JAMES MAGRUDER

Shift Work

"Aunt Polly, it ain't fair. Somebody's got to be glad to see Huck." —Tom Sawyer

On my first audition for a professional theater, I chose not to sing something upbeat and youthful like "Corner of the Sky" from *Pippin* or "Something's Comin'" from *West Side Story*. I sang "The Ballad of Immoral Earnings" from *The Threepenny Opera*. In *German*. I kid you not. *Auf Deutsch*. "In einer Zeit, die nun vergangen ist…" und etcetera. It's a great song—for Mack the Knife. Not for a twenty-year-old with a big nose, freckles, and pitch problems. As I sang, my wide-armed gusto, a must for musicals, momentarily stilled the flies in the windows of Lincoln Hall, the Cornell theater arts building. My auditors were just as frozen.

Then I read for the role of Randy Hastings in *Gemini*, the season opener for the Hangar Summer Theatre. Randy is a college sophomore from Connecticut—I knew knew knew that—so why, and at the last possible second, had my brain decided to tell my mouth to talk like an Englishwoman whose hearing aid had just dropped into her lap? When that loud badness reached my own ears, I downshifted and began shading my Randy Hastings with Milwaukee colorations courtesy of *Laverne and Shirley*…

I'll stop there. But the thing is, folks, *I had been on stage before*.

I finished to rustling paper sounds from the far side of the room. No one asked for an adjustment, or for me to read for other parts, or to sing scales. No one mentioned a dance call. I was going to work at Harold's Army-Navy—"Your Everyday Fashion People"—on the Ithaca Commons for the rest of my natural life.

"Thank you for coming in today, Cary," said Gavin Steeg, the new artistic director of the Hangar.

I nodded, face on fire, gave the script pages to the stage manager, then opened the door. The wannabes stretched to the other end of the gloomy corridor; the oldest ones were mumbling lines on wooden folding chairs. The most limber dancers all seemed to be smoothing their bangs with the balls of their feet.

I turned and called out to Gavin, "Give Dave my best."

Gavin smiled. Just past forty, he knew things. Since my foster brother, Dave, and I talked all the time, he knew my greeting was unnecessary, but

he also knew that, after stinking up the room with my audition, I had to broadcast this tiny personal advantage in front of the competition.

"I will, Cary. And thanks again."

Singing Brecht and Weill to get a part as a baseball player in *Damn Yankees* was overcompensation on my part. I'm a townie. Dave had been a townie too until he got an off-the-charts IQ score in the sixth grade. A childless sociology professor snapped him up, put him into private school, and then got him a complete free ride to Cornell at Telluride House, the special college-within-the-college for brainiacs. I stayed on with my foster parents Hugh and Mary Gabelson and their real daughter Judy. I left them after getting my diploma from Ithaca High and before they had a chance to tell me to go. Dave embarked on a double major in economics and the history of science; I took a few community college courses, including German, and did musicals at the Strand Theatre for fun. I'm not stupid by any stretch, but I must have decided somewhere along the line that we couldn't both be geniuses. Dave has been saying all this year that he envies me my solo apartment on East State Street, but he doesn't pretend that selling Belgian knapsacks and the world's scratchiest socks is anything but a dead end. He graduates with honors in two weeks. If I keep my nose clean, I could be assistant floor manager by Thanksgiving.

But it doesn't have to be this way, Dave's been insisting ever since his boyfriend Gavin Steeg took over the Hangar. A paid job in summer stock will give me experience and direction for the future. Basically I auditioned to get Dave off my case. Gavin lives in Manhattan, and they've been using my queen-size on his visits, because, despite its sophistication, Telluride House would appear to have a "No Man-Boy Love" policy, even though the two met there in December. (Part of Telluride enrichment is its "Artists & Experts Series." I'm told Gavin made an expert presentation.) When the season finishes in August, Dave is going to move in with Gavin and figure out what kind of grad school to go to.

That both Dave and I turned out queer is less interesting to people when they discover we're not actual blood brothers. On the other hand, they seem to expect incest in foster kids. Dave had left the Gabelsons before puberty, and though we'd spend time hanging out together, the subject of girls versus boys never came up. I don't know who was more surprised the night I saw him walk into the Common Ground, Ithaca's only gay bar, with a crowd of jittery preppies and a fake ID. He's a year older than I am and American handsome. He claims he's envious of my ability to grow a mustache too, but I know better.

I haven't told Dave I have no interest in being an actual actor, though I do like to hang out with entertainer types. When I was in *Annie Get Your*

Gun last November, I had an affair with a milkman from Trumansburg, also in the chorus, whose wife was pregnant. We'd make deliveries along the east side of Cayuga Lake right after dawn, then screw in his truck at the entrance to Taughannock Park. All these months later, the dairy section at the Hi-Lo can still get me going. That sounds so townie, doesn't it?

It was a nice day out, a little chilly for May. The ground was wet, but predictably, there were Big Red bozos in shorts and sandals all over the Arts Quad trying to catch some rays. I had an hour to kill before my shift, so, delaying the trek downhill to the Commons, I headed north to the College of Human Ecology. In the basement of Martha Van Rensselaer Hall they have this research unit called the Family Life Development Center. Its chief feature is a model kindergarten where professors and education majors take notes on the way children interact. It's where, after watching for weeks, the Gabelsons picked us out in 1964. It's a pet store without the shavings and the chew toys.

I used to think they held a Foster Child Farmer's Market every semester, like midterms, but Dave said no, that wasn't the case, New York State had stopped donating kids to Cornell a decade ago. I had wanted him to take a child development class, but he didn't have any credits to waste. I'm a foundling, and I've never been able to shake the fantasy that my mother still works someplace in Martha Van Ren Hall. She had me late one night after grading exams, dropped me in the well of an interoffice mail cart, and wheeled me down to the kindergarten with the first name of her favorite movie star pinned to my swaddling blanket. My last name is Dunkler, the German word for "darker" as it turns out, but how that came to be is another mystery of my universe.

The person who could answer my questions is Dr. Joyce Brothers, the Hume Ec School's most famous graduate, but I don't have her phone number. I cross an interior court, which acts like a wind tunnel. I shiver in my blue button-down, check the pocket for the Army-Navy badge I'd stowed there for the audition. The sun makes it hard to see into the windows of the model kindergarten, but a couple of the hardier boys have chased a girl outside and are whipping alphabet blocks at her. She's crouched in the doorway of a log cabin, fists cocked. Their screams are pitched too high for me or for the profs to decode, and I wonder, like I do every time I come here, whether I'd ever napped or played house or fought off Indians in that cabin. Today I practically ask the maintenance guy sweeping leaves out of a concrete gully how long it's been standing there. But then I see he's not much older than me and would have no clue.

After Dave graduates, I suppose I could apply for a Cornell job—bookkeeping, office machines, the like. The benefits are excellent, and they

say once you're in the university system, they can never kick you out. I could be chief butter churner at the Cornell Dairy. The miracle of cream plus elbow grease equals butter knocked me out as a kid. The Ag School provides the entire campus with homemade ice cream. It's a selling point in the brochures. Townies go to Purity Ice Cream on Cascadilla Street. They have a great product too.

I WAS NEAR THE END of my shift, racking construction boots along the back wall of the store when I heard "Cary Dunkler, please come to the register" over the intercom. I took my time and finished the 9½s. Only Dave ever had me paged, and that only when my boss, Kristy, was night managing. Making Dave wait a bit would give her a thrill. He claimed to be allergic to the packing peanut smell of the place, but I think he was afraid that if he came looking for me, an avalanche of Italian Army sweaters would fall from the ceiling and mess his hair. It was weird for him to visit me on a school night. His thesis in the history of science wasn't completely done, and he doesn't fib about stuff like that.

At any rate, Kristy, mother of three, was batting her eyes and maximizing her chestal area at the checkout counter. Queer or no, Dave Bailey, brainiac charmer with a face like Dudley Do-Right, made her splash. The tilt of his dimpled chin on my approach meant he thought he'd done me a big favor. He did do me favors, but that sly look of his always made me tense up.

He dove right in. "You made a big impression at the Hangar auditions."

Boredom has its positives. Seven hours of stocking military surplus had made me forget my earlier humiliation. "Not possible, Dave. I sang in German. Loud and bad."

"Gavin said it was a bold choice, but charming nonetheless."

(Dave got away with words like "nonetheless" when he talked. Telluride talk. He had used "preclude" so often his freshman year, I had to give him shit about it. Then he moved onto "evince." It sounds as if I hate my brother. I don't. Not at all.)

"Am I in *Damn Yankees*?"

"It's too soon to know."

"So what's—"

"The big impression you made was on Larry Brownstein."

I didn't bite.

"He's Gavin's best friend from day one and the playwright of the last show in the season. The new play. He was in the room too."

After *Gemini* and the musical, I wasn't sure what else was going up at the Hangar. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kristy check her hair in the shoplifter mirror. She also waitressed across the Commons at Simeon's. Her

nurse shoes for that job had to be black. Here they were white. Her mom watched her daughters. Sometimes I didn't know how they kept it together.

Dave was so revved up, I couldn't help but smile. "I didn't audition for any new play," I said.

"That's not the kind of impression you made, Cary."

The long and the short of it was that Larry Brownstein, professional New York playwright, wanted to meet me in that very special way. Gavin was suggesting an immediate double date—the next night—while they were still in town. Dave was suggesting a double date at my apartment, and that I make dinner for "the boys." I liked to cook. The Gabelsons had given me a copy of *The Moosewood Cookbook* and I'd worked through most of it, even the eggplant recipes. I probably don't need to tell you that the Moosewood Restaurant is a two-minute walk from the Commons. Make it at home is my advice. Everything they serve there—water to chili—arrives at the same lukewarm temperature. The Cabbagetown Café on Stewart Avenue has better food.

"Are you seeing anybody right now?" Dave asked.

"Nah. I'm just screwing the president of Telluride."

"My sloppy seconds?"

Why did I go along with the plan? Partly because I didn't get to hang out with Dave enough, and he'd be leaving Ithaca before I knew it. We had been hilarious, bunk bed brothers, Goofus and Gallant, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Heckel and Jeckel, until Professor Bailey took him away. I wasn't seeing anybody, and other than Gavin, I had never met a New Yorker. Or a writer. And every time I hear Harry Nilsson's "I Guess the Lord Must Be in New York City," I tear up. No other song can do that. Another mystery for Dr. Joyce Brothers. Part of it's the banjo, which sounds like water rushing through a paddle wheel. I also suspect the harmony on the second verse. Sometimes I play it on my stereo to test its hold over me.

"THE BOYS'" AGES, ADDED TOGETHER, came to eighty. My symbol for Gavin Steeg would be his spiky ball of black, brush-cut hair. He took up room the way a big-shot director would, telling me where to arrange the veggie lasagne, the bowls of vichyssoise, and ourselves, and making me hold the spinach salad until after we'd finished the main course. Orders from anybody could set Dave off, but being more laid back, I didn't need to run the whole show, even if it was my space.

My apartment was my favorite thing about me and probably the queerest thing about me. After a couple of lousy roommate situations, I asked Kristy for more hours at Harold's, took the financial leap, and went solo. I have the whole first floor of a house built in 1896, five rooms, with

a wraparound gingerbread porch and a tin ceiling in the kitchen. I cut the grass, weed, shovel snow, and salt the driveway for a break on the rent. I'd been there since last September, walking to work, cashing my checks, and hitting the junk stores on lower Seneca Street to fit it out. I was definitely more excited to have brought a filigreed iron bed back to life than to invite another person into it with me. I had two Hoosiers in the kitchen, one with a built-in flour sifter, and a blanket chest full of trousseau linens. If the shop owner is a woman, the easiest way to get discounts on *everything* is to gush over the needlework on an old tablecloth or pillowcase. It reminds them of their grandmothers and aunts, or if they're old bags themselves, they take a trip down Memory Lane. I happen to like handmade items and make sure to rotate my purchases. That way everything gets used. I don't mind the ironing.

Larry Brownstein was younger than Gavin but, nearly bald, looked older. He graduated from high school the year I was born. He had this way of sidling up—to the table, to questions, to me, as if things were liable to change any minute, and he wanted to take them down. Talking or listening, he tilted his head forward, turtlelike. On a kitchen run I raised the dimmer on the chandelier in case he was half blind, but it made no difference. Maybe being that kind of listener was a sign of a writer. He was shorter than I was, and had a round face, a reedy voice, and slender fingers. He said he wrote longhand on yellow legal pads and paid someone to type up the drafts of his plays. Dave shot me a look. I could do ninety words a minute.

"The boys" were outrageous with the compliments. I couldn't decide if it was the age difference, or their being Jewish, or New Yorkers, or out and proud, that gave them—well, more so Gavin—the confidence to praise everything from the pie safe in the dining room to the irises in the trumpet vase on top of the pie safe to the fresh chives I'd clipped directly from my herb pot into their bowls to how the way my jaw met my neck was like Bernini. It wasn't the wine talking. They'd barely touched their glasses. At one point, Gavin stretched his upturned fingertips to his "little David" (taller too) and said to Larry that while the Jews were responsible for many of the most staggering achievements of the ages, they could never ever make a face like that.

My neck was still red from Bernini, whatever that was, but Dave didn't blush or bolt from the table to hear this. He beamed. He glowed. He kissed Gavin's fingers. I'd seen him work people over all my life, but I realized that I'd never seen him with someone he was in love with. When he and Gavin used the apartment, I made sure to crash at my friend Robin's. Dave having sex in the next room wasn't something I would ever need to hear.

My brother was no more of an actor than I was, but his nonstop chatter about all the Ithaca things we'd show the boys, and his smartypants references, and his constant handling of Gavin made it seem like he was hamming it up for a camera. Or it was like the way they bring in a stud to turn on all the brood mares. (Or is that the other way around?) He was drinking, and as dinner went on, he shot me more and more encouraging looks—he types, he refinishes, he irons!—like maybe next I was supposed to do a back bend for Larry Brownstein, or recite a poem. I wanted to tell him to settle down. He already had the job of Gavin's boyfriend and I'd made dinner, wasn't that enough for a first date?

As for *my* job opportunity, Larry wanted to know where I had managed to find the German lyrics to "The Ballad of Immoral Earnings." He had brought the salad plates into the kitchen while I whipped cream for the blueberry apple crisp.

Robin had seen *Cabaret* eleven times, and her father, Dr. Tascher, was chair of the German Department. I'd memorized Macheath's first verse by singing along to a record at her house.

"I have a friend who's nuts about *The Threepenny Opera*. She thought it would make me stand out."

"She was right," Larry said over the electric mixer.

"She's going to be in *Mame* at the Strand. I might audition for that too."

He cupped his hand to an ear, meaning I should talk louder. I held up a finger to say wait until I was done whipping. He handed me the bottles of vanilla and rum extract when I pointed to them in the green Hoosier.

Finished, I rapped the beaters against the bowl and held one out. "How does that taste?" I asked, in all innocence. His hand lingered on mine as he took it. Fair enough.

"Heavenly," he said. I smiled to myself. Nice, fine, or good would have worked too.

Apple crisp should be served warm. Too hot and the cream melts and disappears, so while we waited for a proper cool-down, I asked Larry about his play. He was adapting a Mark Twain book called *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, about a small-town lawyer and a runaway mulatto slave, had I ever read it? Only *Tom Sawyer*, I said, a long long time ago. I also mentioned that growing up, Dave was Tom and I was Huck in our foster family. He'd get the ideas, and I'd get the world of trouble. The Frankenstein mask he shoplifted from Woolworth's in second grade and put under my ski jacket was only the beginning. I got caught but didn't rat him out to the manager or to Hugh Gabelson.

Larry surprised me by saying *Huck Finn* was a much better novel. It was the fountainhead of American literature, in fact. Like salad after the

entrée, I'd never heard that before. Larry didn't announce it like a teacher, or like Dave referring to "motifs" for bonus points. He claimed it like a personal belief.

I thought of him later, Huck Fountainhead Finn that is, as we all drove in Gavin's two-seated convertible to see the Hangar lit by moonlight along the lake. (The theater had started life as a small-plane hangar in the thirties.) Larry and I were wedged in the nonexistent backseat, top down, me in his lap, his legs cradling mine. It felt tighter to me than Huck's hogshead—my favorite illustration in *Tom Sawyer*—and weird, given our size difference, but the older one is the cradler. Dave, his hand on Gavin's thigh, looked back, and though the rushing air made it impossible to talk, it was clear he thought we were going to have a stupendous summer for four.

A FEW DAYS LATER I got a postcard from Larry of the skating rink at Rockefeller Center. He spilled the beans that Gavin had cast me in *Damn Yankees* and said that he looked forward to seeing more of me. Robin pounced on that double meaning. Which parts did he want most to see? I tend to be the pursued one, but not because I'm a catch. Robin claims I'm too laid back, if not downright lazy, on the romance front. I find it helps if I keep a time frame going in my head. A boyfriend is a shift. Mike the milkman had been an ideal shift, because I knew going in that we'd be through when his wife's water broke. If things worked out between Larry and me while he was in Ithaca, I could make myself as available or as scarce as the situation required, but his shift would end when *Pudd'nhead Wilson* opened. Dave's move to New York to live on love with Gavin all day every day struck me as insane.

Here's the other thing. A postcard helps because I'm dense when it comes to people flirting with me. Robin, and Kristy at work, marvel at the chances they say pass me by. I literally don't see it—or them.

To get ready, I bought the *Damn Yankees* LP and I read the Twain. It's not very long. There's a pair of boys in it who get switched at birth. Chambers is 1/32-part black but, fearing that he will be sold down the river, his slave mother, Roxy, switches him with Thomas à Becket Driscoll, the white heir to the plantation she works on. Chambers grows up to become the spoiled rotten drunk Tom Driscoll, while the real Tom becomes the house servant Chambers. It ends with a murder trial solved by fingerprints, which were the latest thing in criminal evidence for the time.

I have to say that the plot put me off. Real people and events inspired writers. Did Larry Brownstein want to see more of me to find out what it felt like to be a foundling, then picked out of a litter at the age of four, then have a semi-brother raised to greatness because of a random IQ test? Listen to me. Not-so-random IQ test. An IQ test is the opposite of random. I took

that test the following year in sixth grade, but I don't remember it; I can remember Dave's miracle score (168), but not mine; I remember Professor Leigh Bailey bringing me a model airplane kit in swap for Dave; I remember taking apart our bunk beds, and Mary and Hugh Gabelson wondering if I'd like a puppy. Technically, I wasn't switched at birth like Chambers and Tom in *Pudd'nhead*, but I couldn't help but be sensitive to the theme as Dave prepared to graduate Phi Beta Kappa *summa cum laude* and I sorted a mountain of Chinese flip-flops next to a one-speed table fan.

My semi-sister Judy Gabelson also put me off when she asked on the phone whether I was attending Dave's commencement exercises. I shouldn't have barked at her that I'd turned down double overtime to go, because it gave her the opportunity to remind me that she had put up half my security deposit, helped load the van, given me her tiger maple bureau, and I had yet to invite her or her parents to State Street for any kind of a housewarming.

I'd been a bad foster child, but it was easy to sidetrack her. "I promise to have you all over once the musical opens," I said. I teased her with a pause. Judy was stagestruck but had never chased the dream; she spent her extras on bus trips to New York to see Broadway shows. "*Damn Yankees*." I paused again. "At the Hangar."

It worked. "The *Hangar*?" she cried. "Oh Cary, that's fantastic. That's a big step up!"

"It's still chorus."

"Doesn't matter. It's *professional*. You'll get paid."

"I don't know about that," I said truthfully.

"They have actors there who come from New York."

Directors too, I thought, with apartments on Morton Street. The Gabelsons didn't know that Cary and I were queer. I sometimes wondered about Judy's sexuality, but lesbians, normal-looking ones, weren't a major presence at the Common Ground. We assumed they held their pussy pot-lucks up in the woods.

"The piano was just tuned," she said. "When can you come over?" Judy had a Music Ed degree from SUNY Albany and taught high school in Slaterville Springs. Whenever I was in a show, she helped me with the second tenor lines. She'd plunk them out over and over, then record them on a cassette tape. Saved my butt. Harmony is hardest for me.

"Soon as I get the sheet music."

"Deal. See you Saturday. Need a ride?"

"Nope. I can walk."

"It could be steaming out. Or pouring."

"Nope."

Ithacans are either rah-rah about Cornell graduation or they pretend it isn't happening. With all the parents and relatives in town, a four-day tidal wave of cash washes through the Commons and forget being able to park. Ithaca College nets less, given its smaller student body, but Harold's has us staple discount fliers on both campuses.

Judy called it. It was steaming on Commencement Day, high in the upper eighties. I regretted not packing a spare undershirt in with Dave's graduation gift. Except for the lack of horses and centurions, it might have been *Ben Hur*—brass bands, giant vertical banners, the reviewing stand at the forty-yard line, not to mention thousands of people crammed into Schoellkopf Field roaring on cue. From my nosebleed spot, Dave was one tiny, indistinct scale in the skin of an endless green snake ribboning into the stands. With her pull, Professor Bailey had arranged seats for us while she baked far below, in fruity regalia with the rest of the faculty. We'd be meeting up at Telluride House after the conferral of degrees. And after that, David Prescott Bailey, Cornell B.A. 1980, was staying up late with Gavin Steeg in my apartment. Larry Brownstein was due in three days.

The Telluride banquet was herky jerky at first. When conversation stalled, or when Dave was off hugging classmates and meeting their folks, there would be an odd "You must be so proud of him" ricochet among the three parents. Even Judy, who had taught him piano, got in on that. But then the champagne started, and Hugh remembered the camera around his neck. We took a boatload of pictures. There's even one of me with Leigh Bailey and a foot of air between us. It's been ten years and still she gets thrown when I show up for Dave. She overdid the enthusiasm for my *Damn Yankees* gig. "I love how creative you're turning out to be, Cary," she said, as if I'd handed her a finger painting for her refrigerator.

Dave's face was flushed the whole time, like he was ready to bawl. This I got. The day he'd worked toward for so long had come and was nearly gone. It was like the last performance of a show, though there's no real comparison between a lifetime of overachievement and clowning around on stage in a coat of Tan Blush #2. He had a catch in his throat when he accepted, during the meal, a summer research fellowship given "to the graduating senior who most represents the ethical and intellectual values of Telluride." The money was his to use however he liked. I wasn't surprised. I used to think Dave got all the luck because he had started out life with two parents, with real names and who wanted him. They had died in a car accident when he was a tiny baby. If they were watching him from above, or beyond, they'd be damn proud too.

The conferral of my gift was awkward. There's a great used bookstore, The Bookery, in the Dewitt Mall on Cayuga Street. A lot of dead professors'

libraries wind up there, so they have important items along with racks of paperback thrillers. I browse it on my Thursday lunch hours, because that's the day Café Dewitt does an amazing dill carrot soup. Anyway, The Bookery had an early edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, in two volumes, that I talked the owner, Jack Goldman, into letting me have for three hundred and forty dollars, down from four eighty. A lot of shifts either way. I'd held it and studied it for what felt like weeks before I approached Jack about a better price and buying on installment. It wasn't as easy as getting a crewel tablecloth out of an old lady, but booksellers want their treasures to go to good homes too.

I fretted about when to give Dave the Darwins and wound up waiting until dessert was being cleared, so there wasn't anything else to do but watch it happen in slow motion. He freed the books from their wrapping paper, looked, kind of gasped, counted one, two, one, two. Then, during a tiny instant after his face had lit up, I watched him wonder how I had pulled off this caper. Had I stolen them? I looked at him and said right back with my eyes—I paid for them, mo-fo, and you know it. He understood. He also knew that I knew that that's what he would have done if he had wanted them that much and didn't have the dough. In the end, isn't Tom more devious than Huck?

Leigh Bailey leaned over her teacup and said "*The Origin of Species*?" in a tone worth the price of admission.

I pushed back my chair. "Darwin was part of your thesis, am I right?"

Dave nodded. His eyes were definitely glistening now. Mary Gabelson's too. He shoots, he scores. Even with two payments to go.

Borrowing a T-shirt in his room after—I was heading out with Robin while he used my digs—I rerouted the subject away from this latest example of what he called my historic generosity. I rerolled my sleeves and watched him from the mirror on his closet door. He was sitting on his bed, mouth open, hair heading off in the wrong direction, dazed and weepy from the weight of the day. The Darwins were balanced, one on each thigh, like the etching of Moses with his broken tablets that hangs above the magazine rack in the Tompkins County Library.

IT TURNED OUT I WASN'T as masculine as I had previously assumed, a ruling that hadn't much affected my day-to-day existence until *Damn Yankees* started up. I mean, no one had ever beaten me up for how I walked or talked or acted. Rednecks don't pick off the men leaving the Common Ground after last call, like they do up in Syracuse. Ithaca is live and let live, always has been. Some come for college and never leave.

Rehearsals were held in the game room of a community center just off the Commons, one more spot I'd passed my whole life without noticing. That anybody out on Albany Street could watch us dance through the windows made me feel like I had a theater *job*. Thirty dollars a week, nothing to quit the Army-Navy over, but satisfying. After the first read-through, Gavin dismissed everybody except the Senators, aka the ball team, aka the nine-member male chorus. (I won't tax you with the plot of *Damn Yankees*, except to say it's about baseball, not the Civil War, and that the Devil figures into it. The songs are fun.) During a ten-minute break, the stage managers braced mirrored segments along one long wall. The chorus boys from "The City" marked their territory by tossing their dance bags on a table in the corner bearing a milk crate of bingo cards.

Gavin, sitting in front of the mirrors, had us line up at the other end of the room. There was one other townie besides me, Clark, who I remembered seeing in a so-so *Camelot* that Robin had also been in. There was an Ithaca College theater major wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a rising Cornell senior, and the five New Yorkers, two of whom had changed during break into tights and leotards. Watching them stretch, I prayed I wouldn't be the worst Senator, given a pass because the director was screwing my foster brother.

Gavin made a speech about how, say what you will about the Faust story, it was the ballplayers who were the genuine heart of Damn *Yankees*. If the audience didn't fall in love with us as individuals, then there was no *Damn Yankees*. He let that sink in. Some of the guys were taking notes on their scripts. He said that the schedule was too tight for us to play a real game together, as that would help us discover our characters and meld as an ensemble. Short of that, in order to become these individual teammates that the audience must grow to love, we would start with names and walks.

"Who wants to lead off?" Gavin said, cocking an eyebrow to see who got the batting reference.

I didn't have a dance bag and didn't take notes, and the assignment confused me, so I drifted to the back of the group. Gavin wouldn't treat me any different, even with my Bernini neck-jaw double play. (I'd looked it up.)

"You just want us to walk across the room?" someone asked.

"No. I want you to think about your character, a baseball player who is not you. He walks differently from you, and he has a first name that you're going to tell me."

There was some uneasy shifting and muttering, then a New Yorker named John Camelleri with Superman's chest and arms squealed, "I'm Chauncey!" and began to prance down the room like a runway model.

Gavin met him halfway. "That's exactly *not* the point," he said, laughing with the rest of us.

"So are you saying you want us to butch it up?" said John.

"I am indeed."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I was trying to be sensitive, John. We aren't in the Ice Capades"—he gestured with the classic wrist drop—"and we aren't"—eyes now on the leotard duo—"the Ballets Russes. We're all men here." That got another laugh.

John began again. He spread his legs, bowed his knees slightly, and very slowly placed one foot in front of the other. "I'm Petey," he grunted.

"What's the matter with you, Petey?"

"I'd walk faster, Coach, but my balls get in the way."

Class clown, but it broke the ice.

After Petey came Smokey, Vince, Stretch, Poindexter (Ithaca College horn-rims), spitting, scratching, squinting, loping, peglegging. Gavin nixed the names Zorro, Ringo, and Terence.

Dead last was too much pressure, so I slipped in as number seven. "I'm Lud," I announced to the group. For my walk, I imitated Robin's dad, the German professor. I turned out my left foot some, dragged it slightly, then hitched it up a tiny bit on every third stride.

"Is there something wrong with your leg, Lud?" asked Gavin.

I flashed on what Dr. Tascher said whenever I asked him how he was doing. Slowly shaking my head, I said, "I have the sciatic pain from a herniated lumbar disc. Numbers three and four, if you must know."

The laugh was a nice surprise.

After the last two had passed muster, Gavin set us all walking at once, then jogging, then made us sprint. Then, using our character names, we threw an imaginary baseball around. I had never done stuff like this during rehearsals for Strand shows, but I tried to get into the spirit. I caught whatever was thrown to Lud but got rid of it fast, always keeping the mirrors to my back. I did think some of the guys were hotdogging it—slides, basket catches, one-hops, miraculous saves. But no, Gavin explained that night at Simeon's, where we were having dinner with Dave and Larry Brownstein, that was the actor's imagination at play. And weren't all athletes hotdogs by nature? He said he was happy with how the day had gone, especially since the nine of us had begun rehearsal looking like a bouquet of day lilies. And those two gazelles in tights… Gavin slid down his reading glasses to peer at the wine list.

I flushed. I hoped I hadn't been as faggy as them. Or was still. Or as Dave—all over Gavin like an octopus again—was currently being. I could practically hear Kristy mouth-breathing at the waiters' station. Catching her eye as she worked other tables, I knew that the ages of "the boys" shocked her silly.

For all his supposed interest, Larry was shy. He mostly let Gavin talk *Pudd'nhead*. I chipped in names from Twain a couple of times to show them I'd read the book, but it didn't register. While Gavin drew ideas for the set transitions on the napkins, Larry dissected his fish and chips, as if he thought maybe rubies, or lucky dice, would roll out of a filet. And Dave—well, he wasn't accustomed to not being top of the agenda, and he hadn't read *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. This wasn't a date, I wanted to tell him once I'd figured it out; we were sitting in on a creative meeting, like in advertising or Hollywood. At one point I motioned Kristy over, but she twisted her head away like a rearing horse, then made the "call me" sign with her thumb and pinkie. Gavin and Larry weren't *that* old. Kristy's deadbeat ex-husband, Wayne, had ten years on her.

I had decided over dinner that I would sleep with Larry, but out front afterwards, he nixed Dave's idea of going dancing at the Common Ground. He couldn't lose momentum on a crucial rewrite. He was so apologetic, I gave him a quick hug goodbye. I refused a lift home. Gavin's and Larry's apartments were in the opposite direction, closer to the lake. Dave had yet to tell Leigh Bailey that he'd be living "with a friend downtown" for the summer. That would make an interesting conversation.

"See you tomorrow, Lud," said Gavin.

"Wait," said Larry. He stopped and looked up at me in that interested way he'd had at my place. "Is Lud short for Luddite, Cary?"

I shrugged. Let him guess—in bed, all on his lonesome.

Early summer nights in Ithaca are so sweet, you forget the endless, defeating winters. It's not humid yet; the air is soft, alive with the rustle of new leaves and the chitter of insects. Breathing in the lilacs, I practiced my Lud walk up State Street until it got too steep.

Lud was not short for Luddite, a term that was going to require a second trip to the Taschers' encyclopedia. John Camelleri had gotten what Lud meant. He'd come over to me at the end of rehearsal. Imaginary baseball was hard work, so he was blotting his impressive, and impressively hairy, chest with a Rutgers T-shirt. A clown, yes, but no day lily.

"How's the cake, Lud?" he asked.

"Oh like always I guess," I said, automatically.

"It couldn't be like always," he said. "I never got this kind of cake before."

"Hmmph," I said. "I thought something was different."

Then, not wanting to mess up a line in a routine that John clearly knew by heart, I bent over to tighten a shoelace, amazed that anyone else would love Lily Tomlin's "Lud and Marie Meet Dracula's Daughter" enough to memorize it like I had. It's a routine about her parents she does on her *Appearing Nitely*, comedy album, and it was another favorite thing of mine.

"Lud's a good name for you," said John.

"I could say the same, Petey."

He zipped up his dance bag. "See you tomorrow, *Margaret Ann*."

I was dumbfounded. He knew "Tell Miss Sweeney Goodbye" too. He knew all of *Appearing Nitely*.

John had been the biggest hotdog in the room, but at the same time, his intense focus—wherever the ball went, he followed it with his eyes, played backup to the other guys when it came close—made him the most believable Senator. When I got home, I sat up on my porch glider with a beer and wondered what it would be like to do something that captured my full attention.

MY PEONIES WERE BENDING OVER from the weight of their gorgeousness. They had a week left at best. I cut a mix of white and pink and wrapped them in wet paper towels to take to Judy. She can't get them to grow at her place. She's tried cuttings and she's tried from scratch, but nothing comes up. Could be the creek across the street has made the ground too wet, or maybe her yard gets too much sun. I use eggshells and bone meal. She's tried that too.

Back when she bought her house on Titus Street, Judy Gabelson was said to be the youngest mortgage-holder in Ithaca. Whether being that sensible made her a catch now is another thing. She's twenty-eight, but not fat or flat-chested or pizza-faced or buck-toothed. She had been self-conscious about her scoliosis at one time, but that's not the same as having a port-wine stain cover half your face, like her friend Emily, and she'd never had to wear a brace to school. She'd be classified as "plain," but you just know that the right person will make her beautiful one day. Like I said, I don't know what flips her switch, besides theater trips to New York.

I really like her house. It dates from the 1920s, and except for a small front porch jutting out, it's this perfect two-story cube. Everything fits and flows together, with no wasted space. I spot things at the junk stores I feel belong there, but Judy's taste is Scandinavian: huge, trippy throw pillows, blond wood, square dinner plates, the stuff you can buy at Contemporary Trends, just off the Commons.

No such thing as a Scandinavian piano. Judy played the same walnut upright she'd taught Dave on when we were kids. I'd helped move it from her parents' house into her living room; it stood in the middle of the bright sectional pieces like a harassed chaperone guarding the punch. I have a Deco table runner embroidered with poppies that I would love to slip over its top like a comforting headscarf.

The first week of *Damn Yankees* was almost through, and I was there to learn my harmonies. Judy made much of the flowers. We lamented, like we did every summer, the criminally short growing season of the peony. She arranged them in a vase, and I ate a wedge of her crustless quiche, a cooking technology I can't figure out. Why didn't it burn? Hot or cold, it's an amazing three-cheese brick. I wouldn't need another meal for days.

She plied me with questions about working with professionals, so I told her about the team improvs, and that there was a shorthand the New Yorkers used with each other, and that the men would be dancing a soft-shoe reprise of "Heart" with baseball bats as canes, and that I was one of three cast members who couldn't sight read. My own music education had been a year of enforced trumpet. Scanning the contact sheet I'd brought along, Judy thought that the name of the actress playing Lola, Suzy Skurnik, sounded familiar. I should ask her whether she had been in *They're Playing Our Song* on Broadway.

I told her that my teammate (too early to say friend, though we did lots of Lily Tomlin during breaks) John Camelleri had just gotten off the first national tour of *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. This had impressed me until Larry Brownstein said that *Whorehouse* was a terrible musical. Or so, he retracted politely, *he* believed. Our third date, the night before, had ended in his apartment, where he kept me laughing with descriptions of all the horrible musical numbers he had seen over the years, tops being a harvest ballet where the dancers had thrown plastic vegetables to one another for a full ten minutes. I reached over and kissed him midlaugh to get it over with. Or started. He really was a shy guy. We slept in his double bed. In fact, I had had to wake up, trek home for my sheet music, and come back down to Judy's for my lesson.

It was fun; Larry was overboard complimentary with what was going on, but the dark covered my blushes. Although he was the oldest man I'd slept with by almost fifteen years, his body didn't jiggle. He did have back hair, but not so much that you could grab a handful. The nicest thing, besides our rocks getting off with no hitches, was his helping me put on my T-shirt in the morning. Trying to skedaddle, I'd put it on backwards. Larry freed my arms, twisted the label side to the back, and kissed my neck before letting me finish.

At the door, he apologized for the lack of food in the kitchen, he was used to bagels out in the a.m. Saying goodbye, he sidled up to me just behind the screen door and bumped me with his hip, also very nice, but he didn't mention a specific next time, unlike Gavin, who so knew what he wanted in Dave that he had gotten out his date book and began scheduling months of Ithaca trips on their first morning-after. Scary.

Judy took me through my music. She would have me sing the second tenor part, first with piano, then without, again and again. She'd try to trip me up by cutting out on the piano, or singing the baritone or soprano line along with. Finally, warning me, like always, that the orchestra wouldn't sound anything like the piano-vocal score, she played chords only. That was toughest, because sometimes my note wasn't in the chord, and I'd have to search my memory to find it. Judy was so patient with me and so, I don't know, *jazzed* by the process, that I asked her whether she'd like to be rehearsal pianist for *Damn Yankees*, join our amazing summer and all.

She circled her wrist with thumb and middle finger, one of her "settle down now" teacher gestures. "I couldn't possibly, Cary."

"But you're great at this. They're going to need a backup pianist once the orchestra starts practicing."

"I have school."

"School's out next week, Judy."

"I have grading."

"I can give your name to the director."

"Absolutely not."

"I won't even tell him how I know you."

"No, Cary!"

As per usual when I pushed her to think about herself, she changed the subject to Dave: what he was up to and what he was going to do with this latest bucket of Telluride cash. I said I figured he'd bank it for his move and how great it would be that she could visit him in New York in the fall and hit the museums and see all the latest shows together. She made a tiny face and began the intro to "Heart," the big hit song from *Damn Yankees*. She'd never say so, but I think Dave makes her feel like a townie too.

Whatever he'd be up to, it occurred to me that the three of us should have lunch at least once, just ourselves, before August was up. I would finally make Judy choose between us. That's a joke. Gabelson legend goes that twelve-year-old Judy had cast the deciding vote to take *both* of us from the Family Life Development Center, because at five and four, Dave and I absolutely would not be separated. We did everything together, shared every toy, even synchronized our naps and potty breaks. For all I knew, we'd been the subject of dozens of term papers—"The Boys Who Would Be Twins." Whether it was Hugh or Mary who had only wanted one of us would never be revealed—three guesses which boy—but the experts said we might fail to thrive if we were split up. Judy broke her parents' tie. Eventually I got over my anger at the Gabelsons for taking foster money from the state instead of adopting us outright. Professor Bailey couldn't have stepped in otherwise.

Why stuff like this bothered me I can't say, especially when Dave and I were still tight. I was looking forward to a catchup later with him about sex with older guys. For starters, we could make back hair comparisons. Then it dawned on me that screwing "the boys" was another way to keep us tight. Gavin and Larry were the latest type of toy to share. Standing at the piano, I felt my stomach turn over with the feeling that Dave, brilliant as he was, might not be aware that the New Yorkers were part of a historic pattern. I cut off an eight count. "Judy, what's the musical term for something you play over and over?

"Leitmotif."

"Not that one." I racked my brain, trying to remember the classical album titles in the Gabelsons' hi-fi cabinet. "I mean the same basic music, but done in a different style. 'Something and something.'"

"'Theme and variation'?"

"That's it. "

She began playing "Old McDonald Had a Farm" six different ways. Funniest was the Bach. My nerves went away, and I was about to bring up the rehearsal piano job again when Judy asked me how my girlfriend was doing.

"What girlfriend?"

"Robin Tascher."

"She's not a girlfriend."

"OK, but how is she?"

Robin was going to need a catchup too. She was being oversensitive, I thought, to my having moved on up to the Hangar Theatre, not to mention my involvement with a playwright, so I would have to downplay my enthusiasm when we got together. She hoped that Gavin or Larry knew a hotshot theater dyke who could come sweep her off to New York. This didn't make strict sense, since Robin was so not gay. Her type was John Camelleri. She had ditched Cornell junior year for Dan Pingus, a ponytailed dude whose years unloading rail cars at a paper mill had given him forearms like a caveman's club. She'd moved home after five months of growing pot in Dan's basement in Janesville, but didn't re-enroll; her vagueness ever since about "future plans" terrorized Dr. and Mrs. Tascher. Ithaca has its share of faculty brats on permanent drift. It really is a fantastic spot for hanging, hiding, or flopping out in.

"She's jealous of my gig, but she's happy for me too."

"Tell her she could have auditioned for *Damn Yankees*."

"I say that every single time. She wants me to go to Europe with her this fall."

Judy closed the lid on the keyboard and swiveled around like I'd smashed a violin in her class. "*Europe*? What on earth for?"

"For all the things Europe is famous for. To see the Berninis in the Borghese Gardens."

"The who?"

I shrugged.

"What makes you think you can just pick up and go to Europe, Cary?"

"Last I heard, there's no law saying I can't." What was her problem?

"You should finish college first."

"Finish? How about start?"

"Yes, how *about* starting, Cary?" If anyone was my mother now, it was Judy Gabelson. "Maybe with Dave gone…"

"Maybe with Dave gone what?" I asked.

She bit a fingernail. "Maybe when Dave leaves town, you'll have room to blossom in."

I flared against her assessment. "Hey, I work. I support myself, have my own apartment, still read plenty of books. I'm doing great."

"There's more to you, Cary. I know you know that."

I ducked that and moved to the window, on the lookout for raccoons, even though it was too early. Judy said that a raccoon mother brought her babies to the creek bank most evenings. I like to think they kept house under her porch.

"There's no law saying only educated people can cross the Atlantic," I said.

"I *know* that." She rose from the bench. "I haven't been to Europe," she said and sort of stomped upstairs to get the tape recorder.

Of course it was a harebrained scheme. I'd have to rob a bank to get there; we all knew that. I just couldn't understand why it would piss her off. Nothing was keeping Judy here.

BEING HIS IDEA FROM THE start, Dave put it into words first, though in such a fake-casual way, it was hilarious. Especially since he was wearing an apron and attempting to cut flour and butter together on Gavin's kitchen counter. Over the years the most I'd ever seen Dave cook was a grilled cheese, and now, never one for baby steps, he'd jumped right to piecrust.

"Have you given notice yet?" he asked.

"Ha," I answered. "You need to throw some more ice water on that." I moved to the refrigerator to help him out.

When I had explained it to him, Dave had intellectually grasped the "theme and variations" angle of our time with "the boys," but he had yet to figure out that Gavin and Larry were as different one to the other as he and I were. I won't say I wasn't flattered that Dave would want me around in New York. It's just that there was no view, postcard or otherwise, of the

city that I could imagine slipping into. Taking the simplest angle possible, I would ask myself what would I do with my hands? What would they take hold of?

"I'm not moving to a place I've never visited," I said.

I flicked water on his dough and slid a French door open for some breeze. Chief perk for the new Artistic Director of the Hangar was this summer cottage built on a lakeside bluff. If you sat real still, you could hear the slurp of the waves on the pilings of the boat landing below. Dave claimed to be splitting his time between here and doing research in the Olin stacks, but his deepening color and the beach towels on the patio railing said otherwise. It made me sad that he thought he ought to fib. He had earned this siesta.

"You could go down one weekend—"

"Nope, I'm in rehearsal."

Dave walloped the dough. "Everyone is *always* in rehearsal."

Behind that sour statement was his frustration that Gavin wasn't spending enough time with him. If it wasn't rehearsal, it was a design meeting about the next play, or a fundraising dinner at a trustee's house that his near-jailbait "housemate" couldn't show up at. He complained that I saw more of Gavin than he did. I don't know about that, but I did see how Gavin grooved on the madness of the theater. Every day he ran a two-room kindergarten, one for the scenes, the other for the musical numbers. I was having a great time and the Senators were starting to feel like a team. Because of my long arms and big beak, it was decided that Lud had to be second baseman. I didn't get the nose connection. I was just pleased to be an infielder.

"Flour that rolling pin, or there'll be heartache ahead," I said.

"The directions don't specifically say to."

I gave him a look. He reached for the canister.

"Larry says his apartment is miniscule," I said. "Two rooms just off the lobby. It's maybe one-third the size of mine here."

"People there make life work in tinier spaces."

Dave could say that; Gavin had five rooms, a tub, and at least a double bed on Morton Street. Larry slept in a single off the lobby of his building and had only a shower. He called his Hangar apartment an environmental luxury.

"The only time Larry has lived with a boyfriend was fifteen years ago, in grad school," I said. "For four months."

"So?"

"So, don't you think more practice on his part would be a good idea? Before I pull up stakes and move to a place I've never been?"

Gavin had had two long-term lovers; both clocked in at nine years. I assumed that Larry had been feeding me these specifics about Gavin's life as a way to keep me from coming up with Dave's bright idea all on my own.

"If it feels right, Cary, it is right."

He sounded like Dr. Joyce Brothers on a call-in talk show. Things with Larry felt nice, which is not the same thing as right. We were busy. I'd only slept with him a total of four times. One time was just sleeping, which was mature, if not right.

"I don't think I'm smart enough for Larry," I said.

"*What?*" Dave hated whenever I hinted that there was that difference between us. I don't suggest it often. "You're plenty smart, smarter than a lot of the bozos I just graduated with."

Unlike Judy, Dave didn't tell me what to do with my smarts. I liked his way better. Judy made me feel they would shrink, or get stale, over time. Dave made me feel like I was stockpiling them for the right occasion.

"What do you and Larry talk about?"

"I don't know. I tell him stories about what's going on at Harold's or at rehearsal, and he tells me who's gay in Hollywood."

"Does he make you feel stupid, Cary?"

"Not at all." That was the truth. Larry's questions made my days sound almost interesting. For example, Kristy's life seemed tougher, and her way of handling it braver, when I pieced it together for him. What I told him about Robin just made him laugh—he said she was a purely literary figure.

"He's eighteen years older than I am."

"That's just experience. Experience is not a concomitant to intelligence."

Concomi-*what?* Dave statements like that crack me up. "If you say so."

"I mean it, Cary. Don't write Larry off just because it's easier to let his age be an issue."

"Fine. I won't."

I was about to ask him how smart he thought Gavin was, all things considered, but I noticed that there were no other ingredients out on the counter, just the cookbook, the dough, and the rolling pin.

"Hey Dave, pie or quiche?"

"I haven't decided yet," he sniffed.

That was also hilariously Dave. Too much history of science, I thought. Too much data control. Next would be cocktail sauce without the shrimp. Baked Alaska without the ice cream. Oyster stuffing without the turkey. A Bailey banquet of correct half-measures.

"What's so funny?"

"If you're making pie, it helps to seal the crust with beaten egg yolk. The filling won't bleed, and the crust doesn't get soggy."

"And with quiche?" said Dave, daring me to continue being the expert.

I smiled, wet a finger, and repaired a break in the dough. "With all the eggs in quiche, it really doesn't matter."

I looked up. He was wagging the pin in my face, Brother Knows Best.

"You know, Cary, you could always cook in New York," he said, absolutely reading my mind. "There are thousands of restaurants there."

"Pie or quiche," I repeated blandly. He'd gotten me, and he knew it.

"I don't know. Check the fridge."

EVENTUALLY I SHARPENED MY LOCATION management skills. I bought a duffel at Harold's for my script, my harmony cassette tape, a change of underwear and socks, work shirt and badge, a toothbrush, deodorant, and a mini-umbrella. I could now go from Larry to rehearsal to home to the Army-Navy in any order and not have to backtrack or compromise my hygiene.

I went to Larry's when invited. On the next company day off, I woke up early at home, did a load of laundry, then brought breakfast down from Collegetown Bagels. I wanted Larry's opinion of the local product. Although he thought my cinnamon-raisin bagel with butter and jelly stood in clear violation of the Torah, he approved of his sesame seed with cream cheese, a slice of tomato, and black pepper. And my standing there in skimpy cut-offs was going to make an ideal second course. Finishing a new *Pudd'nhead* scene had put him in the mood. I myself am a fan of daytime sex. Dessert before dinner. Dave had alerted me that male testosterone levels peak in the morning, not a problem, he said, for our age bracket, but useful to know for older guys.

I showered a second time, changed into long pants, then headed to the Commons. Lola and the Senators had a demo/photo shoot for the *Ithaca Journal*. Summer weekends in this town are full of free entertainment—acrobats, fire-eaters, jug bands, magicians, cloggers, unicylists—so we expected a crowd. A couple of the New Yorkers had been griping that this was a potential union infraction, but I knew we were all psyched to be doing publicity. We had had our first Act One stumble-through the night before down at the theater. I was amazed at how it was pulling together. Six Senators, but not me, had dropped their bats during the soft-shoe reprise. That may not sound like much, except at a certain point, we had to balance them vertically on our palms for a count of twelve while we grapevined left and right. Look at your feet, even for a second, and—CLUNK!

I didn't drop my bat on the Commons either. The people in front of Home Dairy stamped and whistled. Robin was there, looking bleary in lime pedal pushers and her red cat's-eye glasses, her giant cup of Wawa coffee tracked with lipstick—I wanted John Camelleri to meet her and vice

versa—and Kristy had taken a break from lunch prep at Simeon's to come cheer me on. Judy begged off, afraid maybe that I'd introduce her to the music director.

Our uniforms were still under construction in the costume shop, so at Gavin's insistence, we wore our tightest, whitest T-shirts and our tightest blue jeans. The photographer from the *Ithaca Journal* kept rearranging us around Suzy Skurnik, who sat on top of a short ladder in a bustier and fishnets. The idea was to gaze up at Lola with wonder at her unbelievable hotness while she filed her long, blood-red nails. We must have changed positions fifteen times. The photographer, an old perv I recognized from the Common Ground, clearly just wanted to cop feels off our chests and shoulders.

Suzy finally kicked off her pumps and said, "That's enough of that." She motioned to the assistant stage manager to fetch her dance bag.

Suzy Skurnik was a piece of work. I'd steered clear after an early attempt during a break to ask, for Judy's sake, whether she had been in *They're Playing Our Song* on Broadway. Suzy narrowed her eyes, removed a nozzle from her mouth—the New Yorkers toted water bottles—looked me up and down, and said, "Are you onstage or backstage?" Triple ouch. I mean, why be such a c-word when you don't have to? Since then, if forced to acknowledge my existence, she'd widen her eyes a tad and exhale in my direction. Forget about her ever learning the name Cary, or Lud.

Of course Robin, who regarded Suzy as competition, just had to go up to her after the photo shoot and introduce herself as the actress who was playing Gloria Upson in *Mame* over at the Strand Theatre. She so hoped that their performance schedules would allow them to see each other's work. (I cringed whenever Robin called acting "the work." *Hamlet*, maybe, was work. If you're Hamlet.)

Suzy, still buffing her nails while everyone packed up around her, looked at Robin as if a horse had just dropped a basket of road apples at her feet.

"Is that a professional company?" she said.

"How do you mean?"

"Does the Strand Theatre pay?"

Robin was too stunned for a comeback.

The upside to Suzy's c-ness was that it allowed John Camelleri, standing right there, to ride in for a rescue. The three of us went for lunch at the Dewitt Mall, but not to Moosewood. On the way in, I dropped a dollar into the instrument case of the flute player in front of The Bookery.

For Kate, the owner-chef of Café Dewitt, to give me a hug in front of John was the upside to being a townie. John had begun calling Ithaca

"Sprouts With Everything," as opposed to where he'd grown up, grimy, crumbling Paterson, New Jersey, which he called "Diesel On That."

Waiting for our food, I let Robin and John get acquainted and watched Kate manage the seven orders on the rack, with only one assistant and no wasted moves. Why hadn't I ever thought about a restaurant job? At the better joints in town, waiters made a ton in tips, but I knew I'd rather prepare food than hype or serve it. Even at Harold's, I preferred stocking shelves to pushing one brand of jeans over another. All choices have their points is the way I see it.

The conversation had circled back to our leading lady. "She's miscast," John was saying.

This was interesting. I had thought Suzy had been great in the stumble-through. "How so?" I asked.

"She's funny, but she's not sexy enough to be Lola."

"She can sing," I said.

Robin fluffed her bangs. "Anyone can sing Lola's material," she said. "Even I could."

"Of course you could," said John. "You would make a great Lola."

"I missed the auditions," said Robin, a lie. Then she did her Liza Minnelli bubble-giggle from *Cabaret*. Like I said, John was her type, and he had basically just told her she was sexy.

"Gavin miscast her," said John. "She's just a jappy cow from Bethpage, Long Island."

I felt I should defend Gavin, who was practically my brother-in-law. "He must have had his reasons. He cast me too. Even after I sang a sex song in German." This was a dig at Robin's audition suggestion.

"What?"

"You know… 'in dem Bordell, wo unser Haushalt war,'" said Robin, picking up her cue to be exotic and bilingual, town and gown, Sally and Liza.

"What?"

We explained my *Threepenny Opera* gambit, which John found so wrong he wouldn't let us leave the table until I sang a few lines as proof.

Next up for me was The Bookery, but John peeled off. He was going to work out, then sunbathe at Buttermilk Falls with some of the cast. I couldn't shoehorn Robin into that plan, because I had a shift at Harold's and couldn't go myself, so I asked John whether anyone was going dancing that night at the Common Ground. By now, most of the company went there to burn off energy, but between the store and rehearsals, I was working eighty-hour weeks. It felt like forever since I'd been out and about.

We looked at one another. There were shrugs, maybes, but no commitments and no exchange of phone numbers.

I had made my second-to-last *Origin of Species* payment and was giving Jack Goldman a recap of Dave's reaction to the Darwin when Robin butted in.

"Here's your next big gesture, Cary," she said.

She handed me a beautiful copy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. There was a bust of Twain stamped on the cover in gold leaf; the page edges were gilt; the endpapers were marbled in a five-ink paisley; best of all, behind a tissue paper veil was a full-color plate of Roxy getting the news that she's been sold down the river by her genuine son, Tom Driscoll. It's a big moment in the book, so crucial it was the act break in Larry Brownstein's adaptation.

"Yours for only twenty-four hundred dollars."

My jaw dropped.

"It's part of the Stanfield Edition of Twain's *Complete Works*," said Jack. "Thirty-seven volumes."

No need to ask about breaking up a set. I said goodbye to *Pudd'nhead*, gently placed him in front of Jack and looked at Robin. I couldn't believe she'd be this mean to me.

"Why—" I stopped.

"Why what?" she said.

"Why show me this, when you know I could never afford it?"

"Because you are such a dumb cluck."

She breezed out of the store. I followed.

"What are you talking about?"

"He's hot for *you*, stupid," she hissed. I could hardly hear with the flutist tootling next to my ear.

"Jack Goldman?"

Here she might have done her best Liza/Sally sells the fur to pay for the abortion, but she was too upset. "No, you doofus. *John*."

"John Camelleri?"

She poked me in the chest with a fingernail as red as Suzy Skurnik's, the one trait they shared. "Yeah, and you can tell him from me that he should change his last name."

AS I'VE MENTIONED, HARMONY IS hardest, but I had *Damn Yankees* down cold. Lyrics had never been a problem at the Strand, but the next day, in the middle of our Act Two stumble-through, they were a problem at the Hangar. The Senators sing a number, "The Game," in which they pledge abstinence before a crucial matchup with the Yankees. The running gag is that the men trade spicy stories, get hot and bothered, and then throw cold water on each other in the refrain and "Think about the game, the game, the game."

[richard: worry about copyright with lyrics?]

Lud had a solo story he starts telling Petey. I knew my lyrics until I locked eyes with John Camelleri. Robin's complicating verdict at the Dewitt Mall had led me to avoid John, not so easy when changing down to our jockstraps in a tiny group dressing room. I hadn't even said hello. I wasn't trying to be junior high about the situation. Robin, despite her sophistication, was fallible. Suddenly there he was, two feet away onstage, cap backwards, in Petey's catcher's pads, a fellow actor focused on what I was communicating to him in the moment.

LUD: "There was that Pullman car that I got lost in/On a sleeper out of Boston…"

MEN: "Yeah…yeah…"

I looked at John's full lips, his five o'clock shadow, his thick neck, the hair at his throat, and—he was so hot, I froze. I dried. I corpsed. I forgot my lyrics while the piano played on.

LUD: "……" Two measures? Ten measures? "……"

An actor can bullshit his way through a dialogue flub, but a singer? Forget it. Songs keep time. Lyrics rhyme. I stared into John's face and babbled nonsense syllables—abba dabba—until my brain clawed its way back on the chorus.

The show went on; I was backstage and onstage, on and off, in a burning haze of shame, ready for Gavin to strip me of my uniform. The Big Apple had just lost a promising line cook. Judy would be crestfallen. Dave would be incredulous. I would hide out in my hogshead until the year 2000.

Waiting to make another entrance, I felt a pair of arms cross around my shoulders from the back. "It's OK," John whispered. "It happens to all of us."

I didn't believe him. "No, it doesn't. Not really," I said, wriggling in his hold.

"It does, Cary." He locked his hands on my sternum—Heimlich Maneuver time. "I promise." I relaxed for a split second and leaned into him. Our ears brushed; I felt his breath on my cheek as he repeated his promise.

After the run, and after notes—Gavin merely laughed at my flub and said don't worry about it, Lud, but *don't* do it again—and after everyone had dressed and headed back into town for dinner, John and I went over to a lonesome picnic table hidden behind a stand of poplars between the theater and the lake, tore off our clothes, and fucked, as the saying goes, like bunnies.

SOMETHING ELSE I HAD NOT done: played the field. (Ha.) As the days went by, make that fields plural, because John Camelleri's trip was outdoor sex. He must have thought he wasn't queer as long as he didn't screw a man in a bed. He never said that specifically, but he did say once that doing it in the woods, or on our picnic table, or on a ledge overlooking Cascadilla

Gorge, or on a granite sculpture by the Cornell Observatory was like being his preteen self again, the twelve-year-old Johnnie who had just figured out what he had down there and wanted to use it, but indoors was crammed tight with eleven other Camelleris, twice as many religious statues, a crucifix over every bed, and only one bathroom. No one he knew could locate him outdoors.

He was twenty-four now and shared an apartment in Astoria with three other struggling actors, and pretended to be straight for showbiz reasons, and kept an old comforter in the trunk of his Dodge Dart. Standing naked outdoors, across from me in the water, with the sun or the stars above, seemed to him like the most private, special place in the world.

I think what turned my head, in addition to John's Italian combo of totally butch and totally tender, was the unspoken knowledge that I had to be there for it to happen. I heard it behind his words—John was a talker—and behind the press and push of our bodies against rock, wood, earth, and brick. I guess before John, I'd felt part onlooker, part assistant during sex, but these exchanges were mutual. What happened happened *between* us, not just to him, or to me, or anyplace else. "I am here with you," I once said into his neck, not as a reminder, but as a discovery. He pulled back. The moon gleamed behind his head, but I was able to watch his teeth in the dark as he replied, "Of course you are, my darling. Where else would you be?"

"Why me?" I'd wonder. Was it because, as a townie, I knew the best outdoor spots? I asked him just that on our picnic table, after a sudden cloudburst. Sex during a warm summer rain, with fireflies after as the cherry on top—whichever god or goddess was in charge of the weather was on our side that night.

John found that funny. Water pearled from his forelock onto my chest, puny and hairless next to his. I really couldn't fathom why he had picked me.

"You're my dowsing rod, Cary."

With John, I got my definitions up front. "What's that?"

"It's a forked stick that prospectors use to find a source of water," he said. "It means you lead me to water." He pointed to our wet clothes in the grass.

"I lead you to mosquito bites and scraped-up arms and legs."

He halted further discussion with another dive for my fork and stick.

The question I didn't ask was how did John make do during the cold months. Did the outdoors take on the dimensions of a stopped elevator, or an empty law office on Wall Street where he temped, or the famous alley on Broadway that connected the Plymouth, the Golden, and the Royale Theatres, or behind the all-night diner in Astoria, Queens, with the cook who made him a bacon-and-onion omelet?

THOUGH I MIGHT HAVE WANTED to, since deception really wasn't part of my nature, I didn't stop seeing Larry Brownstein. If outdoors was John's way of not being queer, then outdoors was my solution for two-timing them. With no exchange of promises or hopes among any of us, I wasn't technically cheating. (Or was I? "We have a caller on line three, Dr. Brothers.") I had also started typing *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and that meant occasional nights at Larry's. I couldn't quit the gig for no reason, or duck his advances. He was a great guy, and things were still fun. I vowed that if I started feeling guilty in his direction, I wouldn't charge him for the typing.

What I didn't like was not being able to have a catchup. Robin would have been best, but I wasn't going to pull John out of the closet, even if she had initially read him right. No one besides Dave and Gavin knew I was with Larry. Judy didn't know I was queer. Having endured years of it with Wayne, Kristy would come down like a sledgehammer. She thought cheaters were the worst.

After watching the final dress of *Damn Yankees*, Larry was enthusiastic about "my work" (interior eye roll here). He had noticed and commented on little moments I had created for Lud, fine fine, but what I wanted to know was what he thought of everybody else. He privately agreed that Suzy Skurnik wasn't the sexiest of Lolas but she had a good set of pipes. We went down the Senators roster. He said that Petey, the muscle-bound catcher, had a case of "proscenium pelvis," an expression I knew wouldn't be in the Taschers' encyclopedia. Larry said that it usually referred to actresses, but it meant that wherever John happened to be onstage—up, down, facing left or right, his pelvis unconsciously swiveled as near to center stage as possible. It needed to be putting itself out there front and center all the time.

"Is it a good thing to have?"

"Some of the greatest stars have it," said Larry. "It's not part of an actor's training, like voice and speech."

"Is it upstaging?"

"No, it's involuntary."

"Would it bother John to hear that he had it?"

Larry considered this. "He's probably never heard the term. It's very old-school."

Around us the cast was packing it in, pulling their bags and windbreakers off the empty seats down front. Tomorrow night our first audience would be sitting in those rows, so everyone was advising everyone else to get some rest, drink tea with lemon, no milk, it coats the vocal cords, nap in the afternoon, go over your lines, sing half-voice, good show good show good show. I wanted a strap for my duffel so I could sling it over my

shoulder the way they did. I squeezed Larry's hand good night and let him go give his notes to Gavin.

John passed by with some of the guys, slapped my butt Petey to Lud, but flashed a John to Cary "picnic table" look. No getting that kind of rest for him—he was ravenous after a run-through. We all went outside and stood in the gravel approach to the theater, beat but too keyed up to disperse. Five crates of soft drinks and four boxes of snacks were stacked in two towers at the concessions stand just inside the giant sliding metal doors. To get ready for the public, the lawnmower had done its first pass of the season that afternoon, so the air smelled of freshly cut grass. Moths whirled under the floodlights shining on the twenty-foot sign painted with all the shows of the season. When we returned the next day, our headshots would be stapled alphabetically on the cork bulletin board next to the doors to the theater. My face would be in that crowd, equal size to everybody else.

John and I were waiting for the rest to head off. He had the comforter, and I had a checklist of destinations. Before we could work out a plan, Dave came crunching up the gravel, mad as hell that Gavin was staying on for a production meeting.

I hadn't known that Dave would be there for final dress. I introduced him to my teammates. His tie to Gavin was common knowledge, so they were eager as puppies to get his feedback on final dress. As far as Dave was concerned, *Damn Yankees* had become the mistress beneath mention, so he gave them nothing, which was shitty of him. He was deaf to their fishing and to their praise of Gavin—on purpose or not, I couldn't tell. Dave was so deaf and so shitty, John packed his car with as many as could fit and took off, leaving the two of us to walk to Purity Ice Cream.

I ate mocha chip and listened to Dave rant about the fights he'd been having with *his* two-timing man. It was clearly not the moment to do Gavin the favor I had promised him, which was to explain, brother to brother, how the demands of being a director meant that there would be stretches of time when he wouldn't be able to meet all of Dave's needs. Things would get even hairier on *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, because it was a new play, and he hoped that Dave could get used to the process. Otherwise… More than anything Gavin had said or done so far, his worried look let me know how sunk he was on Dave. It was worth a thousand of his outrageous compliments.

So that topic was off the table, as well as what Dave had thought of my performance. Odd how I'd just blown off Larry's praise but found myself suppressing a need for Dave's approval. In the past it hadn't mattered whether he'd even come to my Strand shows. John told me that Lud, the way I played him, was an "unspoiled rookie from the sticks blind to his strengths." That made me laugh, since it sounded like a baseball variation

of every report card I'd ever brought home to the Gabelsons. I told him that Petey was the glue—the *hot* glue—of the team. The joke around this truth was that summer stock sets were built with hot glue, balsa wood, and chicken wire. All the pros told horror stories of flats falling over midscene and doorknobs coming off in their hands.

Judy had called the Hangar a step up; for me it felt like a graduation into something. I was putting myself out there, hitting my marks, keeping the bat up. It was like what was happening with John, who wouldn't need to tell me why he'd just spun out of the parking lot without a goodbye. I had seen what he had seen, and we agreed on what that was. Dave Bailey could be a selfish asshole.

I sucked at my little paddle spoon, wishing I were riding stick in the Dart, while Dave revealed the latest surprise. Gavin expected him to get a job in Manhattan and, bigger surprise, they would be splitting the rent and expenses on Morton Street. Although Dave and I both knew that he would wind up doing *something* in the city, I had assumed he would seek the best next display case for his genius. Whether a decent salary was attached to that location was beside the point. Love was their currency, his latest free ride.

"You've never had a job in your life," I said.

"I've held several fellowships."

"But what can you do?" That just flew out of my mouth.

"Don't be stupid, Cary. I can do lots of things."

He never called me stupid, or he hadn't since I had gotten busted for pot possession and also hot-wired Hugh's car in my one wild, tenth-grade year. I could have decked him, or pushed him off the stool and into the gravel. I snapped the spoon between my fingers. He needed to know that I could be with John Camelleri, younger and hotter than his boyfriend, right now. Instead I told him to never call me that again.

Then all you could hear was crickets and cars, the kids wild with excitement on the way in, their faces sticky and full on the way out.

IN THINKING ABOUT WHAT CAME next, I understand why people keep journals. Events piled up during the three weeks of the show, but their exact order escapes me.

Damn Yankees was a big fat hit. Every bat stayed aloft opening night, every patron stood, and every review made room for the "lovable" "adorable" "endearing" Senators. Judy sent roses, the first I'd ever gotten, and said she'd never seen me so at ease onstage. The Gabelsons came back twice. Dave gave me a pair of oval cufflinks, antique silver, enameled with turquoise *fleur-de-lis*. They were so classy, I'd have to buy a shirt with

French cuffs. On one of our few daytime outings, Larry had seen me inspect a Rookwood trivet. He'd gone back for it and wrote me a note about how he expected he would never meet another twenty-year-old with a taste for art pottery.

When something good happens in Ithaca, people hear about it. For twenty-one days we were mini-celebrities. The radio stations played "Heart" and "Whatever Lola Wants" and plugged the show nonstop. Men spotted us at the Common Ground, where we'd arrive in a pack after performances, send us drinks, and ask for phone numbers. People I'd seen around all my life would come up in the Army-Navy and say they loved the show. Jack Goldman at The Bookery said we equaled the original Broadway production.

I'd wake up every morning stoked to perform that night. If I was walking up 89 to get to the Hangar, cast members with cars, even the leads, would stop and make room for one more. My favorite moment to play was the solo I had flubbed in "The Game." The Pullman car that I got lost in stood in for my secret with John. I was told I got laughs, but I didn't hear them, so intent was I on driving home to Petey who Lud had really wanted to bunk with on that sleeper out of Boston.

Being nonpro, the Strand could rehearse whenever; on a day off, John and I went over to catch Robin in a run-through. All that really needs to be said about that *Mame* is that Barbs Burgess, longtime artistic director, saved the best parts for herself. Annie Oakley was one thing, but Mame Dennis was an impossible stretch. Barbs was all guts and no swank. I knew maybe two-thirds of the cast. A lot of them were just walking through it, or stoned, or up to their hambone tricks, trying to get each other to break character onstage, things I used to do. A couple of them even waved to me in the house during the run-through.

We made sure to tell Robin that she was terrific over and over because she knew she was in a turkey. Although I wanted to hang out and preen with John, she dragged us to Simeon's lickety-split, as if she feared all hell would break loose if a pair of adorable endearing Washington Senators from the rival show was spotted in the Strand lobby.

Unable to relax until her second screwdriver, she kept us howling with the backstage shenanigans at *Mame* and vowed that this would be her farewell appearance at "Barbs' Big Top." John reached over, placed a hand on hers, squeezed, and said, "Well, you know the first rule of the theater."

Robin, for once, didn't pretend she already knew something. "No, what is the first rule of the theater?"

"Save yourself."

We fell out on that. Our laughter fed on itself; it escalated in waves. Other diners started staring, which made it more hilarious. We were becoming one of those tables I hate in restaurants, but I didn't want to settle down. The insider feeling was too good to stifle. Across the room Kristy, a tray of dead dishes balanced on her shoulder, made the "slit your throat" gesture with her free hand. She'd get canned if the two underage drinkers she served got too rowdy, so we ordered food.

In public John played it straight. He'd slept with enough women to know the moves. Throughout the meal he touched Robin's arm, bumped shoulders, took a fry, leaned in to listen, got her jokes, showed teeth.

John was also running an act with our leading lady. At some point after opening, he had decided that Suzy Skurnik was such a horror, he had no other choice but to make her want him before closing. He wolf-whistled her outfits, held doors, carried her bag, told her what roles she *must* one day play, spoke strings of Italian that he wouldn't translate, rubbed his fingers over her cheeks to even out her stage makeup, anything to race her motor. Even though her performance never changed a hair, he fed Suzy a constant line about all the new discoveries he saw her make with the part.

The attention paid off. Suzy started seeking him out. She learned both my names. One night at the Common Ground the three of us danced together to a Supremes medley. The secrecy of what John and I were really up to—the *stakes*, another theater term either Larry or Gavin introduced me to—sent us into the john for a hot minute, John for once not seeming to care who saw us swap spit between the old porcelain sinks. Day by day, Suzy's pelvis swiveled closer round to his, but as long as John's thigh was wedged against mine under any given restaurant table, I felt that his double life made us even hotter.

He didn't think the same of mine. Robin, stimulated and confused by John's attention that night at Simeon's, blew my cover. On our third round of drinks, and that was all Kristy would allow us, Robin asked me how *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was going.

"It hasn't started rehearsals," I said.

"No Cary, how is the play?"

"How would I know? I'm just typing it."

College-bound Robin hadn't taken typing, so she wouldn't know that reading the text reduced your speed.

"If Larry asks what you think, tell him it's brilliant. Even if it isn't. You have to get him talking about it."

"I think he's happier to not have to think about it every single moment."

"Think again, boychick," she said, sounding pissed all of a sudden. Maybe she had figured us out. I had never told John that Robin thought he was queer from the get-go.

John caught up. "You're typing the script for *Pudd'nhead*?"

"At two-fifty a page," said Robin. "Plus the occasional breakfast special at State Diner." She squeezed her cast-off hamburger bun to emphasize this point. "When you think about it, this could be Cary's very own personal 'Ballad of Immoral Earnings.' You could kill with that song *now*."

We let that one lie there until its smell faded away. John was looking at me funny.

"Larry Brownstein?"

I could issue no denial. John could, and pardon me for Dave's verb, *evince* no jealousy in front of Robin, but his opinion was easy to read: old, bald, short, nellie, *say what?*

I rotated my plate, swirled my glass, capped the ketchup, reunited the salt and the pepper, reached for his thigh with mine, found it missing, scraped dried mustard off my napkin with a fingernail. Then Robin bested Suzy Skurnik in the c-stakes by asking whether Larry had mentioned anything yet about my moving to New York.

"No," I half lied. Larry hadn't used the word "move." He'd gotten as far as "see." He would like to see me in the city, which I interpreted as my showing up for a weekend with a return bus ticket.

Robin drained her glass and waved Kristy over. "You better get to work then. Cary and Larry," she giggled. "They even rhyme."

If I ever move there, you jealous bitch, I will never ever call, I vowed to myself. But you know, after John and I kicked Robin Tascher to the curb on Buffalo Street, we had the best sex ever. Other than to give him directions to Libe Slope, the only reply I could make in the car, stomach quaking like I'd just killed a man, was "He isn't you."

John pressed my hand to his mouth, then rubbed it against his stubble. My opinion: stacked, butch, mine: *say yes.* For three hours we ground it out like demons on the north side of the Cornell Art Museum, not needing to talk until finally John slipped up between innings and moaned, "What am I going to do without you, Cary?"

Now that I took as a direct invitation to Go Greyhound.

LARRY HELPED THIS DECISION THE night I finished typing *Pudd'nhead Wilson.* We were celebrating in bed after a steak dinner, and I paid some extra attention to his ears. Maybe his ears had never been worked over that way, or it had been years since the last time, or maybe the sight of that one hundred and seventeen–page first draft stacked within reach on the

nightstand primed his ears for the experience, but he really really dug it. I claim no special skills. Eventually I moved on and he said, "Keep that in the repertory."

I froze, but not so long for him to notice. I had been having sex for two years, and no one had ever said something like that to me. It made it sound like a routine, and that was wrong. I had done Larry's ears *freely* because I thought he'd like it. I had liked doing it, liked that he liked it that much, but then he'd liked it so much, he'd gone and put a higher value on it. It wouldn't be *free* on my part ever again; it would be expected, it would have to be worked in. And hey, guess what? It didn't need to be said. I had ears of my own, and with them I had heard how much Larry had grooved on the tongue-to-ear move, so I would have put it in the repertory anyway. But telling me to do it took away my choice and screwed everything up. With five words Larry reduced what we had been doing—sesame bagels, the blue jays bickering outside his window in the morning, a hip bump at the door—to a menu. It wasn't fair, I suppose, but I decided during my little freeze that he was an older man, and I was a younger man, and his shift was over. I'd earned that typing money, and now I'd keep it.

DAVE'S MOVE WAS SET FOR August 20th. Three weeks away, on the last day of July, I was going to beat him there. I called the bus station several times to recheck fares and schedules, then began making plans to the tune of "I Guess the Lord Must Be in New York City."

Kristy was supportive. Judy less so. I hit both of them up for storage space in their basements, but can't recall who came first that day.

Judy, pulling dandelions in her backyard, sensed my pants-pissing excitement and so didn't let on how she felt about the decision. Instead, she started with the practicals. I told her I would only lose a month's rent, which had been paid out already as my security deposit. I would certainly give my two weeks at Harold's so as not to jeopardize a positive recommendation. She advised me to write down the addresses and phone numbers of my landlord, my boss, and Ithaca High School, because they asked for those things on applications. I could switch banks after I compared rates. Change-of-address forms could be found at every post office. Was I able to pull together a jacket, tie, white shirt, and dark slacks combination for interviews? I was. Did I need a loan? Nope, I said, smiling, giddy because she hadn't felt the need to ask me what I was going to do. She believed in me. Harry Nilsson started singing, "By tomorrow, I'll be on my way…"

Judy then sat back on her heels and asked me where I was going to live, the cost of living down there was astronomical.

"Some friends from the show live in Astoria. They say rents are cheapest in Queens. If I get stuck, I'll rent a room out in some old Italian lady's house."

"I thought you liked living alone, Cary."

I shrugged. "It's New York. It's worth the hassle. You know that."

Judy tucked some hair under her sun hat. "Do you want to be an actor? *Damn Yankees* has given you a lot more confidence, but the theater is an incredibly tough business; you'd need real training and—"

She stopped, a pained expression on her face.

"What? What is it?"

"Are you going because of Dave?"

"Dave?" That was my shock.

"He doesn't even know I'm going," I said.

That was her shock. When I went on to say that Dave could be a selfish asshole sometimes, she dropped the dandelion weeder into the basket like it was on fire.

"What? He'll be in Manhattan. I'll be in Queens. Judy?"

She was staring at me, as if my face were melting off in the same fire. "Don't follow him, Cary."

"I'm not."

"Are you sure?"

Sure what? Of my move? That Astoria was in Queens? That Dave wasn't a selfish asshole sometimes? Dave and I had already been separated fifteen different ways. Dave hadn't taken my suitcase out of the closet and opened it; I had, and I was following John Camelleri on my own initiative.

I should have come out to her right then as the corroborating factor, but I was too ticked off. Getting up to go, I pointed out a ripped screen on a back window, said I'd fix it when I came back with my stuff for the basement, and left her to burn in the grass.

Kristy, who did know the corroborating factor, sniffed it out instantly. "Please tell me it's not that old guy."

I sighed. "Don't say that, Kristy. Larry's been incredibly nice to me."

"He's not right for you."

"I didn't say it was him, did I?"

"You didn't say anything, Cary."

I sauntered away from the register, headed to the wall of jeans.

"Get back here!"

I hummed Harry Nilsson as I straightened and re-sorted, an easy job in June and July. Thank God I'd be gone before back-to-school season started. There'd be too much merchandise, too many idiotic questions, and as muggy-as-the-Amazon August wore on, never enough pants or shoes

in the standard sizes. Every night at closing time, the store looked like a cyclone had hit.

"Who is it then?" she asked, poking my ribs with a plastic hanger. Her eyes were lit with excitement. Wayne and three kids by thirty hadn't killed her looks or her belief in romance. "Who who who who?"

At first I would only allow that he was a Washington Senator, not helpful when she hadn't seen *Damn Yankees*. I had bought her a ticket for the final weekend, and she was taking her mom with her as a special treat. Things eased up for them in the summer; no heating bills, and the Farmer's Market donated all its unsold dairy and produce to the food pantry. Kristy and the girls would eat crazy-quilt dinners on Monday, and they never lacked for clover honey.

"You're leaving me high and dry, Cary, you have to tell me."

So I said it was the Italian she'd seen me with at Simeon's, and her disbelief that so studly a guy could be queer filled me with pride. I told her the whole story—it felt great to spill it at last—and when I'd finished, she said, "He treats you right, Cary, that's all I care about." I wrapped my arms around her, and she wondered whether John had a brother. An older brother with a good job. Who liked kids.

SOME OF YOU, I FIGURE, have been in plays, so you know how a closing night feels. After every laugh, at the end of every number, during every crossover onstage and costume change backstage, you think, "Wow, that's the last time for that. This will never happen again." With some shows it's a relief. With others you're fighting tears. Robin says it depends on how you feel about the makeshift family you've created for those weeks. I'll admit I lost it a tiny bit in the final curtain call. Suzy Skurnik was as red and leaky as a busted fire hydrant.

At an after-party in the lobby, Gavin announced that *Damn Yankees* had broken Hangar box office records, and that it was just this kind of community support for a classic musical that would help underwrite the development of important, brand-new works like the upcoming *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which would be starting rehearsals in two days. We cheered long and loud at the continuity of our artistic achievement, or something like that. We cheered for everything that night. Off in a corner, Dave clapped politely—Gavin would go missing again on Tuesday. I have to say it felt *excellent* to belong to a world that Dave didn't understand. The shoe was on my foot this once.

Larry Brownstein found me in the drinks line and asked, very direct for him, why I had disappeared. I said that after the script was typed, he could have called me. The look on his face made me feel terrible, so I promised

myself that come September I would take him to his favorite coffee shop in Manhattan and explain everything, except for his unforced error about keeping his ears in the repertory.

We were a habit, John liked to say, so he turned up eventually, slurring his words from drink, high as a kite with great news. First of all, Suzy Skurnik had practically sat on his dick backstage. Even better—and here was the real payoff—Suzy's agent had been in the house and out of all the Senators, he'd picked John out as "a big talent." Last and best of all, the agent wanted John to come in when he got back to the city.

"Come in?" I said. I'd learned Bernini and Luddite and dowsing rod and proscenium pelvis and stakes, but the New York showbiz lingo had largely escaped me. I didn't known that getting your first agent was like losing your cherry.

"He wants me to audition for him."

"Oh John, that's amazing," I said. "You're amazing."

He lifted me in the air, not caring who saw us. As I slid down his body, he growled, "Let's get out of here."

He was too drunk to drive, so I took the wheel. He talked the whole way about what he should sing, and say, and wear for his audition.

I'd never need a car in New York, I thought, psyched with the knowledge. I'd learn the subways, the buses, all the transfer points. Dave and Gavin would come out to Queens for brunch. I'd meet Judy in Rockefeller Center; I'd sneak into second acts of musicals; I'd help John learn his lines and prepare for auditions; with my home skills I'd build us a loft bed and make our tiny space seem huge.

I drove up State Street and idled in front of my house; there was beer in the fridge, but John refused to come in, even to empty his bladder. So for our last hometown hump, instead of baptizing my wrought-iron bedstead, I drove us to a spot I'd been meaning to show him. I took East Avenue through the dark campus. I pointed out the Andrew Dickson White House on the right, and the back of Lincoln Hall, where I'd sung *auf Deutsch* for Gavin back in May. Only seven weeks in the past, and so much history since. I turned right on Forest Home Drive, went just past Beebe Dam, and parked the Dart in the spot reserved for the Dean of the College of Human Ecology.

I led him by the hand to that courtyard fronting the Family Life Development Center in Martha Van Ren Hall. Compared to our other locations, it didn't spell romance: the grass was sparse and the bushes scraggly from a lack of consistent sun. But still, by the light of a weak quarter-moon, you could see the outlines of a log cabin and a jungle gym bolted into a playground covered with pebbles.

"Where are we?" said John.

"This—" I paused with an emphasis I had gained from sharing the stage with Equity actors—"is where I was born."

"Huh?"

I took the comforter from his hands, shook it open, and lay it out near the cabin. I gently set him down and told him the story of my life, according to me. I skipped over my birth mother and her interoffice mail cart, because once in the moment, I couldn't decide whether she had been more like Roxy, protecting her real son from peril, or more like Kristy, seventeen and pregnant and refusing to abort. I focused instead on my bond with Dave, and the Gabelsons watching us through the two-way mirror in the model kindergarten, and Judy's choice, and Professor Bailey's legal kidnapping. My story was leading to the revelation of my latest, greatest chapter, a dramatic, life-changing move to Queens, but John, pulling cotton batting from a tear in the comforter, had drifted off.

I stopped and he said, "Wow, that's rough." Then he went in again on what to sing for Suzy Skurnik's agent. I said he'd kill, no matter what song he chose. He laughed and pulled me to him. "I guess this is the last time. I'm going to miss you so much, baby."

"Last time in Ithaca," I said. "I'm moving to the city at the end of the month."

There was a very long pause. John rolled away, then sat up. "Did Larry Brownstein give you the go-ahead?"

A blank stare was ineffective when the truth couldn't be read by the light of a weak quarter-moon.

"New York is expensive," he said.

I held myself very very still. It felt like Judy playing just the chords. The second tenor line was lost in a bundle of notes, and I couldn't find it.

"You know, Cary, just because you have your play done in summer stock doesn't mean you're famous. There are thousands of playwrights in New York."

Just like there were thousands of restaurants.

John Camelleri was pretending he didn't know why I was moving.

Options. Weep, scream, smother with comforter? No, no, and no. Explain? Not remotely possible.

Final option. If it's going to be the last time, then you make it last, so it will last in your mind for as long as you need it to.

We were going at it, big and strong and outdoorsy, when I heard some bushes rustling. There wasn't any wind, but I paid this no mind. Then there was the slap of shoes on concrete. John stopped, but I wouldn't. Then there was a flashlight upon us. John started to move, but I held on tight. Then

the crackle of a walkie-talkie, then a second flashlight. The order to freeze was, I found, unnecessary.

THAT ONE PHONE CALL RULE is true. John called Gavin, and I called Dave, so we could have saved a quarter. Gavin swept in, twenty yards of charm. I don't think those cops had ever seen anyone like him. On no invitation, and with no encouragement, he began to talk. He started with the humble history of his life, then the history of American drama since Eugene O'Neill, moved onto the history of *Damn Yankees*, the history of the Hangar Theatre, touched on aviation in general and on his boyhood dream of becoming a pilot, and then, putting a bow on it, spoke of his plans to build—with the help, God willing, of Cornell and the State Legislature and the National Endowment—an arts center on the lake to rival anything else in New York. The snow job of a lifetime, it was a fundraising appeal spliced onto his Telluride "Artists and Experts" lecture.

Winding down, he referred only once to the reason why we had gathered together in an airless holding pen deep in Barton Hall. He cast our misconduct as a "boys will be boys" incident, no different than two drunken undergrads experimenting with their confused feelings in the dead of night, college is the place for that, no literal children were in the playground, no harm done to anyone, no harm at all, the boys had learned their lesson, exposure was punishment enough. By the time we staggered out of there, further charges pending, any ranking officer on the Cornell University Police Force had two complimentary tickets for any performance of P*udd'nhead Wilson*.

The brothers needed a heart-to-heart, so Gavin dropped us off at the old hogshead. Dave would spend the night at his mother's. While he called her on my phone, I took lemonade out to the porch. As far back as junior high, he referred to Leigh Bailey as "Mom" only when he thought I was out of earshot.

We rocked on the glider and sipped in silence, skins searching for a breeze until it felt safe to talk. There was plenty to say on both sides, and it didn't come out smooth. As far as I was concerned, both Gavin and Dave had pimped me out to Larry Brownstein. That's a strong verb to use for a person like Larry, for an actual gentleman and my first listener. It made sense that Gavin hoped his closest friend could experience what he was having with Dave. You want happiness to catch on. The same went for Dave, who also wanted, he said, to help steer a path for me out of Ithaca, because he believed in my potential. He said he wasn't going to just leave me behind, so yes, he had put the bug in Gavin's ear, but that didn't constitute pimping me out.

I had to admit, if only to myself, that a part of me had been sleeping with Larry so I wouldn't disappoint Dave. I had taken the bait our first double date—he bakes! he refinishes! he types! No one had forced me to clamber into the back of a two-seater convertible for a ride to the lake between a man's legs. It didn't look comfortable, and it wasn't, but I had gone along with it. Dave slips a Frankenstein mask under my jacket, I don't rat him out. Dave puts a gun to my head, I'll take it out of his hands and use it my own way. Anything to keep him shiny.

It got rougher when Dave expressed his contempt for the other man, meaning meat-headed, sweet-talking, straight-acting, closet case John Camelleri. I had been used. What he'd been having with me—and this was Gavin's term—was a classic "showmance," as flimsy and fleeting as a summer stock set. I didn't want to be a classic anything. Classic means "over." And, ideally, "showmance" was going to be the last expression or reference I'd hear from any man for the rest of my natural life. But once again, I had to admit that a showmance was no different from a work shift, the problem here being that John Camelleri punched out first. Dave maintained that John had never punched in, but I knew different. Some things that happen between two people cannot be faked.

The entire time we were detained in Barton Hall, John had apologized a hundred different ways to Gavin, but not once had he looked at me. Saying goodbye, he obeyed the first rule of the theater and told Gavin he felt he had grown tremendously as an actor in *Damn Yankees* and hoped that Gavin would call him in for any auditions—musicals *or* straight plays—he might be holding in the coming year. He didn't acknowledge my goodbye. Dave and Gavin and I watched him open his car door. His face was ashen under the ceiling light. He was about to sit and key the ignition when he spotted something. I watched him lean right, watched his big, tender arms fish around in the backseat. Then just before closing the door, he pitched my duffel onto the asphalt.

In the summer you water at night so your plants don't fry. I got up for my begonias and herbs. I had an urge to put on "I Guess the Lord Must Be in New York City," but there were the neighbors, and Dave would think I was nuts. I went into the kitchen to fill the watering can; the lyric "seeing my prayers gone unanswered" ran over and over through my brain, like a dead branch had gotten stuck in that paddle wheel banjo sound I loved and feared. The pain I was feeling about not ever seeing John Camelleri again was so intense I had to clutch the edge of the sink to keep from buckling over. Had John ever punched in? Would I ever know?

When I made it back to the porch, Dave ordered me to stop messing around with the flowers and sit my butt down, there was more to discuss.

You don't get to be a genius by ducking the tough questions, even if it can take years to find the words to ask them with. In a strangled voice he asked me why I had destroyed his old bunk bed once upon a time.

"Destroyed?" I said with genuine surprise. "Hugh and I took the beds apart."

"No, Cary. You took an ax and tried to chop my bed into kindling."

It didn't sound like me. "What are you talking about?"

Dudley Do-Right was staring at me under a funnel of gnats at the porch light. Charges might be pending up the hill, but he wasn't going to let me off this hook.

"Judy told me years later that right after I'd left with Leigh you ran into the basement and got an ax and went crazy with it. She said Hugh had to roll you in a rug to calm you down."

I'm not an angry person. It still didn't sound like me. "I wanted more room, maybe?"

"Don't try to be funny. I *know* you."

"This was what, ten years ago? I don't remember."

Even by quarter-moonlight, I could see his eyes were glistening. He kept opening and closing his hands, like the truth was in a bucket on a rope he could pull out of my throat if I would just open wider.

"I'm leaving Ithaca in a month, Cary."

"I'm sure you have your own theory, college boy," I replied, instantly jealous as shit at the mention of his move. John Camelleri had stabbed me in the heart, back, and head while Dave, who got everything, would get to live on love with Gavin Steeg.

"I do."

"Well?"

Dave drained his lemonade like it was a cup of hemlock. "I think you wrecked my bed, so that if I changed my mind, and wanted to come back, I wouldn't be able to."

"That's—"

If we couldn't be separated at five and six, why did anyone think it was a good idea to do that to us when we were ten and eleven? I heard my feet pounding on the basement stairs, saw the ax shining above my head on the pegboard, felt its handle in my fist, heard it crack again and again against the stepladder to Dave's bunk, heard glass breaking when it missed and hit a lamp. I felt Hugh tackle me to the floor and then all I was were muffled screams inside a wall of wool.

Now my head was screaming again, with its own question years in the asking. I managed to control the volume by listening to the crickets, to the humming window fans next door, to the tires thudding over potholes,

and the sideward metal creak of the glider as I reached over him for his empty glass. On the return, needing room, I put another foot of distance between us.

"Why did you say yes?"

He knew me well enough to know what I was asking. "I didn't have a choice, Cary."

"Bullshit," I said softly, shaking my head. "You did. You know you did."

He even knew the question beneath the question, that's how smart Dave can be: How could you have left me behind? I stood with our glasses, to give us both more room.

"She wanted to be my mother for real."

I wasn't going to cry, I was long past that, but Dave began to bawl, bawl like a baby, bawl in the way that dozens of Hume Ec students had observed, then wrote in their research papers once upon a time about what happened when "The Boys Who Would Be Twins" were separated. (Or so I'd like to believe.)

I set the glasses on a table in the hall and fetched him a linen handkerchief monogrammed with a *D*—Dunkler or Dave—from the top drawer of Judy's tiger maple bureau. I was sorry we wouldn't be having that lunch for three before he left town. I tucked it between his fingers and his hot, wet cheek and picked up my watering can.

"Do you even love the guy?" I asked.

"Gavin? Of course I do."

He blew his nose as if that proved it. I should have asked him how did he know; it might have helped this rookie from the sticks, but I was beat. Instead I offered Dave my opinion that he didn't need Gavin Steeg to get him to New York, or anyplace else. He would be a star wherever he went.

SO I DIDN'T KEEP MY nose clean. In addition to the dropped charges of trespassing and illegal parking and indecent exposure and disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace and underage intoxication, feel free to add petty theft to my townie accomplishments this summer. Reasoning that, what with my imminent move to Astoria, Queens, I could never afford to pay for, much less house, the thirty-seven volumes of the Stanfield Edition of Twain's *Collected Works*, I went into The Bookery one afternoon during the run of *Damn Yankees*, greeted Jack Goldman like the buddy he was, moved back two aisles, found, then whisked the frontispiece from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* into a manila folder waiting on top of the change of underwear in my duffel. Color plates of this vintage are pasted, not sewn, into the binding, so Roxy pulled right out, like she'd been waiting for me to free her all

along. To cover her disappearance I slipped a one hundred dollar–bill behind her yellow tissue curtain.

To be safe, I had her mounted and framed at a store in Triphammer Mall, rather than down on the Commons. The plan had been to present Roxy as a parting gift on Larry's opening night but, events being events, I wound up putting the package, wrapped and ribboned, inside the screen door to his apartment on Tioga Street while the premiere was going on next to the lake.

With Dave gone now, I figure I can finally apply to Cornell. I have solid experience in stocking sweatshirts and such. I might even get used to selling them. I would also feel confident cooking on the line at Noyes or Willard-Straight or Clara Dickson or Risley. Leigh Bailey, in a first favor to me, used her pull to get my name expunged from the campus police records. So when fall semester starts up, I'll call Day Hall for an appointment with personnel, and she'll have made another miraculous save.