

**LESS THAN CHORUS** by Lee MacDougall

The party would begin during the show. It was a production of the musical *Cabaret*, and we spent much of the evening celebrating at the infamous Kit Kat Club. A few of us were playing waiters at the club; we sang in the big musical numbers, moved furniture during scene changes, and served the stage customers. We would also spread the word about who was hosting the party after the show. The line between the two was often blurred.

The concept for this production was to have the leads perform on the stage, while the chorus of waiters and call-girls would lurk in the aisles, waiting for their chance to jump up and perform during the songs. When they were finished we would be back in the dark, serving the “guests” at the club who were seated at tables crammed into the aisles. This show was an apt metaphor for the young actor’s experience at the Festival.

Stratford is a large repertory company, with a different show running every evening and afternoon, to enable patrons to visit for a few days and see as many plays as humanly possible. To give the actors an incredible opportunity, and to keep us off the streets, we would be cast in up to four shows a season. We would rehearse three shows simultaneously for the first few months, open them to the public, then rehearse a new show when we weren’t performing. If an actor had been cast in three shows, and they couldn’t find a fourth, they would stick them in the musical.

So *Cabaret* had a rather large cast. There were the nine lead actors; eight young men who played waiters, sailors, and Nazis; eight young woman who played hooker/dancers; and there were twelve guests. This last group only appeared in the scenes at the club; their duties included applauding, smoking, and generally providing atmosphere. There are many long scenes in Cliff’s apartment, or at Fraulein Schneider’s, so the guests had a lot of down time during the three hour show. There is an area under the Stratford mainstage called the underworld; a dark confluence of hallways that allow people to make entrances via the ramps, or vomitoria. Because there was nowhere to house the guests, they were asked to remain in the underworld for the duration of the

show. Whenever we ran through this area carrying furniture, we would hop over the twelve bodies sprawled on the floor, trying to nap while they waited for their moment on the stage. But they never actually made it to the stage. When they were needed, they would trudge up the vomms and squeeze around the tables in the dark aisles. The guests hated this show.

There were a few actors among the guests who had lead roles in other plays. They had signed their contracts believing in the notion of a true repertory company, in which an actor might play Hamlet in one show, and the third soldier in another. This never happened. As in any democracy, the leads were always leads, and the servants were only servants. But some people still lived in hope, so they accepted the role of guest, thinking it would be a nice restful show. One day during rehearsal, a women playing one of our leads happened upon a female guest.

“Oh this must be so boring for you,” the older actress said, “hanging around, doing nothing for hours.”

“Ya, it’s pretty deadly,” mumbled the humble star.

“And you have a great part in the Marlowe. I’m amazed that you would accept such a small role in this. I mean a chorus part.” continued the gracious veteran. “Oh - but the waiters and the girls are the chorus. You people are - *less* than chorus.”

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When I arrived home the music was already blaring, and the living room was full of people dancing. In those days Stratford had three theatres running shows every night. Word had spread that we were hosting, and people had let themselves in. No one locked their doors. I started stacking beer and ice in the sink, and putting out bowls of chips. This looked like it might be a big one.

The house I was sharing was a few blocks from the theatre. It was a three-story Edwardian red brick, with an elegant wrap-around veranda, and many small rooms, all decorated in worn-out furniture and hideous wallpaper. The dining room had purple and orange striped paper, the living room had dull brown paneling, and the small sitting room we called the Ramada room, because of its garish hotel wallpaper. The kitchen had old, painted cupboards and creeping ivy paper. Upstairs were four bedrooms with equally tragic decor, the one bathroom, other than a toilet in the basement, and the third floor attic had a few cots where guests could crash if they had to. We called the house Riata, after the Texan mansion in the film *Giant*, and it cost just over five hundred dollars a month to rent. Split three ways. It could sleep twelve.

My roommates were two actors named Erin and Aaron. Erin had just graduated from theatre school, was a muscular fireplug of a guy with a great sense of humour, and was a lot of fun to be around. Aaron was a year younger, a little taller and leaner, and was a dark-haired, olive-skinned hunk of a man. He had a penchant for drag, and heavy metal music. I had met them the year before during our first season at Stratford, when I was in the young company, and they were apprentice actors. This meant they were paid less than a living wage, and given the opportunity to learn from the pros. This year we were all full members of the company, and were three young, ambitious actors among the hundred and twenty hired.

Aaron was dating Karen, among others. These included Sarah, an ex-girlfriend with huge hair; and any other young woman who was visiting for a few nights. They were casual bangs, but Karen was his “official”. She was a dark, fiery beauty with a great laugh, and a wild spirit. They had been dating since she arrived in April; a late addition to the company to replace a girl who had quit because she felt she wasn’t getting the parts she deserved. I remember seeing Karen the day she arrived. She was walking up a set of stairs in a tight skirt, and she glanced back and picked Aaron out of the crowd. The look between them was electric. They made a pact to have sex in all their costumes, during the shows. *Cabaret* was easy because Karen was a Kit Kat girl, and wore next to nothing. Down under the stage, a hallway led to several change rooms that were always empty in the evenings. As long as they were quick, they could get it done during “The

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Pineapple Song”. The big hooped skirts of the Restoration play proved more difficult, but Aaron was always up for a challenge. Their other shows were *Much Ado About Nothing*, (soldier and house maid), and *Troilus and Cressida* (togas).

Erin was dating Carly. She was a blond, folksy, carpenter’s assistant, who made her own bread, and loved having sex. She didn’t live in town, but in Waterloo, so when she wasn’t visiting, Erin was also juggling Lil, one of the lead actresses in the company, and Donna, a costumer designer. Lil was in her thirties, which seemed very old and exotic to us. She had a smokey laugh, and a voluptuous body. She wanted to settle down with Erin, but he was partial to Donna; also in her thirties, with sparkling blue eyes, a low voice, and a tomboyish air. One night the boys and I had a debate about all the various women in their lives, and mutually agreed that Donna was the greatest catch. She had a promise of adventure and a slight smile that drove everyone crazy.

I was in a relationship with a guy in Toronto at the time, but while I was at Stratford we’d been seeing each other less and less. Russ had been a fellow actor in a summer stock company in Muskoka when I met him, but now he was getting less theatre work, and more of a life; a real job and a house. As our worlds moved apart, so did we.

The parties at Riata that year would usually begin with a game of Heavy Dick. This was a dice game that involved beating the odds with five dice, and a lot of yelling. As long as you rolled a one or a five, or three of a kind, you could remove those points and keep playing. The word dick was a synonym for nothing, or no points. Rolling five dice and getting nothing was rare, but when it happened it was a big nothing, or Heavy Dick.

Once we’d played a few long games of Dick, people would start dancing, and eventually the clothes would start coming off. This was a particular quirk of our group of actor friends that summer. Jimmy was a bit flamboyant, and had long twelve-year-old-girl arms, and longer legs. In a daring bit of casting, he was playing one of the Kit Kat girls this season. At some point during a

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party he would want to swap clothes with some of the girls; this would get the tops off, and before you knew it everyone was peeling off and dancing. Mary Louise was a beautiful blonde country girl, who wore cowboy boots and peasant skirts. Brett and Andrea were deeply in love, and were always up for something outrageous. One night during the nude dancing, a bunch of them decided to go for a drive around town. Brett announced he was the British bulldog hood ornament, and squatted naked on the front of the car. They drove slowly along the silent, tree-lined streets, with Brett's balls swinging to the gasps and screams of the nude passengers inside.

By the time Erin and Aaron arrived home, the place was rocking. The dance floor was bouncing, and the Heavy Dickers were screaming in the Ramada room. More actors were arriving, and we laughed at how quickly these things snow-balled. Erin asked me if any of the B's had arrived yet.

“Just the usual. No E's yet though.” I responded.

In an acting company this large, there were several different kinds of actors. Because most Shakespeare plays have many roles for men and very few roles for women, and as many of the lead roles were given to the same actors every year, you ended up with a lot of men playing smaller roles, and a lot of women with nothing to do at all. Some of this group we called the Bitter, or the B's. They were bitter about not getting the roles they felt they deserved, and angry that no one seemed to realize how brilliant they really could be. Then there were those who had been toiling away in the trenches of small parts for years, or at smaller theatres, and felt that they had “paid their dues”. These actors felt that they were Entitled to larger roles. They were called the E's. They were a particularly nasty lot, and could shut down a dinner or a party in a few minutes with their ranting. The saddest group, and the most virulent, were bitter and entitled. As they were both B and E, Erin had named them the B'nEse. They could be quite pleasant when you first met them, but give them a few weeks, or a few drinks, and they would pin you in a corner and spew bile. We'd come to realize quite quickly who fell into which group, and as this looked like it might develop into a dreaded Full Company party, we'd have to be on the lookout.

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The lead actors were rarely included in these groups. They were so happy to have good roles year after year, that they were generally gracious to the many below them. But take away a lead role, or relegate a former lead to a smaller supporting part, and these same models of compassion would release their inner B'nEse before you could say Eve Harrington. Most of our friends were too new at the game to be anything other than just angry. Anger seemed to be the first emotional response of all the young men we knew - someone's part had been stolen, or someone was being picked on by an evil director - there was always something to rage about. The women seemed to take their anger out on each other; there were always alliances being formed, or girls being ostracized for stealing parts, or men, or something.

Many more people were pouring into the house now, and someone had brought lawn torches to light up the yard. They were lit and placed in buckets on the wooden, wrap-around veranda. As soon as they were flaming we could see our wealthy neighbours the Carsons at their window, probably clucking about how we were going to burn down the street. We waved at them, and made gestures of invitation. They looked at us with disdain.

Karen, Mary Louise and the other ladies of the cast had arrived, and thankfully brought more food. Karen was bent over laughing in the kitchen. She had made a cake in the shape of two giant boobs for the party, but they had fallen as they cooled, and now it looked like an ass cake. We spent a while discussing whose ass it was, and which people would still eat it. Most of the food was cakes and cookies. The men brought beer and chips to a party; the women brought desserts. The older members of the company would bring liquor, but they knew better than to leave it out in the open. As the evening wore on, people would start to drink whatever was available, and the expensive scotch would be mixed with 7Up by people who didn't care. The kitchen was filling with the kinds of food that people will eat ravenously at parties, and then feel terrible about the next morning. And party cigarettes. Not many people smoked, but everyone smoked at parties. As the volume of the talking in the kitchen started to increase in decibels, the music was turned up by the dancers, and the talking rose to a roar to compensate. People started to wander up to the higher floors of the house to find some peace. Or privacy.

September was a stressful time at Stratford, because it was then that the Festival started to approach actors with offers of work for the following season. Sadly, some people would receive letters telling them that they weren't going to be needed. The life of an actor is a difficult one. We work on a contract basis, moving from theatre to theatre if we're lucky. Most contracts are very short; three weeks rehearsal and maybe a three week run. Then it's back to unemployment, and the hunt for more work. One of the many benefits of working at Stratford was the length of the contract. Actors started rehearsing shows in February, and closed them in late October. Nine months of work at a good salary. If you were lucky, you had three or four months off, and started again the following season; unbelievable provenance for people who generally worked ten weeks a year. If you were good at saving money, you might make it through the winter without having to work at all, or maybe even take a winter holiday, like real people. If you were very lucky, you might be asked back many years in a row. This was one of the dangers of Stratford. Working here could mean the removal of one of the main stresses of working as an actor: finding the next job. Some very talented people had been hired at Stratford, but as soon as they arrived, they were sucked into the vortex. "If I come back next year, I'll be able to save money. If I'm good at my job, and don't piss anyone off, I'll be asked back again and again." The years of work were like the Sirens, calling you to believe you deserved to come back, then smashing you on the rocks of your own ego.

The truth of the matter is that some people are just not needed year after year. They only have so many middle-aged male roles, depending on the shows they are doing, and if they already have six, they don't need ten. Or they have eleven young women in the company, and next year there are only three good roles. Or a new director is coming in, and wants to bring a favourite actor into his show, so other leads aren't necessary. This is in no way a reflection on talent, or ability. But no one wants to hear that. If they only need three men like me, then why am I not one of the three they keep? To soften the blow of dis-employment, the powers that be decided to let people know well in advance. This year the "We-regret-to-inform-you-that-your-services-will-not-be-required- next-season" letters were being sent out in September. The week of our party.

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Karen cornered me, looking for Aaron. She wanted to sneak off and have some private time with him before he got too wasted. She had heard that his old girlfriend Sarah was in town seeing some shows, and was raging.

“That little twerp with the wig had better stay clear of him.”

Sarah didn't really wear a wig; she was a petite woman with such big hair that it looked fake. The year before, when she had been part of the company, she had been accosted in a hallway by someone from stage management for wearing a show wig while not performing. It was her own hair. From then on she was known as “that little \_\_\_\_\_ with the wig”.

A crowd from Bentley's, the actor's favourite bar, surged into the kitchen. A few of them were wearing black spots on paper pinned to their shirts, which brought cheers from the crowd.

One of the shows being performed this year was a stage adaptation of *Treasure Island*. In the story, when a man is marked for murder, he is handed a piece of paper with a black spot on it. This is a terrifying sign, and the black spot sends men screaming in fear. As soon as the Stratford no-thank-you letters were sent out, actors began to say they had received their black spot. It was a way of laughing at the prospect of termination. Shortly after the first few arrived at the party with their black spots, others who were ashamed to admit that they had received a rejection letter were proudly making spots out of scrap paper, and sticking them to their shirts or blouses with gusto. It became a mark of honour, and they an elite group within the party. They started to rail about their despair, and swear at the idiocy of the directors. People who had received offers of work for next season were strangely silent. Some even complained that they hadn't heard, or hadn't received their spot yet, so as not to be scorned by the envied refusees.

Erin, Aaron and I were still waiting to hear. We all had small parts in shows in this, our second season, and were primed to move up to bigger roles. This was the normal path for young actors. If you worked hard, and pleased a lot of people, and you were lucky, each year your roles



*might* get bigger. Once in a while someone was picked from the rabble and given a large role, or brought in from outside the company and dropped in as a star, but that didn't often happen, and usually led to disaster. There were many one-season-wonders out there, waiting tables and complaining about how badly they had been treated by Stratford. Erin had been told he was being groomed as a comedic featured player, and Aaron had his sights set high. He was sure he was going to be a star. Because I could sing, and had played some roles before I came to Stratford, I had been asked to audition for one of the leads in next year's musical, *The Winner*. Wilf was a part I had played at university, and the audition had gone well. I had pretty well been promised the role. My only real competition within the company was Lloyd Martin, who had been told he was on a very short list for the prestigious new young company that was being formed the next season. Of course he would take that over the musical. I knew that all I had to do was keep my mouth shut, and wait for the offer.

Gloria and Doug had arrived! They rarely came to parties thrown by young actors. They were stars of the company. She had been here for years, and had played all the Shakespearean heroines, and the comic parts, and starred in the musical. She could do anything. Doug had joined the company later, and felt he should have been playing roles opposite Gloria. He resented that people might think he was only part of the company because she was, and was begrudgingly working his way through the supporting roles. He was very B, and E. His name was Doug Barker, but everyone called him Dark Bugger. When he got loaded, which was only a matter of time, he would start to rage. He would shame people for flaunting their black spots. I had to find Erin to let him know things were getting interesting.

I also had to let him know that Gloria and Doug had brought Lil with them. She was on the prowl for Erin, who was upstairs with Donna, his costumer fantasy. When I found them, they were enjoying a quiet joint in the attic, with six or seven others. I pulled him aside and told him that Lil was in the building.

“Oh Jesus,” he said. “I’ll tell her I have a cold. She won’t come near me.”

All the lead actors were terrified of getting sick, as they might lose their voice, and have to let their understudy go on. None of them would ever admit it, but they were all afraid of being shown up by their understudies. At least that is what we, the understudies, believed.

We could hear Karen and Aaron fighting in the sunroom on the second floor. She was threatening him about his ex, Sarah, and I heard him say he hadn't talked to her in over a year. Erin and I knew he had traveled to the city the previous weekend to "see" her. We didn't take these battles too seriously, because they were usually just stoking the fires for a full-body-contact make-up session.

I heard a scream and moved downstairs to see what had been broken. There were now people in every room; some standing in corners, some dancing wildly, and the game of Dick in the Ramada room had morphed into a group wrestling match on the floor. The Carsons next door were still staring at us in horror, now from their front porch. Reggie, their athletic quarterback son was glaring with them. He was very square, and just about to leave for university. He was probably getting a lecture about the Sodom and Gomorrah that our house represented; a lifestyle which he should avoid at all costs. Jimmy danced up in Mary Louise's dress, so I dipped him, and we both waved at the Carsons. Jimmy tried to get me to switch clothes with him, or at least neck for a while, but I told him I was getting someone a drink, and bolted.

I was collecting empty bottles in the kitchen when I ran into Carly, Erin's carpenter steady, who was just arriving.

"What are you doing here?" I yelled over the din.

"I just came in from Waterloo to surprise Erin!" she called back. "What's going on?"

"Oh, just a few people from the theatre. He'll be so surprised you came."

I dropped the case of empties, and squeezed my way through the crowd toward the stairs. I had to get to Erin before Carly did. She was insanely jealous, and if she found him with Donna,

she would go crazy. I remembered he was trying to find Lil, to tell her that he had a cold. By now I was on the stairs, moving upward, and couldn't turn around for the crush of people. I'd have to go up and come back down. I met Aaron on the stairs coming the other way, and quickly briefed him about Carly's arrival.

"Oh shit," was all he could manage, before he was carried away by the descending crowd. When I got to the second floor, there was a line-up for the washroom. I didn't have to go, but Karl Anders, one of the truly brilliant leading actors, was at the end of the line. I could easily spend a few minutes talking to him while we waited. Erin could fend for himself.

"Good party," he said, once I was leaning against the wall beside him.

"We didn't think this many people would come."

"I guess it's that time of year. People need to release a bit of tension." He was in his thirties, with glistening eyes, and a striking jawline.

"Ya," I laughed a bit too hard. "I thought you were so great in the Ibsen."

"Oh thanks." There was a bit of a pause. "And you stood out in the young company show last year."

I was dumbfounded. He had noticed me?

"Ya. We had a lot of fun." I sounded so stupid.

"Yes," he said. Awkward silence. "We should get together sometime. Have lunch or something. I could make you dinner." Was he being serious? I looked at his eyes, and could tell immediately that he was. Was he trying to pick me up?

"Ya. That would be good."

"Or maybe just have a drink or - something." He smiled.

He was. I had to get out of there. I wanted to talk to him, but the last thing I wanted was to be jumped by him. I couldn't walk away. I was supposed to be waiting for the washroom. There were people in the line after me. I looked past him to the door.

"Whoever's in there is sure taking a long time."

“I think it’s your roommate. Erin? He went in with a woman a while ago.”

My out. “Excuse me. I’ve been looking for him.”

I made my way to the door, and listened closely. I couldn’t hear anything, except the pounding music from the main floor. I knocked twice.

“Erin?” No response.

“Erin it’s me. There’s a lot of people lined up out here. And you wouldn’t believe who just arrived.”

Again there was only silence.

“Erin? Did you know Carly was coming?” I said.

The door flew open and a flushed-looking Erin was staring at me wide-eyed. Donna was smiling coyly behind him.

“No,” was all he could muster.

“Yeah, imagine that. I just spoke to her in the kitchen. Surprise.”

Erin closed the bathroom door in my face. I turned and moved down the hallway. Karl was still in the line, now talking to a pretty young actress. I realized it was Beth Green.

A group of us had been standing at the call board about a week earlier, studying the next day’s schedule of rehearsals and classes. It was a complicated form, covering three theatres, and it often took a while to scan the whole thing. There was a list of young women’s names in one corner, and it said they were meeting with the Artistic Director. Beth saw the list of names, and then asked quietly, “Are those girls reading for Juliette?” *Romeo and Juliette* was on the play list for next season, and obviously the girls were auditioning for something. “Uh, I don’t know,” someone mumbled. We all kept our eyes to the schedule, trying not to catch her attention. She turned and slowly walked away from us, down the hall. We exhaled with relief. We were just

other actors in the company; we had nothing to do with who was seen for what. Fifteen feet down the hallway, she turned back and screamed, “WELL FUCK YOU ALL!”

Beth had a lot of rage. She would bend the ear of the Karl Anders, and possibly rip it off. I mumbled something about using the basement washroom as I passed them, and slipped by without stopping.

Mary Louise grabbed me when I got to the main floor. She was sweating from dancing, and was wearing what looked like one of my shirts. I remembered that Jimmy had her dress on.

“You have to save me,” she gushed. “Rodney Doll is after me.”

Rodney Doll was another of the stars of the company. He was tall and dashing, and married to an actress named Briana. They fought openly, and he often declaimed that it was only a matter of time before one of them killed the other.

“Rodney is at our party?” That probably explained the scream I’d heard earlier.

“Yes, and he was playing Dick with us. Then he started rolling around with me on the floor, saying he wanted to show me what a real heavy dick looked like!”

We both squealed at the image of Rodney’s dick. He made sure that all of his characters wore very tight pants, and he groped himself in every role. It was rumoured that he liked to wash his privates in his dressing room sink after each show. Even clean, no one wanted to see it.

“Tell him Briana is here,” I offered.

“Oh that’s good. Thank you!” Mary Louise waved and threw herself back on to the dance floor. Briana never came out in public, except to opening nights, where she might see People of Influence. But this party was turning out to be special, so the Press might be here.

I found a huddle of people in the dining room, and wondered what the problem was. Linda Probst was sobbing in the corner. A few kind souls were holding her hands, trying to offer her some comfort. She had every right to cry. She was one of the women in the chorus of *Cabaret*, and therefore had to dance wearing very little. She had been on the curvy side when she arrived, but - well, we hadn't noticed that she'd gained weight, but someone had. That week she had received a letter from the Festival telling her that her costumes were not fitting anymore, and asking her to make every effort to return to her original weight. The same day, from another department, she'd received her black spot letter. Being told you're fat and fired was enough to make anyone cry. She had tried to be brave, and was wearing a black spot on her ample bosom, but now that she'd had a beer, or four, the tears were flowing.

The group in the dark Ramada room was quieter now. The wrestling had subsided, and they seemed to be talking earnestly. I sat down for a while to take a breather. It was a peaceful oasis; an island of calm in the midst of the insanity. I closed my eyes, and heard snippets of various conversations: "... a part I could have played in my sleep." "...don't let it bother you. You're twice the actress she'll ever be." "... you know he's drinking during the shows; he can barely speak by the last scene." I sat up quickly. Without knowing it, I had wandered into a room full of B'nEse! I had to escape. The envy was poison. "Must - get - out! Please!" I stumbled for the door, stepping over bitter bodies as I fell.

Erin grabbed me by the arm as he rushed by, pulling me into the kitchen.

"Have you seen her yet?" he prompted.

"Seen who?"

"Carly you asshole! Who else?"

"There's a lot of who else's. Hasn't Lil found you?"

"No. I haven't left the can. If you see Carly, give her a drink. Keep giving her drinks, and I'll see her in the morning." Carly couldn't drink anything alcoholic, and if she did, she'd be out cold in half an hour. I raised an eyebrow. He'd have to come up with some payment.

“Okay,” he considered. “I’ll - I’ll vacuum the house.”

“In your bicycle pants.”

Erin never vacuumed; a bone of contention around the house, but he knew how I felt about his lycra shorts.

“Done.” he said, sneering at me.

I turned toward the bar. “And I have to witness the cleaning!”

Erin raced away, and I started to make up a Zombie of a drink; one that would taste like sweet orange juice, to attract the crunchy-granola farmer side of Carly, but have enough booze in it to knock out a Russian politician. Just as I was adding the last of the over-proof vodka, Lil caught me by the elbow.

“Darling, have you seen Erin?” she gargled. She must have been drinking before she arrived, because she was leaning into me in a way that she normally wouldn’t.

“No I haven’t. But he might be in the basement. There’s line up for the upstairs loo.”

“Thanks. I owe you a good one.” She turned and made her way toward the basement stairs. I hoped she knew where the light switch was, because the stairs went down at a wicked angle. I turned toward the front porch with Carly’s potion, when the lady herself came flying out of the Ramada room.

“Jesus! Someone tried to take off my top,” she exclaimed.

“Probably just Jimmy. I did see Erin, and he’s looking for you. He said to give you this. It’s some vegan thing he made up for you specially.” I handed her the drink and watched her sip it like a tea-taster.

“Down the hatch darling!” I tilted my beer back and chugged a goodly amount, hoping that she’d follow suit.

“I have to be careful.”

“Oh it’s very mild. I saw him make it.”

She took another sip, and swished it around her mouth. "It's good."

"And good for you." I was going to hell, I knew, but at least the vacuum might get used.

The music stopped and the dancers yelled. I made my way into the living room to see what the problem was. Brett was wearing nothing but his boots, and in an attempt at a special turn, had tossed Andrea into the stereo. They were picking her up, laughing. The stereo components were scattered, but everything still seemed to be connected. I pushed the Play button and a K.D. Lang two-step blew out of the speakers. Everyone cheered and they were off again. I danced with the group for a long while, just to escape the insanity. Brett's boots-only dancing was a welcome distraction. Andrea laughed, but she wouldn't take her clothes off in this crowd.

Once I had worked up a good steam, I decided I might need to use the downstairs facilities. And I could check to see if Lil had made it back up in one piece. When I got to the stairs, I flicked on the light. I heard a man's voice call something like "No thank you!" from down below. I immediately turned the light off. I thought about trying the upstairs john, but I remembered the line up. I knew my way around the basement fairly well, so I decided to venture down in the dark.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, there was a bit of light coming through the small basement windows from the streetlights outside. Just enough to cast strange shadows on the boxes and old furniture that lay scattered about. I made my way toward the toilet, and remembered there was a light bulb with a chain on it near the door. I didn't want to step on anyone, so I reached up and pulled it on. I saw two bodies on a carpet in front of me. One was Jimmy, with Mary Louise's dress up around his shoulders. The other was Reggie; the Carson's hunky quarterback son. I heard Jimmy gasp, and saw just enough to admire the couple's flexibility, before I pulled the chain again, pitching the room into darkness. I ran for the stairs, calling out a "Sorry!" as I stumbled over a crate of old record albums.



I had to pee now quite urgently, so I decided I would try my luck around the back of the house. We had a large open yard, with nothing in it but an old garden shed, and a decaying hammock strung between two trees. I had tried to start a vegetable garden, but the rabbits kept everything clipped flush with the ground. There mustn't have been a moon that night, because I tripped on the back stairs as I made my way into the blackness. I felt my way to the shed, and started to pee against the side of it. My eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness, when I heard a woman moan. I looked around, and realized to my horror, that someone was sleeping in the hammock. I angled myself away from them, and finished with a shake. I zipped myself up, and snuck at peek at the hammock. It wasn't one person, but two, and they weren't sleeping. I froze when I saw it was Aaron. But who was he with? Probably Karen. They were insatiable. They didn't appear to have heard me, so I turned back toward the house. A male voice stopped me.

"I think it's divine."

It was Karl Anders. He was leaning against the shed, watching Aaron and whomever.

"To watch, I mean," he explained.

"Who is he with?" I whispered.

"I think it's Linda Probst. I guess she needed some consoling."

Aaron? With fat and fired? He wouldn't. He would. They were.

Karl leaned in to whisper. "Shall we join them?"

I didn't bother with an excuse. I ran in the darkness around to the front of the house. There were a few taxis in a line. People were fighting over who had called first, but at least they were starting to leave. I stood saying goodbye to people for some time, watching over my shoulder for Karl. He didn't appear.

After about an hour of goodbyes, the final taxi rolled away into the darkness. The torches on the front porch had burnt themselves out. The flower boxes were full of cigarette butts, and there were empty beer bottles along the railing. The music was finally playing something slower, and I saw Carly passed out on the couch in the living room, her empty drink in hand.

Karen was in the kitchen, picking at the last crumbs of her ass cake.

“Honey,” she said, “have you seen Aaron?” She licked a bit of icing from her finger.

“No. Not for a while.”

“That prick is probably whispering to Sarah on a phone somewhere. I know when he’s lying to me.”

“Ya,” I mumbled. “Maybe in the attic? Maybe he went to bed.”

“There are people passed out on his bed. Did you see Rodney Doll?” she cackled.

“No. But Mary Louise was dodging him at one point.”

“Oh God, you don’t know. He just left, soaking wet.”

“Wet? Was he washing his thing?”

“No. He couldn’t get into the can, so he went down to the river to pee. And I guess he was a little drunk, and as he peed, he fell in! Into the river!” We howled with laughter. How perfect that the lech would fall into his own pee, but come back to the party to tell everyone.

I worked my way upstairs, thinking I’d just about had enough. When I opened the door to my room, there was Erin, with Lil, in my bed.

“Oh sorry buddy,” he offered, “someone passed out in mine.”

“We didn’t think you’d mind darling,” said Lil. “We won’t be long.”

“No. Sorry. Take your time.” I backed out of the room. “What about your cold?”

Lil called through the doorway. “I felt him darling. He has a fever. And as my mother used to say: “Starve a cold. Fuck a fever!””

I was wondering if I had clean sheets somewhere, when I ran into Lloyd Martin coming down from the attic. I hadn’t seen him come in. He was the other actor who was up for the part in *The Winner*.

“Hey Lloyd. I didn’t - know you were here.”

“Ya. Good times, good times. Was at the bar, but I heard you guys had something going.”

“ It was wild. Couldn’t move for a while.”

“Ya. Listen - did you hear about next year?”

I thought before I answered. Either he had heard, and was wondering if I had, or he hadn’t heard, and was wondering if I had. “Uh - no. Haven’t heard a thing. Have you?”

“Ya, just found out today. Looks like I’m doing Wilf. They want me to do the new young company too, so we’re working that out. I’m gonna try and do both.”

“Great,” I said. “ Wow. That’s amazing. Both parts. You’ll be busy.”

“Ya. So I hope you hear soon. Gotta get going before my ride leaves.” He turned and headed down the stairs to the main floor.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Good party,” he called back up.

I put one hand against the wall to steady myself. My part. Given to Lloyd. So that was it. I was surprised that you could have the wind knocked out of you, and not show it. It occurred to me that any good roles, in the other shows next season, anything of any value had already been given away. To other actors. So it was done. Heavy Dick. I was not coming back. I was surprised how calm I felt. I thought, “So this is how it feels. This is what I would do.” I’d have to remember that.

I headed down the stairs, thinking I might go for a walk. It was very late now, or very early, and it was a beautiful, silent time of the night.

The music had been turned off, thankfully. I could hear Doug Barker in the Ramada room, venting to someone.

“They have no integrity!” he hissed. “Not one iota between them.”

I poked my head into the room to see who he was talking to, and it was Karl Anders, who appeared to be asleep. He had probably tried to listen with his eyes closed for a while, and then gently slipped away as Barker droned on.

“I can’t bear the sight of him,” Doug railed. “I told him never to speak to me again, after that muck-up last year. I was under the impression that it was time for me to give my Edmund, to show them what the part was really about. But apparently not...”

I left Doug to his soliloquy, and moved through the empty kitchen toward the back door. There on the steps was Gloria, sitting alone.

“Oh hello,” she said. “I thought everyone had gone to bed.”

“Most of them have.” I stood behind her, not knowing whether I could pass by gracefully.

“Is Doug still in there?”

“Uh yes, he’s talking to Karl.”

“Hopefully he’s asleep.”

“I think he is.”

“Doug won’t care.” She looked across the silent dark yard. “Will you walk me home?”

She didn’t live far. Just a few blocks away, a little closer to the river. “Yes. I was going for a walk myself.”

“Oh, you’re a good liar.”

She pulled herself to her full height on the stairs, and I realized that she was as tall as I was. No wonder she looked so stunning in those long gowns, playing all those elegant tragedians.

We walked around the house, and started to make our way down the sidewalk. It was a warm, humid evening; the kind where you can feel the end of summer in the air. Before the first touch of clear coolness that signals the coming of autumn. We walked in silence for a while, enjoying the calm after the craziness of the party.

“That was fun,” she said.

“Yeah, it was a wild one.”

“Well it’s a great house for it. Everyone has their own private party.”

“Yes.”

“Have you had a good time this year?” she asked.

It was an odd question. We didn’t often quantify the time when we checked in with each other. It was usually just “Are you having fun? Are you all right?” By asking if I’d *had* a good time, she implied that it was over. Did she know something?

“Oh ya, a fabulous time,” I answered. “I love it here.”

“Yes. It’s a pretty special place.”

We turned a corner that led us down the slight hill toward her house.

“I’ve been so lucky. To get to watch people like you.”

She laughed. “I don’t know what you’d learn from me. What not to do maybe.”

“No. Not from you,” I said.

“We do get to see some unforgettable things, don’t we?”

“Oh God yes. Nicky’s Iago. Seanna’s Portia.”

“David’s Winter’s Tale,” she offered.

“Yes. Robin’s Seagull.”

“Colm’s Iachimo.

“Goldie’s Kate,” I paused. “Your Margaret.”

“Yes, that was fun,” she laughed.

We were at her house now, and stopped by the front steps.

“I hope you hear good news about next year. If you want to come back,” she said.

“Well, I don’t think it’s going to happen.” I turned and looked down toward the river. The sun was just starting to make its presence known in the night sky. A dull blue was rising in the distance, and I could see the white shadowy presence of a few swans as they started to paddle near the opposite bank.

“Well, we’ll miss you.” She looked at me kindly. “You’ll be back.” She took my hand, and smiled a faint, charming smile. “Thank you for a lovely evening.” Then she turned and moved up the stairs. She opened her door, and waved over her shoulder as she moved inside.

I turned toward the river. I stood on a stone bridge for a while, watching the colours of the weeping willows and the clouds reflected on the glass-like water. A lone duck emerged from under the bridge, and made a few circles in the water, waiting for me to toss it something. A few crumbs. When it realized I had nothing, it turned and continued its search, letting the light current carry it, slowly away.