal is anyway. Nathan was on Darvan during Olympic Trials. He's hardly a purist," I confided. Ramona raised an eyebrow inquisitively as Nathan bounded through the open sliding glass door while the rest of us tried to fake activity in other matters.

"I took care of everything," he boasted.

Ramona took a deep breath and adjusted her belt before glancing out the front window. "Then what in the hell is Monroe doing with those birds, Nathaniel?" She screamed again pointing out the window to the panel van where Monroe was supervising the unloading of one hundred and seventy-five stilted mannequins.

"He's promised to place them in small, unobtrusive flocks.

You won't even know they're there."

"Yeah? Someone once made that same promise about Tampons. I don't like it," she ranted.

"Ramona, I'm worried about you. You need to relax."

"Perhaps you could give me a little something to calm my nerves, Nathan?"

"Ramona Simpson!" I scolded.

"You're absolutely right, Nathan. I should calm down any minute." She lowered her head for my benefit.

"How about if all of us leave the work to the professionals and go down to the beach for a quick tan?" he suggested.

Ramona bit her finger and gave in. She also napped the rest of the afternoon on a yellow beach towel.

Yards away, the large pink, gray and white striped tent took shape behind the house and Monroe's small legion of laborers assumed uncontested occupation of the grounds. In another few hours they were flanked by a new regiment of hors d'oeuvre waiters and bartenders and an amiable guest count of six hundred plus. There were of course the expected arrivals among whom I greeted Huey and Carson, my Gay attorney Christopher Banks, City Attorney Scott St. Martin, Paul and Randy from the dorm, most of GLSU, Junior and his leather pals from 'Spurs' and around 280 non-affiliated students from the University of South Florida including Mark's Swiss fantasy recently immigrated, whom I'm

sure Mark planned to affiliate before the night's end. Then there was Ramona's impressive guest list that included such surprises as the Mayor's wife, Mitzi Beaumont, and the Governor's wife, Natalie Russell, TV anchors and press personalities from much of the State, members of the sovereign Chamber of Commerce and the rank and file of City Council. White-gloved attendants darted in and out of the crowd with polished silver platters of shrimp and caviar, -true Russian export, I'm told. Twelve cash bars defined stratagem where greens were being stuffed into cash drawers faster than cut grass into a lawnmower catcher. By fluke, one of Ramona's guests, (I think I caught the name of Mercedes,) brought along her two vacationing nephews and the other three members of the Caracas based singing sensation popularly known as 'Chevere.' By request and by ten o'clock, they had set up their limited equipment and began to dazzle the crowd with their unleashed Latin enthusiasm and detached pelvises, each one a moussed blond in his own right.

After hanging onto Nathan's arm for the first two hours of Ramona's 'gay-la,' I finally broke away to mingle on my own. Being the guest of honor, I received drink after drink which I drank after drank. I was wearing my new off-white double breasted suit and I thought of my mother who should have been here for this kind of thing.

My hand hurt from shaking. I stopped to talk to faces I recognized and paused to introduce myself to those I didn't.

Even then I knew that in another hour, everybody there would reach the inebriated state I had already mastered. I charged the one hundred and seventy-five flamingos with monitoring my intake.

Ramona out dressed everyone by wearing a designer dress which was rumored to have been made in East Germany by a designer who created it from the measurements smuggled to him by a Western reporter. The dress is said to be a gift from the United States Ambassador to East Germany. I'll attempt a description for those of you it might interest. The dress was done in black can-can net with metallic gold vein that reached to the bottom of her calves and billowed away from her legs with the enlistment of several black layers of silk. She sported the sheerest of black hose with her feet tucked comfortably into black patent leather pumps. She was a show piece from the word go and continuously blocked on either side by the first ladies of Tampa and the State of Florida. This was my favorite spot on the elbow rubbing circuit.

"Ramona, he's simply adorable and so witty. He simply must meet the Governor."

"Are you sure the Governor is up for it? I've become pretty popular to avoid."

"Oh it makes no difference to Bob," she told me. "Now there's a coincidence. Your father's name is Bob as well."

"Oh but it makes a difference to my father," I assured

her.

"Yes, I suppose it would." Mrs. Russell looked nervously away and then seized the opportunity to maintain her turn in the conversation. "And I'm sure I've had lunch with your mother. -Carole, isn't it? Charming woman really. You're very fortunate you know. It's a good thing your parents were able to secure that adoption from those hippies of Gypsies or whatever they were."

I GUESS THOSE OF YOU WHO THOUGHT I HAD EXAGGERATED BEFORE,
ARE FEELING YOUR PLACE ABOUT NOW!

"I'm not really adopted, Mrs. Russell. It's just an old family joke my father tends to take seriously from time to time."

"Oh, I see." It was clear she didn't.

Just then Ramona pointed with her chin to the edge of the wood decked patio. A figure perfect woman stood alone with her back to us. From behind feet of auburn hair her face mechanically scanned the rest of the gathering. Ramona knew who it was. Nathan spotted me across the lawn and shrugged his shoulders. When the mystery woman shook her head to manage her hair, I gasped. It was Mardell and she was apparently without escort. I instantly excused myself and squeezed my way toward her. When I got hung up in a line at the buffet table, I nearly lost my initiative for confrontation, but I wriggled free to approach her.

"There you are." She turned. "Hello, Joey," she half

whispered with elegant sophistication. Her green eyes seemed to water with sudden compassion as she flashed a white flag smile of surrender.

"Mardell! I'm surprised to see you here."

"It would be nice if the adjective 'pleasantly' preceded that surprise, but I don't imagine it does, does it?"

Actually, it does. You look wonderful. But where's..."

"-My partner in ignorance? I suppose he's off kicking a wall somewhere. I told him I was coming here tonight. I had hoped he would put the chip away for one night and turn out to support his classmate, but you know Davey."

"Until now, I thought I knew you too, Mardell. I'm glad to see I was wrong."

"There's no sense jumping off the bridge after him. This pointless alienation is counter productive and immature. Davey's carrying feelings within him that I don't even understand. I just know that in the beginning, it seemed you were getting all the breaks and that rubbed some of us the wrong way, -you being from out of state and all." (I wonder where that came from...) "When you got the shaft, Davey saw it as deserved justification. I can't see it like that."

"Well, Davey's got a few problems he needs to work out with his ego. I know I've created some pretty big waves in this town, but just look around, Mardell. Those that can accept me and accept my production are going to find themselves in

the bigger boat. Those like Davey and DiMenno are going to feel our wake the most. But I'm not out to capsize their one-man rafts. It's more like offering them a paddle of understanding. If they refuse it, they drift where I'm concerned." (I apologize to the reader at this point. In a sober state, I would have never taken an analogy for that seven day 'cruise', -if you can pardon that pun, as well.)

"You present a formidable challenge to them, Joey."

"But competition inherits challenge. It was prescribed for us and it's unavoidable. It wasn't my design."

"That's true. But what about your promise to the AIDS Foundation and your commitment to outsell the three of us?"

"A promise is a promise, Mardell. Every penny my show makes from this party-on is spoken for. Outselling you is my way of breaking even. I guess I subscribe to Davey's deserved justification theory too."

"I certainly don't have a problem with that. I'm not sure now why I ever did." She smiled. "So if this is a fundraiser, where does a lady buy a drink around here?"

I extended my arm which she threaded with hers and I led her to one of the many bars. Nathan joined us briefly under the tent. Mardell raised her White Russian in a toast and amazingly I found myself without a drink for the first time all evening. Nathan loaned me his glass after he sipped to her toast of 'camaraderie.' Mardell followed me to the edge

of the grass and Nathan excused himself to find Hughes and Carson. I finished his drink.

"You now Joey, if there's anything I can do to help you with your auditions tomorrow, please and I mean this, let me know. I feel as though you've been left at a disadvantage having to audition last and besides, there's not a blasted thing I can do until 'Up with People' leaves the Center the day after tomorrow. Well, I guess I could go to their show a couple more times. God knows by now, I could perform it myself. They're basically a good group of kids, I guess. I say that even after they practically demolished one of my Cyprus Trees during load-in Friday, but that show and their message is like adding a cup of sugar to a quart of maple syrup. Every time I leave their performance, and I've seen two, I have to eat a jumbo bag of potato chips. So if you can get me out of tomorrow's shows, I'd be indebted."

"As a matter of fact, I think I can use you." Can you be at The Hartung, say three o'clock tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'll be there."

Hughes arrived to steal Mardell away from me and I slipped off to find Junior. I hated to talk shop at the party but I couldn't wait any longer. To say I was anxious for this play to get underway, would be like saying I'd had one or two cocktails this evening. The truth was the alcohol had managed

to numb every quadrant of my body without disabling my mouth or ears, though 'Chevere's' Salsa Rhythm was closing in fast on the ears.

"Junior, it's this simple." I led him away from the crowd and the band and down to the waterfront. "I want to rewrite the opening of the second act. Now, I know it will work dramatically, but you've got to tell me if you can pull it off technically. Remember that money is less of an object after tonight. At the same time, the factors of time and resources still weigh heavily. With all that is mind, I need the second act to open with mirrors."

"Oh? -That sounds like my kind of opening."

"Climb out of the gutter big boy." Junior's innuendoes kept me guessing. I'd give him that. "Use Mylar or mirror film but I have to thave the effect and it needs to be clear. You remember the original stage design don't you?" Junior shook his head. "Scrap it. I want the Time Square backdrop modified so that the buildings that we originally had on fly, will now be on the wagons. I haven't ironed out the details in my head but I'll have them by tomorrow. I know I'll need three primary wagons and they will have to be built solid. I guess you can put air casters on the bottom so they can move about stage quietly. When the curtain opens on the second act, these wagons will be lined up end to end on the curtain line with the mirror

side to the audience. They need to fit together perfectly and I want them to cover the entire stage. The audience needs to see themselves. It's absolutely essential. Do you understand?"

"Does it matter? Knowing you there'll be full page sketches for me to follow by tomorrow."

"As a matter of fact I was drawing on the plane this afternoon on the way home. You're right. Pictures tomorrow."

"Then mirrors it is. I'll have Ralph open the yard tomorrow morning and I'll be at The Hartung at eight o'clock."

"That's what I want to hear. Now get back to the party. I haven't seen you score yet this evening." I winked at him as he turned his oversized body back toward the party. I thought about following him but I wanted to be alone for a while.

I leaned over and rolled up the white dress pants above the calves and took off my shoes and socks. The white foam raced ahead of the tumbling surf and smothered my feet with cool temptation, almost imploring me to venture deeper into the Gulf's medicinal store. I wandered a few feet more into the water until the sand squished around my feet and that's as deep as I got. Instinct forced me back onto dry beach. A hundred yards away, Mark's patented laugh and Ramona's resonant voice were no longer audible over the spectacular choir of waves. Nathan had his hands cupped over his mouth and I hoped by ignoring his call I could lure him out here alone.

The bright stars of the night sky primped foolishly in

the blackened sea and the full moon dubbed each new wave with a sparkling sword of passage. I took a final gulp of straight Kahlua and tossed the glass high on the sand. When I looked back to the water, the moon suddenly focused its beams on a pink barge like oceanliner. As it neared the shore, the sleek vessel lowered an ornate boarding ramp with wonderful pink flower garlands. My head snapped back toward the party to see if others had noticed my hallucination. To my surprise, they were walking toward it as though it were expected. Most carried their drinks. Ramona had her pumps in one hand and a bottle in the other. Nathan ran toward me now and grabbed my arm. I struggled leaving parallel trenches in the sand to mark my resistance. On deck the party continued with dancing and drinking. Shelly Winters handed me a fresh drink which I accepted graciously, paying no attention to the strand of seaweed hanging from her hair. My head pounded out a Salsa Rhythm while my heart strained to pump inside a pericardium full of sticky Kahlua. I turned to the railing and glanced back at the tent that was fading in the distance.

To my amazement, one hundred and seventy-five flamingos frantically nibbled at the scant remains of my sober existence. Surely they would leave nothing leftover by morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I lugged that Tropicana Orange crate to the table in the middle of the auditorium. I knew I wouldn't hand out scripts at today's auditions, but it had become a ritual for me to carry them wherever I went. I couldn't seem to get over the fact that I had created them. They were so thick and heavy and I just got the grandest kick out of packing that crate around. There was something significant here because Nathan always offered to carry it for me.

"If that pink object in your hand even resembles a flamingo, I'll have you hanged," I screamed toward the proscenium opening from my position in the center of the dark auditorium where I prepared to baby-sit a Thermos of black coffee.

"You can't hang the hung!" Junior returned my volley at

top voice that hurt my head.

"That certainly remains to be seen," I muttered with breath that reeked of hangover. I slurped aloud.

"I heard that," he teased as he bounded up the aisle in faded Levi's torn at the knees. "I'd prove it but I'm frightfully pee shy."

"No one's asking you to pee," I prompted, practically fixing an all out stare on his crotch. His large hand, -a dead give away in some circles, tugged at the denim flap until all five buttons had submitted to my instantaneous delight, exposing red hearts on white boxer shorts.

"Cute," I managed to say.

"Ralph gave them to me for Valentine's Day. I just had to show them to someone," he explained as he rebuttoned his show stopper. "Here." He held out a flamingo with twisted legs and one side of its body caved in. "I must have hit it with the truck last night. I don't remember exactly, but I'd swear it was trying to cross the road." Without looking at Junior and unable to take my eyes off that goddamn bird, I commanded him to get rid of it. I don't care what anyone tries to tell me. Something is not normal with those birds. After he stuffed the pink reminder into a folded seat across the aisle, he sat next to me pulling out a small notebook that had formed itself with sweat to the contours of his rear pocket.

"I've thought it over, Joey and air casters won't work.

The haul is too far from front to back stage."

"Then try swivel casters. Get the kind with brakes so we can lock the back wheels into position once we get them parked where we want them. Also, make sure the wheels are hidden under the wagons and they have to move smoothly without a sound. In fact, I command that everything move smoothly today, without a sound."

"Bad one, huh?"

"The worst I've ever had."

"Yeah. Me too. I don't remember what happened after I got on board that ship."

"What ship?" I asked completely spooked.

"You know, I don't know why I said that. I have no idea what ship I could have possibly been talking about. I must have really been messed up!"

I poured a new cup of coffee and drank the whole thing before continuing with the set alterations. "Well this is really going to throw you, but the wagons have to be four sided rectangles. From one of the long ends to the other, I'm going to employ video projection, so install large screens on the ends of these three wagons. I guess for variety, let's make the screens different heights on the wagon. I need you to check with 'Spurs' to see if I can borrow two of their projection VCR's. I'll need to hunt down a third. Those you can install inside the wagons with separate power supplies. The wagons

need to be wired for the individual lights in the Times Square scene anyway."

"I think I'm actually following you. I'm swerving but I'm still with you."

"That's good, I think." I handed him the Thermos. "There was something else and I can't think of what it was. Oh! I remember. Turn over the trees and foliage of Scene One, the Greek columns of Two and the street lights of Five to Daniel's stage craft 101 classes. It'll be good practice for them and it will free us up to concentrate on the really big stuff."

Mark stumbled out from behind the curtain. "Hel-lo? Anybody home?" Junior and I looked up from our mugs. Mark was leaning against the proscenium arch with his face in his arms. "Am I even at the right place?" he whined. "Why won't anyone answer me?"

Suddenly, like a bat out of Carlsbad, Nathan shot from the wings head first into a flip, a cart spring, a round off, another flip and an aerial tuck and roll out into a controlled handstand. All of us gripped our stomachs as he walked on his hands down the side stairs of the stage.

"What are you on?" Mark mumbled.

"Life!" Nathan shouted as he maintained perfect balance up the aisle, "and Vitamin B," he added springing to his feet. "Want some?"

"I'll take anything. Anyone got a hair of that goddamn

dog?" Mark held out his hand.

"How about you baby?" he asked planting a kiss on my lips.

"I'll stick to coffee, thanks."

"Just in case you're interested, I ground three of them up in your scrambled eggs this morning. That and the salsa should have you feeling better in no time."

"You know that's so ironic. I was just about feeling like I might review the contents of my breakfast in reverse but I didn't know if I'd make it to the lobby in time. You just saved me the trip. Thanks so much."

"Don't mention it."

The morning wasted no time in joining the afternoon and hangovers transformed themselves into creative energies harnessed only by our commitment to deadline. Mardell arrived promptly at three o'clock just as Junior finished the final nail on the first of my specified wagons. Nathan and Sam had climbed the catwalks all afternoon harvesting spare light units and repositioning them to accommodate my last minute changes. Greg was busy running my errands downtown and Ramona was simply amused organizing the paperwork for the night's auditions. She made regular trips from the copy machine to the coffee machine and back to her table in the center of the auditorium where Nathan had strung a telephone cord from my office window so she could make and receive calls from her post. I shook

my head forebodingly from the wings of the stage. Her accountant was expected to call any minute with the tabulated results of last night's function, so I allowed the telephone. But I wondered if perhaps I couldn't be upstaged by my own production staff. Ramona's taking initiative and Ramona's taking over were but a hair's width apart and I'd have to make specific and detailed assignments within my administration to keep me in control.

Mardell was completely supportive of my special plan for her role in the evening's agenda and she brainstormed the rest of the afternoon creating personal strategies to screen those who auditioned.

Over the weeks, the play and the program had excited awareness all over campus. It was odd then, that I would be so nervous and actually stare gape mouthed at the number who eventually filled the auditorium. Ramona dodged my reprimanding glare when a couple television crews arrived despite my warning of a closed house. I allowed them to get some file footage while the aspiring actors completed the first battery of paperwork, but as the last mini-bios floated on a wave of hands to the front row, all cameras cleared the theatre and the doors were sealed to the non-auditioning public. I instructed Ramona to separate the audition cards into male and female categories and I confided in Nathan, for the first time, a raw anxiety and a deeply-seeded fear taking root in the garden of my

confidence. He predictably pledged to back every last one of my convictions with a love that would float the heaviest of my aspirations.

I mounted the stage at five o'clock and mentally prepared to confront the future cast of 'A Show of Hands,' whichever thirty-seven they happened to be.

"All right. We have a long night ahead of us. I assume you are as serious and willing to face the next few hours as I am, so let's begin. My name is Joey Tucker. The play you are about to audition for is my own and I plan to stage it with the tightest cast available to me here at USF."

"Excuse me, Mr. Tucker." A hand shot up from the back row. "What do you mean exactly when you say the 'tightest cast' available?" There were several chuckles. I smiled.

"Oh, good. You're here, which conveniently brings me to my very next point. There are bound to be a variety of people here tonight, Gays and Straights, I mean. So for the duration of the evenings schedule, I am not concerned with your sexual preferences. I am only concerned with your ability to act and your willingness to contribute and comprehend. Everything else is irrelevant to me tonight. Is that clear? I don't want to have to typecast this production and I'm not automatically giving parts away to Gays because this happens to be a Gay show. So, I'm glad you're here." I pointed to the prized running back of the University's Fighting Brahma Bulls. "I'm especially

looking forward to your audition." The group laughed a little uneasily.

"Now if there aren't any other clarifications, I'd like to begin by introducing a few members of my immediate staff. Could everyone involved up to this point please stand up?" Little by little the majority of the auditorium rose to their feet. I couldn't help but beam with pride. "Let's see if we might simplify this." The group sat back down. "Let me start with Ramona Simpson who will be my Director's Assistant." Ramona stood and waved to the audience. "Ramona comes to us from City Hall where she is executive aide to Mayor Beaumont." Sam couldn't seem to accomplish the steep angle with the spot light from his location in the back of the theatre so he turned up the house lights. Ramona's strapless fire engine red dress provoked a few whistles, which not surprisingly originated in the back rows of the theatre. "My next introduction holds obvious personal merit since he has been there from the beginning and will be here until the end, -my right hand main man, Nathan Evans." Nathan stood hesitantly and clearly embarrassed by my set up. "Nathan has served The Hartung well over the past four years and this season he attempts to cover two facets of production simultaneously as the show's lighting engineer and lead actor. To his right is Mark Simmons, veteran actor of New Jersey Summer Stock, currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Art and Design. Mark has already lent his remarkable

talent to the set design as well as to the show poster which graces our lobby and much of Tampa. Mark also takes on a dual purpose with the second lead in this production." Ramona pushed Mark to his feet and the audience clapped. "I don't want there to be any resentment toward these actors as they have proven themselves in countless productions and technical expositions. They also agreed to take these roles at a time when the production was confined to a pipe dream by the Regents of this University. They have spent the last month learning extensive lines that would have severely compromised our progress if they would not have been selected until tonight's auditions."

There didn't seem to be any objections so I continued. "With this, I want to emphasize that I am not casting for individual parts as much as I am searching for a company that can work together and sense the impact of this work. I know that I have fought long and hard for this production. Many of us here tonight have shared in this struggle. Mine is a controversial script, but only because Homosexuality remains a controversial issue for whatever reasons. Being Gay will not create controversy in this camp. Anyone having a problem with this basic philosophy should seriously consider his or her intentions for being here." I took a deep breath giving the back row the opportunity to speak or leave. They were quiet and didn't move.

"My show is just one of four productions this season.

I am pleased to introduce another of these director/playwright's tonight. Please welcome Mardell Armstrong." I held out my hand and Mardell walked down the aisle and joined me on the stage. When the applause died down, I spoke again swallowing hard with an adrenalin chaser. "Mardell will be assisting me with auditions this evening. Each of you will have the opportunity to work with her before tonight is over and the final cast is selected. I do have one last requirement if you plan to have anything to do with this show and that's your availability for rehearsals. The schedule from tonight on will be set from six o'clock until ten o'clock Monday through Saturday with brush up rehearsals for small groups on Sundays as posted. If the company is on stage by six, I'll have you out of here by ten. I don't think there is anything too difficult about that. So with that understood, I will begin calling on groups of names. Pay close attention to my direction and to the mistakes and attributes of those who audition before you. Get a feel for the format of the tryouts and watch Mardell very carefully. I would ask that you remain in the auditorium and behave like an audience for the duration of tonight's schedule. I'm shooting for a wrap up by ten o'clock. I'll run a couple of fifteen minute breaks. There is no smoking in the theatre at any time. Food and drink must be confined to the lobby and the company list will be posted on The Hartung doors tomorrow for thirty-seven actors and ten additional stage hands. Thank

you and break a leg."

I bounced off the front of the stage leaving Mardell to prepare for her role as my confederate and I joined Ramona and Nathan at the table in the center of the audience. Though it will come as no surprise, she had changed her clothes again. Well, actually she had pulled a fuzzy white sweater over her dress and she had slipped long white leg warmers over her pumps. Whoever this estranged Mr. Simpson was, he had to be paying alimony and child support in the six figure digits, to the left of the decimal, per year. Not only was Ramona's nine year old daughter attending the most prestigious girls preparatory school in New England, but I'd never seen Ramona wear the same thing more than twenty minutes at a time. I suppose she was an upwardly mobile female of the Eighties, -one who shopped direct and one who couldn't pass up an affordable original. She smiled professionally, if not clerically, and handed me two stacks of auditions cards.

"Male and female," she instructed one hand at a time, "in alphabetical order," she added.

"What's the jock's name," I whispered in Nathan's ear.

"Dane something," he whispered back.

"Kelly with a 'K,'" Ramona offered. I leafed through the significantly larger male stack of cards and pulled his and nine other cards from the top. I adjusted the microphone at the table.

"Okay. With the exception of Dane Kelly, the following names have been selected at random." The audience laughed having predicted that I might likely make examples from assholes.

"When your name is called, I'll ask that you leave the auditorium and wait in our lovely sound-proof green room. The lovely Ramona Simpson will call when I'm ready." I called out the first ten names. "Dane, front and center please."

The nine men made their way to the auditorium doors and as expected, Dane's cohorts got quite a jolt from my persistence. "Mr. Kelly, if you're here to audition, do me a favor and join Mardell on stage."

He leaned forward on his seat. "Why doesn't Mardell quit playing fag-hag and come back here and sit on my face?" The small group of USF football players roared with laughter but the rest of the house was dead silent.

"And why is that, Kelly? Is your nose bigger than your dick?" My head spun in time to watch Mardell, with hands on her hips, walk to the very edge of the stage. "Your mouth certainly is! Now hear this jocko. Joey doesn't have time to put up with your kindergarten mentality. He's four weeks behind the rest of us and unless you have the balls to face me on stage, we'll have you and your gutless boyfriends removed from this theatre." Junior and his leather delegation stirred in their seats, sensing a potential call to arms.

"And that goes for anyone else hell bent on causing trouble

here tonight. I don't require everyone to believe as I do or to even endorse a script you've never read, but unless your minds are open, keep your mouths shut! What's it going to be, Dane?" My heart thumped loudly in my throat. I didn't want to start the evening with a brawl and yet I couldn't allow myself to be trampled in front of an eventual cast who would be looking to me for direction. Dane was shoved to his feet by his buddies who seemed none too eager to defend their masculinity against Junior's colleagues. Dane's bulky body ambled down the aisle and reluctantly hopped onto the stage. Mardell reached out her hand and they shook to my relief and to the relief of the general assembly.

"All right, Dane. This is what I want and Mardell will help you set it up. Don't alienate her, and this goes for everyone. The scene changes every ten people but the ideas stay the same. Mardell can make or break you depending on your attitude and degrees of stage confidence. Okay, Dane. Mardell will play your mother. You are about to tell her that you think you might be Gay. Now the scene belongs to you two. I want to see you act, move the audience and do it without jokes and without heroism; -just first rate acting. All right, Dane. When you're ready."

Mardell sat center stage on a pre-set arm chair. The lights went down in the house and then went up on the stage. Dane squinted into the audience with a hand shading his eyes.

"Look, Tucker. I'm not so sure this is such a good idea. Maybe I should just leave like you said."

"When you're ready, Dane. Quiet in the auditorium!" I simply could not lose him now. And it was so like me to favor a dark horse too. I turned around to observe the behavior of the back row and when I turned back, Mardell sat alone. Dane had vanished. I leafed through the cards and prepared to call the next name when suddenly, Dane broke back on stage in a half trot and acting desperately out of breath.

"Mama, I'm sorry I'm late. I just got drinkin' with the guys and I, well I lost track of the time." He kissed a shocked Mardell on the cheek and I squirmed in my seat, delighted as hell.

"Do you know what time it is young man?" She caught his cheek in her hand. After what he had said from the back row earlier, I wouldn't blame her for an intent to maim and by the look on his wrinkled face, I wasn't putting it past her.

"Ouch, dammit! And I'm not a young man anymore."

"Dear God, you're just a boy and you watch that filth trap mouth of yours. You had your mama worried sick. Why I've just knitted a third sleeve for this sweater." I should have mentioned she was pantomiming with imaginary needles. The audience responded. "No seventeen year old should be late on account he was out drinkin' with the guys."

"Ah, mama," he whined convincingly.

"Don't you ah-mama me. Now you better sit right down here and start explaining yourself, young man. You can start by giving me the name of this place where you do this drinkin."

"At the club, mama."

"At the club," she repeated. "And I ask you what establishment in this city would admit my baby, without an I.D. and without whiskers on his face for that matter? Oh never mind. I can't seem to get through to you anymore." Dane raised his hand as if to speak, but Mardell cut him off. "And as if having a teenage alcoholic hoodlum in this house wasn't enough torment on the planet for one lady, you left the house without taking out the trash again, -fourth day in a row, this week!"

"I'm not an alcoholic, mama."

"Ever since your papa died there has been no discipline in this house but that's going to change." Dane rolled his eyes and scuffed his feet on the floor. "You'd might as well relax young man 'cause no one's leaving this house until we get things straight around here."

"Straight, mama?" The audience laughed and Dane paused professionally allowing the laughter to subside.

"You heard me young man. Now I want to know the names of these boys that force my baby off to some bar against his will."

"But I wanted to go, mama, and the guys, they're all right. There's John. I think I told you about him...he's Gay. And

there's Angelo and he's not sure what he is just yet."

"So let their mamas worry about them. After all they're the ones who raised them. They're the ones to blame for their sexual confusion."

"Mama, it's not sexual confusion."

"Don't argue with me! Boys chasin' after boys, why it's abomination. 'Says so in Leviticus. But let their mamas deal with it."

"Mama, could you take the blame for raising me wrong?"

"Most certainly not. Your father raised you! After the breast feeding I washed my hands of the whole thing." The auditorium shook with laughter and applause. Dane was searching for a set up and Mardell was determined not to hand it to him. Dane zeroed in.

"So, if I happen to turn out to be Gay like John or Angelo, it's papa's fault?"

"God rest his miserable soul and don't you be saying things like that. You're not a homosexual or anything of the sort."

"What if I am, mama? What if I am?" he drilled.

"I'll tell you what-if, young man..." she sniffled blowing her nose in a handkerchief. "...If you forget that garbage one more day this week, you'll be grounded. I mean it young man. -Grounded!" Real tears rolled down her face and Dane moved to hold her. There was silence. No one in the auditorium dared move for fear their chair might squeak. I finally

initiated applause that once set off, seemed to go on forever. The front rows jumped to their feet, and Dane, whether he knew it or not, had established the precedent for the auditions if not the show itself. I signaled for him to approach me and I dispatched Ramona to retrieve the next actor. The audience settled back into their seats and Dane took Ramona's place at the table.

"Thank you, Mardell. Ian, let Mardell set you up and you can begin when you're ready." I switched the microphone off and turned to Dane. "Nice job, Dane. How do you feel about it?"

"Great, actually. I can honestly say I got into it. Of course, Mardell did most of it."

"Did you experience any problems relating to your character or to the scene itself?"

"I guess I really didn't think about it once I got started. I was so nervous."

"Are you serious about wanting a part in this production?"

"I auditioned for one, didn't I?"

"And you did well. In fact, your five minute performance puts me in the position to offer you a substantial role in this play. But I have to be assured that you're willing to work with me and not against me on this one. I have to confine the antagonists to the script and not purposely induct any into the company. You and your buddies would lead me to believe

you're on some anti-Gay crusade. If this can be overcome, you've got a part."

"Are you putting me on?"

"I'm putting you back on stage if that's what you want."

"I can't believe it! Tucker, my buddies don't take this seriously, but if you think I'm good enough, yeah, I'll play in your game for a while."

"Then understand that it is my game. You won't be playing for USF this time. It's my rules for the next eight weeks."

"Sure. I've never done any of this shit before. God! Won't my old man just crap a pineapple? He's always raggin' on me about academics and shit."

"Check the cast list on the stage door tomorrow then. I'll match you with a character you can handle, okay?"

"Sure, Tucker and thanks."

"Listen, Dane. Keep your pals quiet up there, okay?"

"Gotcha!"

Ramona returned and Mardell finished briefing the actor on stage. I motioned them to begin and Mardell spilled into dialogue. In another forty-five minutes the first round was completed. Three actors displayed potential and I assigned another to my auxiliary stage crew. Ten more names were called and I laid out a different yet similar scenario for interpretation.

The night, though exciting, was dragging at a slug's pace

and I was wearing out. I began pairing up actors to face Mardell but this only complicated the screening procedure. There was really no way to rush or dodge the process, so I leaned back and tried to calm down. Ramona miraculously managed to pry a valium from an old cherry Lifesaver she found wedged in the corner of her purse. We split it when Nathan went to the bathroom.

At ten o'clock I began dismissing the audience if they had already auditioned and I apologized for the long wait to those who hadn't gotten under the lights yet. At ten-thirty, I climbed onto the stage to offer one final break to the largely thinned out crowd. From my vantage point, it dawned on me that I had greatly ignored the handful of women who had turned out to audition for this male gender based production. There were five females left at a quarter before eleven and I offered each of them parts. The remaining dozen or so who remained patiently for a chance to behave as they hoped I desired, were instructed to go on stage and create a Gay bar scene. Nathan jumped to the booth to activate his disco lights and popped a Donna Summer tape into the system. The dozen were so convincing that those of us in the audience jumped onstage to join them. It was a perfect end to a productive evening.

I locked the doors at twelve-fifteen and with audition cards, boyfriend and assorted staff in tow, we headed for the beach house where we still had a long night ahead of us.

I spent the next several hours wrestling with a simple mathematical equation to reduce one hundred and sixty names to a cast of thirty-seven actors. Nathan was a great deal of help when it came to a final sum and Ramona busied herself jotting notes and typing several revisions of my list. Mark tried to further calm my valium-proofed nerves by concocting a tea like saffron infusion that rather freaked out my bladder. But I persevered long after the last head hit the pillow and morning, faithful as ever, finally gave way to a temperamental dawn.

It took four tacks, three strips of masking tape and two sheets of contact paper to secure the cast list to the stage door in the early morning prelude of what was to become a pre-season tropical storm. I had left the house with everybody still sleeping and now I wished I would have been more persistent in waking Nathan. I climbed into the Porsche and headed back toward home. Palm trees contorted backwards until they bent northeast and waves that were once confined to either side of the long Courtney Campbell Causeway, now leapt over the paved land bridge and into each other's domain. School after school closed at the disc jockey's voiced command and the weather service repeatedly advised against most everything related to being outdoors. The windshield wipers were pressed into double time and I became gradually convinced that I must have been

the only driver in the Bay Area. The low clearance sports car frantically hydroplaned over large spots of captured seawater and I gripped the wheel with sweaty hands. My visibility was reduced to the point I could have seen more with a blanket over my head. I was verifiably scared. Winds rocked the little car and waves jumped the bumper guard and sideswiped my determination. For several miles at ten miles per hour, I was surrounded by violent water, not a healthy environment for a certified hydrophobic. The storm worsened and I found myself braking for wave crossings. Through a puddle deeper than my current judgment, the Porsche stalled in a puff of exhaust and rolled to a stop on the Causeway. I thought to put my hazard lights on but I hadn't seen another car all morning and I didn't want to run down the battery. I tried to restart the car before I activated full panic but the starter only whined. The wind rocked the car and whistled through its German seams as I laid my head on the steering wheel. Land locked Nebraska had been a safe haven and had warded off my prophetic clash with water. I suddenly missed this feature of home. I tried the car again. "Start you goddamn kraut-stinking piece of shit!" I screamed with full voice into the small space. I tortured the ignition again and again until finally it wound over the top and started. The engine crawled off the bridge to wet land along the broken shoreline. I had to get home to Nathan. The gas pedal made a depression in the floor board once I recognized the road

leading to the beach house.

It was not until I was in the driveway that I could even see the garage and Ramona, Mark and Nathan waged a battle of duration with wooden shutters against a wet wind that lashed the cedar siding. For a split moment inside the garage, I thought I might have experienced the sensation of relief but Nathan soon assured me there was little to be relieved about. I learned that the beach house, in fact the entire stretch of beach was directly north of the storm's condescending eye. The shutters had never been used in the four year history of the Evans-Estate-On-The-Gulf, nor had a storm ventured this far up the coast this early in the year for more than twenty years.

With the last shutter locked and secured in place, the west side of the house braced itself for the worst and we quickly huddled on the inside of our fortified retreat where we would sit out the ride however long and however bumpy it happened to become.

We watched the local stations, flipping from one channel to the next comparing storm updates. Tropical Storm Delvin was still tracking thirty miles off shore and heading North by Northeast. Tampa cowered like a stallion about to become a gelding.

Ramona wondered if she should call the new cast members to cancel rehearsal for this evening but the University had

officially closed at Noon and we all agreed that a canceled rehearsal would likewise be the consensus.

Outside the waves peaked at twice their normal height and the sky churned, ominous and black, knowing full well that it had our particular stretch of gulf front by the balls.

If a significant point of elevation could be applied to any tract of land in the entire state of Florida, we had to be sitting on it. Even though it was beach property, the house squatted on a grassy knoll exactly nine and a half feet above the mean level between low and high tide. At best the back door could only be four and a half feet above Delvin's churning fury. Whether or not this advantage was relevant in hurricane conditions remained to be seen, but I for one, was thankful for every blessed inch.

Hours crept past and poker hand after poker hand got filed away into the dummy deck as stations tried to stay on the air with rational predictions of the storm's progress and estimated landfall. Delvin was on his final stretch and definitely not afraid to sprint for the mainland. Bit by bit the gulf inched its way up the beach pushed by winds that tiptoed in comparison to the gales that were to follow at fifty miles per hour.

Ramona occupied her time by cutting out homemade bingo cards and Mark manufactured tabs of colored paper. At six-forty-five, the glass panes began to rattle inside the shutters and I helped Nathan cover the inside of the upstairs windows with

sheets of plywood from the garage. The point of impact had been established for nine o'clock with one station estimating it later at nine-thirty. By eight-thirty, the only damages we could tangibly assess were worn nerves. Nathan, with his arms around me and crossed over my chest, had to constantly remind Ramona that if Delvin was coming from the Southwest the garage would sustain the greatest amount of weather.

Winds were now clocked by a coastal weather station at seventy-four miles per hour slamming sea into most low lying areas. One more MPH and Delvin was going to be a full fledged hurricane. Bradenton, just south of the bay, had already collected twenty inches of rain in twelve hours and the sandy soil wasn't facilitating run off. Bradenton and its sister city of Sarasota were plagued by flooding. Their shared municipal airport as well as Tampa International grounded and anchored all flights until further notice. Long Boat Key was reporting several structural losses and most resort hotels there had been evacuated just hours before.

Much closer to home at Madeira Beach, sand bagging operations were abandoned at all gulf side properties when the winds topped out at sixty miles per hour.

Undetected, the sun had long since slipped out of commission behind a charcoal veil and night fell unusually hard on the Bay Area. Somehow, Mark managed to doze off and the local affiliates tried to appease the ravenous networks with live

video feeds. But finally, after ten o'clock, it appeared Delvin might only bump the coast as a combination of trade winds from the Southwest had teamed up with a warm gulf stream to neutralize his spirits and contain them at sea. Ramona broke out the remaining alcohol from the night before last, and we toasted to Tropical Storm Delvin and his mighty vainglory. After the brief ceremony, Nathan and I coaxed our tired bodies up to bed.

It had been a long day, but more consequently, it had been a lost day and the scripts from 'A Show of Hands,' spent another unexpected night in their Tropicana Orange crate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Was it all worthwhile? Looking around the auditorium and seeing hand picked actors like Dane Kelly highlighting his lines with a yellow fluorescent marker and saying them so softly that only his eyebrows moved, I knew that it had been worth the agony, the publicity and the string of disappointments leading to this moment.

Like clockwork, they had arrived well before six to explore the theatre and to discover the script. They had come from every sector of the University and from most every persuasion of the city and now they stood alone and apart in different seats and areas of the auditorium. Predictably, the known gay contingency huddled together. The straight females chatted nervously in the aisle. Dane sat on a corner of the stage completely oblivious to the stares and comments from the boys

In the huddle and I sat, still as my resolve, and watched. I had brought together strangely diverse groups who would otherwise be prone to conflict and ignorant discordance, into the same arena. Social management was up for grabs and I made the call 'mine.'

I couldn't very well expect all differences to be put aside nor was it what I desired if this arrangement was to be a true confluence of values, right or wrong. The public would see through an amalgamation and so it was important to emphasize our differences, our backgrounds and our philosophies. But to work together, we would have to extend tolerance beyond bias and past prejudice. It was time. If I could unify them in body, there was a good chance I could align them in purpose.

I whistled between two fingers and motioned a general roundup. Okay, Tucker. You're on.

"Welcome to 'A Show of Hands.'" I don't have to tell most of you how long it's taken me to get to this point tonight, but this is only the beginning of the beginning. Five weeks from this moment, the scripts you hold in your hands now, are going to make sense to each of you if I've done my job. I believe it is something we can all be very proud of, something we'll want to share, something we'll hopefully feel an insurgent need to perform. For those of you experienced in production, this is not going to be an easy show. In fact, it's liable to be a technical nightmare. For those of you performing for

the first time, you can expect a rough time of it. The play is structured around philosophy rather than a bunch of clever lines strung together with the sole intention to entertain. We're going to make the audience think. That rubs a lot of people the wrong way. But what we have to say must sink into their conscience. It's got to reach deep and take a hold of their souls. It's got to shake the living daylights from their preconceptions and it's got to make us feel better about who we are. If we don't accomplish these things by the time the curtain goes up for the first time in little more than a month, then we have failed as a performing troupe. We have failed as actors and we have failed as a race of compassionate people. And it's not going to be easy. Heterosexuals have awfully thick skulls at times. Isn't that right, Dane?"

Dane stretched his leg. "Yeah, I suppose."

"But nearly as important as reaching everyone sitting out there, is reaching each one of us in here. Understanding ourselves is the key to sharing something meaningful with our audience. There's a lot we don't know about each other. There's a lot we might not know about ourselves. There may be a lot we don't approve of in each other's lifestyles. Then right now, in this circle, it is no different than it is out there in the city and the world. But we're small. We can change. We can care and we can work together. Maybe we'll discover some clues within our group that can help all of them out there.

Each one of us has a very unique opportunity to learn from this experience. When do you think there will be a time when you'll have a chance to work with the likes of leather bar Homosexuals, university and world athletes, prom queens and lesbians again? Well, I'll tell you when. -Tomorrow night and every night hereafter until we come up with some solutions for managing the same coexistence out there. Do you know what's really strange? I just noticed we have different eye colors and different hair. We're different sizes and different ages. Now if we can get beyond that, what's to prevent us from getting beyond everything? So get to know each other and don't be afraid to get close to one another. We're together for the next eight weeks. It's an awfully short time to make such a huge impact on the world." I paused to smile. During my speech, I had noticed Mardell enter the auditorium. The early evening sun filtered through her auburn hair and scattered into the theatre. Something had happened or gone wrong. I could sense the immediacy in her stance. Being a director herself, it's not likely she would have interrupted a closed rehearsal unless it was serious.

"Ah, as a matter of brush up and administration, Ramona's going to take the next few minutes to verify name spellings and telephone numbers. Ramona?"

I bounced off the stage and walked up the aisle. Mardell and I hugged exchanging kisses on the cheek. We sat.

"Joey, you know I wouldn't barge in here like this if it weren't important but this whole thing has landed in my lap and it really belongs in yours."

"Dear God! They're closing us down again?" My voice sank to registers of profound seriousness.

"No, no. Nothing like that. Remember that performing group at the Convention Center?"

"Yeah. 'Up with something?"

"-People. Anyway, the group left town yesterday morning just ahead of the storm. But that's not all they left. I tried calling you last night but the phone lines were down along the coast."

"We still didn't have service this morning when we left to come here. So go on, you tried to call."

"I tried to call to tell you what I found in the theatre when they left."

"Mardell, you make it sound like contraband. It's not drugs is it?"

"Will you let me finish? It seems 'Up with People' staff asked two of its members to leave the company right here in Tampa because they discovered them to be Gay. Well these two guys had spotted an article in the 'Times' about the university's Gay playwright, -that being you, who was staging a Gay production, -that being this. Anyway what it boils down to is they are too ashamed to return home to their families mid-

tour and they were hoping they might be able to work on your show now that their cover's blown."

"But I already have a cast."

"That's exactly what I told them but last night when the electricity went out, we got to talking about what they did for their troupe and this little voice inside of me says, -'Mardell, maybe you should put them in touch with Joey, just to see what he thinks.'"

"Well?"

"Get this Tucker. One is a piano player and the other one was the dance captain and choreographer. So I get to thinking..."

"How ironic!"

"Well that's exactly what I thought so I brought them here to talk to you."

"They're here? Now?"

"Haven't you heard anything I've said?"

"In the lobby?"

"In the lobby. -Real cute guys too. I'm already attached to them, I'm afraid. I told them they could stay at my apartment until Saturday. That's when Tina, my roommate, gets back from Europe and she can be a real bitch; -she's not at all like me."

I suppressed a smirk when I realized she was being completely sincere in her comparison.

"Anyway, they're expecting some sort of tuition refund

from 'Up with People's' main office in Tucson, and I told them they could use my mailing address. Turns out the dancer cooks. Well my kitchen's in shock and my diet's blown, but I really like these characters. The Bitch has been abroad for two months now, -on sabbatical, she says. In heat, I say. At any rate, she gets back on Saturday. The guys hope to put their refunds toward room and board. I didn't even bring up that huge beach house out in Clearwater that's obviously too big for just the two of you..."

"Strike that thought from your head, child! Nathan gets jealous when Mark spends the night...on the couch...with Ramona!"

"So let Nathan come up with the idea all by himself. You know how he can be with his independence. Besides, these guys are lovers so there's not competition, so to speak."

Nathan gets worked up if the Tom cat from down the beach wanders into the yard."

"Well, at least hear what they have to say."

"I'm only limited by my imagination, right?" Mardell shook her head. "My imagination hears a musical score already!"

I held the heavy auditorium door and Mardell passed ahead of me. There on the stairway sat the two passive dissidents who stood as I crossed the lobby to greet them.

"Joey, meet Sydney Bosak and Rad Anderson. Guys, this is Joey Tucker." We shook. I spoke.

"From what Mardell has told me, I should be flattered you've

taken an interest in my work."

Rad, which we'll have to assume is short for Radcliff, volunteered as the duo's spokesman. "We're in bit of a jam actually. Our tour has bottomed out here in Tampa two months ahead of schedule. If we go home now, we'll be the laughing stock of our home towns. So whether or not you can put us to work, we've really got no choice but to stick it out here until the 'Up with People' tour is finished."

I was smiling. Mardell watched me. "I didn't mention the accent, did I?" she remembered. Rad, we established shortly, was from Canberra, Australia. He laughed at our reaction.

Sydney piped up. "Not too long ago, we saw a feature article on you and your show. -Last Tuesday, wasn't it, Rad? Even then, we half joked about how much we'd much rather be in your line of production and out of this family entertainment racket."

"That's right. Little did we know that 'Up with People' had been gathering firewood for the stake. The 'People,' as it turns out, are more exclusive that their message would indicate."

"Mardell did explain that you were asked to leave by your staff," I acknowledged, trying to mask my enchantment with his accent.

"And isn't that the crock? We were staff. Both Rad and I have traveled with that outfit for two and a half years.

We always kept to ourselves and never imposed our relationship on anybody. The decision to can us came from Tucson and it took everyone by surprise. Half the cast is still shaking in their leotards wondering if they're next to go. If this is a shakedown, it shouldn't take too long before they realize how many of us there really are. Homosexuality and the Arts feed on each other to survive. There's nothing new about it. Theatre has flourished for centuries on our creative nourishment alone." Sydney realized he was getting carried away. "But we're keeping you from your rehearsal, aren't we?"

"I can see there won't be any theoretical clash between us. I think you'll feel right at home once you read the script."

"Then you can use us?"

"I'm sure we can find something to keep you on your keys and toes." I winked at Mardell. "We can talk about specifics after rehearsal tonight."

"Great! Listen, I've got to run back to the Convention Center but I'll swing by in a couple of hours to pick you guys up." Mardell kissed each of us on the cheek and disappeared down the front steps of the building.

As the guys and I walked down the aisle to the stage, I coached them to follow my lead when it came time to introduce them to the cast. I waited a few seconds for Ramona to wrap up an explanation of her primary duties at City Hall, which told me I'd been away far too long, and butted in.

"All right. The creases have just been ironed out in our favor and I'd like everyone to meet the two newest acquisitions by 'A Show of Hands.' Our production choreographer, Rad Anderson and our musical director, Sydney Bosak." There was scattered applause from the bewildered group who hadn't realized any musical or dance requirements when they auditioned two days ago. Of course, there were the expected ten raised eyebrows; well, nine if you take into account that Greg only had one that stretched across his forehead and Ramona's were so thoroughly plucked you hardly noticed them at all. Sydney and Rad sat among them and I smiled at Nathan. "The more in touch we get with the scripts and particularly in the second act, we'll begin to appreciate the vast talents and disciplines of these two men."

Their faces were so trusting and their postures so attentive as they sat encircled and in Indian style about me. "I have several points to tackle tonight." I held up the huge blue binder which I had nicknamed 'Sky' and introduced it to the group. "In here, I have my original script, notes and production objectives. If anyone needs paper and a pen tonight, get with Ramona during break and bring these items every rehearsal from this moment on. I'd like to see each of you match my organization and there will be nights when that will take no effort at all. I am relatively new at this but the script is newer than any of us. It has never been tested by cast or

approved by audience. As you read through it, you'll find lines that have no specific actor assigned to deliver them. Herein lies our strongest advantage. We can suit the play to our individual capabilities and call it intentional. For example, I can take a line and throw it out to any number of you. I can practically choose from thirty-seven interpretations and since I am the playwright, I can select the actor that most closely resembles my original intention for that passage. Ideally, this process could take several weeks, but we must have the chore completed by Saturday, this week. This is further complicated by the fact that the second act is being altered and will not follow the opening in your scripts. The production team will have this remedied by the end of the week. Starting Monday, all rehearsals will become workouts at the hands of Rad. He is going to make accomplished dancers out of all of us. The second act requires extensive choreographic maneuvering. You are advised to wear dance attire and bring towels. No one is excluded from dance workshops regardless of how many left feet we happen to represent. Since all of the first act's lines will be assigned by Saturday, scripts will not be allowed on stage for use during Act One after the fifteenth of April. I can't stress our time factor enough. It's official folks! We are behind schedule before we even get started. We've got to make up this deficit in the first two weeks. For this reason, it is obvious how essential homework has become for all of us.

While I'm on the subject of extra time and extra effort, Spring Break starts on Thursday and Easter is Sunday. I'm not one to be a Bunny Scrooge but Fort Lauderdale is going to have nothing on Joey Tucker. 'The Boys' had better be here and that goes for the girls too. Rehearsals will run on schedule from six to ten and set work will begin every morning at eight o'clock during break for those of you who can help. Since you have a week off from classes, it would be tremendously advantageous for us to put in full days at The Hartung. There is considerable construction and a mess of painting and prop gathering to keep everyone busy. I'm not going to harp on this anymore. If you had plans, talk to me about them. I have just a couple more administrative items before we get into the script.

"Four days ago a major news article appeared in a prominent national Gay magazine called 'The Advocate.' Many of you may have already read the article for yourselves. For those of you who haven't, I'll paraphrase. Along with a decent story about the play and the stumbling blocks imposed by this university's Regents, it also dissects the relationship between me and my father who is Senator Robert Tucker. It talks about my father's career seemingly dedicated to the expulsion of Homosexuals everywhere, his anti-Gay legislative history and the fact that he has raised a Gay son."

"They could care less about our play in Washington D.C. My father and I share the stage there and it just happens to

be roped off into a boxing ring. Fortunately for us, Tampa thinks a little bit differently and so far, the media has been content to focus on the play. I wish I could tell you that this is going to be a sleepy little production but the fact of the matter is you've walked right into a media event. The Homosexual theme of our production combined with the resistance with which it has already met, creates an atmosphere for public interest. Toss in some celebrity sirloin and all of a sudden it becomes a magnet for Jackals. We can expect to be hounded. Now we can let this catch us by surprise or we can prepare for it. As most of you are aware, any revenue we produce after we've paid back our original five hundred dollar loan to the theatre, is channeled directly to the AIDS Foundation. Publicity for the most part, cannot hurt us as long as we appear unified as a cast and committed as actors. There are a lot of people dying out there who are going to see hope in our conviction. It is important that each of us in here understands the magnitude of that responsibility. Whether you are Gay or Straight, you're going to find a purpose for doing this show. You may not have it by the time you leave here tonight and you may not bring one back to rehearsal tomorrow, but sometime during the next few weeks, each one of you will be touched by the profound necessity of our contribution. It's going to show in your acting and it's going to be with you the rest of your lives. Something else is going

to be with us the rest of our lives and that is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. We've got to make a dent, kids. In this theatre, with this script and with our determination, we've got to make a dent."

Ramona had left and now returned to the stage with a glass of water which she handed to me. I took advantage of the break and gulped out loud as I gave them time to digest my pep talk.

"Right now, we're going to take twenty minutes and Sam is going to give an abbreviated tour of the facilities here. Combine this with a short potty break and be back on stage at seven-thirty. Thank you."

Mark and Nathan stayed behind as the group wandered off backstage. I stretched my arms and popped my back. Nathan waited until the house was clear and wrapped his arms around me.

"You're reaching us, Joey. I've got a lump in my throat the size of Mainland China, and I am proud to be your boyfriend."

"Yeah. -Me too!" Mark sounded. "Just kidding, Nathan. Come on you two. Let's cut the 'Walton Homecoming' and zero in on his plans to make me a dancer. There have got to be blueprints and one hefty jock strap for that undertaking."

"What are you saying, Mark?" I understood his reluctance to dance. It was the hefty jock strap that I wanted clarified.

"If someone thinks I'm going to be a dancer, they've got one big set of balls. This body doesn't dance. It doesn't

do cartwheels and it doesn't withstand pain."

"I bet you'd do a cartwheel if Patrick asked you to," Nathan wagered.

"Well that would be a cause, -almost an obligation."

"You'll dance, Mark. You'll both dance up a storm. You'll see."

Mark began rubbing his hands over an imaginary crystal ball. "I see traction. I see Dane placing the Director's mutilated body in the trunk of his car."

"Oh ye of little faith," I insisted.

"Faith I've got. Balance and coordination are what I've got ye-little-of, Tucker."

"We'll work on it. I promise."

Mark tossed his hands in the air and practiced an exaggerated leap off stage.

"You know, Nathan. We're lucky to have Rad and Sydney. 'Up with People' made them leave the group right here in Tampa because they suspected them to be Gay lovers."

"Are they?" Nathan asked with a hint of his own suspicion.

"As a matter of fact they are."

"Well, where do they plan to live? You just don't jump the train and set up a homestead."

"For now, they're staying at Mardell's, if you can believe that, but her roommate gets back on Saturday." I left the topic purposely opened for discussion.

"If they've committed themselves to our show, they'll have to stay some place, I suppose."

"And..?"

"And they can stay at the beach house until the show closes. They can house sit while we're away in Europe, too."

"Nathan, you shock me at least once every day. I'm sure you've sacrificed more for this show than anyone." I hugged him.

"You're probably right and if you expect me to dance without a live-in tutor, you're crazier than Mark. They can have the bedroom downstairs."

"Where you two prima donnas come off thinking you're not going to have to work for these leading roles is beyond me. Round 'em up, will you, Nathan?"

Seven twenty-eight and the auditorium doors opened and the group reconverged on stage. I thanked Sam for the tour.

"Monday morning at nine o'clock, we have a recording session booked at a production studio downtown. Segments of our show appear on video screens and we need to get those filmed as soon as possible to ensure we have quality takes that we can incorporate into rehearsals immediately. As a matter of direction, Act One begins with video. You'll notice in your scripts, there is a comical and entertaining exchange between three characters of the Planet Phallic. As actors, we have

to come up with the nelliest impersonations we can muster in order to emulate all the stereotypes of Homosexuals. These three preliminary characters are played by men. They have to be flighty and they have to break the ice. This is a heavy weight show and the audience is going to be uptight before the curtain even opens. We've got to treat this from the very start. I'll play one of the characters since my acting is one of the requirements of the production project, but anyone else capable of a winning lisp and someone not afraid to don a little mascara for this role, is encouraged to see me after rehearsal. Also for this same session, I need to tackle a couple more impersonations for video footage in Act Two. I need to develop a Ted Kopple look-alike. Where's Dennis and Kyle? Dennis, it might be a far stretch of the imagination but with a wig, and Ted wears one," I interjected, "and a little aging, I think you can pull off our leaning character of Ted Topple. And I couldn't help but notice during auditions that Kyle's voice sounds alot like Dan Rather. Our parody is the extremely dark network news anchor, Tan Matter. I have video tapes of both men that I'll bring in tomorrow. I'd like you to study them closely the rest of the week and over the weekend. We'll do what we can with it on Monday at the studio." Both seemed excited to receive their first assignments.

"One last thing while we're on the subject of news anchors and video. We've been asked to appear on Phil Morley's PM

Magazine next week. Of course, I'd be tickled pink if Nathan and Dane would volunteer as production spokesmen and show-up on the set in tank tops with biceps and pecs buldging to explain the little queer thing you're involved in on campus. But anyone sincerely interested in this venture, can talk to me this week.

Believe it or not, I'm finally to the point where we can get into the script a little. This next section might take a while but it's interesting. Don't feel compelled to take any notes. Just sit back and listen." There was some shuffling and slouching. Dane laid on his back on the stage in front of me. He wasn't having any trouble relaxing in a theatre full of Homosexuals. The Homosexuals, on the other hand, found it difficult to relax their fantasies, I imagine. (I wouldn't know.) I continued.

"I'm going to give you an historical basis for the script. From this, you should be able to get in touch with the different periods of the play and the varying attitudes toward Homosexuality throughout the ages. 'A Show of Hands' encompasses a mere two thousand years in two hours.

"In the prologue to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' Shakespeare said it was not his intention to offend. Nor should it be ours, but if we should, let it advance understanding."

"Let's start at the beginning, and I mean, THE Beginning. Whenever a writer lends his rendition or rather his interpretation of an event or passage from the Bible, it seldom

achieves total acceptance. Normally, I would not even choose to tangle with this sensitive aspect of accepted History, but since the Bible weighs so heavily and influences current thinking and philosophy to such a great extent, I am obliged to shed light from a different angle. 'A Show of Hands' is broken into two acts. Act One charts key events in Homosexual History as they are witnessed by an objective alien from the Planet of Phallic where everyone is gay and free from persecution. This alien beauty pageant victor is sent to Earth by the Phallic Census Bureau to obtain an accurate count of Homosexuals on our Planet Earth. This character, played by Nathan, and named 'Gil,' will travel through the ages documenting the often tragic progression of the Homosexual from the dawn of Man to a contemporary point in time where Gil is finally allowed to intervene and share his observations. This character's innocence should inspire a gut level viewpoint within the audience as well, since they too, will be forced to abandon prejudice and return to a humble and unadulterated beginning in the Garden of Eden where, unfortunately, Gil lands his rocketship five minutes too early. So let's rehash Sunday School, boys and girls. The Garden of Eden, a mythical garden located somewhere in ancient Mesopotamia, east of Assyria and near the river Euphrates, is where Adam meets Eve. Nothing complicated here; -boy meets girl. It's not like Eden was a teaming dicso in lower Manhattan and it's not like Adam had a lot of options.

But what if Adam had an option in the garden, another ingredient on the salad bar? What if Adam's option looked like Gil?"

I pointed to Nathan. "What if Gil looked like Adam?" I pointed to Mark. "Adam would have ditched the bitch and made the switch! Not because Nathan is adorable but because Nathan is built like Adam. That's how natural Homosexuality is."

"I think it's important that we examine the Middle Eastern background and the production of the Bible as we know it. But first consider that the Bible was written in a period that encompassed nearly two thousand years. Then consider the advances contemporary gays have made in the last twenty years. Ideas have changed drastically in our lifetimes so what prevents the assumption that radical changes in thought and tolerance must have taken place in ancient times as well? -Nothing, but a faith we're taught to profess and a book we're warned to accept. We know that Homosexuality must have flourished simply by all the Biblical laws written during this two thousand year period forbidding it. Probably one of the most tightly interpreted passages in the Bible inspiring anti-gay activism today, would have to be the account of the ill fated sister cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Book of Genesis tells of the story of Lot, his family and two angelic visitors in heavy disguise who entered the gate of the city of Sodom one evening. Lot wastes no time inviting the strangers to lodge in his household but the invitation doesn't go unnoticed and the news

of 'new meat' quickly spreads throughout the entire city. Now few can argue that the men of Sodom had gotten a bit carried away with sexual promiscuity. In fact, all signs point to an insensitive brutality and widespread sexual violence and abuse among the homosexual citizens of the area. And so the story goes that the men from every dwelling descended on Lot's humble flat and demanded that he produce the strangers so that the crowd may 'know' them. 'To know' is an interesting infinitive when it comes to Biblical usage. At any rate, Lot begged that the crowd 'know' his two virgin daughters and leave the strangers alone. Well this wasn't exactly the bargain of the week and the crowd proceeded to threaten Lot. Now the angels, feeling somewhat responsible for the provocation, open the door to the house and jerk Lot back inside, but not before they pulled one of those impressive Bible stunts out of the sacred hat. The entire crowd is struck blind. Lot's family and the two angels escape from the city. Lot's wife, having been instructed not to look behind at the destruction from which she fled, knew she had one helluva story to tell her bridge club and she stole a quick glance back. Well ashes to ashes and curiosity to salt, she was iodined. Soon after, as legend would have it, the entire city was destroyed by earthquake. I doubt the plot would last on prime time but the ratings have survived for centuries."

"From the Bible, we continue our historical homage in Greece. There's a lot to be said about the Greeks. There's

a lot more to be just plain understood. The Greeks really had few hang-ups and sexual expression wasn't one of them. The Athenians of the Fourth Century before Christianity, not only accepted the concept of a sexually uninhibited society but they also respected and practiced Homosexuality as a means of transferring power and wisdom from man to man, father to son, and god to mortal. The list of Homosexual practitioners was much more extensive and as equally impressive as the social register at the Parthenon, which might as well have been a bath house considering its patronage. Zeus, himself, was said to be no stronger than the weakest attraction of a handsome male warrior. Temptation had a strangle hold on society and giving in to it seemed to be an obsessive pastime. The ancient Greeks are still often criticized for an idealistic stance with homosexual freedoms and for being the father of promiscuous theory. -That's quite a legacy, if you ask me."

"The next milepost on our highway of Homosexual History, marks an event late in the seventeen hundreds during the reign of Fredrick the Great, King of Prussia. A patron of artists and philosophers, King Fred publicly kept company with his lover, Hans von Katte. Fredrick's father was vehemently outraged by the affair and ordered the execution of Katte by decapitation. King Fredrick was forced to witness the execution and is reported to have blown his lover a kiss and begged for forgiveness. Then he fainted before the actual beheading. King Fredrick

the Great died in 1786."

"Now, I'm going to take a seemingly illogical jump to a more contemporary period, but as you'll see, some of the most shocking atrocities levied against homosexuals, occurred after the turn of the Nineteenth Century. But first, we'll take a look at a fascinating character who succeeded in fooling much of the world. The date is 1895. The place is Castellaneta in Southern Italy. And the man is Rudolfo Alfonzo Rafaelo Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentino d' Antonguolla. Just thirty-one years later he was to die suddenly on August 23, 1926 as the Great Lover, Rudolph Valentino. His short life was a remarkable success story from his schooling in a small agricultural college in Italy to his becoming the most critically praised and most recognized actor in American Silent Film. This original Italian Stallion didn't experience the same success off screen. He was locked out of the master bedroom on the honeymoon night of his first marriage to Jean Acker and he hadn't perfected his bedside courage for a second marriage with actress-producer Natacha Rambova. It is said that neither marriage was ever consummated and rumors circulated that the Great Lover was physically impotent. But what's more concrete than cement? And speaking of 'hard,' Rudy had no problem getting it up and off at 'The Torch Club' of Hollywood, -a popular hang out for actors and studio directors of the male persuasion. Famous for its ten cocktail bars, four large Roman-style baths

and forty some odd private bedroom suites, the spot was immortalized by such film greats. For Valentino, the tragedy lies in a dark closet imprisoned by a couple dozen feature films that rather promoted him to be the greatest heterosexual lover of all time. Unfortunately for those who have the task of piecing together his life, Rudolph Valentino left no personal diary or artifact that conclusively proves much of anything. Therefore, he is condemned to eternal speculation."

"Unlike this sex idol from Italy, a man whose infamy followed Valentino's some twelve years after, certainly was not clouded in speculation or doubt. In undeniable fact, Adolph Hitler became the dreaded Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. In the years that followed, hundreds of thousands of Jews disappeared in a Holocaust which has been much publicized since, though it astoundingly escaped criticism or intervention at the time. With the Jews, over two hundred thousand homosexuals were rounded up and murdered in concentration camps. Hitler was zealous in pursuit of his superior race and gays seemed to impede his rage by emasculating the empire. They quickly found pink triangles on their labels. Before the purge, homosexuality had celebrated the carefree Twenties with a vengeance and no where was this more in evidence than in the major cities of Europe. When Adolph Hitler suddenly lowered the boom, the first heads it landed on just happened to belong to homosexuals high in the ranks of the Third Reich. Right

have no idea of the impact he was to later achieve in the area of gay rights in his own country. But little Harvey did grow up and accomplished more for gay society and advancement than any single man before his time. Rising from obscurity to become San Francisco's City Supervisor from District Five, and the first openly gay elected politician in the United States, Milk succeeded in passing pro-gay legislation both on municipal and state levels. Often opposing elected heavyweights with three times his political seniority, Milk spoke against human rights violations on every front and in nearly every forum where an audience gathered to listen. Harvey Milk was probably best known for his defeat of 'The Briggs Amendment,' 'Proposition Six' and Anita Bryant's Crusade for a Heterosexual Christ.

It was no surprise that opposition stood up to slap Harvey in the face. In fact, the only element of surprise didn't actually surface until a rainy day in November, -the 27th in 1978. Barely a year after Harvey Milk took office, he was murdered by fellow Supervisor Dan White, at City Hall. A disgruntled White who saw Harvey Milk embodying the degradation of society as he knew it, emptied five bullets into the gay supervisor's chest after he had lodged four separate bullets in the body of Mayor George Moscone across the hall. Both politicians died instantly.

In the murder trial that certainly followed, Dan White was convicted on two counts of voluntary manslaughter. The prison sentence for these very lenient charges was established at seven

years, eight months plus time off for good behavior. Good Behavior? Dan White had executed two political officials and makes up for it by serving a seven year jail term? Dan White was released January 6th of last year, having only served a sentence of five years, one month and nine days. Ten months later, only five months ago, Dan White committed suicide on October 21st."

I closed the blue notebook and took a long breath. "As for the rest of the play, well, it has it's footnotes somewhere in the future. Once you read through the entire script, at home, when you have time, -like tonight before rehearsal tomorrow, " I cleared my throat for emphasis, "you can expect to achieve a better understanding of these events and the impact they have had on current day thinking and attitudes."

I stood up brushing imaginary stage dust from my jeans as it was the dramatic thing to do. "Let's call it a wrap for tonight. We can pick up tomorrow where we left off, and we'll start by blocking the first act. Thank you and good night."

The cast gathered their notes and scripts and shuffled toward the back doors. I had misread Mark's watch and it was only nine fifteen, but I had provided a decent introduction and I believe I had convinced the forces that we were justified in our assault. Nathan asked if I wanted to bring the Tropicana crate home tonight, but we left it on the stage, empty like an abandoned womb.

When we walked into the lobby after turning lights out in the theatre, we encountered members of the cast propped up against every wall and scattered up the staircase. Each gazed at opened scripts.

"You didn't expect to leave us hanging, did you?" Dane asked for all of them.

While full worth had not yet reached maturation, adolescence held undeniable promise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

'A Show of Hands' was a runaway horse and Nathan's and my relationship, tangled in the reins, was going to be dragged through a great deal of trail mix. As it turns out, there were a lot more raisins that I even cared to anticipate.

The April 'Advocate' was stocked and sold, leaving in its immortal wake a snappy, not to mention thorough exposé of my father's legislative antics over the years. A pebble had been forcefully heaved into a murky pond and there wasn't bank nor cove that didn't receive a ripple of some magnitude. For my father, it must have appeared that surf was up, since no where was my 'coming out' more recognized and talked about than in Washington D.C.

'The Washington Blade,' unquestionably the District's most

credible gay publication, was stuck in the center of the Senator's back, editorializing him up one bigoted side and down the homophobic other. 'The Post' even carried a partial column on page three of Sunday's Edition. No matter where the news happened to surface, there seemed to be a common demand for the Senator to stand up and speak in his own pathetic defense. After all, it wasn't my admittance so much as it was the fact my father had laboriously constructed a shaky political platform nailed together with anti-gay sentiment. I caught myself smiling a lot when I thought about it. And my father has this uncanny knack for fouling up every impromptu public address so it was no surprise to hear nothing but silence from the Senior Tucker Camp for several days. Then, finally, after the original article was filed in 'The Advocate,' and in seeming conjunction with the subsequent media dominoes that fell one after the other, Jerry appeared in front of the cameras in the Senate Press Room on Thursday. My father, on the other more concealed hand, was yards away in the Capitol bathrooms throwing up repeatedly out of nervousness and runaway disgust, -all according to my mother who later relayed the incident via telephone. But Jerry was as calm and cool as the mannequin he was paid to be while he read the two minute statement without expression and without apparent attachment to its carefully written supremacist attitude. I hadn't forgotten, though he evidently had, how he had once been on my side of a very similar speech delivered by Senator Tucker.

You see, Jerry had a skeleton or two hanging out in his closet too. But I'll get to that later.

Jerry was a logical sort of guy, well schooled in conservative thought but equally versed in a somewhat liberal lifestyle. In January of 1984, he was 'Cosmopolitan's Bachelor of the Year,' photographed on top of his spanking brand new BMW in front of his Paper Mill Townhome overlooking the Potomac from Georgetown. Jerry was young for his accomplishments and dangerously handsome for his own good. This not only made him particularly attractive to the juvenocratic surge on the Hill in the late Seventies, but it also listed him as a major commodity in the D.C. social circles that were usually dominated by dusty old farts with charming and eligible daughters. He had earned himself a standing invitation if not a moral obligation to attend every political hoe-down within a fifty mile radius. As for his actual object of worship, it predictably seemed to be money. By the time he had reached thirty, which in itself seemed almost avoidable when you considered his physicality, he had nursed quite a savings account which had been treated by the tributaries of inheritance and popularity. Nevertheless, it was in the Spring of 1982 when Jerry was just beginning his apprenticeship in Congress under the direction of Congressman Peterson of Massachusetts, that his astuteness and enthusiasm began to gather moss, as it were. Had Jerry's Washington State boyhood naivete prevailed, Jerry could have

earned himself the Congressman's last name as well. But Jerry learned quickly and narrowly escaped the razor sharp talons of Washington decadence. For, at a time and for the most part unknowingly, Jerry was the acting senior page in the United States House of Representatives, presiding over an infamous brood of teen-age sex for barter. All in all, only two elected Congressmen and three junior pages were exposed in a gay sex ring that shook the House and Senate Chambers nearly bringing the walls of the Capitol Building down about them. Somehow, Jerry was spared implication. In the foreshadowing of what was to become a sordid mess for all involved, Senator Tucker extended a political wing over his new hatching informant. After all, Jerry was the key whistle blower and he blew for all he was worth. Six weeks later and after the hearing that followed the initial exposure, Jerry signed with Senator Tucker's staff, just in time to co-author some of the most lethal anti-gay rules and regulations in this century. For many, and certainly for me, it was difficult to tell where exactly the uncovering stopped and the real cover-up began. Mysteriously the issue was dropped despite Peterson's claim of having performed oral sex on Jerry on two occasions. The Senator's trust and the Senator's praise never wavered. Jerry had been a savior to the candidacy of my father's second Senatorial bid and he would be rewarded accordingly.

And so Jerry had little problem delivering my father's

statement, which he had probably written anyway, to cast public attention far from his own personal insecurities. As he had before, he'd once again proclaim his allegiance to Senator Tucker's denouncement of homosexuality. And as I had before, I'd once again sit in front of a television and listen to my father's absurdities ring from shore to shore like Liberty herself. And I'd shudder at the thought of the ramifications these statements would have in my own gay world and the new independence his words might discourage.

But this press conference would be different because of my determination and my example to overcome. I was in the immediate company of hundreds of thousands who shared my conviction to sprint past the barbed wire that poles like Robert Tucker struggled to support in the hope of ensnaring our pride and our will to achieve. And with this family in a crowded living room, I faced a television screen with eyebrows raised in silent defiance. Jerry neared the podium, cleared his throat and began to read flawlessly.

"With regard to Senator Robert Tucker's son and in an attempt to address the media with sufficient response to an unfortunate set of circumstances, the Senator has prepared a short statement which I will read at this time." Jerry placed a pair of glasses on his nose and Nathan turned up the television. Jerry read.

"As a father, I have long encouraged independence and

determination in my children. All three of my offspring were raised in fundamental pursuit of the original Decalogue handed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Among these laws, the commandment to honor thy Mother and Father was hoped to have been our accomplished emphasis. The recent events and escapades of my eldest son in Florida, ashamedly came to his mother and me as a malicious and disrespectful slap in the face. The fact he had incorporated an exorbitant amount of independence in his lifestyle is of no consolation to either of us at this time. This disgrace he has chosen for himself certainly distinguishes him from a true member of the Tucker family. Joseph is aware of the family unit and what it represents in our household, and he is also aware of the consequences of dishonoring his parents. He will now have to take responsibility for his actions as only he can. I have washed my hands of the matter and wholly intend to sleep peacefully tonight having made this statement and knowing in my heart that I have done all I can as a parent to discourage this behavior. I am afraid and greatly distressed to discover my son has bowed to the monetary incentive raised by my adversaries. It is clear that only a reward of high proportion could have provoked such hateful and disrespectful actions on the part of my son. It is a sad state of political affairs when there are those who would stoop so low as to deploy one's own children against him. I know the public will recognize this for what it is." Jerry looked up from the prepared page.

"The Senator has no further comment. He is unavailable to field your questions on this issue and he hopes this statement has been helpful. Thank you."

Nathan switched off C-Span and the telephone rang once, twice and then three times before any of us could break the trance held by the television, to answer it. I was too proud to be ashamed in front of my friends and I struggled to maintain composure. I picked up the receiver and mumbled "Hello."

"Joseph, it's your mother. Did you catch that?"

"Yes. Thanks for calling earlier to let us know."

"Now don't be too terribly upset and give me a chance to explain. Your father's acting irrational which is what he was elected to do. In no way do I endorse his statement nor do I share any emotional likeness to his staged distress. I am very proud of you Joseph and whether your father will ever admit it to himself, his son is every bit as convicted as he is. Now then, let it all out honey. I only have a couple minutes."

"Where are you calling from?" I managed to ask.

"A pay-phone in the Rotunda. Your father's down the hall, throwing up I think. He's just as dramatic as you are, dear."

"He copped out, Mom. The Press didn't ask him to apologize for his son. They demanded he account for his own action and for his own history with the issue."

"But that's just it, honey. Don't you see how ridiculous he sounded? 'Throwing in the Ten Commandments like that. Anyone

with a half a mind can see right through that crap. Hell, a Nebraskan Farmer could grow corn in the dust on top of our Family Bible at home. 'The Post' won't be satisfied with that piss-poor response and my God, 'The Blade' won't sit back and rust. Back home, the state is in turmoil over this but you see, dear, it's the first time they have gotten fired up over anything. Well, there was the corn blight in 1976 and Debra Winger's speeding tickets in the governor's car in '85, but other than that, honey, you are the news."

"But I don't want to be a spectacle or a freak show for the citizens of Nebraska, mama. I want to be respected for being the man I am."

"Respect takes time, doll. People around 'Corn Country U.S.A.' still think Debra Winger's a little fast for her own good and she's come out with two decent movies since that branding incident three years ago. Respect isn't a nametag or a badge that you're awarded overnight. Give it time."

"Right now, I'm so angry, I feel I could stage a press conference on my own."

"Then by all means, hold one. You've got enough credibility now to command the press at any given moment. Set a time and prepare a statement."

"And you'll support me? I mean, you'll come right out and say you support me?"

"Well, in a way I already have, I suppose."

"What do you mean by that, mama?"

"Yesterday, the 'National Organization of Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians' asked me to be the national spokesperson at their annual conference and fund raiser next month. Your father doesn't know yet, of course, and this could very well end our marriage, but I'll stand by my children even when he won't."

"Mom, I don't know what to say." Tears rushed my eyes.

"Just make me proud, Joseph. I don't want to get up in front of all those people if this play is a flop. I may run for office someday."

"And you should. Don't worry, mama. This play is respectable and in good taste. And even if it turns out to be just another college production, I've already turned a profit for the National AIDS Foundation. I have made advances, mother and you should be proud."

"To get your father to respond to one of his own children on public television is advancement beyond my expectations. But your father's out of the bathroom and I should be going. How's Nathan?"

"Mom, he's right here and he's fine. You know, he's a real strong person just like you always said I'd need. Of course, we're up to our necks in production right now and we don't have near the time we need to ourselves, but there will be plenty of time to correct that. I really can't wait for

you to meet him. You will be coming to the show, won't you?"

I sniffled uncontrollably

"Oh, honey. Of course I intend to be there. It just really depends on your father and on what stage of divorce we'll most likely be in by then."

"Divorce at this point, wouldn't be so tragic, you know."

"It's a lot easier for you to divorce yourself than it is for me. I'm not sure I've gotten everything out of him that I'm going to need. Time will tell."

"Oh, mom. I wish you could be here. It's all so exciting now. So much publicity is spreading around and no one, including the University, really knows quite what to make of it. I miss you, mom. Especially when I've ran into the same wall for the eighth time in the same day. I usually try to think how you'd handle it and well, it's gotten me where I am right now. It's been a crazy life, hasn't it, mama? I mean, with dad's career and living in that shadow and all the really silly things I did growing up. 'Remember PeeWee League, Mom?'"

"I've still got those flowers squished in the Britannica back home under 'J' for Joseph, and I'm every bit as touched now as I was back then. It's never easy watching your kids grow up I guess, but it's certainly been entertaining. Now that I think about it, you were more experience than any twelve mothers packed under their aprons. If I could have traded all your tears for blueberry Popsicles, I would have done it long

ago just to see those blue lips of yours ask me for one more before dinner time. But I could only protect you so much I suppose. I figured if I guarded you from your father, you could probably take care of yourself when it came to anything else. And you have, you know. So much so, that you can even confront the Senator on your own terms. I feel sainted within the Matriarchs."

"I love you, mom."

"I know you do and I love you too. I'll be there opening night so save me the best seat in the house, you hear?"

"It'll be the seat right next to mine, mama. I'll see you then and don't take anymore of dad's shit."

"Don't you worry. The wheelbarrow's full and I doubt I'll be pushing it around for the Senator much longer. Goodbye, sweetheart." She made a kissing sound in the receiver.

"Goodbye, mom."

In the aftermath of that press conference, things began to add up everywhere I looked except at the box office where they seemed to rather multiply. Presale three weeks before the first curtain was dangerously nearing sell-out and the regents, in forced cooperation with the Theatre Arts Department, scrambled to add two additional weekends to the show's record run. By the end of the week I was able to stage a press conference of my own, not so much to tempt my father into using

Nathan had been against my public outcry from the start. He had said a few days ago that what really mattered were the people, the victims I could affect, -the men and women my efforts might help, and not who, between my father and me, could scream the loudest. Even the biggest scream, he said, had only a limited number of times it could echo off a canyon wall before it faded and was forgotten. But charity, he said, is self-perpetuating and lasts forever. Let the folks know what a humanitarian you are and don't give the doubters the satisfaction of the stereotype by turning out to be just another blithering faggot. -And Nathan was right. Life isn't a single issue. You make your point and move on.

In a very introspective state I took a three mile walk along the beach. I tossed a broken sand dollar back into the surf and softly sat down. A tear suddenly raced over my cheek and dropped to the sand before my eyes could even account for it. Then, one after the other, tears spewed from both eyes. Why should I cry now? I wiped my eyes confused by my own emotions. I had my play. I'd won the heart of Nathan. I'd defeated my father. Tears of elation? Why not, for a change. I had to giggle at the sun who begged me for one last stare-down before he dipped his fiery toes into the gulf and the rambunctious breeze kicked up her heels announcing the advent of evening. Higher up on the beach, a little red sports car

darted onto the shoulder of the frontage road and flashed its lights. I waved to the familiar design and the driver emerged as the last shimmer of the setting sun struggled to highlight his blond hair as he approached the edge of the water. I patted my eyes as his hands gripped the muscles behind my neck. For a while, he said nothing sensing my state of repose.

"I'm tired," I finally said, quite matter of factly. The sun slipped completely beneath the horizon before I bothered to return to the statement to elaborate. "So much has to be done before I can sleep." I was courting compulsory hysterics. "I know you're tired, too," I told him. "I've put you through Hell and the tour's not over yet. I've been a lousy boyfriend so far. It must seem that all I do is take and never give." A sea gull skimmed the golden surf in front of us and our eyes followed it. "I've never needed anyone as much as I need you and I haven't even taken time to tell you that. It's so frightening; -to love, that is. It's like exposing an open cut to the knife responsible. Jesus! Do I ever make sense? I just want to sleep." I dug a hole in the sand until I reached water. "Do you think that you and I could just take a nap the minute this play-thing is finished?" He moved to sit beside me. My eyes drifted out over the water. Nathan drew a heart in the wet sand between us. "God, don't stop loving me now," I begged him. Nathan smiled and traced a corral in the sand around us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Broadway, I pondered with daring imagination. It certainly didn't seem plausible that my show could go all the way when it seemed less than a month ago that it would go no where at all. But news from Ramona that Vivian Fox and Duane Mercure, had just purchased tickets for closing night, fueled ambitions that had been running near empty after the first full week of rehearsals.

"I've never heard of Vivian and Duane," Nathan admitted.

"Well, me neither until now, but according to Ramona, who got it straight from the ticket broker who took the phone order, if you're a director aiming for Broadway, and Fox and Mercure happen to pick up your show, you're in for one helluva long run. And they're coming here to Tampa to scout my material! Do you know what that means, Nathan?"

"Tell me."

"We'll have to increase rehearsal time. That's all there is to it."

"Joey, you can't increase rehearsal time. You've got three actors on academic probation as it is. You increase rehearsal time and we'll have to put kindergarten nap mats and sleep in the theatre before class. They're going to break."

"Are you finished? My dear Nathan, it's only for three more weeks. We're just not there yet. We lack technical grease and dramatic perspective."

"And what in the hell is that supposed to be?"

"I'll tell you exactly what it is. It is precisely what Fox and Mercure will be looking for, that's what."

"Come on, Joey. It's only a college production!"

"Only a college production. Well, that's just nice, isn't it. And I suppose Harvey Milk was just a queer politician and I suppose Oscar Wilde was just another writer and I suppose Michelangelo was just a ceiling painter. 'A Show of Hands' might be just a Broadway Sensation, too. Only time can tell; not Nathan, not the Regents and not my father. Only time, and Vivian Fox and Duane Mercure," I lectured. "I will tell the cast this afternoon. It will create healthy anxiety and the more professionally oriented we become now, the easier it's going to be for Fox and Mercure to visualize our transfer to a cushy Broadway Theatre."

Nathan was stone set against paying my tantrum any further attention and I knew it. I went back downstairs to fix a neutral breakfast to re-establish diplomatic relations in the household. I couldn't help but interject the topic again at the breakfast table as the news was sure to draw Sydney and Rad into my camp. My inroad was ingenious suggesting that Rad take advantage of Nathan's gymnastic prowess in some of the choreography. Rad agreed that a few show-stoppers strategically placed could raise the level of difficulty far above 'just a college production.' Nathan began to see my point and share my objective though I never expected him to verbalize the defection from his original line of reasoning. He was as stubborn as his Bighorn boyfriend.

With the reliability of the new sun came a replenished source of energy that seemed unfailing as the days raced by us. Expectedly, the day would tax every stock pile in my vast warehouse, I'd steal a few hours of sleep and remarkably be ready the very next day to face twice as much as the day before. Nathan wasn't holding up anywhere near my exhausting schedule but he wasn't giving in either. Both he and Mark spent nearly two hours each day mastering the dance that Rad had choreographed much above the innate ability of the cast, and after a week, they were actually getting it. I had made it a point to learn each step just to prove that anyone could dance and I'll never forget the looks on their faces that first evening Rad and I

laid out the seven minute routine on stage as Sydney accompanied in four-four time on the baby grand piano.

By the close of that second week, Sydney had gone out on a limb by recruiting nine additional musicians to form the show's orchestra. Five were gay 'Up with People' alumni from around the Bay Area and the rest came from the University Music Center. When these ten musicians got together, it became the best damn exciting interpretation of an original piano line, that I had ever heard. We made arrangements to utilize the hydraulic orchestra pit and to throw out all pre-recorded sound. We were going live and Joey had his musical.

Easter weekend and Spring Break came and went but not before Junior and Mark advanced three days ahead of their projected set schedule. There had been an informal agreement to pitch in during break to work on the massive multi-scene set, and I'll be damned if every last one of them didn't show up at seven o'clock each morning. Styrofoam, lumber and canvas were everywhere, but when the last of the polyethylene fumes seeped out of the air vents in that theatre, the entire set had been raised and Mark and Junior had been painting every since. The stage was ready for technical rehearsals with Nathan and Sam. So much attention had been paid to the really big things like scene and sound but I knew it was time to work on the guts of the production; -lines, costumes and make-up.

The Hartung Costume Shop now worked overtime to crank out the leotards, pink triangles and spacesuits that the production demanded and I drilled actors scene after scene for diction and projection. The blocking had been easy since the show seldom stops moving long enough for anyone to look awkward standing in one place.

Though attention to detail became obsessively crucial, it was a cinch to see that the cast would much rather be dancing or constructing instead of memorizing and articulating. The show was opening in little less than three weeks and more and more time was spent in longer and more intense rehearsals. Nathan is quick to claim that my subliminal charisma encouraged the cast to cut classes in order to log more hours in my shadow and on stage with 'A Show of Hands.' I found that preposterous. If anyone ditched class it was because they had read ahead in their textbooks, never mind when, and found no use for elective review in class lectures.

But there were snags and plenty of them, too. The aerial harness to be worn by Nathan for the opening of the show when he is lowered to the stage, could not be perfected. He'd either come down from the loft crooked, or not at all. Once he even fell out of the harness six feet above the stage but he wasn't hurt. I tried additional guide wire and counterweight, but the rigging had become too complicated to stabilize. Then one night, on the verge of R.E.M. sleep, it came to me; -why

not a phallic spaceship? I talked with Mark who had long since abandoned convention and morality in Art and he set about designing the wonderful, penis-shaped space craft. Upon completion two days later, it was six and a half feet tall, large enough for Nathan's compact body, with a clear plastic head-shaped dome. It was wired for lights, white on the inside of the spaceship to illuminate the passenger and red flashing lights on the exterior for stellar pizzazz. Two brace bars ran through the capsule and extended for a foot on each side where three hundred pound test cords were attached and threaded through a sophisticated set of pulleys and rigged to an electric counterweight system on stage left. Nathan was subjected to a battery of initially embarrassing test runs in which he had to board the craft from the catwalk nearly fifty feet above the stage floor. We later installed an electric fan in the bottom of the craft to displace the synthetic fog that choked the stage during the opening of Act One. For this, Sydney composed a separate score of special effects using a synthesizer.

Roberta, 'Bert,' from the costume shop upstairs, surprised us all by turning out full leotards in flesh tones for Lauren, who played Eve, with green sequin leaves in strategic locations. They looked wonderful in the lights and on the set of The Garden of Eden. Mark's and Nathan's leotards were mostly flesh-tone except for the bright red Canadian Maple Leaf sewn in sequins over their crotches. This implied the similarity between the

two males in practical neon. I was tickled by Bert's intuitive nature.

The three large wagons for the second act had been completed late last night when the video projectors were installed inside each of the them. The actual production of the video footage had already taken the last eight days. Two separate sequences had to be flawless and when they happened to be attempted take-offs of existing TV programs, the main concentration was to emulate rather than to duplicate. And so 'Nightline' with Ted Koppel, became 'Nighttime with Ted Topple, and the 'Phil Donahue Show' became the 'Bill Monahue Show.' Dennis was able to pull off the visual presentation of Ted Topple but he had some problem with the voice patterns of the star anchor. Finally, the studio relented to edit at no extra cost.

As you'll remember, one of the original provisions of the semester project was that the playwright actually act in the production. I played two roles and both were captured on video tape so I would not have to be on stage during the actual performances. I played the role of the first citizen of Phallic which assured my name being listed first as characters in order of appearance, and I played the part of Bill Monahue. The rough spot with the latter appearance was assembling a live audience of middle aged females who cared to participate in the play. At the last moment, Ramona arranged to transport the entire secretarial pool of City Hall, and three different lunch hours

were spent taping the segment in a studio borrowed from WTPA. I could have easily gotten carried away, being surrounded by twenty-eight dishing women who thought I was the cutest thing since Pierce Brosnan, but time remained an ever-pressing factor and even 'Bill' had to eventually concede to deadline.

Last Wednesday, we actually took the show van, a video crew and 'Tan Matter' to Cape Canaveral to tape a sequence in front of the first space shuttle to occupy a launch pad since the tragic Challenger mishap of 1986. Splice by splice, the video segments were coming together.

In the meantime, Senator Tucker had been tactically reduced by the Washington Press Corps to denying comment. Mom went public with her acceptance to speak at the National Conference of the Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians. Father spent more and more time in the townhouse off Capitol Hill, making fewer trips back to the demanding state of constituency. Mom seldom accompanied him anymore unless a state dinner warranted her presence in public. She made arrangements to fly to Tampa at the end of next week and my father predictably objected saying she was entirely 'out of line.' 'Out of line,' she thought as she called her secretary and made arrangements to spend an additional weekend in Florida with her queer son. Nathan fixed up his parents master bedroom and Ramona brought over some things she felt my mother could use. My younger brother and sister wanted to make the trip but father imposed immediate sanctions

by revoking credit cards and upholding tuition payments for summer school, until they agreed to stay put.

Springtime in the Bay City couldn't have been more accommodating; -eighty-five degrees plus in the shade and not a cloud in the deep South. Flowers soon lined the roadside from Clearwater Beach into Tampa, and if only I had the time to enjoy it, romance would have been in good company.

And speaking of romance, it was everywhere. Ramona snagged a suitor; -the real Wall Street type: a mathematical genius but a common sense klutz! He was quite successful in the business world jetting to and from Tampa from major points of commerce on the planet. Originally from Burma, this son of English tycoon parenting, was schooled in London where he developed the noble knack for international banking. His aloof demeanor struck Romona in all the right places; one place in particular mid-latitude, evidenced by the smile on her face and sudden spring in her step. His rugged physique and thick black hair, (or the fact that it was his own at age 52,) struck all of us as charming with the onset of his courtship. Nightly he would arrive at the theatre and whisk Ramona off to a late dinner in some chic Tampa night spot, where, as Ramona recounts, he would shower her with fresh oysters and bay prawns until her legs would seem to levitate off the floor in some aphrodisiac induced stupor. After that, like most anyone, she justified,

she would be lost to bliss for the remainder of the evening. The following afternoon she would float into the theatre after "yachting since dawn" with sunburns in the strangest places. I distinctly remember rubbing Solarcane on the bottoms of her feet during rehearsal two nights ago. Regardless, Sir Candor Auden was Ramona's answer to heat. It was that simple and that involved.

Mark, on the other hand, found romancing a little more complicated than giving into a platter of shellfish. He was beginning to spend all of his time with that Swiss character, Patrick, whom I had incidentally cast into the production on Mark's personal reference. Patrick would bring books and articles to rehearsal from which he would quote Stalin and Marxist theories on Socialism for hours. Mark actually appeared intrigued and though their discussions, of which I occasionally caught wind, proved to be intellectually stimulating for Mark, I feared he longed for sensitivity and a more intimate approach. According to Mark, though it's absolutely none of our business, he hadn't even touched Patrick. Mark felt certain that if he held out long enough, Patrick would eventually give-in to proletariat pleasures. I would coach Mark with suggestions for introducing homosexuality to Patrick's socialistic scheme of things, but Mark procrastinated saying, "Patrick is a fundamentalist not prone to the sexual liberties of the Twentieth Century nor to the vices therein which could uproot the system."

I had to ask Mark if that could possibly carry any validity in a contemporary vein. He admitted that so far, the veins that count, hadn't carried anything. "But as long as my values of attrition are not compromised or threatened, almost anything carries validity these days. Hell, the bloody Swiss could tell me he believed Humpty Dumpty was pushed and I'd gladly formulate some coup d'etat premise to support his theory."

And aside from the monopolization by 'A Show of Hands,' I was free to wallow in Nathan's abundant love. But regardless of this pig's contentment, I too, may have been a little indifferent to the mud. I hated taking him for granted but time and schedule left little thought to sustenance. Nathan existed and Nathan loved. Those two acts of duty didn't require constant visual aid. Of course, to Nathan it must have seemed I existed and I directed, but that would be taking my life out of context. The two of us didn't have time for flowers or for spray-painted missives of endearment on concrete retaining walls. For now, we had to settle for 'I love you's' scribbled on a steamy bathroom mirror or for stolen kisses at a deserted stoplight during our commute.

Unavoidably, we envied Sydney and Rad who always seemed to manage time together on the beach or at a movie, or downtown at the clubs. Last week they moved into the beach house at Nathan's insistence only to frustrate Nathan to no end with their constant displays of affection and mutual admiration.

From our bedroom window, Nathan would point them out chasing each other naked in the surf, by the light on the moon. I promised him we could chase each other until we dropped, just as soon as the play was finished. Then, he had to know, I'd fall directly asleep. The play, he must have thought, was our prodigal child. By no choice of his own he was chosen to foster the dream, guardian by proxy. He grew to despise the responsibility by which I was consumed. But in spite of it all, he was an outstanding actor true to his limited credits, and he gave every bit as much as I did. If Nathan offered to chase me on the beach, it was a sure bet that we wouldn't make it to the back deck without caving in to exhaustion. We were that tired.

Huey sat in on rehearsals from time to time, with his legs crossed and his shoulders pinned back as if to announce our show as his personal discovery. Never too far away in the back of my mind was the reminder of his involvement when I first struggled for recognition. I was a lot like my mother in that I could forgive but I was incapable of forgetting.

Dane, after being somewhat recalcitrant in the beginning, now idolized my direction and longed to be more like Nathan. It was very easy for me to catch Dane mimicking Nathan's use of theatrics, often exaggerated one step bigger and three decibels louder. The frequent audience of Dane's pigskin-tossing peers seldom seemed to impede his performance or his flare for

the stage. I never discouraged their attendance for several reasons. They helped destroy the inhibitions of my more heterophobic actors, Dane and I seemed to have an understanding that no harm would come to our production and Nathan seemed to revel in being lowered fifty feet to the stage floor in a seven foot penis with half of the school's brawny Brahmins completely aghast in the front row. It certainly didn't hurt the show's reputation one bit when the university's mascots were practically grazing in my orchestra pit. I found security in their presence. Otherwise and by practice, I had no use for ego-toting jocks who, for the most part, lacked the wisdom and ingenuity to say anything more intelligent than the same pointless statements their fathers had said in their time. Of course, we know by now, that I placed anyone who quoted their fathers on a microscopic slide for mental dissection. But Dane was all right. Besides, Nathan was a jock of sorts and their two examples lent hope to the class.

Who would have ever guessed I'd fall in love with a jock? I suppose we were just one of those silly matches with nothing more in common than our crazy love for each other. And we were inseparable. We spent most every rehearsal break in the light booth, gambling with the possibility of stray sweat shorting out the entire computer light panel turning the two of us into a couple of 'Ore-Ida Crinkle Cut French Fries. There were even times when we happened to take advantage of leftover energy

and a late night walk...in the back yard. Nathan was a hopeless romantic, if there were still such a character. On those rehearsal nights when nobody seemed to be doing anything right, I'd unload my entire world on Nathan's shoulders in front of everyone. Nathan took my ranting in stride and would announce to the entire cast that he still loved me anyway. About that time he would strut offstage with that cute athletic butt scrunched up inside some pastel colored sweat pants and I was Jell-o, too horny to stand myself, -well, too horny to stand period! And then this little 'Marlin Perkins' voice would begin to narrate some Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep adventure and I was...let's just say I was somewhere else. And Nathan begged me to go someplace, anyplace with him. "Just the two of us, alone, without the thirty-six member chaperon squad. 'Just one weekend off, Joey," he implored.

"Opening night," I would remind him, "just two weeks away."

"One night then. We'll drive down the coast to Naples. We'll get a hotel."

"We can use that night in rehearsals. We'll get an ovation."

Nathan knew it was no use. I couldn't allow time away from the show anymore than Omar Gadhafy could allow the Loveboat to sail into the Gulf of Sidra. But I promised to bring a packed set of matching luggage to closing night and we could get away and stay months if he liked. "Once this is over," I told him,

"Nathan Evans will be everything and I'll be Nathan's until forever comes." I took a stab at sentiment in an effort to reassure him of my love. But he saw through my sappiness.

"Until forever comes," he reminded me, "-or until 'A Show of Hands' opens on Broadway and 45th Street.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was quickly becoming apparent how critical the role of aspirations played in the lives of everyone about me. Achieving respect as a theatre company in spite of the disadvantages strapped to our ankles seemed to unite the cast under a common objective. We had inherited the challenge of proving our critics wrong, a challenge we all took quite seriously.

I had been averaging four to five hours of sleep each night and my body began to protest my schedule nearly as loudly as my boyfriend had objected to it. And when I finally laid down for my four to five hours, I most assuredly slept, to Nathan's added frustration. Catnaps at the theatre were common place for both of us before the cast arrived for nightly rehearsals and in his arms, no matter where we were, I re-energized.

Still, I had not managed to convince Nathan that I was not deteriorating beyond the expected wear and tear of the play. He began to vocalize concern over my long-term health which I tried to dispel.

"I think you're getting sick," Nathan concluded.

"With what, Marcus Welby?"

"I don't know exactly. You're just not yourself lately."

"Myself?" I begged a qualification.

"You know..."

"-Horny? Amorous?"

"In a word, yes. It's just not like you."

"It's just not like Ramona, or it's just not like Catherine the Great, but I'm no powerhouse and I won't always have energy left over for sex. It's the play, Nathan. It will end one of these days and we'll go back to normal functions. I promise."

I suppose that's why I left the acting to him. The fact of the matter remained that I was dead tired. Last week I may have had stores of energy but all of that has changed now, and Nathan knew it. It didn't help my case when he caught me napping on the side, every time he turned around. I'd have to work on that.

"What are you writing now?" Nathan asked as we zoomed into Tampa on the causeway.

"My memoirs."

"I told you, Joey! People only write their memoirs when they're reached the end, -when they're just too damn tired to go on." He strained to see the content of my open page.

"Watch the road, Nathan. It's just my journal, that's all."

"I never knew you were keeping a journal."

"That's because, my love, I keep it hidden."

"From me?"

"No, I keep it hidden from TIME-LIFE Publishers! Of course I keep it hidden from you silly. This kind of thing is supposed to be hidden."

"Well, I don't know why. I don't want to read it or anything." Nathan had clearly flunked the chapter on reverse psychology. "Am I in it?"

"Ah-ha! What do you care? You don't want to read it or anything..." I reminded the defense.

"You're absolutely right. It should be kept personal. I do find it curious that you can find time to write a novel of epic proportions and not have time to love me."

"Every minute of my day is dedicated to loving you."

"I see."

Well, that went smoothly.

We arrived at The Hartung shortly after Noon and a majority

of the cast was waiting on the lawn. Dane and Lauren both had classes until twelve-thirty and Ramona was due with a mini-bus any second.

I had initially harbored several reservations about this particular outing with the cast. The talk shows and Cape Canaveral were exciting diversions, and for the greater part, they were par for the course of public relations and performance preparation. But this was definitely asking the cast to play the rough. When Five West at the University Medical Center first spoke to me regarding a possible visit from the cast, I ruled negatively on the grounds that we would not use an AIDS ward as a publicity tool for our promotion. But when the staff there came back with a 'no-press' promise, I consented. For reciprocal benefits, I could not deprive either group of the opportunity to meet. The cast would be put in touch with the cause of their work and the patients from the ward could witness the gift that was unfortunately being wrapped for patients that would most likely replace them in the beds they now occupied. In spite of this morbidity, I had to view this visit as positive. Clearly it wouldn't be easy for any of us, so I arranged a briefing by the ward director of nurses that would hopefully prepare each of us emotionally for the delicate and painful issue we were about to face.

Dane bounded across The Green to the theatre parking lot. In the nights and weeks that had preceded today's visit, no

single cast member had exuded more enthusiasm than Dane and I grew to depend on his example setting energy and dedication. Opening the mind of this epitomized jock was worth more to me than turning the heads of every single citizen in Nebraska. I'm sure Nathan saw Dane differently than I. They had played racquetball yesterday morning as I slept in late and by Nathan's report, the competition was waning. By Dane's account, Nathan's inability to play the game should have been inducted at the Racquetball Hall of Shame; -independent chips on very independent and wonderfully broad shoulders. It wasn't necessarily the Clash of the Titans, but their egos did resemble opposing continental shelves at times.

Ramona finally pulled into view and the cast gathered around me for one final pep talk. Lauren was the only member still unaccounted for which I found to be collectively impressive considering the nature of the event.

"Okay, gang. Listen up. We don't have a lot of time to psych ourselves up for this. Acting aside now, we're people. Right? We have capacities to care and capacities to demonstrate profound concern. Let's just be ourselves. Don't be celebrities and don't be afraid to reach out to these folks. It's one thing to be able to do a play where the grander percentage of all proceeds is channeled toward the development or a cure for AIDS, and it's another thing to become directly involved with the people who may or may not ever see that cure. Most people

couldn't do this. I'm proud of you. Now, I want everyone of us to walk onto that floor in Five West and to walk out with a person in mind to whom you can dedicate your performance. Let's load 'em up!"

The short ride to the medical campus was a silent one. Not a word was issued. For several minutes, 'A Show of Hands' became obsolete. A nine day deadline carried no relevance and my own exhaustion evaporated. Panic, such a selfish and consuming emotion, had seized the cast and held them hostage in their seatbelts. Rad and Sydney held white hands clutched so tightly that the first sign of skin color was high on their wrists. When Mark broke the silence by announcing that Lauren was following behind us in her Celica, most everyone of us jumped in our seats.

As we neared the hospital entrance, I thought I had spotted a television crew on the front lawn. Ramona steered the bus away from the press and into visitor parking. We unloaded cautiously.

"Breeze past them, this time, gang. No comment, today. It's not what we're here for."

As we shuffled by the crew and their video equipment, not a single advance was made and we entered the building unsolicited. The hospital had been true to their word.

We were met inside by Lucy Foster, my contact and the woman responsible for our visit. She was the brave director of nurses

at Five West. She led our troupe to a large auditorium just beyond Admitting. We took seat in the first few rows. Lucy climbed the small stage, normally used for medical lectures. She offered a smile that stretched across her tiny face. She wore her hair in what looked like a relaxed bouffant, if you can picture that, and her heels were just as high as Ramona's. She cleared her throat daintily and introduced herself.

"Good afternoon. My name is Lucy and I am in charge of Five West. Joey has asked me to attempt to condition you for what you can expect as you visit us here, but first let me take this opportunity to praise you on behalf of the entire hospital for your work with AIDS and your commitment to its victims. We can't tell you how much your courage and your kindness will mean to the residents and to those not yet diagnosed with the disease."

"I want to talk a little about the disease and then I'll briefly explain our program at USF-MED. Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome is a fatal disease. To date, there have been no recoveries. By the end of this decade, it is estimated some five million Americans may be carrying the AIDS Virus. The larger percentage of these carriers will still be from the two main risk groups identified now as homosexual men and intravenous drug users. The disease can be detected early by several symptoms among which are the inability to shake common ailments such as a cold or the flu and extreme fatigue."

Nathan squeezed my arm and I shifted in my seat. For heaven sakes, I thought to myself. Nathan winked at me bringing my defenses back down to DefCon One. I winked back.

"At the same time," Lucy continued, "the disease can progress to its final stages before the victim even realizes or accepts that he or she is a carrier. AIDS can be contracted through repeated sex with multiple partners or unsafe sex with one infected partner. The virus seems to have no established set of guidelines for existing. Generally, if some precautions are taken, it is relatively difficult to contract. We want to stress, for the resident's sake, that only through intimate contact or the explicit exchange of blood products, can we be at any risk by visiting, nursing or just plain being around these people. Are there any questions or comments?"

Junior slowly rose to his feet. A lump breached in my throat as I struggled to anticipate what Junior might have to say.

"This may not be appropriate now, but my first lover is up there." Junior wiped an eye. "It's been twelve years since we were together but this visit hits particularly close to home for me, and I just wanted everyone to know."

Lucy quickly picked up where Junior left off and he sat down. "Thank you. It's important that we share our feelings on this subject, otherwise we remain ignorant as a society. Your friend's name wouldn't happen to be Leo, would it?"

"Yes, Mam. It is."

"Leo has been talking about this visit for two days now. He says he can't wait to see how Junior's aging." The cast laughed aloud and even Junior appeared to perk up a little.

"Here at USF-MED's Five West, we have one hundred and twenty-seven patients in residence. In addition to this we also monitor seventy-four patients in home care programs throughout the Bay Area. At this time, eighty-five percent of our residents are participating in a drug test for AZT or Aziodythymidine. Though it is not a cure, we have charted overwhelming results and marked improvement in the various conditions of the residents. AZT does appear to temporarily halt further advances of the virus. Now, AZT was originally derived from the sperm of herring and salmon, but it has recently been synthesized for mass production. The guys and gals are grateful for the new quantity made available here at USF. As Junior's friend, Leo says, 'Before now, getting this pill to us would have entailed jacking off a lotta fish.'" Again the cast reacted to Lucy's unexpected sense of humor which not only caught us by surprise but also did a great deal to set us slightly more at ease. "Now if there are no more questions, I'd like to relay a request from the patients of Five West."

"You name it, Lucy," I piped up from the center of the cast.

"Well, we've taken the liberty of arranging a short

broadcast from the auditorium via shortwave to the television sets in the hospital rooms. Do you think it might be possible for you and your cast to present a little something from your show, or would that compromise opening night?"

I looked around at the members of 'A Show of Hands' and quickly responded. "There wouldn't be an opening night without the patients in those rooms. We'd be honored."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Lucy exclaimed. "It's now ten minutes before one o'clock. The entire hospital tunes in at the top of the hour. What can I do to help you get ready?"

"Do you have a piano?"

"Yes, behind the curtain."

"Sydney?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Cast, we'll do the opening dance in 'System' from Act Two. Rad, warm them up." I shouted.

The cast climbed over their seats and positioned themselves on stage for a quick stretch at the direction of Rad. The television crew that my paranoia believed it had recognized earlier, now took positions in the auditorium for this special broadcast. Lucy combed her hair, or rather fluffed it up, in preparation for her introduction of the cast. I stood next to her holding her hand and the cameraman counted down.

"Five, four, three, you're live!"

"Good afternoon residents and staff. The University of

South Florida Medical Center is tickled to have the cast of 'A Show of Hands' performing an excerpt from their show, live for us today. As many of you will know, Joey Tucker is the play's director and he and his cast are donating all proceeds from their show to the National AIDS Foundation and to local AIDS Programs in the Bay Area. I give you Joey Tucker and his cast from 'A Show of Hands!'" Lucy beamed.

"Hello everybody. 'A Show of Hands' opens in two weeks at the University's Hartung Theatre. We will make no secret of the fact that you are our very first audience. Today we're going to show you a dance number from the second act. The dance is called 'System.' Before we begin, I suppose we should ask Lucy if the children's wing is receiving this broadcast. It may be a bit much for tender young minds. Then again, perhaps the less I make of this explanation, the better. From 'A Show of Hands,' -'System!'"

The video cameraman followed me as I took my place with the cast. I'll try to walk you through this just in case you don't happen to make it to Broadway to see it for yourself. On stage left, five guys knelt on hands and knees, in a circle, supporting the five females of the cast who stood upright with one foot on each of the guys backs. On stage right, Nathan was surrounded by a dozen men, (in the actual performance, the men are dressed in white and the women are dressed in pink.) Sydney began tickling the ivories with a classic, yet souped

up version of 'The Flight of the Bumblebee.' Nathan's group of men began making surging motions with a variety of choral moans and masculine sounds. The five women began accompanying them with various swaying and collectively provocative gestures. Sydney moved into his original composition and the music quickly built to a climax. At the most frantic measure in the composition, the male group rushes the female pyramid following Nathan's lead. Nathan slides into the center of the pyramid as the voices and bodies collapse around him. The music changes as the group consolidates and slowly revolves around Nathan who is not visible from within the mass. (In the show, Nathan changes Dancekins inside the conglomerate and emerges wearing bright colors.) While the music slowly builds again, only the females vocalize sounds of labor and pain. (On The Hartung stage, a red light begins to glow inside the human ball and fog escapes from its core.) The huddle begins to pulsate and suddenly, arms fly open from the troupe and Nathan is raised from the center and extended above the globe. With Nathan still above them, the group collapses and Nathan drops into a cart spring followed by a flip and then an aerial flip. Male dancers from the womb join Nathan in a difficult dance break. After nearly five minutes of grueling steps, Mark enters the stage, (normally costumed in black tights and top with a white skeleton on his front and back. In actual performance, the stage lights dim gradually as black lights highlight the skeleton in neon

purple.) Mark engages each of the dancers as the dance continues and they fall away from him dead, (to be dragged off stage by stagehands camouflaged in black.) Soon it comes down to Nathan and Mark who dance an intense standoff. The music begins to accelerate at which point, Mark jumps onto Nathan's back and Nathan lumbers to an agonizing death. Mark, A.K.A. AIDS, dances victorious and flees the stage.

Usually each of us had to imagine our own applause after such a workout, but today, in this auditorium, a response was barely audible for the first time from beyond the double doors at the back of this small theatre. Lucy ran up the aisle and spread the doors wide open and unmistakable applause rambled down the halls of the hospital and into the auditorium. The cast re-entered the stage and bowed in front of the video camera still trained on them.

Lucy thanked all of us and reluctantly, we followed her, out of breath and sweating, past the drinking fountain to the lobby elevators. We piled into two cars and made the slow ascent to the fifth floor. Once those elevator doors opened across from the nurses station, I think each of us realized the immediate scope of our visit. There was no applauding up here, no regaling activity and certainly no cause for optimism. Heart monitors beeped monotonously setting the rhythm to which wheezing oxygen tanks would accompany. There was coughing, a lot of coughing and some chimes randomly sounded to get the nurse's

thinly spread attention. The white uniformed maids and matrons at the front desk across from us smiled almost oblivious to the positions they held as guardians of this terminal ward. Ammonia choked the air and nearly peeled the yellow paint from the cheerful walls. As I thought about it, obviously this wing had served other purposes in its short architectural history; -purposes that more ratified the Science of Medicine rather than this fatal defiance of it. The ability to cure, after all, was the cornerstone of the establishment. The fact that it had had no impact on this particular floor seemed to have gone unnoticed as every bed in the room was occupied.

Lucy pointed out that most residents knew to expect us but we would encounter an occasional closed door. They were shut to honor personal wishes or to conceal accelerated cases.

The cast split up courageously. Each one of us had the erroneous conviction that we could make a difference but we were too late for the current patients of Five West. Still, as soon as we ventured away from the elevators and away from the nurse's island and into the view of the patients, there was notable excitement in the form of whistles and some clapping. All of a sudden, these were people with a disease; -not statistics as we had conditioned ourselves. There were men and women. There were families that visited sick fathers and there were bed-ridden mothers without children. And there were children without mothers. This wasn't just a gay man's disease,

but clearly, gay men had it too. And we weren't too late. These people were still alive and they still had cosmopolitan concerns. They talked about the University Brahmins with Dane, of City Hall with Ramona, about politics with me. Some talked of a cure. Others spoke of Spring flowers they could see from their tinted hospital windows. Some of their stories evoked tears. Others prompted laughter. Many of the residents expressed interest in seeing more of 'A Show of Hands.' I told them I would look into the possibility of broadcasting from The Hartung on opening night via special shortwave, even though I didn't think it was possible. Lucy took me aside and spoke frankly. Many of these people wouldn't make it through the week. A passing nurse commented almost cynically, "But there'll be new ones to take their places."

There was so much I wanted to do for these entirely selfless victims. It seemed each of them knew a cure wouldn't make it to them in time and yet they could smile just knowing that the drugs they were taking might ensure that they could see another flower bloom in the garden outside. But other than that, assurances were scarce and those that persisted were not pleasant to think about.

Junior stood alone, leaning against the full length window at the end of the hall. I broke away. As I walked down the floor, closed doors began to compliment the corridor on either side. Names had been handwritten on cards and taped to the

doors. Evidently someone of foresight had seen little reason to more permanently affix the names of the transient victims. I touched Junior's neck where it met his shoulder. He was cold and wet. He opened his eyes and caught my reflection in the tinted pane. I stood next to him staring out the fifth story window. We didn't talk for the longest time. Junior seemed to sob quietly to himself and I strangely sensed that he needed me to stay and he wanted me to say nothing. I just looked out the window at the daffodils. My eyes followed the sea gulls that hovered over distant dumpsters, picking at my emotions that lay scattered on the sun-hot lid. The gulls had more in common with the patients in those beds than Biology would ever come to credit. Every tear that rolled off Junior's square face, plunged inside those trash bins and echoed there. The sea gulls were all around us and they dared not waste the moment as we had done. Oh, there had been so much wasted time. It was as if we all waited for the fatality of it all to reach a certain predetermined magnificence before we would acknowledge it with Science and Medicine. Meanwhile, the sea gulls scavenged for their very lives. At long last, we knew what ailed them and we took epic measures against contracting what they carried with them from the garbage heaps where they most certainly dwelled. Compassion, forthrightly, was absent. And while we wallowed in our protection and selfish preservation, the sea gulls were dead and dying. For too long, it had been an

acceptable loss.

"You see that door?" Junior pointed, breaking the silence.

"Yes," I said.

"See the name on it?"

"Leo," I read.

"That door is closed, Joey." Junior convulsed with pain. I grabbed his huge body and held it as tightly as I could. We shook. It seemed the floor was shaking if not the entire hemisphere, but I wouldn't let him cave in.

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because that door is closed, Joey. You heard what Lucy said."

"Come on, Junior," I squeezed him, drying his eyes with the back of my hand. "That's like saying you haven't eaten because the TV dinner has foil on the top. Now, go in there!"

"I'm not ready, Joey," Junior sobbed.

"I have a feeling Leo wasn't ready either." I moved to open the door. Inside, Leo was on the bed laying on his side and facing the window. He had no roommate unless you counted the oxygen respirator that had mated with Leo's lungs. He coughed frequently and we stood there a moment and watched the dislodged mucous flow through clear tubes to an almost full

bag strapped to the frame of the bed. The room was warm, uncomfortably so and the air smelled rank and rotting. Junior walked softly to the nightstand and leaned against the bed railing.

"I sent these to Leo four months ago."

"And I haven't gotten a damn thing since, Bitch!" The words sent Leo into a coughing rage.

"I didn't think you knew we were here," Junior whispered.

There was more coughing and Leo struggled to speak again. "I heard you talking outside the door. I'm sick but I'm not deaf." He coughed again. "So introduce me to the new boyfriend," Leo commanded.

Junior moved to the other side of the bed when it became obvious that Leo wasn't or couldn't move to face us. "Oh, he's not a boyfriend, Leo. He's Joey Tucker, the director of the play that I am in at the University." I moved to stand next to Junior.

"That name sounds familiar to me," Leo squawked. "I think I saw you on television yesterday."

Junior looked at me and I leaned on the window ledge wishing I could open the window. "Leo, how are you feeling?" Junior struggled with words almost as desperately as Leo did.

"Not too well, but they tell me this is the final stage, so there's still hope." Leo paused to cough. "Who would have thought back in 1968, that we'd come to this? Well me anyway."

"That time with you was the best of my life, Leo. I'll always remember those early years." Junior was about to cry again so I placed a concealed hand behind his back and pinched him for support.

"You've still got time, June. Go out and top those years. Have a ball. Have one for me, June. I bet it's hard for Joey to believe that I was once bigger than you are, but I was, wasn't I?" I smiled at the emaciated form on the bed. "We were both in the Navy, you know."

"God how we used to fight with each other. And it wasn't play fighting, was it, Leo?" Leo grinned and continued to stare out the window. "-And the first jobs we had out of the Navy, Leo, -do you remember? Jesus that must have been 1970. Construction jobs at Disneyworld. Hell, the park didn't even open until '71. Leo here, was the construction foreman for Space Mountain," Junior explained for my benefit.

"If it wasn't for all those topless boys, we could have finished the damn thing in '69!" Leo laughed which sent him into a spasm and a trickle of blood mixed with the mucous in the tube. The more Leo laughed the more blood was discharged into the bag on the side of the bed. Junior's leg pressed against mine. "Tell me, June. Do all nine inches still work?"

Junior blushed. "Well, it hasn't shrunk," he offered.

"Mine has!" Leo yelled. Again he coughed and the tube turned red. Junior jumped up from the heater where we sat and

started for the nurse's buzzer. "Oh don't worry about a little blood. For Christ's sake, when it's gone, it's gone."

"Leo, we should get going. I don't even think we're supposed to be in here."

"Hold on just a minute, June. You haven't told me about you. How are you feeling?"

"Uh, Joey doesn't even know this yet, but I tested positive last week, but I feel fine." Junior struggled with the news.

"Well, don't you worry, honey. You never much cared for getting poked. Chances are you'll probably never get it."

Leo coughed. "Joey. You make sure June's looked after."

"I'll take care of that myself, Leo. It was nice to have met you." I touched his hand and then turned to walk away. The announcement that Junior was positive destroyed all ability to remain strong for anybody. Junior bent over the bed to hug Leo, who by now, was coughing continuously. Junior ambled over to the nightstand and picked up the vase with tears in his eyes.

"I'm going to take these dead flowers out of here, Leo," Junior told him.

"No!" Leo coughed. "Leave them there." Junior placed the vase back down. "They give me something to aspire to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Though it couldn't have been avoided, each of us carried the prospects of death back with us to the theatre. Everyone wanted to talk about it to release if not reconcile the feelings they had. Patrick suggested we "take an hour out of rehearsal this afternoon to discuss Five West as a group, for therapy," he said. I could have choked!

"Perhaps the Swiss should concede to the Greater Commonwealth of Europe, for solidarity," I suggested back. He wasn't amused. "If," I stated, "we could afford to spend an hour of rehearsal time discussing our field trip today and if I wanted everyone here to talk things out, to be comfortable with what we've just experienced, then I'd look into the possibility of discussion time. But this isn't something we should be comfortable with and we're all not going to look at

this the same way. What we did today was not noble or honorable. It was responsible. Individually we have to conceive a way to deal with the emotions we encountered today. Each of us here and now, can personally reach into that experience and extract a reason for doing our show and even greater, we can find a need to communicate what we've seen today to somebody else who wouldn't otherwise be responsible and investigate this gigantic problem on their own. All right everyone? Up on stage in five minutes. Rad, stretch them out. I want to see a dry run from the top. Sam, incorporate as much tech as you can and I want to see those video wagons used today."

"Yes, Joey."

"Junior," I shouted. "I want to see you. And no scripts on stage either," I warned. Junior approached and sat next to me in the second row from the stage.

"Yeah, Joey?"

"Junior, I'm not exactly sure what I want to say to you yet, but to the greater extent, I suddenly share your anxiety. But as a friend, -as your friend, Junior, I can't bring myself to treat you any differently because of what I know. You've set a strong pace for others to follow and I can't let you fall behind your own example because you've spent too much time getting worked up over something that may or may never amount to anything."

"Joey, I appreciate what you're trying to say..."

"Wait. I'm not finished. I know you too well, Junior and you wouldn't take a day off from this show to get some rest so I'm giving everybody tomorrow off and that will include you. It will be a one day reprieve from me, from the show and from this theatre. It's going to be the last one we get for the next six weeks, so I expect you to make good use of it."

"You don't understand, Tucker. I can't stop working or I'll start thinking. I just don't want to hash all this out right now."

"Well, you can't come here tomorrow. I'm locking her up tight as a new whore, my friend."

"But, Joey..."

"No buts, Junior, but I wouldn't mind discussing that other body part of proportion that was mentioned this afternoon in conversation," I teased him. For a moment he just looked at me from where he sat. His dark brown eyes seemed to sweat as a corner of his mouth pressed into a grin.

"You name the dark corner and we'll talk," Junior boasted grabbing his crotch.

"Get up there with the rest of them!"

"I don't care what anyone else has been saying about you, Joey Tucker. You're okay by me."

"And just what is everyone else saying?" I hollered after him as he hopped up on stage. I reached for my clipboard and organized some show notes. I suddenly realized what I had just

promised. God! A whole day? I had to be cracking up. What would the masses make of this compromise? God knew the bloody Swiss was going to have a field day with the implications of my weakness alone. What next, I wondered? Would it be mass enrollment in The Actor's Equity Union, or even worse, actors demanding the freedom of script interpretation? I had to revoke this decision before it was too late and there would be chaos to pay. Ramona walked down the stairs from backstage and approached me cautiously.

"Are you feeling okay," she asked me. "I must have misunderstood, but I could have sworn I just heard that Tucker Legree was giving everyone tomorrow off."

"You're right, Ramona. You most certainly misunderstood."

On stage somebody broke into a chorus of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow,' and the entire cast soon joined in harmony.

"Which nobody can deny." Junior just stood there with his shoulders shrugged and his palms held open.

"All right, all right. That's enough already." I stood to address the emancipated. "Tomorrow is a day off, but give me a high caliber run-through now so I don't waste my whole day off regretting this decision." Nathan winked at me from among them. "Okay. Clear the stage. Take it from the tip top. House lights down in five minutes. Make this sweet ladies and gentlemen. I'm not going to be stopping you. If you're going to make a mistake, have the decency to cover it up, please."

Thank you. Cue the pre-set music. House lights going down...pre-set lights going down. House dark and GO!"

The synthesizer shrieked in the darkness while the stage was slowly strangled by fog. "Stage left behind the arch is not working. Someone check the tank!" I shouted. The video wagons were rolled into place and the first one flashed on and there I was. In a way, it was strange seeing myself up there, -almost spooky. I felt alarmingly detached from it all and yet, there I was. The other two screens blinked on and I had to marvel at the effect of these three giant screens alone on stage. It was actually so simple that it was chilling and uncomfortable and ideal all at the same time. I sat back and enjoyed the conversation between the three citizens of the Planet Phallic.

Ramona joined me in the audience. The spaceship began its descent and the fringe of the fog bank billowed away from the large electric fan in the ship's tail and oozed off the edge of the stage and into the front row where large vacuum ducts sucked it out of the theatre. Suddenly the blue lights in the raised stage leapt to full brilliance creating magnificent columns of light in the suspended fog. After a moment the stage silently began its first full revolution around the descending craft. In another moment Nathan and his 'penis fly trap' touched down lightly in the center of the blue columns. Nathan

released the cables from the inside of the rocket and they were retracted in the darkness. Nathan emerged from the craft and looked around in the fog as the lights dimmed about him.

"Watch that dim rate, Sam!" and the stage was dark. "How's Candor these days?" I queried Ramona who half slouched in the seat next to mine.

Ramona's fixation with the stage didn't waiver as she spoke quite nonchalantly. "Last I heard, he was headed for Bombay."

"Last you heard? Come on, Ramona. What happened to this one?"

"He showed up one night last week wearing a digital watch!" She waited for my face to match her's in horror, but I didn't understand the infraction. "Well, I broke it off with him before that tacky little digital display could reflect the very next digital minute, and that's the last I heard."

"Now I see," still every bit as confused as before. "Hold it! Junior! You've got to clear the stage faster than that. There's still too much fog. For Adam's sake, I can't even see Eve." I was getting hoarse. "Mona, I'm not sure digital science qualifies as a feaux pas," I whispered.

"The hell it doesn't, Joey! I swore to myself on July 16th in 1970, the very first day Digital turned its first civilian dollar on this continent, that I would never trust any man who wore one. My divorce was finalized ninety days later and I've held that vow for seventeen years now. And you

know what? My first fashion inclination was right on the money. Digital is certainly on its way out now, isn't it?"

"You can't be serious, Ramona. I mean, even you wear some pretty funky accessories from time to time."

"But every watch I own has two hands. Well, there is that miniature diamond ensemble who's second hand snapped in two during a Uri Geller television broadcast in '74."

"I guess that brings you back to square one, doesn't it?"

"Square one on a bingo card, Joey. I won five hundred dollars last night on my way home from work. It's as if I never left the circuit at all."

Something just wasn't right on stage. "Come on, gang! You're turning Sodom and Gomorrah into Minneapolis-St. Paul. Tramp it up!" I turned back to Ramona. "So what's it going to take to get you over this one?" I asked sympathetically.

"Only the memory of that goddamn tweaking alarm on his wrist. It's all for the best, Sweetheart. He was too conservative to keep up with Ramona Simpson anyway. Hell, I only touched his manhood once," she confessed with a hand to her mouth.

"But knowing you, you probably touched it with your tonsils!"

"You take that back, Joseph!"

"I will not! You know there is not a man alive who could spend three weeks with you and emerge conservative."

"I suppose there's a point to be taken. At any rate, I got a lead from Marijo who followed Erika out to Brandon, just east of the city. There's a new bingo laundry mat. You get eight cards for each washer load and bonus cards for each dryer. It's so practical. Of course, I've washed everything in my house so I was going to offer to do all your laundry this week. four boys in one house should generate enough laundry to keep me on a perpetual spin cycle! They're giving away a jet ski this week, you know."

"No. I didn't know. And what's so practical about driving thirty miles out of town when you have your own Maytags at home?"

The stage slowly revolved into the Greek Scene. All of a sudden the revolving stage jammed and all ten men toppled off their white column pedestals to the amusement of the rest of the cast. I nearly wet my pants from laughing. -It was that funny until it turned quite serious. "I hope you are still amused when you have to stay an extra hour tonight ironing out this shift change. You fall off those pedestals in costume, and you can expect to be upstaged by an explosion of white powder. Junior, secure yourselves to the pedestal and the pedestals to the stage!" I collapsed backward into my chair. Ramona patted my knee. You see, the Greek scene depicts ten 'white collar' workers earning a living in an ancient Greek Museum as statues. The actors are to hold their original poses for a solid five minutes until the audience is convinced they

are seeing actual statues. Then, the work day whistle is blown and the actors hop down off their pedestals and leave stage hand in hand, arm in arm -all to the hopeful surprise of the audience.

Ramona waited a minute before resuming the previous conversation. "I may have my own Maytags, Joey, but I don't have my own jet ski," she justified. "And from what I hear, a jet ski would come in awfully handy this weekend on your trip down the coast..."

"Our trip down the coast this weekend is about as probable as you winning a damn jet ski," I told her. "I have too much to do with this show to take time out to change underwear much more to change plans."

"Your relationship may depend on some reinforcement, Joey. From my own observation, Nathan is becoming just a little disillusioned with love right now. -I think you both are. This morning, he begged me to take him with Marijo to Brandon just so he could get away from the theatre and this show business pressure. Don't take me wrong, sweetheart. I'm only saying these things for your own good. Nathan is just like you. You both demand so much attention or you shrivel up. Nathan's retreating inside himself. I can see it in his eyes. You should feel it in his heart. He has become so mechanical and Nathan's just not like that. He's a spur of the moment kind of guy. Usually he's so unpredictable and full of life, but that's

changing. I've seen the change in both of you. It's as though your on auto-pilot until this thing is over. But Nathan is just like you. You both demand so much attention and without it, you shrivel up inside. The way I see things, this show only commands a couple grams of time on the grand scale of your lives together. Take the moment now to nourish it. Don't leave it to fend for itself." She squeezed my cheek lightly and stroked my temple. "I sit here and can't actually believe that I, Ramona Simpson, undoubtedly the most functioning heterosexual woman alive, am giving advice to the gay lovelorn. I guess there are universal ways these things work and there are universal ways by which they can fail. We're really no different."

"You're absolutely right and I should strongly consider your advice about men taking your vast research into account." I smiled. "It's real seldom my ego consents to advice given by anyone, but I'm humbled now and desperate to save him. I just kept thinking we could put the relationship on hold until this blows over but I'm beginning to realize that this weather front has stalled over The Hartung. Tomorrow, I'll follow him anywhere, just as long as we're back to the theatre by Noon on Sunday. Thanks, Ramona."

"You're welcome, sweetie."

We both watched the action on the stage. Almost miraculously, they had made it as far as the German Revolve

which depicted the persecution of homosexuals in the Forties. I had to compliment Ramona for securing the military costumes for the Storm Troopers.

"You know, Joey, it really just took some common sense. 'The Diary of Anne Frank' has played nearly every theatre in the world. A few quick phone calls to playhouses around the state and I felt about as resourceful as Julie Andrews in 'The Sound of Music' when she turned ordinary draperies into play clothes for the Von Trapp children."

The lobby door eased open, sadistically throwing daylight into the auditorium. Mardell and Carson attempted to minimize their interruption, and waved from the back of the auditorium. I motioned them down to the front where I sat and Ramona excused herself to help-out with costume assignments back stage. I hugged Mardell and shook hands with Carson. I was actually thankful for a diversion from the activity on the stage.

"To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?" I asked them.

"Ticket sales," Carson answered.

"We just checked our ticket outlets and we're sold out for the first weekend," Mardell added.

"Congratulations," I offered.

"Thanks, Sky. Mardell and I got to talking on the way over here and we realized that the publicity from your show has really blanketed all of us."

Mardell flipped her hair and turned to face me. "Joey, Carson and I have decided to donate a dollar from every ticket sold, to your campaign against AIDS. We both agree that AIDS is the social issue of the decade and this is our way of addressing it."

"You guys are terrific! What does Davey have to say about this gesture?"

"Well, when we approached him with the idea, he gave us an 'are-you-kidding' kind of blank stare," Carson imitated.

Mardell pulled a compact and blush unit from her Gucci purse. "Joey, he just wants attention. He probably figures that being the only one not contributing will set him apart. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the first kid on his block to announce that he suffered from Gingivitis, for the same attention."

"He'll get his attention, all right," I almost vowed. Are you two ready for next weekend?" I changed the subject.

"Hell, Mardell has been ready for opening night for a month. Me? Well, what with the last minute script change and all, Fate pretty much has me by the throat," Carson explained.

"Mardell told me how you changed plays midstream. I have to tell you though, I love the new concept of the set being a public bus with all the action taking place in the back. It's nothing short of brilliant, Carson."

"Thanks, Joey. I had no choice, really. I couldn't seem

thousand of I'd feel as though I hadn't accomplished anything, even when it was obvious that I already had. Still, it was only a drop in the dumpster, but I could feel good about my drop.

"Wait a minute! What's with this improv? I gave you scripts. I remember giving directions. Watch your goddamn lines! You miss one more Nathan, and the scene won't make sense." Nathan threw his arms up in the air. "And where in the hell are the streetlamps?" I took a deep breath and exhaled emphatically. "Wrap up the act and take twenty." I stood up and walked out to the lobby. My ears strained to hear their closing lines. In spite of my nervous tantrum and incessant complaining, they were doing such a fine job. I climbed half way up the stairs and sat there ashamed of myself for being this director-prick and proud of myself at the same time for pulling it all together. Nathan bolted up the steps and nearly tripped over me sitting there in the shadows of the afternoon sun.

"Joey!"

"Hi, baby. Care to sit a spell with me?"

"Sure," he mumbled.

"Have you had it with me yet, Nathan?"

"Of course not. You're just doing your job. You're a director after all, and I knew that when we met and agreed to work together. I'll tell you one thing, though. You sure won't

get away with this bossy shit once this play is finished!"

Nathan smiled that forgiving smile of his.

"I can't promise I won't still try it every once and a while, despite your warnings."

"I know you can't, but I still love you. I'm sorry about my lines in there. I'm afraid my mind has been on scramble ever since you granted the cast a day off."

"And that's another thing," I continued my tirade. "I can't wait to get away from this place tomorrow. By the way, Nathan, I'm taking you with me and I don't want any argument," I said turning the tables on him.

"You mean it, Joey? We're actually leaving town?" Nathan's voice climbed to octaves not yet screeched before.

"Yeah, I mean it. You and I need to start cementing our lives together so we will stick together through thick and thin and all that crap. I'd hate for this show to close and for us to find out that it was all we had in common."

"I don't think it is, but you've got a point. And you know, I was thinking maybe after graduation, you and I could hop a military transport out of Miami to Brussels and we could train-trek the continent for a few months."

"That's a perfect idea, Nathan. I'll even carry your luggage. You know, before this ruckus, I could have had a passport overnight through my father's connections, but that seems to be an advantage of the past."

"So we'll go through my pop. But the way you and your father have been getting along lately, he probably would still expedite your travels out of the country."

"You're right," I conceded.

"So, we're set then. We'll leave right after graduation and we'll live off our graduation money and our credit limits and we'll make love in every major city." Nathan grinned.

"I didn't see that feature in the brochures but I'll take your word for it." We hugged each other where we sat. I felt as though I was breaking down in his arms and I found it difficult to let go, so we didn't. After a while Nathan initiated a sway.

"I love you," he whispered in my ear.

"I know," I whispered back just as Mark sprinted up the steps out of breath.

"We're ready to start the second act, you two."

"I'll be right there," Nathan answered. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked me.

I nodded into his shoulder since I couldn't rustle up a convincing 'yes.' I gave him one last squeeze and he jumped up to follow Mark as two sets of audible tone chimed in the lobby, warning the empty space that intermission had ended and the play was about to resume. I smiled, pleased that Sam would think to incorporate every last detail. "Nathan?"

"Yeah, Joey," he said poking his head back into the lobby.

"I love you, Nathan."

"I know," he shouted as he disappeared into the auditorium.

And that's all I really wanted. I know it's been the play-this and the play-that, but it's all coming together now. My mind feels like an ocean receiving all the tributaries of reality. The mouth of each, spewing awareness into a vast profundity. My spirit sits on a thousand banks evoking the riddled universe to dip its toes, to challenge my brevity, because Nathan loves me and every mystery of the heavens is dispelled. Tomorrow is but a ripple that entreates deliverance on a foreign shore. And today is nothing more than a passing cloud over my beach. I loosened my Reeboks and hopped down the stairs to the lobby floor.

Through the window, I saw Huey coming up the sidewalk to the complex. I stretched the door open for him.

"Well, Tucker, this is the final lap for us isn't it?"

"Sure is. I never thought I'd make it this many times around the track."

"Sure you did. In fact, you subscribed to it and that's why you're here today."

"I suppose you're right." We retreated to several leather cushioned seats in the lobby. "But you know, the end seems so anticlimactic -so void of circumstance."

"It always does, son. You know, one of the most humbling

things we directors come up against once our play closes is that Life can't take a single one of our directions. We're back among the confused masses trying to make sense of everything around us. Lines catch us off guard and props throw us for a loop. Before you know it, we miss the totalitarian way so much that we find ourselves diving head long into another production. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

I laughed at him. "Huey, I just want to thank you; -I need to thank you for everything from your patience to your resistance to your guidance. I think it's safe to recognize that this has proven to be a challenge for me in the grandest sense."

"I hate to lose you this semester, Joey. I regret not having had the opportunity to work with you for four or five years more. I have to wonder who, between us, has learned more from this experience. I'm inclined to feel it's me who should be thanking you, and I do."

"All right, Hughes. Fess up! In spite of all the shit we've put each other through this semester, the play didn't turn out half bad, did it?"

"Not half bad at all, Tucker. In fact, in my seven years of directing here, I'd have to say, ego suspended, 'A Show of Hands' has to be the most dramatic and emotionally charged undertaking I've ever seen anywhere. Technically you've leaped most every fence that usually surrounds the perimeters of

collegiate productions and doing that on your original budget says more about your ability than I ever could. The play's fulcrum is well balanced and well supported by dialogue and cast and the progression of two thousand years in two hours is so smooth it's disturbing. I'm just sorry I was so quick to oppose you from the start."

"I'm afraid if you hadn't, the play would have suffered in the short run. I hold no grudges at this point. Consider the nastier elements of the semester forgotten. I've finally realized there are more important things in my life than this play. In the larger scheme of things, hopefully this play will quickly become trivial. And considering the consuming preoccupation it's been, I welcome the change."

"I've had the exact same feelings year after year. Unfortunately, they also pass and I find myself neck-deep in theatrical obsession all over again and you will too, Joey. You are one of those great original talents. It won't let you abandon it until it's drained you of the very last ounce of your creativity."

"Why Professor Hughes, I believe I've just noticed you speaking in contractions. Why must you rape the tongue of your Mother so?"

"I already admitted to learning a great deal from you, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did."

"Do you mind if I sit in on rehearsal?"

"Be my guest, Huey and thanks for being my friend." Hughes patted my knee as he rose from the overstuffed chair and walked toward the big double doors that opened into the auditorium. The 'System' theme music barreled into the lobby and Huey tugged it shut behind him. I closed my eyes and allowed the cushions of the chair to shift ever so slightly to the point of envelopment. The late afternoon sun spilled through the lobby windows to warm my soul. My skin tingled in the delightful solar attention and I couldn't remember a time when I felt so warm and so very grateful to be loved and alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I suppose I should have left this blasted journal home so that I could truly take advantage of Nathan's and my vacation slash retreat slash holiday slash day off. But I needed to catch up with these last couple of entries and besides, spending time with my journal happened to be one of the last reserves of total relaxation available to my worn and tattered nerves.

We had barely left the theatre when Nathan suggested we leave for the Southern Coast immediately. At the beach house in Clearwater, I marveled at how much we managed to cram into a shoulder bag before we were out the door and heading down US 19.

The evening was calm and the breeze was warming. The sunroof was retracted and the windows were rolled down. I drove as Nathan stretched out his enlarged body in the passenger seat.

He hadn't cut his hair since we met, which now lent itself to his character in the show. His long sandy blond locks flapped in the wind. Headlights from on coming cars dove into his blue eyes and I became aroused where I sat. That was a good sign I could eventually return to complete normalcy.

We crossed the Sunshine Skyway Bridge and Nathan recounted the tragedy eight years earlier when the 'Summit Venture' steered into a center support while she drifted in the fog, bringing the entire western span crashing down on her decks. At Bradenton, on the southern tip of Tampa Bay, we turned west to Longboat Key and drove along the beach over a series of islands connected by bridge and landfills. At Lido Beach we stopped the road hungry Porsche and took a short walk barefoot in the sand as we ate Whoppers that we'd picked up in a Burger King Drive Thru. We raced each other back to the car and I tackled him in the sand. We wrestled on the dry beach in the dim light of a crescent moon. Love and sand abrasions became apparent as we hopped back in the car, bringing half of the beach with us.

Nathan drove now. It was interesting how we didn't take complete advantage of the silence when we had basically craved time alone. I wriggled my toes to loosen the sand in between them. He squeezed my hand as we rejoined Interstate 41 South. I helped him shift.

After several miles, Nathan cleared his throat. "You know,

I was just thinking about growing up. We're you popular in high school? I mean, captain of the football team or anything?"

"Not particularly. I was famous, but not necessarily popular. Why?"

"Mostly curious, I guess. I was never popular. Well, I take that back too. There was St. Anne's Parochial School in Scarsdale, New York, -fifth grade. I was popular then. To entertain the troops in plaid," Nathan launched into his story, "I would punch out communion wafers from my bologna and offer bodies of Christ to everyone at my cafeteria table. The kids though I was a riot. The nuns on the other hand, were convinced I was Lucifer incarnate. I was expelled third term."

I tried to suppress a laugh and ended up spraying the dash board. "You've got to be joking!"

"I was then, but I'm not now. It's funny how my atheist tendencies of later life find irony between Christ and bologna."

"You're not an atheist," I scolded him.

"I'm not a Democrat either, but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm impressed with the current administration."

"You'd better let me drive. I think somebody must have slipped something in your Whopper."

"I'm okay, but isn't it funny how the requirements for popularity change as we grow up?" Nathan's eyes darted from the road to me and back to the road again.

"I suppose." I reached for the radio to change the subject,

which I didn't entirely understand, and to interject some white noise that wasn't necessarily off the wall. What luck! Sally Jesse Raphael had just started.

'...Good evening. My name is Sally Jesse Raphael and tonight we're talking about Herpes and the Discriminated...'

'...Hello, Sally. My name is Rhonda...'

'...Go ahead, Rhonda. You're on Talk Net...'

'...Sally, it seems I always have cold sores. I like to think I'm fairly attractive except for these constant eruptions around my mouth...'

"Talk about being unpopular." I turned the radio off.

We located the Naples Hilton within minutes after entering the coastal town. I beat Nathan out of the Porsche and Senator Tucker raced Supreme Commander General Evans to the hotel registration desk. Platinum! We checked in as the Tuckers. Nathan refilled his father's credit card and parked the car.

Once inside the room I snatched the room service menu and Nathan threw me onto the king size bed. We made our selections together and I picked up the phone.

"Yes. This is Mr. and Mrs. Tucker in room 1004." Nathan hit me in the head with a pillow. "We would like two Gulf shrimp cocktails, the Blackened Mako Shark and the Swordfish Sandwich,

-no tartar sauce. One Ranch and the other Thousand Island. Fine, -Remoulade. Oh, and four Heinikens. What the hell. The Mrs. and I are on vacation, send up a six pack!"

I hung up the phone and joined Nathan on the balcony outside. He was standing against the wrought iron railing in his Calvin Klein underwear.

"'The Last Tango in Paris' is on HBO tonight."

"You go ahead and watch it. The air is so nice up here. I'm going to stay out here a while."

"Then I'll stay out here with you," I told him looking out over the Gulf from our tenth story balcony.

"No. That's all right. Go watch your movie. I'll be inside in a bit. Really."

I didn't understand his persistence to be alone but I left him at that and returned inside the room. From my vantage point I watched from the corner of my eye. It seemed he had wrenched his leg between the bars of the railing and now he struggled inconspicuously to get free. I could have died laughing but I kept it inside. Nathan glanced over his shoulder and smiled as though nothing was wrong. I faked interest in the TV. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. "Give me a holler if you need a hand getting out of your, uh- predicament," I told him.

"I can't believe this happened," he admitted red faced. "Get out here!"

I climbed off the bed and walked to the balcony with the biggest smile. I leaned down and put my head between his legs.

"Is that completely necessary for this operation?" he referred to my forehead rubbing his crotch.

"Do you want my assistance or don't you?"

"Well of course I do."

"Then relax," I instructed massaging his calve muscle until it became more flexible. I lifted his leg to a slightly different angle and fed it though the bars.

"Thank you," he muttered.

"You're welcome," I replied burying my face in his underwear. He rubbed the back of my head and we held that position until the cement of the balcony began to hurt my knees.

"Can you see that island out there in the water?" Nathan pointed. I rose and stood inside his extended arm. He brought it back laying it across my chest.

"Yes," I said.

"That's Marco Island. That's where we can rent a Catamaran tomorrow morning."

I tried to wrestle out of his hold. "Oh, I don't think so, Nathan. Blood rushed from my head and I backed away from the railing. "I'll lay on the beach but I won't leave it."

"What's this?" Nathan turned my body so our eyes faced each other.

"I'm afraid of the water, Nathan. I can't go out on a

Catamaran or an air mattress for that matter. I am completely petrified. I'm sorry."

"Well, we'll just have to work on that tomorrow."

"I don't work on vacation and I don't get in over my head."

"It will be a matter of trust, Joey. See these muscles?" he demonstrated an impressive flex. "I can save you if anything goes wrong. I can protect you. You'll see."

"I'll see, you're right about that. -I'll see from my vantage point on the beach!"

Room Service rapped on the door and Nathan rushed to the bathroom where he turned on the shower. A young Latin quickly set up our dinner as Nathan showered. I tipped him generously knowing the gratuity would land on the charge earmarked for the Senator in Washington. Preliminary credits had started to roll on the TV screen and soon, Marlon Brando began his mumbling and award winning seduction.

Nathan picked at the mozzarella melted on top of his swordfish. The beer and plot made him sleepy and he soon slipped away with his blond head resting on my pillow-propped shoulder. 'Tango' was painfully predictable with this being at least the tenth time I'd seen it, so I whispered 'I love you,' as he slept and I updated my journal-ed life to this comfortable and peaceful point.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When my eyes opened, I caught a glimpse of him silhouetted on the balcony. The new sun had just crowned each wave of the choppy gulf and the sky was pink but scheduled crystal blue. I unwound the white sheet between my legs and joined him outside. His hair stood in various directions and his puffy eyes squinted ever so defiantly at the ambitious glare bouncing off the water.

"Morning," I said. He was silent but loving. More than ever, it had become important to extract every ounce of attention he had for me. My ego was in constant preparedness to receive even the smallest indication of his love for. In the four and a half months I'd known him, I'd seen him pulled in so many different directions by so many equally strong and stubborn factions. There were times when I'm sure I must have felt like little more than a tug by comparison.

But we were together at last, and my tug was being noticed. In spite of my confidence, I sensed he was in one of those rare moods, so I walked back inside to order a breakfast I really wasn't hungry for.

The drive to the harbor was a short one up Ninth Street to the water. He maintained his unusual silence which was only occasionally interrupted by yes and no answers to questions I asked to draw him out. I wondered if this introspective on which he was obviously embarked, was a result of stage fright that had finally taken hold, but his big, glassy eyes revealed a profound void that couldn't be attributed to anything but the reflection of the entire universe in his confused silence. I remember thinking to myself that it wasn't odd to take a day out of life to contemplate it. I also remember my selfish resentment in the realization that he had selected today, of all days, to blow on constructive thought.

The sun waited patiently mid-sky for him to revel in its rays but he remained uniquely oblivious and indifferent as the fishing boat pulled away from its mooring and headed toward Marco Island. (I must tell you, the fact we were on a vessel at all, was the forced result of an emotional tug of war decided in a tie and refereed by an appeasing trust.) The breeze grabbed his open shirt and his eyes hid behind his raised hand blocking the sun. I offered my sunglasses which he slipped on his ears.

Then, I squinted into the sun, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I love you," I yelled over the sputtering of the motor. He mouthed the words back to me. My eyes watered momentarily where I stood clutching the railing of the small boat, but the wind whipped them dry. I wanted to touch him; to feel his skin or smell his hair. I watched his lips as his tongue emerged to moisten them. The boat hit a wave broadside and the spray flew over our heads. He licked a drop of salt water from the corner of his mouth. If it wouldn't have been for the other eight or ten sightseers on board, I would have easily attacked him where he stood. As it was, I found myself shackled by chastity and detained by prudence. The boat veered right to shoot through the reassuring shallow waters of Big Marco Pass before slipping gracefully into Gullivan Bay. His spirits seemed a little more animated upon seeing the much discussed Catamarans lined in protocol on the white sand. He pointed to a silver-gray vessel with a yellow and white striped sail preening in the sun's awesome glory. I reluctantly nodded my endorsement when I witnessed the first qualified emotion of the day registering on his face. When the revamped fishing boat came within five feet of the dock, he jumped the distance and tied it down. The captain looked sternly at him.

"A fellow could get himself hurt," the captain yelled from the helm. I caught up to him on the pier as he muttered to himself.

"I hate getting reprimanded as an adult."

"Forget it," I told him. "I'll race you to the Catamaran," I offered, as competition would surely align his priorities. He ran like lightning taunted by a steeple rod, but I stayed at his side. My legs moved faster. They had to. After all, they were smaller than his. I powered ahead of him once we reached the wet sand. His breathing was strained and his temples flexed as he gritted his teeth. It was another tie. We slowed, then stopped, grabbing our legs above the knees. He coughed. I spit.

"Nice try," he said, messing my hair. I pushed him backward onto the sand and started walking toward the rental shack.

"Which father should we allow to pick up today's tab?" I asked reaching for my wallet. He placed his card on the counter. The attendant asked if we wanted the craft for an hour or a day. "The day," and the owner authorized the credit card for an additional deposit before walking us down to the yellow and white craft. He tugged a pontoon and we lifted the other and walked it to the water. He wished us fun and returned to his shack.

I rummaged through the back-pack lunch we had assembled at the hotel, and found the Hawaiian Tropic. I tugged the shirt over my head and pulled the shorts down to my ankles and stepped out of them. I liberally applied the coconut oil on my chest and shoulders. I looked up and caught him watching me as I

suspected he was. My oiled hand slipped behind the elastic of my turquoise Speedo. I suppose I was being a bit dramatic but I had his attention and that, after all, is the object of seduction. He offered to do my back and I reciprocated taking long loving strokes on his wonderful body. The sun had warmed his skin and the sweet smell of the lotion practically begged an erection. I wanted to kiss him but I could wait until a less public location.

Apprehensively, we waded along side the Catamaran guiding it through the shallow water that ebbed about our waists. It was cool but thus far, not in an alarming way. It lapped against my sides reaching for the goosebumps higher on my torso. I climbed on to the canvas that stretched between the two hulls and lowered the sail while he flutter kicked pushing us toward the mouth of Gullivan Bay. My eyes did not leave his.

"Just trust me."

The breeze lifted my hair in ridges as I extended my body over the taut awning that glided parallel over the smooth surface of the bay. We passed the north point of Marco Island and the sliver of white beach that had protected us from the choppy gulf and a diligent wind, slipped quietly into the blue-green water. I turned on my stomach and craned my neck to plant a kiss on his forehead. He pulled himself slightly out of the water and met me on the lips. My tongue explored his salty mouth while the sun blushed behind a cloud as if to admit it

was clearly upstaged by heat of our own. We kissed again and exchanged 'I love you's' and 'I know you do's.' We were about 300 yards offshore when he powerfully pressed himself onto the dry canvas beside me. Holding on to him for all I was worth, we raised the sail and dashed out to sea. The Catamaran sliced the Gulf into two equal parts and Marco Island became a comma on the fading horizon. The speed was completely hallucinatory and my head felt weightless. The mainland wind rushed offshore to impregnate the yellow and white striped sail. We went faster and faster flying past fishing trawlers and other shore hugging vessels. In minutes it seemed we were in the center of the mighty Gulf of Mexico.

The warm currents of the Caribbean boiled beneath the skimming hulls and his hand hydroplaned gracefully from wave to wave. He sat up to put his shoes back on, though I'm not sure why. His striking tan glistened in the sun like lamé at a drag show. He was barely clad in a black and white striped Speedo and those damn tennis shoes. He posed there, so Calvin Klein-like and I gazed at him until the glare off his chest forced me to shut my eyes. At that instant the Catamaran pitched, hitting a large scoop in the surface. He jerked so suddenly overboard that the jolt knocked me clear of the boat. I fought my way to the surface swallowing salt water as I gasped for air. Adrenalin flooded my panic gates and I shook the hair from my face and bobbed impatiently in the warm water waiting

for him to scream his location. I spotted the Catamaran yards away but he was strangely no where to be seen. I searched the frothy water for 360 degrees screaming his name. There was no answer. Minutes passed. My stomach knotted as I tried to swim toward the Catamaran. The words 'just trust me' seemed to grab my arms and prevent them from making any headway in the water. I begged them to crawl in the direction of the boat but the diluted adrenalin no longer advanced my conviction. I yelled his name every several flailing strokes until my voice gave into complete hoarseness and my arms ached beyond functional cooperation. The muscles about my heart seemed to cramp as the restrained tears in my head mounted to pop out my eyeballs. Where in the fuck was he? My arms stung from slapping the water but I couldn't stop. As I got closer, I could see through teary salt stung eyes, that the Catamaran had capsized on its side and the top of the sail was laying in the water. There were sharp pains in both sides of my stomach and I nearly gagged on the salt that lined my mouth and throat. I gave in to crying at the first sign of tragedy. 'Just trust me,' the Gulf seemed to chant tormentingly. Fear gripped my ankles and pulled them down. My head slipped under the surface. I no longer cared to fight in light of what seemed inevitable. I felt the sensation of sinking and I allowed it. It was the only feeling more tangible than the pain of losing him. In a last attempt to surrender honorably, I pried open my eyes to look Fate in

its twisted face. The sun filtered into a dull blue underworld. There wasn't a sound. I prayed that he could hear the angels singing even if they weren't yet apparent to my water-plugged ears. I wished for a thousand Nel Carter's in two part harmony and for the vision of his face throughout eternity. I grew impatient as the whole thing drew out. I couldn't wait any longer to be joined with him wherever it happened to be. My heart pumped violently and I begged it to burst out of my chest. The light was fading and my ears registered a high pitched tone. Perhaps, Nel was finally warming up. I tried to relax but my entire body was constricting. My leg grazed something hard and my hand reached for it instinctively. It was only a pole. With the last ounce of adrenalin that trickled through my tired veins, I challenged my Death and pulled myself to the surface along the mast of the Catamaran. My foot tangled in the wet sail with my head inches from breaking out of Poseidon's cold blooded prison. I ripped my foot free and exploded into the atmosphere. My lungs heaved in pain. His name roared from my cramping throat to condemn the wind, the water, the sun, the sky and God. I prayed that the angels had their arms wrapped so tightly about him that he was no longer afraid.

I pulled my body to the airborne hull some three feet above the surface of the greedy gulf. I strained my eyes and fought opposing horizons for some sign of my missing boyfriend. I screamed his name over and over in each direction. I damned

God for being so unjust. I blasted the angels for being so fucking eager to sing and I cursed the Gulf and all things in it, except for him. "Take me dammit! You can't just leave me here. Don't you see I can't go on from here without him. Give him back or take me too!" I howled until my throat ached. I stood on the hull and yelled his name, sobbing uncontrollably. There was nothing. I collapsed to one knee still teetering on the raised pontoon. "Now, you've taken every goddamn thing I believed in," I yelled. "Please take me, too. Take me you Bastard!" I felt the boat begin to give in the water. I prayed the almighty vulture had decided to claim me after all, but my weight on the hull was causing the Catamaran to upright itself. I lost my balance and was pitched into the tainted water. It disgusted me and I quickly pulled myself onto the canvas rigging. The sail wasted no time in capturing a pocket full of wind. I was determined not to leave this spot without him so I pulled on the sail with tears streaking down my face and bare chest, until yellow and white stripes were bunched at my knees. My mind simply refused to make any sense of it. It was too goddamn nonsensical to believe. For the first time in my life, all my indifference toward God turned to violent hatred. The sky was churning black. I hoped I'd pissed Him off and He was winding up for His final pitch. By taking me too, He might finally redeem Himself. I doubled over in agonizing pain and then I saw it! A single Reebok wedged between

the once sunken hull and an aluminum brace. For no reason and every hope, I lunged on the shoe. "Jesus Christ!"

He was still in it. Without thinking, I grabbed his ankle and pulled him from the water with unusual strength. My head fell on his chest but all I could hear was the satanic slapping of the waves against the hollow pontoons. My tears pooled on his perfect stomach. I held my breath while I closed his green eyes and shut his mouth.

It started to rain; -just lightly at first and then stronger it pounded my arched back. The giant raindrops seemed to struggle for my attention as if to break the news to me. But I already knew. Joey was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

And that's the way I force myself to remember it. I held Joey's cold body with my shivering own for close to seven hours after the sun had given up that day. The Catamaran drifted unresponsively like a funeral barge and I wrapped us in the wet sail to ward off the wind. The Coast Guard arrived a little after nine o'clock that night according to the 'Tampa Times' and I was air-lifted to Naples General and treated for shock and hyperthermia. When I revived, everyone was already there. Everyone except Joey. Ramona, Mark, Huey and the cast had carpooled down the Tamiami Corridor on the same road that had held so much promise barely twenty-four hours earlier. It felt as though the entire tribunal had been assembled to point one collective finger of accountability at me. And I accepted all blame and welcomed any punishment as long as the sentence proved

fatal. Everyone seemed so superficially preoccupied with the inner regret that it wasn't me who swallowed half the gulf that afternoon. I didn't blame them for their regrets when I shared them as my very own. Joey had brought them all together. What had I contributed and why was I the one to carry on? We had all been hand chosen recipients of Joey's benevolence. We fed on it. And now everyone milled around my hospital room, each one of us starving, each one feeling like the biggest part of themselves lay on the sea floor of The Gulf of Mexico.

Still, I knew inside that my pain was pronounced so very differently. There was no recovering for Nathan; -no clever meaning hidden deep within my pain. And this overwhelming pain was the one thing I could accept and embrace even. Dear God, I prayed, don't take that away too. And in the hours that passed and the memories that wouldn't, it became apparent that He intended for me to suffer in the profoundest sense. I lived to comply with His intentions. What else did I have?

In the days following Naples, I cowered like an eaglet under Ramona's extended wing. She organized family and friends while I sat boarded up at the beach house, surrounded by his belongings and reading this odd collection of feelings and observations that Joey had meticulously compiled for my seemingly latent coming of awareness. Finally, I understood.

Mark visited me daily and sometimes sat for hours with me as I read to him. He never contradicted my pain and he never doubted my loss for he shared them too. And Mark was stumbling as unsure of the path ahead of us as I was. We both looked to Joey for strength and Joey wasted no time in showing us that all the strength we'd ever need was in the original blood brotherhood established that uncertain day when he fell, hurting his head. -That day when Mark and I both realized Joey's blood was on our hands. It was there again and again in the days that followed the accident. Mark knew it. Joey knew it, too.

And Joey placed no blame and he never doubted my trust nor my ability to protect him given a chance. But he didn't give me a chance. He didn't give me any warning, he didn't give me any anniversaries and he didn't give me any time to test his love before forever came. And now, he expected me to go on without him. How is that possible when I hear him in the house or see him on the beach or feel his warmth next to me in my bed? When the Gulf shoves wave after wave onto my shore to remind me of what it has taken, how could I possibly go on? Mark sat patiently by as I rocked Joey's wooden orange crate in my lap and as the sun tip-toed out of the house and behind the horizon. "Can we go to the theatre, Mark," I asked, very unsure of the voice I'd barely used since the accident.

He held the theatre door and then my body as we walked

down the aisle in the dark. We sat in the middle of a row several yards from the stage and cried. He had worked so hard to bring us together, to teach us respect for our differences and love for our insecurities and here we sat, together, in his theatre which felt the biggest injustice of all when talk of canceling his play, at the request of his father, circulated around campus. And I prepared to allow it, too tired to fight the establishment that Joey had died fighting.

Still sniffing, Mark walked along the row of seats to the aisle and disappeared in the darkness. I placed my arms on the seat back in front of me and laid my head there. There would be no more direction from Joey. The days of long rehearsals and the reassuring sound of that excited baritone voice were gone from The Hartung and all but gone from my heart. Mark pushed a wagon with squeaky wheels that Junior never quite managed to correct to Joey's satisfaction, to the edge of the stage. I raised my head to bluish light coming from just beyond the curtain line. On the screen Joey flashed a silly smile and began to ramble on about the 'outrageously handsome' man selected to journey to Planet Earth. Joey announced that this man was the answer to his prayers and the product of his every fantasy. 'To spend one minute in his presence,' he continued, 'would be to make peace with the gods.' Oh, to have one more minute, I thought to myself, to hold him close to my chest and keep him from going under. I pounded the chair in front of

me. I pounded my heart for beating, when his wasn't. Mark put his arms around me from behind and pulled me upright and together we watched Joey smile fondly, then fade so peacefully to black.

"You know we have to do his play," Mark struggled to say after minutes of silence.

"I know," I said. "I know."

The theatre cringed in darkness seized by the ultimate eclipse of life. And in that darkness each actor lifted a mask to his face and tied it there with strings of purpose. And when the velveteen red curtain ascended into the silent loft, all of us found ourselves facing a rotting heap of rejected identities and abandoned disillusionments. And after we pleased the critics and took our bow, we reached deep into that pile to reunite with the only face smiling back at us. In that glorious moment, all of us underwent a final change in face.

Life and Death became constant.

A S H O W O F H A N D S

CAST

(in order of appearance)

First Citizen of Phallic, Bill Monahue.....Joey Tucker
Second & Third Citizens of Phallic, Lot, Himmler.....Dane Kelly
Gil.....Nathan Evans
Adam.....Mark Simmons
Eve, Lot's Daughter, Art Lover, Agnes, Diane.....Lauren Howe
Lot's Other Daughter, Another Art Lover, Anne.....Megan Van Dame
Kersten.....Junior Salazar
First Victim, Britt, Broadway Choreographer.....Rad Anderson
Second Victim.....Sydney Bosak
Stranger, Defense Attorney.....Greg Barstock
Ted Topple.....Dennis Sullivan
Tan Matter.....Kyle P. Edwards
Citizens, Greeks, Extras, Storm Troopers.....Daren Parks,
Patrick Reeves, Luis Blanchard, Stephen Cooper, Stuart G. Fuentes,
Rex Solomon, Dennis Goldstein, Nel Thorndyke, S. Sonny Bascarella,
Michael Barrentine, Billy K. Maxwell, Bret Barbeau, Sandy Rolfson,
Aaron Marshall, Tom Gillespi, Frank Torres & John DiBiscelgie, Di
Thompson, Dawn Morrow.

ACT ONE

Prologue: Oh Phallic Voyage
Scene 1: Appendage of all Evil
Scene 2: Sister Cities
Scene 3: Another Day, Another Drachma
Scene 4: Great Freddy
Scene 5: The Silent One
Scene 6: Ashes to Ashes
Scene 7: Homo-genized
Scene 8: Phallic Longings

ACT TWO

Scene 1: Pre-curtain, Broadway
Scene 2: System
Scene 3: Us
Scene 4: Without Us
Scene 5: Without Us Forever
Scene 6: Home to Phallic

There will be one fifteen-minute intermission.

Written & Directed by **Joey Tucker**
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