**Crossed Signals**

 Dave Luckett was one of my classmates at Yale. A frail young man with enormous, haunted eyes, he looked a little like Franz Kafka, and he walked around the campus as silently as a ghost. Among the few students who didn’t live in one of the university’s residential colleges, his home was in Woodbridge, a New Haven suburb, and he drove his little Ford Falcon to the university every day for classes. I didn’t know him very well; we were in one American Literature seminar together, but he didn’t contribute much to group discussions. On one occasion, though, when the class was studying *Huckleberry Finn*, he said that Jim and Huck were in love with each other.

 His comment was greeted with hoots from the other students, but Professor Fitts called for quiet and said, “That’s an astute observation, Mr. Luckett. Victorian prudery prevented Twain from speaking openly about the relationship, but Jim calls Huck ‘honey,’ and certainly loves him in more than a fatherly way. I don’t mean to suggest that things got physical – that would cast Twain’s noblest character as a sexual predator. The Greek term for Jim’s feelings is ‘agape,’ spiritual or transcendent love, as opposed to ‘eros,’ which means lust, the kind of bestial arousal Injun Joe felt for the Widow Thatcher and her daughter Becky. Twain hated and feared Indians. During his journey to San Francisco in 1864, he heard bloodcurdling tales about Indian attacks on wagon trains. So, thank you, Mr. Luckett, for leading us to one of the more unsavory aspects of Twain’s work.” Dave blushed beet red but said nothing. It was as if he’d never received a compliment before and didn’t know how to respond.

 On the last day of winter term, I ate supper in the Saybrook College dining hall. and on my way out I found Dave waiting for me. “There’s a place you have to see,” he said. “You’ve got to come with me.” His peremptory tone startled me.

 “Why?” I asked.

 “You’ll like it, I promise,” he replied. I noticed that he was sporting a crimson scarf made of what looked like silk, in contrast to my scruffy blue woolen muffler. His voice was resonant and he seemed entirely self-assured.

 “Cross your heart and hope to die?

 “That’s not even remotely funny,” he said. His face froze and he started to turn away.

 “Hold on, man, I’m sorry. Let’s go.”

 “Do **you** hope to die?”

 “Not any time soon,” I said. “I’ve only just started making mistakes.”

 His expression softened and he laughed. “I know what you mean. You have to make mistakes in order to learn what’s right, but there are times when I wonder if right and wrong are just categories invented by dogmatists to consolidate their power.”

 “I’m not dogmatic. I’m categorical.”

 “But are you imperative?”

 “Nah, just optional.”

 “What do you opt for?”

 “Well, E. M. Forster says, ‘Only connect,’ so I opt for connecting with people.”

 “Forster was queer, you know.”

 “I didn’t, but so what?”

 Dave gave me a slight smile but didn’t answer, and we walked on in companionable silence. By then I had a hunch about our destination. The Stonewall Inn was well known at Yale as a gay bar that was occasionally raided by the New Haven police. But the raids had become less frequent in recent years, because the customers, men and women alike, had begun protesting defiantly, and the cops found it too much of a hassle to run everyone in. The Stonewall Riots didn’t happen until October of 1969, but in ’64 the Gay Pride Movement showed early signs of life.

 The bar was warmly lit, with posters of gay icons like Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis and Rock Hudson on its walls. I noticed one of John Wayne and laughed. “Even him?”

 “The Duke’s a Duchess. Everyone in Hollywood knows it. Haven’t you ever noticed the way he sashays along swinging his hips?”

 “Now that you mention it… Please don’t tell me Marlon Brando’s gay, too.”

 “Brando fucks anyone who’s reasonably attractive.”

 “Not George C. Scott, then.”

 “George is a great actor, but he’s not pretty.”

 “Reminds me of that Kingston Trio song – ‘Don’t let her die an old maid, but take her out of pity.’ Or him, in this case.”

 “I think George would punch Marlon’s lights out if he made a pass. He’s hopelessly hetero.”

 “How do you know?”

 “Gaydar,” Dave said.

 “What?”

 “Gay radar. It’s infallible.”

 The bartender was an attractive black woman in a red dress, but when she said, “What’ll it be, boys?” her voice was a rich baritone. I ordered a Manhattan, and Dave asked for a Brandy Alexander. When the drinks came, Dave lifted his glass and said, “Here’s to the Playboy of the Western World.”

 “Oh, did you see it?”

 “Of course. You were wonderful as Christy.”

 “Thank you. But Robin Strasser was better as Pegeen Mike. The play’s really about her.”

 He wagged a finger playfully at me. “Arrah, now, no false modesty, misther honey. When ye took yer bows, why, didn’t ye look as if ye were doing the audience a favor at all, at all?” His Irish accent was over the top, and I laughed.

 “So shoot me, I’m full of myself, like all actors.”

 “Why not? If you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

 I’d already been feeling uncomfortable, but my discomfort became dread. “Dave, I think you’re misunderstanding something here. I’m not gay.”

 “Maybe you don’t know yourself as well as you think you do. Didn’t you ever have a circle jerk with other boys?”

 “Well, yeah, a couple of times. But we didn’t jerk each other off.”

 “Doesn’t matter. It’s the thought that counts.”

 I chuckled and toasted him. “Here’s to absent friends.”

 “Male, female, or middlesex,” he said. We clinked glasses, downed our drinks, got refills, and took them to a vacant table. The place had filled up considerably, and the noise level had increased. On the jukebox Peggy Lee was slinking through “Fever,” and one of the men started singing along in falsetto, until another said, “Oh, pipe down, Mary! You sound like a cat in heat!” But there was no real malice in the insult, and “Mary” blew the heckler a kiss.

 A handsome, muscular guy at the next table stood up and came over to ours. “Who’s your new friend, Dave?” he asked.

 “Hi, Merce. This is Toby Tompkins. Toby, Merce Goldman.”

 “Glad to meet you, Merce.”

 “Love your name, Toby. Cute alliteration.”

 “I know,” I said. “I’ve been thinking of changing it to a professional name that’s a little less wifty.”

 “A professional name?”

 “Toby’s an actor, Merce. He played Christy Mahon in “The Playboy of the Western World” at the Dramat.

 “I thought you looked familiar,” Merce said to me. “You were as good as Robin Strasser. But Dick Goodyear stole the show as your father.”

 “Absolutely,” I said. “His second scene brought down the house.”

 “Dick’s not…” Merce started.

 “Good Lord, no!” said Dave.

 “He’s not an actor, either” I said. “He’s going into the insurance business.”

 “How boring of him,” said Merce.

 “Not at all,” Dave said. “His acting talent will help him sell suckers policies they didn’t know they needed.

 “Loaded with hidden interest rates that will beggar them when they come due,” I said. “Like Shylock’s pound of flesh in “The Merchant of Venice.”

 “Shakespeare’s gift to antisemitism,” Merce said.

 “Not entirely. Think of Shylock’s speech about being Jewish. You know, ‘Hath not a Jew eyes? If you prick us, do we not bleed?’ And yes, I know that when Shylock cuts out his pound of flesh, it will be somewhat worse for Antonio than a bris. But think about what has happened to Shylock. All his life he’s been spat upon and cursed for being of the people who delivered Jesus up to the Romans to be crucified because he was a political revolutionary. And think of how he’s punished. He and his daughter Jessica are forcibly converted to Christianity, deprived of their faith. She is taken from him and given to Portia as a servant. I’ve always thought her “quality of mercy” speech was more than a tad hypocritical – mercy for Shylock came at a steep cost.”

 “Edmund Kean played Shylock as more sinned against than sinning,”

 “Did he?” I said. “That’s the right approach, I think. The play’s considered a comedy, but it’s a pretty black one.”

 “All the female roles in Elizabethan drama were played by boys,” Dave said.

 “Only at the Blackfriars Theatre. Young men took the roles of characters like Portia, not to mention Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra.”

 “I wonder if Shakespeare was gay.”

 “Well, he married Anne Hathaway and they had two children together. But many of the love-sonnets are dedicated to young men – Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, to name one. I don’t think people were as uptight about sex back then as we are today.”

 “So Elizabeth wasn’t the Virgin Queen?” Dave put in.

 “She never married, because she didn’t want to share power with anyone. But she went at it hot and heavy with the Earl of Leicester. Her ministers tried to cover up the affair, but it got out. One gossipy guy said Leicester had given her a red gown - taken her virginity. He was quickly disappeared, but it was too late. The dirt had been dished about Gloriana.”

 “How do you know all this stuff?” Dave asked.

 “I’m interested in Shakespeare, so I read everything I can find about his life and times.”

 “Some people think the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare’s plays and poetry,” said Merce,

“Some people think JFK was a pacifist.”

“You mean he wasn’t? Oh, damn, now you’ve spoiled it!” Dave said.

“’We were eyeball-to-eyeball, and the other guy blinked,’” Merce said.

“Was Lee Harvey Oswald gay?”

“Not that I know of,” I said, “He had two kids with Marina.”

“That could’ve been a beard,” said Dave.

“A beard?”

“You know, a disguise to hide his homosexuality. Oscar Wilde was as gay as the March wind, but he was married, and he had two children.”

“There’s an old Turkish saying,” Merce said. “’Women from duty, young men for pleasure, and melons for sheer delight.’”

I laughed. “What kind of melons?”

“Oh, honeydews, of course,” Dave said. “But getting back to Oswald, Jack Ruby was gay.”

“Yup. A gay mobster. Here’s a good title for a master’s thesis in American Studies: ‘The Fairy Queens Of Crime’”.

“I don’t like that word.”

“’Fairy?’ Sorry- spell it with an ‘e’ and you have Spenser’s word for ‘elf.”

“Much better. Like Legolas in ‘The Lord of the Rings.’”

“I haven’t gotten around to reading that,” Dave said. “It’s very long, isn’t it?”

“Part of a tetralogy, if you include ‘The Hobbit.’ Man, you’ve got to read it! It’s as good as Malory’s ‘Le Mort d’Arthur.’”

“And a lot clearer, since it’s not in Middle English,” said Merce. “There are bits of other languages in it, all invented by Tolkien, but he provides a glossary in the appendix.”

“He also wrote a collection of tales about Elves and their wars against evil beings like Sauron,” I said. “It’s called ‘The Silmarillion,’ and it’s full of epic poetry about the conflict. It was published after his death by his son Christopher.”

“Tolkien was a professor at Oxford, right?’ Dave asked.

“Yeah, he was a philologist there,” I said, “But he didn’t have to teach any classes. As long as he kept on publishing papers in scholarly journals, he kept his tenure.”

“The Holy Grail of all academics,” Merce put in. “You’re set for life. You can’t be fired unless you kill someone. Or rape them.”

“Even if you’re accused of rape,” I said. “a clever lawyer can convince a jury that the sex was consensual. When I was at Andover, there was a townie girl named Jeannie Murray who was gang-raped by five lacrosse players, but their shyster found some Andover High guys who were willing to say that she’d seduced them. Money changed hands, I’m sure – Jeannie was a little flirtatious, but she certainly wasn’t a slut,”

“Did you fuck her?” Dave asked.

“Jesus, of course not!”

“Why not? Don’t you play lacrosse?”

“If you mean that to be a joke, it sucks.”

“Why? Because lacrosse players are arrogant WASP assholes?”

“No. I’m a WASP, but sometimes I’m ashamed of it. And I try not to be arrogant about anything. I brag, instead.”

Merce laughed, but Dave’s face went dark. “There’s too much bragging around here,” he said. “Everybody talks about being better than other people.”

“Come on, Dave, we *are* better,” I said. “We’re the *crème de la crème.* Didn’t you hear Brewster’s speech to the incoming freshmen last fall?”

“He left out the sour cream and the spilt milk.”

“My mom makes a great sour cream sauce for baked potatoes,” Merce said. “And you shouldn’t cry after spilt milk.”

“Cute,” said Dave.

“What’s eating you, anyway?” I asked.

“Bad dreams.”

“Freud said dreams are mostly about having sex with your mother,” said Merce.

“Freud was obsessed with all that oedipal shit,” I said. “I wonder if he wanted to kill his father.”

“More likely he wanted to fuck him,” Dave said.

“That makes Freud Electra, the girl whose heart belonged to Daddy,” I said.

Merce laughed. “So ol’ Siggy wore a dress, and his beard and ‘stash were fake.”

“I wonder if the shrinks at the Department of Mental Hygiene know that,” said Dave.

“I doubt if they care. They just want you to keep your mind clean.”

“I thought that was the chaplain’s job.” Merce burst into song: “Whiter than snow, whiter than snow, I shall be whiter, whiter than snow. Wash me in the water that you wash your dirty daughter in, and I shall be whiter than snow, holy Joe! I shall be whiter than snow!”

“Don’t put Bill Coffin down,” said Dave. “He’s a good man. I’ve had some talks with him. They’ve helped a little.”

“Helped with what?” Merce asked.

“My problem. I seem to be allergic to life.”

Merce and I glanced at each other, but couldn’t find a comeback. “Hey, no big deal – it’s just seasonal, like hay fever,” Dave went on. “I’ve got to be getting home. He stood up and walked to the door. “Good night.”

After the door closed behind him, Merce said, “’Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.’”

“Dylan Thomas?”

“Yeah. He raged, all right. He was on a binge at the Cedar Tavern, and his last words were, ‘I’ve had eighteen straight whiskies. I think that’s the record.’”

“Record or not, it put his lights out,” I said. “He went into a coma and died in the hospital.”

“Drank himself to death,” said Merce.

“Very efficiently. My father’s a drunk, but he won’t admit it. He’s blacked out a couple of times, but so far he’s still alive.”

“Both my parents get blasted almost every night, but they don’t think there’s anything wrong with them.”

“Of course not,” I said. “It’s the cocktail hour, so they hammer down the hooch. All very civilized.

”The WASP style of oblivion. Listen, I’m worried about Dave. Maybe we shouldn’t have let him go home alone.”

“How could we have stopped him?”

“Oh, shit, I don’t know. I just think we made a bad mistake.”

“There’s a pay phone here. We could call him and make sure everything’s all right.”

But someone was using the phone, and we both had to take a piss. By the time we got back from the men’s room someone else was on the phone. So we gave up and walked back to the campus. Merce had a phone in his room, and he called Dave. He got the answering machine and left his number and a message to call back. But Dave never did.

He didn’t show up for classes the next day, or the day after that. I finally found out from Merce that he had driven his car into the garage, left the engine running while he closed the garage door, rolled down the driver’s side window, and let the carbon monoxide in the exhaust carry him away.