

## CHAPTER 12: SHAMELESS

That Saturday after Christmas, trusty Lavenia and I zipped back to DC in high spirits. Barbara finding herself a new husband took a great load off my mind and heart. (It didn't make much difference to me financially because I'd already promised her to continue my child support up through the girls' college years.) Jack's proposal was a godsend in relieving me of duties for my dear first wife's security. I was happy to turn her over to him.

Now five years after our divorce, I felt at last unchained from wedlock. Driving home, I rejoiced, congratulating Barbara and Jack on their imminent bonds of matrimony, bonds being the operative term. I'd burst loose from those bonds with Barbara, but only loose, not quite free. Our emotional bond as former spouses with children was, as Jimmy Durante used to say, "bigger than the both of us," and I suspected it would outlast the both of us.

Ms. Van Dodge and I rolled on along the highway into DC, taking me happily home to my fascinating gay geisha life at the Four Bells, which had been profligately free in both senses. I felt immensely grateful for my past three wonderful years in DC where we gays were allowed to live the lives we want, more or less openly. My peaceful life, waiting tables notwithstanding, seemed about as good as it could get for a gay guy. I loved living in my peaceful jungle in our castle enjoying flashes of happiness with gentlemen callers. Being a geisha was a great gig.

The thorn on the rose, which I didn't recognize at the time, was that for all the historic gay liberation of the 70s, we gays still weren't allowed to wed. (This crucial limit on gay freedom would take another forty years to go away.) As a result, sex for us entailed no emotional bonds—unless you let it turn into love, which would then be as transient as everything else was. Admittedly, I still felt enduring bonds with Ken and Kenny—and with Charles—like family ties. If you will, we were blood friends.

Parking Lavenia in her private space in the back yard, I ran into the house, shouted hi to Lorro on her cage in the parlor, quick-changed, and raced off to work. Making up for my several days off, I also worked on Monday and Tuesday and then took Wednesday and Thursday off for the Four Bells New Year's Eve Ball, costumes not required but much appreciated.

Most costumes were formal gowns and tuxedos. Lewis was stunning in white tie and tails, and Carolyn could've been on the cover of *Vogue*. Charles (also in dinner dress), Ken (in leathers), and Lou (in muscle shirt and jeans), catered for nearly a hundred urban pioneer neighbors and invitees from the gay demi-monde. They had to lay planks across the muddy non-sidewalk for ball-goers to get to our front steps.

With mustache waxed up in handlebars, I passed around hors d'oeuvres on a silver tray, offering proper geisha hospitality and scoping out promising lads. Unfortunately, most were pre-booked for the early hours of 1976, and uninspired by the other two, I introduced them to each other. Near the witching hour, a previous gentleman caller I recalled as Dan showed up, joined me in singing *Auld Lang Syne*, and came upstairs for a private celebration of the New Year.

When we'd celebrated sufficiently, Dan asked if I'd made any New Year's resolutions. Not having done so, I answered with what popped into my mind, probably prompted by the memory of Cary: to become an artist. Dan assured me that I already was one in bed, and I explained that I wanted to create tangible works of beauty.

Charles enthusiastically supported my impromptu resolution and set me to rebuilding an ornate plaster medallion to give to the new owners of #11 on the Circle. While sculpting in plaster was a pleasant diversion, the minimal satisfaction of finishing it taught me that I didn't want to merely re-create another artist's work. I wanted to create my own masterpieces.

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My new-found aspirations bedeviled me through the cold weeks of January, all through the mindless hours at work slinging pizza and quasi-creative hours in restoring some historic piece of the Four Bells. It was a subliminal distraction even in the very social meetings of the LCCA where we met new urban pioneers like George and Harriet at #11. They loved the remade medallion and mounted it in their dining room (which was almost as fancy as ours).

It was a special surprise to find that my old friend Ann (of Wolf Trap and the Bolshoi) and her dapper husband Robert (a stage designer) had bought the little house on O Street right across from my garden plot. Another new couple, Hugo and Heida (apparently Dutch), bought #3, a brick Gothic castle at the Circle across Rhode Island from grand old One and Two and almost as big. Currently, Lewis and Carolyn were taking a few months' break from Herculean labors on their house(s) to try and live normal, professional lives—as much as possible with the gigantic mastiff Isadora that I'd taken to calling Isadoga—formerly known as Varnish.

In my afternoons, in spite of plastic on the windows still rather chilly, I wore a sweater to tend my jungle. Fortunately my plants really didn't mind temps in the 50s. They were an endless fascination for me, each a natural work of beauty. The way my begonias grew a masterpiece of color and design, albeit transient leaves, awed me. I ached with envy of my plants and their unconscious, involuntary art, and my resolution grew in proportion.

While in horticultural trances, I listened to my classical records or caught classical programs on WETA-FM, where I heard even more new stuff than I'd gleaned from a decade of Karl Haas. Nothing compared with the bliss of tending my living works of art and listening to inspired Mozart Concerti or mad fantasies of Rossini. One bright afternoon the station played a new piece, an insidious, gorgeous melody that seized me, caressing and beckoning to a place of perfect beauty. I'll never forget standing there weeping over a purple and silver leaf while for the first time hearing Pachelbel's Canon in D, my artistic aspirations ready to explode.

When the station started a fundraising campaign, I proposed creating a special plant stand for them to give away for a donation of \$250. It was, after all, something tangible to create. I threw together some old lamp pieces and the figured porcelain leg of an old bathroom sink, making a pedestal with brass bowl on top that looked suspiciously like a drinking fountain. The radio fundraisers described it excitedly, and it got grabbed up the first day. Such was my first piece of art to "sell," but it wasn't the kind of beauty I longed to create. Too commercial...

Oddly, with so much artistic inspiration boiling up inside me, I didn't indulge in poetry. Apparently, I considered poetry an immaterial art for expressing feelings and wanted to make a tangible art as an expression of my Self. So I drew still-lives of furniture and plants, even scenes of the rooms in the house. They all turned out so misbegotten I had to euthanize the lot every evening. I now understood that Cary was never truly satisfied with his art, and just the making of it was joy enough. I wish now that our artist as a youngish man had kept a few of those sketches.

Also oddly, one piece of my graphic art from that time survives, apparently too big to get thrown out. It may embody something of my Self. On a 2' X 3' canvas board I used pastel chalks to capture the view out my bedroom window down the alley toward Thomas Circle with the church's spire silhouetted against a sunset. The lines of wall and roofs were imprecise with evening shadows, but the perspective was impeccable and the sky's color almost believable. (After decades in a folder of big prints, the scene's colors have mostly faded/worn away.)

Frigid January ended with the Chinese New Year, the start of the Year of the Dragon. It was supposed to be auspicious for artistic and professional ambitions, but not for establishing love relationships or getting married, which didn't matter much to the aspiring artist anyway.

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Concerned about my artistic frustration, Charles asked me to paint a mural on a wall of his bedroom. He already had the Teton peaks and a seascape on the side walls and wanted an architectural fantasy around the door. I suggested Moorish arches with views on a fountain and a pastoral landscape that could tie into a faux dome around the skylight. Working with him for a week on the sketches got me properly inspired, and the painting calmed my creative anxieties.

The ornate arches I modelled on some Doré illustrations, adding jewel-like colors, and the dancing satyr fountain as well. Doing the falling water was a challenge, but I finally mastered the translucent streams. The landscape I did à la Monet with red poppies in the foreground, a feathery forest behind, and in the distance an ethereal castle. I finished in time to present my work to Charles as a Valentine and told him the dome would just have to wait for a while.

He got another Valentine with the arrival of his friend Peter from Denver, a sharp blue-eyed blond historic architect. They knew each other professionally, and Charles had invited him to visit the Four Bells for a tour and tumble, so to speak. Peter was sprightly, charming, and very intelligent, and I regretted having to work that Saturday and miss the Supper Club with our guest. Peter much appreciated my mural art and encouraged me to pursue that medium, but I worried about running out of walls. He'd made me already envision 50-foot panoramas...

On Monday night, as Charles was dining elsewhere, I reigned over the Club supper of Lou's incredible chicken cacciatore (which I fortunately never ate at Gusti's), and got better acquainted with lovely Peter who was staying with us for yet two more days. Table conversation focused first on the recent stabbing death of adorable Sal Mineo out in California. It grieved me deeply because Sal had been a teen idol for teenaged me, right up there with Frankie Avalon and Ricky Nelson. Everybody, gay or straight, was horrified by the homophobic killing. Lawyer Carolyn, well attuned to gay liberation issues, reasonably advised that unfortunately, no one, gay or straight, is immune to hateful murder.

Dinner talk left that sobering thought and bubbled on vacantly through the antipasti. Then over the incredible chicken, with a deep knowledge of art, Peter fascinated the dozen at table, describing European cathedrals and museums seen in his wide travels. Geisha Rob competed with anecdotes from as far away as Hong Kong, but I just sat there, much less artistically and geographically erudite, and watched the race. Of course, Charles could've won it hands down.

Club folks frequently sat around the parlor for post-prandial drinks and chatter, most of us grown used now to Lorro's chuckles and sirens in the background, often in duet with those outside. Peter found the cacophony disconcerting and led me out into the stair-hall to talk. He prattled sweet thanks for our hospitality at the Four Bells and looked forward to two more days in town. His grateful blues locking with mine, Peter asked, "Can I sleep with you?"

Till now I'd noticed no signals at all from the charming fellow and immediately had to wonder about Charles. After all, we geishas didn't usually swap callers—except for Ken sleeping all over the place. I asked Peter if he had a referral and he did. He'd thanked Charles for the two nights in his disturbing bedroom and been referred to my sub-tropical boudoir. I have to admit that the next two nights Peter didn't manage to sleep all that much with me. We were too busy. I thanked Charles for the referral, and he said, "Yes, Peter sure is a sweetie." Our sweetie kissed us both goodbye, promising to write and come back soon.

After Peter I was too busy with waiting and existential angst to deal with geisha duties. When Dan from New Year's dropped by once again for dinner, hopeful and dear, I sent him off gently after, complaining of a headache (which I never ever suffered). Ignoring professional ambitions and resigned to waiting tables, I languished in abstract anguish about art.

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It must have been that next Wednesday when I got a late lunch party at my brighter station in the dungeon. The somewhat older but nice-looking man, pleasant-looking young lady, and a very good-looking young man were all of a darker complexion, perhaps Hispanic, and eavesdropping proved that true. Noting my curiosity, the man advised me that they were from Panama. I was charmed by his stress on the last syllable—and the young man’s Cheshire-cat smile. They ate heartily, stayed right up to closing, and left a healthy tip.

After my own favorite lunch of a big salad with sardines, I left to find the Cheshire cat waiting by the door, a dark-eyed, slightly curly black-haired beauty with full lips around that smile. Not too surprised, I said “*Hola*,” and so did he. When I moved reluctantly toward my bike, he took my arm and said, “I want to talk with you.” Such a request was hard to decline, and we walked casually up Connecticut Avenue in talk. His English may not have been perfect, but he could certainly talk, almost without taking a breath.

After a couple early attempts to converse, I found it best just to listen and occasionally commiserate appropriately. I quickly learned that he was Giovanni, 24 years old, a mulatto, the nephew and lover of the older man Ricardo, a big shot at the Panamanian embassy, for the past ten years, and the young woman was Cassandra, Ricardo’s niece and Giovanni’s cousin and fiancée. Giovanni didn’t at all want to marry Cassandra—“Because I am *mariposa*!” he shouted up the Avenue—and he constantly fought with Ricardo over the marital matter.

Giovanni’s melodramatic deposition went on for a good long while at a coffee shop. The afternoon was passing so quickly that I kissed off the rest and settled into Giovanni’s gripping monologue. In between his operatic subplots, I think I managed to convey that I was an artist living in a big house with a bunch of gay guys. We walked and he talked even more until time for me to go back to work. Giovanni thanked me for the much-needed company and shoulder to cry on. Somewhat appalled by his sordid tale, I just said, “*Hasta luego*.”

Well, *luego* came *muy pronto*, because after Thursday’s lunch Giovanni was waiting for me again outside Gusti’s. He said he was coming home with me to see my big house. I could hardly refuse his suave proposition. While I walked my bike, he grilled me about my own tale, enjoying my faerie history in New Orleans, lamenting my marriage in Seattle and five years as anguished husband and father, and congratulating me on my second coming out and the many lovers thereafter. Hearing about our classy geisha establishment in the Four Bells, Giovanni excitedly kissed me on the cheek and exclaimed, “*Sin peruenza!*”

Scrumptious Giovanni explained that in his dialect of Spanish that expression meant ‘shameless,’ and I was to hear it many times in the future in many appropriate situations. The first of those was ten minutes later in my jungle boudoir, which reminded him of his tropical homeland, when he literally jumped on me and figuratively ripped off my clothes. Giovanni’s own raiment disappeared like magic. *Muy pronto*, when I lifted my legs hospitably over my head to receive my guest, with another Cheshire grin, hungry growl, and appropriately affectionate *sin peruenza*, he pounced on my body and went to work *con mucho gusto* for the both of us.

One might say that *mas tarde* we were again *sin peruenza* lying about amongst begonias in flagrant, sated, quiet nakedness. Suddenly Giovanni lifted his cheek from my chest to kiss my chin and said, “*Mariposita*.” I thought Little Butterfly a wonderfully operatic geisha name. He called me so again and with an already familiar growl, jumped on me once more.

*Mas tarde*, Giovanni told me Ricardo just couldn’t provide as much sex as his young protégé needed and was pleased he’d found me for a boyfriend. I thanked him for his gallant presumption and welcomed him back to my jungle bower whenever his need arose.

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Giovanni's need arose on both Friday and Saturday afternoons, but he was retained by his uncle-lover for social matters on Leap Day Sunday, and I was leaving on Monday for Florida. Barbara and Jack had scheduled their wedding for next Saturday after Jake's tenth birthday this Wednesday. I'd be gone for yet another week to 'baby-sit' the girls over their honeymoon. Fortunately, I have a disembodied page written soon after the trip, far from a complete narrative but with some vivid passages and one detail that would rarely happen nowadays.

...Off to Florida in my beloved blue van Lavenia with one suitcase, two dwarf rabbits, a punch bowl, and my bicycle Petrushka. *[I hadn't remembered naming my bike Petrushka! The dwarf bunnies were birthday presents for the girls, and the punch bowl, a glorious crystal antique Charles found for me, was my wedding gift.]* The long trip was physically exhausting because there was much rain and wind, but it was beautiful to watch the moon rise out of the retreating cloud bank on the horizon over South Carolina, a gold and silver moon break. After a desperate nap in the parking lot of a motel, so cold I had to leave the engine running, no matter the gas, I woke more in the mood to drive, especially by a full moon. Just as it was setting, I caught sight of a hitchhiker on the dark side of the freeway. So I had company and fine conversation during the dawn. Probably nineteen, he was from a small town in Kentucky on his way to a TM convention in Miami.

That first week of my Florida visit didn't allow for much paternal time with my daughters what with their school, horse-back riding, Aimée's violin lessons, and Jake's ballet classes, but her birthday party came off beautifully. That such an exquisite blond maiden could be the fruit of my mindless, lustful loins was incredible to me. With this lovely daughter now a decade old and my own 35<sup>th</sup> year imminent, I felt tragically middle-aged—in 1976 life expectancy for men was just under 70. The dwarf bunnies bred by my sister, black and white, made a huge hit. (Sadly, before month's end they would make a fine dinner for some feline or canine predator.)

The afternoon of the wedding was chaos. I wound up driving erratically all over town searching for ice. *[As host of the wedding reception, I needed a lot of ice for that huge punch bowl.]* Amazingly, it pulled neatly together by the time we all gathered outside the church. The strangeness of my situation was exhilarating, my lovely children walking down the aisle solemnly with their bouquets. Barbara followed on Papa's arm, a crown of baby's breath in her hair. I stood between Nana and Aunt Ginny feeling their joy and mine that now she'll have something I couldn't give her. I enjoyed an odd celebrity as the bride's gay former husband, an unorthodox member of the wedding.

At the reception my odd celebrity grew as the many guests who already knew me spread my fame amongst those who didn't. I think I garnered more public attention than Jack who stuck close to the spectacular punch bowl—subtly but powerfully spiked. The shy groom who'd already been through this once before, Jack talked to folks in a newly-wed confusion thickened by the punch. Barbara floated elatedly around in the milling crowd of guests, friends, and family. I watched her happiness now with ironic memories of our much simpler, sparser wedding festivities so long before in Carson City, Nevada.\*

My week of minding the girls was fun, getting them off to school in the mornings with a good breakfast and healthy packed lunch, hauling them around to afternoon activities, cooking them a nourishing supper, overseeing homework, and playing games. I thrilled every time they called me Daddy. If I didn't think of the gay whirl back home at the Four Bells, or of Giovanni waiting for me with his wide grin, I felt almost straight. Perish the thought.

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\* For a description of that wedding, see *THERE WAS A SHIP*, Chapter 6 *DOUBLE OR NOTHING*, section vi.

Worn out after driving all night, in early afternoon I parked faithful Lavenia in back and staggered around into the Four Bells aiming for my bed for a restorative nap. Giovanni was waiting in the hall at the foot of the stairs and helped me climb them quickly to my destination, though a nap wasn't on his agenda until much later. I managed maybe an hour's ravished rest before work. The transition from Daddy back to Mariposita was as easy and sweet as pie.

First thing in the morning I made the rounds of the two great plant stores I knew and peddled my second van-load of Florida vegetation. The proceeds covered my trip expenses but of course not much of my missed tips. A few didn't sell but found a spot at the Four Bells. A flat-leafed one called night-blooming cereus sat by the dining room window near the beaded sheaf of cyperus. Charles had once seen one blooming and said it was spectacularly fragrant.

My old routine of waiting tables, salvage, and restoration work on the Four Bells now got much more complicated what with Giovanni occupying almost every spare afternoon moment. Late evenings after work were occasionally available to welcome other admirers, though by then I'd usually fornicated enough for any two geishas. It was hard work picking up old Ricardo's slack, but I gave it my best shot. For Giovanni's amorous growls, groans, and hoots on coming and frenetic fucking, I called him my Panamaniac. With a hungry Panamaniac on my hands—and often on top of me—I no longer had time to anguish about other life worries.

The auguries for this Chinese Year of the Dragon had certainly gotten switched around. Doing nothing for any of my artistic or professional ambitions, it was clearly lucky for love relationships, if that's what Giovanni and I enjoyed: consuming and fulfilling, gentle and rough, affectionate and stern, athletic and lazy, funny and scary, too much and not quite enough...

Our simply physical communion was a wonderfully new experience for me. We desired without lust, had no intellectual connection, and made no emotional demand—just surrendered to the irresistible physical force drawing our bodies together. Wandering around the Tidal Basin's forests of cherry blossoms, Giovanni and I were like two tropical mariposas fluttering wildly, frantically around one another in a shaft of spring sunlight.

In addition, there were late weekend nights out with Giovanni on the town. Being an official, Ricardo couldn't countenance carousing, and our Panamaniac relied on me for dancing as well as other debauchery. At the Lost & Found we happily cavorted to great new disco like "Play That Funky Music," "You Should Be Dancing," and "I Like It Like That." Ricardo also couldn't waste time on such, so Giovanni and I often biked in Rock Creek Park, where he'd try to lure me into the bushes to satisfy a sudden need for nookie. Sometimes he succeeded.



*Giovanni's Mola*

For my birthday, Giovanni gave me a fabric folk art piece from Panama called a *mola*, as finely stitched and detailed as any I've ever seen. Its two dancing figures seemed very us (with Lorro in between), and I loved its voodoo atmosphere—that voodoo that he do so well...

Like Giovanni's dark magic that very afternoon on our stroll in the Arboretum to view the banks upon banks of azaleas in riotous bloom. Though there were other viewers about, at the far bottom of a hill, Giovanni pushed me down behind a bank of pink, yanked down my jeans, and with a triumphant *sin peruenza*, fucked me *loco*. Though we were hidden in clouds of flowers, his orgasmic hoot surely was heard by other azalea aficionados.

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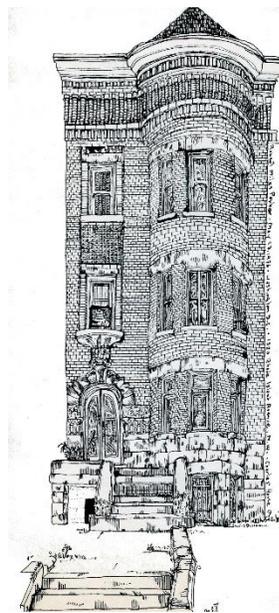
May came on like gangbusters with the flurry in my big Garden at work and Giovanni helping me in the little garden with digging. He got us all muddy, smearing our shirtless chests and sweating faces—to ensure that we would shower afterwards. With this chance to talk, Giovanni said that in spite of Ricardo’s only occasional sexual activity, he loved him madly, hoped they could spend their lives together, and would unwillingly marry Cassandra to cover up their affair. She knew what was up but wanted Giovanni’s body and children however she could get them. It wouldn’t happen till they’d go back to Panama later in the fall. We had till then.

The merry month proceeded with planting, watering, weeding, and at every other free afternoon moment noisily screwing our brains out in my private jungle. Weekends out dancing added jubilation to our merriment. Apropos noisily, later in the month when Dave had moved out, a new fellow showed up to stay in that room, Rob’s 16-year-old cousin Toby, a tantalizing adolescent well in the know about our gay household, on a two-week visit.

One particularly loud afternoon—even I’d started coming with an ecstatic wailing gasp—Giovanni and I staggered naked out into the hall bound for a shower, and Toby was sitting on the stair grinning broadly. Fake-naively, he asked, “What were you guys doing in there?” Giving the boy his even broader Cheshire grin, Giovanni smacked my butt and said, “Guess!”

Toby ran upstairs to his room, either excited or scandalized. That night I was reading in Frank Herbert’s new “Children of Dune,” and he knocked on my door, appearing in tight white underpants and wanting a back-rub. When I dubiously said okay, the beamish boy instantly dropped his shorts and sprawled face-down on my bed. I stood beside the bed gazing down on his post-pubescent pulchritude and only with a supreme effort of won’t-power didn’t...

I made Toby put on his underpants—no geisha back-rubs for underage boys. I daresay he left me frustrated. Hearing my virtuous tale, Giovanni shamelessly offered his own pulchritude to assuage my frustration. I think that was the afternoon of his surprising news of starting a class in hotel management. He wanted to train for a good job so as not to depend on Ricardo for everything. In all his ten years as his uncle’s loving catamite, I was amazed to learn, Giovanni had never worked. The irony of hotel management was not lost on me. This news meant that we’d have less time to fornicate, but I was okay with a somewhat lighter schedule. I needed more alone time with my plants.



*The Four Bells*

Fortunately, I had Memorial Day off from Gusti’s and could go to the LCCA community holiday cookout on the Circle, a splendid occasion to show off my hunky Panamian to old and new friends and give tours of our lush community gardens nearby. Charles used the occasion to distribute cards with a drawing of the Four Bells he’d commissioned from a famous historic-house artist, Robert Miles Parker. We started using it on our stationery. I only now notice that Parker caught the schefflera I’d parked out on the front porch. And do remember that those front steps went down to a dirt (mostly mud) sidewalk.

On June 9 was DC’s second Gay Freedom (Pride) Day with a remarkable crowd around Dupont Circle and environs. Our geisha contingent was out in full shamelessly proud mode. When Charles asked Giovanni where Ricardo was, my guy said his uncle didn’t call himself gay. Charles said, “Oh, doesn’t he? Bring him to dinner this Saturday, and we’ll talk about that.” Since I wouldn’t be there, I certainly wondered what kind of talk Charles had in mind. Much needed to be said.

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When I got home from Saturday evening's work, I fully expected to find Giovanni waiting for me to go out to the Lost & Found. I didn't expect to learn that Ricardo was closeted for the night with Charles in his unique chamber. Something significant was bound to come of that—besides leaving Giovanni after our carouse to spend his first whole night with me. At breakfast Sunday morning in front of us all, Ricardo was openly affectionate with Giovanni, kissing and petting him. Giovanni's startled look told me this was most unusual.

When they'd left, I cornered Charles to tell me what happened, and he explained boudoir dominance as a very effective technique for curing bad behaviors and instilling respect and affection. This was way outside my experience. The following weekend Charles drove Giovanni and me to a little Pennsylvania town called Marietta to tour some historic properties, and on the drive he gave my guy pointers on discipline and giving orders. I was very impressed and more than slightly appalled by my dear friend's exotic expertise.



*Charles at Window, 1976*

Our historic tour around the little old town (where charms lurked unrecognized around every corner), took us through a couple abandoned factory buildings, which Charles exuberantly expected to be repurposed for living and work spaces. Looking around the tiny village, I silently and seriously wondered where all the livers and workers were going to come from.

Charles brought a camera for National Register work, and I borrowed it for a shot of him resting in a window. It's one of the only pictures I have of my mind-mate. And the best.

We toured some small storefronts on the main street, admiring tin ceilings and woodwork counters. Some nice low Victorian façades and simple stained-glass windows along the street spread a sweet aura of long ago. Most interesting was a tiny place with a fancy organ. It had started out an opera house, then was turned into a silent movie theater, then a church, and was now a place for meetings. I thought it would make a lovely venue for chamber music concerts. Again I had

.....to wonder where any audience might come from.

While I drove Lavenia back to DC, Charles and Giovanni talked further, and I learned a lot about my Panamianic by listening in. He said that even at fourteen, he'd loved his handsome uncle fucking him, and now ten years later still did. Then he answered my burning question by revealing that Ricardo never let him do the fucking. Usually just gave a hand-job, only very rarely a blow-job. We agreed that was not appropriate behavior. Charles told Giovanni that was the first order he should enforce and confided that the other night he'd broken Ricardo's ice. Giovanni's story was like a gay "Lolita"—with a little geisha thrown in for comic relief.

At work we got a big surprise when they hired a real woman to wait tables, a beautiful Vietnamese refugee named Thuy. Right away, she shamelessly told me that she'd been a whore in Saigon, and a nice American soldier had helped her escape. Birds of a feather, we hit it off immediately, and I affectionately called her Tweedle.

Thuy took no shit off the Persians. In the kitchen, the first and only time Bahman pinched her ass, she grabbed up a butcher knife and shouted, "I cut you balls off! You like—you pay!" The bully backed right off, and gentle Rezi asked how much. Putting the knife down and not skipping a beat, she said business-like, "Hundred dollar!"—apparently way out of the Persians' price range. I liked her style. Also Tweedle was at least as strong as any waiter in the joint.

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In my exciting, glamorous geisha life I'd paid scant attention to politics—even in this year of a presidential election. But at work on July 3, my new friend Tweedle threw a fit about the Viet Cong proclaiming the Republic of Vietnam. This youngest country in the world cast a new light on our Bicentennial the next day. Patriotic pride was a strange, new feeling for me.

For the Bicentennial Fireworks, Lou, Rob, and I went early in the morning down to the Washington Monument to stake out a place for the Four Bells regiment on its east slope. I was thrilled to find in the online History Collection some old photos coincidentally taken that day by one Jacob Miller, who must have started his celebration there too. In this detail of one below, I can easily believe the cluster of slope-sitters below the branch on the right may well be us.



*Eastern Slope of Washington Monument, July 4, 1976*

With rotating reinforcements and refreshments, we held our strategic position as crowds swelled, by early afternoon spreading thick in every direction. Sitting securely in our fort on the slope, I felt utterly besieged. By later afternoon the crowd grew to multitudes, a sea of heads! By then Jacob Miller must have wandered down to the Lincoln Memorial for this shot up the Mall focused on that faint obelisk where we festively awaited the fireworks.



*Up the Mall, July 4, 1976*

Our occupying force on the slope grew to a couple dozen closest lovers, friends, and neighbors, all bringing food and drink. In mid-afternoon Giovanni and Ricardo fought their way up to our fort with yet more food and wine. By the time darkness finally fell, everyone was drunk and/or stoned and fully primed for the biggest fireworks display in all of history.

It was at least the biggest display I'd ever imagined, the sky all up and down the Mall glittering with exploding flowers and rockets streaking gleaming arches back and forth, all of it mirrored in the Reflecting Pool. For low displays around the Pool, people stood up to see, waves flowing unstoppably up our slope and causing all in their path to stand up. From the Monument chants of down in front would send counter-waves sweeping back down the Mall that made everyone sit down. There was no resisting either wave. It was disturbing to experience humanity as a mass, as a collective organism, and myself as a mere cell in that larger being.

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