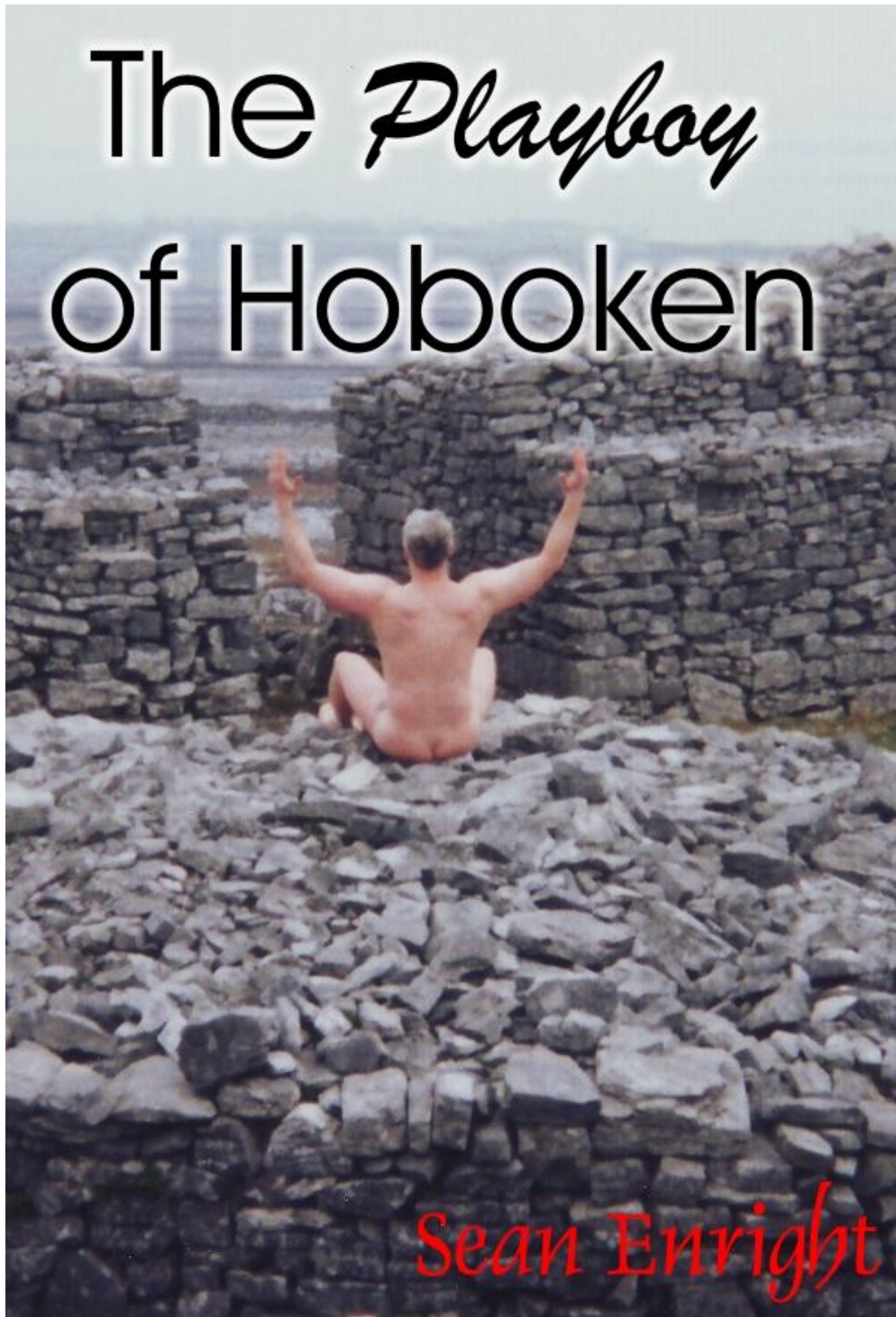


The *Playboy* of Hoboken



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When a dog runs at you, whistle for him.

Thoreau, *Journal* for June 26, 1840

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Act One: Prologue & New Jersey and New York City

Chapter 1- Prologue

I looked out the window at a sheep. I was on the island of Inisheer, the smallest, most primitive of the three Aran Islands, waiting for the end like some people wait for a train. The dull black face of a sheep said to me, “Ye didn’t mean to get this far away, did ye, Yank? Ye thought you’d be the new playboy of the western world? Ha!” The sheep spit. “A well-fed Amurican like ye couldn’t sack the runtiest kitten in a monstrous whelping.” A sheep with an Irish accent: there’s comedy. The sheep did not change its expression – it couldn’t. I had observed it closely for several days, but now there were fairies flitting about its head like little golden houseflies. It was good anyway to hear a voice beside my own. The sheep had one flat and un-curious expression: *Huh?* I knew people back in New York City like this sheep. They stare down existence and refuse to be surprised. But I had tried to be friendly to the sheep.

I was as far from home as I’d ever been. There wasn’t law and order here: it was too remote. Justice was fear on Aran, and fairies were the currency of superstition: the very day that Liam Lott disembarked from a motorboat on Inisheer, I saw the fairies flitting about the head of the goddamn talking sheep. On Inishmore a few days earlier, I had been told all about fairies by Little Margaret.

“Angels trapped between heaven and earth, the fairies are. Make ships lose their way they do,” Little Margaret had said.

“Aren’t they helpful?”

“No, not the like of the Irish fairies. Destroy the proud among the weeds the fairies do.”

“What are you trying to say?” I said. “I’m not proud.”

“I dint say you were, mister honey. I’m only saying what the fairies do.”

Charming. Spooky. Was I proud? So proud I ran away from home and didn’t listen to my friends when they said Maeve was crazy and pathological and didn’t want me? So chock full of hubris and self-delusion (pride’s children) I thought I could go into the middle of nowhere and write my masterpiece, a play about a lazy young man who goes into the middle of nowhere and writes a masterpiece? And now the play was winging its way back toward New York City, a bundle of paper rubber-banded so tightly the bundle looked like its circulation might be cut off.

I talk to sheep. I am unafraid to tell grievous lies about myself. My little cowardly soul curled in upon itself like a dead leaf when faced with profound danger. When the Creator was handing out kick-ass courage, I was in line for coffee with all the hell-bound of the future. My heart disliked serious joy.

And now, my peat fire had gone out. Each night Crusk who owned this slanting seaside house left just enough peat by the door to last about an hour. Gradually the stinky fire would warm up the small room and I’d drowse off. Then the peat noiselessly crumbled into ash and I awakened with a start as the room grew cold again. I lay there shivering, thinking hopelessly about Liam Lott closing in on me. He had easily decoded my hurried path across the dead center of Ireland. I had blindly headed to the west coast and then taken the ferry to Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands, and then boarded an even smaller vessel to get here, to Inisheer.

Why did I leave New York? It was now January. I had been in Ireland for several months. I pulled the blanket up to my mouth and bit it. There had been a woman. Maeve. The cliché is that there’s always a woman. Maeve had lied to me and I had lied

to her. I made a stupid voyage chasing a false woman who was ambivalent toward me. I had willingly got a move on to find out something, first trying to find Maeve, a dying (or so she said) Irish woman I'd met in New Jersey, and then I had gotten into severe trouble with an Irish gangster, because of Maeve's fiancé Fat Dan and a neat trick he'd pulled on me. The gangster, Liam Lott was a medium-time Dublin hoodlum with a couple lackeys and no fear and some drugs in a bag, an explosive combination. I had run away from him rather than stay in Dublin and find a way out – I supposed I could have just surrendered myself at the American embassy and sought asylum there – but I bolted like a greyhound out of the gate, just fatter than and not as blind as a greyhound. Why did I pick that moment to run? I'm not a runner. I stay and stay.

I had teetered too long after college – another cliché. Everybody teeters trying to get their life started. First you wait and see if it will just happen to you. It doesn't. I was the writer who didn't write. I was a tragic poet trapped within the pages of MAD magazine. Now I had written. Now I had started. So now, of course, I was about to die.

I had fled forces in my life that seemed beyond my own control: I would just join the middle class, or could fake it for awhile and act like a writer and have artsy-fartsy friends, but either way eventually I'd have to face the fact: it was my destiny to become a middle class professional ... something. This scared me. Tick, tock, clicked a distant clock. But now, in Ireland, I had made big adjustments, extreme adjustments. Before this, my life had been filled with microscopic, comic adjustments. Where had this new power come from? I had taken my life and wrestled it down to the ground like it was, suddenly, my under-matched opponent and I knew it and knew I could take it down. I had changed. I had made myself change, but I couldn't take these awesome powers

seriously or they would obliterate me. Before this, I was the kind of guy who cashed his paychecks each week at a check-cashing place, hid a hundred dollars from himself to help with the rent, and drank the rest in lousy Irish bars on Manhattan's West Side with his similarly cheap and poor and self-deluding friends.

Back in New York, I had claimed I was a blocked writer, but secretly believed I had nothing to say. But now I had written a glorious play that I was already proud of even though no one else had read it (Little Margaret was right, I'd end up in the weeds reamed by fairies for my pride). This insane hopscotch across Ireland and the Aran Islands had inspired me, Sligo Crumlin, to write. My play was about an American who comes to Ireland and tells lies about himself and is beloved. Then the lies are revealed, but he still comes out on top. Three days ago I'd bundled up my handwritten pages in a padded envelope and mailed it back home to New York, to Eva the K and my friends in the Tool and Die Theatre Company.

Up until now, my life has been anything but extraordinary, but many writers have made much with unextraordinary lives, if they have unusual minds and are able to bring them to bear on their mundane, unplotted days – but I did not really think I had the brain for that. No, I had to go cook up mishaps and make mistakes and enter into dubious relationships – now *that*, I thought, with my little ordinary mind, *that* might make good TV.

In my typical fashion, I had half-heartedly done stand-up comedy back in New York. Twice a month I'd get up the nerve to go down to this comedy club on West Fourth Street in the Village, Whingers, for the Friday night open mike, where I'd fumble through my two minutes. Usually there was a lot of jeering but it depended on who you followed:

if he was really terrible, you'd get this ragged cheer if you stunk less, but if you followed someone halfway decent you got booed and people threw their swizzle sticks at you. The emcee was this strident lesbian named Sharon who'd been on Carson once, in the 1960s. She liked poop jokes, homo jokes: you know, the breadwinners of stand-up comedy. Sharon would stand beside me backstage while I waited to go on, and she'd push me a little with her leathery mannish hands. "Ya nervous, Sligo? You look a little sweaty."

"No, I'm not, Sharon. Not nervous at all. Thanks for your concern though."

She'd swipe a fingernail on my brow. "This is sweat. You're nervous, Sligo me boyo."

"I'm NOT." Of course I was. "I'm hot. You're crowding me."

"Oo, sorry."

"Ever thought of wearing perfume, Sharon? Or something? Or is that too ladylike?" I was funny one-on-one. But as a stand-up comedian, I never got far – I was too pleased with the truth in what I was saying to polish up my punch lines. Punch lines are never true. Punch lines are for the crowd to come together on. Punch lines are for laughs. Here's a good punch line – more comedy! It's a joke I'd open with. Right off the bat, I'd get a big laugh, and then I'd spend the next two minutes dying on stage, listening to the sounds of the crowd's diminishing enjoyment in me.

It's an Irish joke: an Irishman, a Scotsman and an Englishman go to a bar. A fly lands in each of their drinks. The Englishman pushes his glass away and tells the bartender to bring him another one. The Scotsman flicks the fly out and continues drinking. The Irishman takes his fly out by its wings, holds it over the drink and says, "Spit it out!"

But I don't like punch lines. I like the set up. It's the set up where you find the story, and most stories don't have a happy – or a funny - ending. And I disliked solitude and silence. I liked company and noise. Here, in gloomy Ireland, I found both – and I had still gone down to the little half-a-pub in Inishmore and tried to do my stand-up in front of fishermen and village farmers, silent women and children, and been struck dumb by the awkwardness of my little American jokes. I stared out at the lovely Irish faces – they all have beautiful pale skin and healthy red cheeks – I'm pale as paste, with the unhealthy glow of one who has lingered too long in the marijuana garden. The crowd in the Inishmore pub had been brought up on nothing but the conversations in their family and the food from soil they had made using seaweed to fertilize cracks in the limestone.

Now I lay in the cold room and kicked at the covers in frustration with myself. I had picked a fine moment to discover all of this internal clarity and meaning in my existence. It's when death's leaning on the door that a man will try to order his life. I had no money. I had no passport. Liam Lott had it and he had vowed to lay it down only on my dead, cold, white body.

And all of this – well, most of it – was thanks to Fat Dan, Maeve's ex-fiancé. The last time I saw him was at a haunted castle, at a folk-rock concert. He had taken three hits of X and was wearing a gingham skirt, having apparently swapped clothes with a young Scottish hippie chick who swayed next to him wearing his oversized blue jeans and flannel shirt. Maeve wasn't going to marry either one of us – she was leaving us both in the lurch which somehow had brought us, briefly, together. I'm not kidding:

how could I make this up? This was not at all what I had planned to do on my visit to Ireland. I was here to win Maeve and carry her back to New York City like a battle spoil. Oh yeah, and write my masterpiece. Instead, I'd gotten caught up in a reckless, dangerous adventure. I was living large now, like every day was my last meal before they flipped the switch. My stomach was constantly upset.

How to tell a story that doesn't leave people scratching their heads? It has to be perfect the first time it's told. A good story has to fall out the way it happened, because that's how good stories go. You don't edit a good story – people want to believe it's really happening, as you tell it. It's a bummer, but that's the way it works. So, sure, if you just tell jokes, you speak a couple of lines and, blam! You punch it out and it's done and people are rolling. Or you've got another one on deck and you let that one fly. But those are jokes, and that is funny. You have to be with people to be funny. But to tell a story, first you have to be alone. You have to put it together.

I had got myself somewhere so distant and silent that I could hear myself again and see how I fit in a world where I was the only voice. I heard myself and this was the sound I heard: the whimpering and self-abuse of a lonely man. This was how I fit alone on the west coast of Ireland: not well. The stone cliffs fit better. The chalk mountainsides were more substantial than I was. Nice call, I said to myself. Way to go. Way to hook yourself up to nothingness.

For now, even before I could tell my story, I suspected that the only way I was ever going to leave Ireland was going to be wrapped in canvas, dead with a bullet hole in my skull, dumped feet-first off a brown cliff to fall a hundred feet and smash on the rocks

that fanged the Atlantic shoreline. But I had written my masterpiece, hadn't I? It was all up to the Irish mails now.

Chapter 2

There are no sheep in the part of northern New Jersey where I live. If there were, Springsteen would have put them in a song. The only cliffs are the bluffs of Weehawken. The fairies all hang out by the tunnel entrances, wearing colored kerchiefs in coded pocket positions, waiting to damn the proud and not giving a damn about justice. I share an apartment with my friend Fred where squalor is king and darkness is its prince. I've been living there for a year. It's a morbid, small apartment on a crooked and bleak, narrow one-way street in a completely little Italian town. This is as close to Manhattan as I can afford: I can make about \$300 a week temping full-time on Wall Street, and Fred works every other weekend at a custom-furniture shop in mid-town, if his bad back allows him to stand.

I dream of having a home and a woman someday. It sounds sexist, but I'm going to run with the fantasy. I'm in one room, there's lots of wood and exposed brick, the house is in a vaguely rural setting (you can hear birds and it smells nice, for sure) and in another room is The Woman, soft, silent, sweet and singing, and, of course, an invisible presence because I'm Working and though in this fantasy I have a woman, it's essential that I am also alone and Working, which is the only way any important Work ever gets done. For a writer, that is. Which I am, in this fantasy. Anyway, the Woman is always tending our children, dozens of little silent tiny child-presences that are also mercifully not in the same room, and which The Woman keeps in eggcups, they are so small and so

helpless and, of course, the size of the things that fit comfortably in eggcups, so very inexpensive in terms of upkeep.

But for now I have no Woman. I haven't even had a date in months. The only writing I do is on the margins of crossword puzzles. And I live with Fred in a dungeon.

Physically, I don't think I impress, although my girth is somewhat striking. I am not a small man but also not enormous – I am good-sized and given to poking at my own arms. Big guys are not so aggressive, really – first of all, it's tiring being big, so they're usually conserving energy and wondering when they can next gain nourishment. I dress unremarkably – I don't spend the little money I have on clothes, that's for sure, but usually on smokes and drink and cassette tapes. I usually wear green or brown, and sometimes blue – red scares me (I'm like a bull that way) and yellow I just don't understand. I have thick hair but zero beard – my sideburns are only hairs from my head that have grown long down my temple. (Be sure that the way I describe myself is fatuous and self-serving: why would anyone tell the truth about what they actually looked like?)

We're not even leasing the apartment right – we don't have a written lease. Fred knew some Italian guy with a Greek-sounding name who owns a delicatessen. We have to drive my battered car (more on that later) almost to the very mouth of the Holland Tunnel, a hideous urban wilderness where the concrete is the softest presence, park illegally and risk our white coddled necks to pay our rent in cash to this sleaze on the third of every month. Our place is a mess: the vaguely aquamarine linoleum has been overrun by its adhesive, which oozes up between the squares, and the fake wood-paneling bows out from cinder-block walls, and the exposed pipes below the ceiling sweat a sympathetic greenish substance at their joints. The horror. And that's not even

describing the bathroom. It should be impetus to get up and leave every morning, to get better jobs and start saving up to upgrade and abandon the crappy basement “garden” unit, but of course it isn’t: Fred barely gets up once a week, because of his bad back and his depression and the fact that he’s usually so stoned his blood can’t drip-dry back to normal without an extended period of going without. Of course, for me, as a non-writing writer, I am always convincing myself that even if I can’t write, it’s good training to sit in front of the typewriter and stare at the walls and listen to a cassette of the Grateful Dead doing “Hell in a Bucket” from a concert in 1978 while Fred narrates how he and his brother camped out and did mescaline and caught a doe with their bare hands, before retreating again into his Blue Bedroom of Disappointment and Crushed Dreams. As I feel it is my duty to stop Fred from smoking weed alone all the time, I often smoke it with him. So instead of getting a jump on life and improving ourselves, it as if we’re bending over backwards to adapt ourselves to living in a hellhole for the rest of our lives.

Fred has lived there for two years, almost since the very day that we left college. Fred is a genius – not a rocket scientist, not an artiste with some flowery talent for color or sounds or words – Fred is a stock market whiz. While we were in college in Chicago, he made more money in a fantasy stock market league than had been made by the last six classes, just over sixteen million dollars. When we graduated, the president of the college took him out to dinner and begged Fred to take his teenaged daughter skiing: that’s how sure people were that Fred was going to be a billionaire by his tenth college reunion. I’ve often asked him how he did it – I myself am an unmitigated moron about money (I cash my check at this grimy check-cashing place on the Lower East Side every week, waiting in line with the addicts and the welfare mothers and the recent

immigrants.) My idea of banking is to hide money from myself: occasionally I stumble on one of my hiding places, and Hallelujah! I think, it must have fallen from the sky, it must have jetted up out of the ground like an oil well, I alert Fred and we splurge on Mexican food, and two weeks later, we're short at rent-time. Money makes more money? Expensive things are worth more than cheap things? Big deal.

It just doesn't make sense to me, what is valuable in the world. The economy is a complete mystery. Fred doesn't like to discuss it— it's stupid, he says, everybody's making a big deal out of it, but it's stupid. "For some reason," Fred once said, "I just understand this essential thing about business – about corporations – how they're organized, the stresses and fault lines, the relative sizes and importance of things, and how they affect stock prices."

I stared at him, eyes double-glazing over like storm windows. "Things? Stresses? What things? What stresses?"

"You wouldn't understand – capitalization ratios, inventory, innovation history, abstract things, different for each company – but I still make a lot of guesses and make mistakes, too, all the time."

"Is it just American money you understand?"

"It's the same anywhere. Europe, Asia, they have their own wrinkles on market rules. There are regional advantages to certain businesses, Sligo – cheap labor pool, advances on the dollar, and an avid local market without too much transportation overhead."

I shook my head. It could have been Swahili he was speaking. "The more mistakes I make, the more correct answers come to me," Fred finished, somewhat sadly.

The problem was that, since he's graduated, Fred has not gotten a real job. He hurt his back on a camping trip, and for months has done nothing but smoke a ton of weed, read Club Magazine in the bathroom, and watch local sports on the tube.

(Club Magazine by the way is one of the lower of the low porno magazines. The lighting makes the girls look sweaty, the colors are almost cartoonish, but it gets the job done. The letters kill us – we read them out loud – who makes up this stuff? we cry with laughter. Then later, I violently grab the magazine, like it's my cavewoman, and I can then clutch its hair and drag it shrieking back to my lair and have my way with it.)

Fred often spends the evenings lying in bed watching our little black-and-white 10-inch TV set that he precariously poises on his belly, like Sarge used to do in Beetle Bailey. I cut him slack – everybody cuts him slack – after all, he's the Golden Boy, he's going to set the world on fire as soon as he makes the slightest effort, so what's the rush, right? But for now, he holds his wildly improbable furniture job.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not one to talk. Ambition doesn't exactly flow through my veins, propelling me forward. I had shown a lot of promise early on in my life (say, eighth grade) but the arrow on the chart of my life's deliverables had been heading south ever since. I can barely write one-liners – forget getting on stage in front of hundreds of people and doing forty minutes of chaotic escalating hilarity, like Richard Pryor or Dudley More and Peter Cook – I'm talking about writing 120 seconds, which is three sex jokes, a fart joke and one you-know-what-I-hate closer. I was supposed to have written a great play as soon as I got out of college– I couldn't wait to get out of college just so I *could* write a great play. So I shouldn't talk. (That is what one says when one is gearing up to find his own faults in someone else to be unforgivable.)

Still, a cloud seemed to surround Fred. His room – the front room of the basement garden apartment, the only space that got any exposure to weak, refracted sunlight – had a palpable blueness to it that you could cut with a knife. It smelled of his beard. He could not be convinced of the necessity of leaving our little shit-hole, our flyblown, cat-peed, linoleum-peeled, paint-scratched crapper of an apartment.

“Why would I leave?”

“Why would you stay?” Suddenly I’d get red in the face. “Apparently – from what I’ve heard -- there’s a whole world out there! It’s not all like this – smelling of smoke and BO where the only life is a little 10-inch TV!”

“You like TV,” Fred pointed out. “You like *Night Court*.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What else would I want? What’s the point of leaving?”

“Don’t you want to do something? Make something? Feel something happen?”

Fred exhaled toward my face. “Make what?”

“Well,” I said, thinking that I didn’t want to sound too earnest, “it’s like – I want to write something.”

“Oh. Well. That’s different. What do you want to write?”

“I don’t know. A play, maybe. Entertain people. Get in their brain.”

Fred considered this. “Would it be better than TV?” he asked dubiously. I could see flickering behind his eyes ghosts of Mayberry RFD reruns, Miami Vice synthesizer drum music pounding, pounding.

“I don’t know!” I exploded. “Maybe it would.”

He nodded slowly. “That would be something – if you wrote something better than TV. But it’s gonna be tough. Better get cracking.” He took another drag. “Can’t say I want to do much of anything. Make anything.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Fred said. And I believed him. I even trusted him, to stay the same, to never leave. But I had to leave. I was feeling the urgency more and more. Something had to happen to me, since I wasn’t happening. For that something to happen, I had to get outside, even if it was just to the street in front of the apartment. There, Something Could Happen.

My friends from college were starting a theatre company which is what you do when no one else will have you. On a muggy August night four months ago, Eva Kauffed (or Eva the K as we called her) had organized a meeting at the apartment in Hoboken. Fred grudgingly vacated the custom-built sofa in the “living” room and grouched down the narrow hallway to his room, and turned up a Grateful Dead live show cassette. Fred was not a theater-buff.

At the last meeting we had fought endlessly about a name for the company. Warbucks Theatre Company? Sandinista! Theatre Company? We’d named it the Tool and Die Theatre Company – it was a compromise vote, because opinions were so virulently espoused: one person had suggested the Shut Up and Die Theatre Company, and I had jokingly thrown out the name the Big Tool Theatre Company, and we worked it out from there. So far all the meetings had been long, drawn-out affairs where we used Robert’s Rules of Order against each other in a passive-aggressive fashion to inhibit

entirely all sparks of creativity and allow only for plastic, corporation-like compromises and mildness.

We had already fought about fund-raising – Gwendolyn Bugen-Hagen had suggested we hold an auction, but that was just her inner-prostitute speaking. Dramaturgy was an ongoing concern – what shows would we attempt? My place in this was to let a discussion start – and then pathetically interject that I was a writer, why don't I write a play and we put that on? At which point Ida would dissect my personal work-habits and says it wouldn't fit the timeline. "We need a place THIS YEAR, Sligo."

We were planning a series of showcases as the first stage of our fund-raising. That's what Eva the K's press release was going to say, anyway. Any money we had squirreled away, or saved, or solicited with strenuous prosy letters to our parents and guardians back in San Matteo and Columbus and Arlington and Boston, we had pretty much spent, when we concluded official company meetings and adjourned to the Raccoon Lounge for shots and beers and joints in the unisex bathrooms.

Eva Kauffed sort of assisted everybody and everything and organized our meetings and picked up all our dropped balls and stayed friends with everyone and didn't take sides. She wore little grey cat glasses that magnified her eyes enormously until they looked like glistening alien marbles. Sometimes I caught her looking at me, and that gave me fleeting lustful thoughts: did I believe that Eva the K secretly wanted me? Did I secretly want Eva the K? Of course I did. It was no secret that I wanted anyone who'd have me.

The company was already exhausting and we hadn't even staged our first production, which was supposed to happen in a few weeks. We had all been in theatre

together in college, where all administration was taken care of and all we did was rehearse and build sets and perform and party and get wasted and feel brilliant. We were used to university-provided operating budgets. Now there was no money. Everyone struggled to just pay rent.

Everyone was already furtively planning a What-If life: what if the theatre company doesn't work? What if I have to get a real job? We were grouped around this enormous dark glittering pool in total darkness of night, the body of water that was our futures. When would we dare plunge in?

This August meeting was for finalizing the selection of plays. Eva, Carson, Gwen, Ida, Spoydie and I sat grimly in the living room. In the distance, in Fred's blue room of despair and futurelessness, the Dead began a swirling, relaxed intro to "Dark Star."

"So," Eva the K began, as she did every meeting.

"Meeting will come to order," Spoydie intoned.

That was William Spoydie, who got the whole thing started and was ostensibly going to direct. Everyone knew he just wanted to go back to graduate school and study paleontology, and yet no one talked about this, even Spoydie avoided the subject – as if there was something dire and dirty about paleontology, which of course there is, if you think about it. Spoydie fell in love with dinosaurs as a little boy, and never fell out like the rest of us did. How admirable to find something when you're four years old and stick with it. I liked Spoydie. He had ambition and drive, and was fearless about what we were doing with the theatre company, but there was something unconnected about him, aloof. As if he was thinking, Why waste my time on drama and new plays and actors and

actresses? Shouldn't I be out digging? Studying science? I myself didn't think there was much cause for paleontology in Manhattan and northern New Jersey.

But even here, I wasn't thinking like Spoydie was – he was in negotiations at the museums in Manhattan, thought he had an internship lined up, perhaps a summer trip to Africa with a group of field paleontologists. He hadn't told me this, but Eva the K had. (Everyone trusted her, everyone told her everything. And she in turn told me everything about everyone else. A good system for my purposes.)

“I repeat! Meeting will come to order,” Spoydie thundered. This meant you couldn't light another fresh cigarette until the smoking break halfway through. You could finish one up, though, if you had one. It was important to time it so you were just starting a smoke as the meeting came to order

“New plays – we're talking about doing new plays,” Eva the K said.

“I'm writing a – I could write a play,” I said tonelessly, furtively lighting up a smoke. Eva frowned. Ida sneered. I acted like I didn't see them.

“We need to start with something well-known,” Ida Birch said. “No offense, I'm sure you'd come up with something brilliant. Just—”

“Just not for you, huh, Ida?” I said bitterly.

“We all know you can write, Sligo,” Ida explained. “You just need something to write about.”

“I've got plenty to write about!”

“Yes, but don't you want it to be perfect?” Ida rhapsodized.

Ida was dating Spoydie in a business-like manner, but she lived in New Jersey with Raymundo, this extravagant person, a heavysset gay guy from St. Louis who was

saving up money to go to art school. She and Raymundo both temped on Wall Street with me, at Salomon Brothers, usually in Foreign Markets. (Raymundo isn't actually in the company per se, but has signed on to do costumes should we ever need them – for the time being he has a grand title of “stylist” and is constantly inserting bits of colors into our outfits when we go out to work in the morning or meet up in bars.)

Ida was acting as dramaturge for the company. We had run the tiniest ad you could run in Variety, soliciting unproduced short plays, and received a hundred scripts the first morning after it ran before we yanked the ad. Ida had methodically plodded through them all, and at work she surreptitiously called up the pathetic little twerps who'd written the scripts and tried to reduce their already-sad little fees to almost nothing, if we actually consented to do the scripts. (No one was fooled: Ida would be a lawyer, her father was a defense lawyer in Los Angeles, and she could argue rings around even her father, she was afraid of no man, and woke up wanting to pick a fight. She would make a terrific lawyer. Just the kind of shark you wanted in your corner of the ocean.)

“It doesn't have to be perfect – it just has to be a play,” I said. I was feeling contemptuous and looked-down-upon – and we were in my apartment, like that should get me some respect.

“But what have you written, Sligo?” Eva the K asked.

“Poetry,” Ida snorted. “He's written a lot of poetry.”

“It is good poetry,” Eva the K said kindly.

“Poetry is dead,” Gwendolyn said, from her seat in the center of the room, directly beneath the little light there was. Gwendolyn Bugen-Hagen was the gorgeous

one. The scary thing was, she was the best actor too. In college she had done all the serious roles – Pinter and Shepard and Shakespeare and Ibsen – and she had killed in them all. The theatre professors had all been in love with her too – and she didn't sing and dance, and they were all gay anyway – so it had to be because she dripped talent out of her pores. She was the kind of actor the teachers had gone to school for. They had quit the business in order to find and nurture and pass among themselves such talent like a rare book. Gwen recited Shakespeare so plainly it could make you weep. I remembered her at the lake one day, in Chicago, when everyone was floating around out of their minds, barely able to grunt. Gwendolyn had stood on the rocks in the wind and whipped a sweater around her head, gazed dreamily out over the lake and recited part of a sonnet:

Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness;

She played her hands out toward the lake waves, rolling idly and recklessly.

Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport;

She mimed a tennis racket in her hands.

Both grace and faults are loved of more and less;

For “more and less” she raised one palm high up near her throat, and the other palm flat at her knee.

Thou makest faults graces that to thee resort.

Everyone just stared and Gwen took this as her cue to bow.

“Poetry is not dead,” I shouted. “You should know, Gwen – you love Shakespeare.”

“I didn’t say *Shakespeare* was dead, Sligo,” Gwen said. According to Eva the K, Gwen was saving up enough money for three months rent, a plane ticket and incidentals, so she could fly out to Hollywood and screen test and be discovered, after changing her name from Gwendolyn Bugen-Hagen to Gwen Nico. So Gwen was a short-timer – I figured we’d get one good show out of her and she’d high tail it west on an airbus. Carson had taken a lot of candid photographs of her to use for the promo materials, though – we’d keep using them, we figured, long after she’d left.

“Well, actually, he is,” Carson McCully piped in from the corner, his own illicit cigarette dangling from his lower lip. “I like Sligo’s poems,” Carson continued. “And Sligo, you wrote the adaptation of that detective novel, too, didn’t you? We could try that.”

“It was too – prosy,” Ida said. She had read my script, and she was right – but it was a start.

“We could try the detective script,” I said worriedly. It was something I’d written – but it was not good.

“I’d love to play the sheriff,” Carson said happily. Carson McCully was our leading man. He was at least bisexual. He had slept with Gwen, Ida and Spoydie, although not all at the same time, at least not all three. He was a very sympathetic man. He had beautiful brown eyes and wore ironed slacks and was slender and brawny-shouldered at the same time. He worked as a bartender at a yuppie bar on the Upper West Side called Redeye’s.

“Just for now, we need marquee value,” Spoydie said.

“Nobody starts with original plays,” Ida added.

“Of course they do,” Carson said. “Someplace, they do.”

“But we don’t,” Spoydie cautioned. Carson sagely nodded his beautiful head. I seethed inwardly, and felt relief even deeper: I had nothing written and no feelings of inspiration, at the moment. I wanted a drink and possibly to rip Eva the K’s glasses off and lick her eyelashes. And the cigarette break seemed impossibly far away, I thought sadly, stubbing out my cigarette with extraordinary precision in a Budweiser bottle cap.

“What about *The Playboy of the Western World*?” I said out-loud to no one in particular. Eva had mentioned it to me once recently – I had dim memories of it being one of my father’s favorite plays, and he was a noted Irish literature nut – and Evan had said that I would like it, that it was about the real Irish and about real people and that the language sizzled.

“We looked at that, didn’t we, Eva?” Spoydie asked.

“Yeah, I liked it,” Eva the K said.

“Ida?” Spoydie said.

“Playboy, Playboy,” Ida murmured, looking through her notebook. Without Ida’s notebook, we really didn’t have a theatre company. It had everything we’d discussed so far – it had numbers and words, in Ida’s tiny anal script – it was all we had. “Good cast, women and men, not too big, easy sets.”

“Well, that’s all good,” I said hopefully.

“I like the sound of it!” Carson said, probably pictured himself in a smoking jacket and slippers, Hugh Hefner with an Irish brogue.

“Hmmm...” Ida continued, still poring through the notebook. “Some black marks on the script, too. Too local, too dialect.”

“What does that mean?” I wondered.

“It’s got all this rough, country, Irish peasant slang and phrasing,” Eva the K said.

“It’s the reason the play was such a big deal when they first produced it in Dublin – the Church went nuts, because Synge had his characters speak the way the people on the farm really did – earthy, profane, lively stuff.”

“Sounds great,” I said hollowly. I was not much for cheering.

“Sure, the idea’s great,” said Ida.

“But nobody does plays about ideas anymore,” Spoydie said, yawning.

“Sure they do!” I said.

“Well, we don’t,” Ida concluded.

Gwen said, “So I think we were close to settling on Pinter for the Subway Series.”

“So, so far, we don’t do original works or plays about ideas,” I recapped out loud.

To myself I bleated, *I gotta get out of here.*

Eva the K consulted the binder. “Yes. Pinter. Betrayal. Carson and Gwen still remember almost all of it, from school.”

The Subway Series was designed to make us notorious: we would descend like urban guerillas into the West Side subway stations like the transit-vigilante Guardian Angels and perform scene snippets on the cars between stations. We had spent two meetings alone fighting about whether to do the showcase on the express line or the local line. That was our current level of inanity. Carson McScully felt that he in particular was up for the challenge of performance in a rocking metal box. He had brayed about his great balance which he had honed as a child at his parents’ dinner parties in California. “I’d balance on my Bongo Board™ for hours, eating potato chips and chatting up my

mother's friends," Carson said. "They loved it!" We stared at him. "A Bongo Board™," Carson said hesitantly. "You know – the thing that helps surfers train?"

Carson was a beautiful alien. But still an alien.

I cleared my throat, really just because my lungs were so clogged with tar that my air passages were panicking, but the others turned toward me expectantly, so I forged ahead, or behind, rather. "I thought we were still debating the subway."

"No, we had agreed," Eva the K said.

"At least by consensus – we haven't voted," Spoydie cautioned.

"But directors and agents don't take the subway," I said.

"As you've already noted," Carson said angrily.

"Only actors take the subway."

"And writers," Spoydie said with a sympathetic nod.

"Writers only take the subway if they're sucking air and not writing," I said.

"And you took the subway just today, didn't you, Sligo?" Carson said.

Ida patiently instructed me, "We just want to create a buzz by doing it in the subway. Get a newspaper to write about us. Then some ambitious agent will call us and ask to see us privately, just to witness the phenom." Ida liked saying slangy contemporary things like *phenom* and *buzz*. Meaningless things.

"We should do scenes in taxis," I said.

"What, for the cab driver?" Gwen spluttered, her beautiful fake green eyes flashing deep within her gorgeous cowl of fake bronze hair.

"He's just trying to piss us off, right, Sligo?" Spoydie asked me.

"Correct," I said.

“Let’s move on, then,” Spoydie said calmly. “We’re slated to begin rehearsing this Sunday night, with a week of rehearsals planned.”

Then we were supposed to talk about putting together a board of directors – Fred walked out of his room and suggested we get someone famous.

“We don’t know anyone famous,” I said.

Carson said, “My roommate plays squash with Paul Simon’s little brother.”

There was a unanimous sigh. Fred yawned. His warm bong-breath filled the room. “Are we going out or not?” he said. “Otherwise, I’m watching M.A.S.H. in five minutes.” We agreed to adjourn. This was also unanimous. As people got ready to leave, Eva the K slipped up to me and crooked her arm through mine. “Oh, Sligo,” she said. “Don’t let them get you down.”

I knew exactly what she was talking about but turned brusque, embarrassed. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about them,” I hissed at her, but at the same moment I took her wrist in my hand and squeezed it gently. “They just don’t get me, Eva.”

Eva the K and I have this weird chemistry. We’re great friends, but there’s this perilous flirty thing on top of it. I liked the way she smelled. Eva the K always wore crisp clean clothes, and this seemed an achievement to me, living as I was in two pair of pants and two pair of shirts and one flexible underwear set.

“Of course they don’t,” she said, “You take your time – you need to take your time and get it done.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But how will I know when it’s time?”

“Only you will know, Sligo. But when it is time – you have to write hard and fast and get it out of you.” I let it go at that. She was a wise one, Eva was – but it was mysterious exactly what we were talking about.

We piled on the PATH train and headed under the river. I was feeling fine, smiling away at people on the PATH train. Only insane people smile on the PATH so you have to pre-empt the insane and smile first. The PATH runs below the regular subway line in New York, down to Wall Street and up to 34th. It’s the official seventh circle of hell. There’s no place deeper, darker. If you smile on the PATH train, people leave you alone. They assume you’re about to start crying, or crap yourself, or shove them up against the route map and stick a knife under their chin and take their credit cards.

We were heading to the Raccoon Lounge south of Houston Street. First Fred waylaid a couple of drug-dealers at the 14th Street subway station, pushing them up against the subway entrance grilles and jabbing a finger in their chests, criticizing their product and demeaning their business sense: “This is bullshit! He flung the little plastic pouches to the ground. “You think I want your bullshit *shake*? You don’t think there are five other black guys just like you one block over, who won’t sell me good weed? Get out of my face, don’t insult me.” We were in awe of Fred’s ruthless drug-buying acumen. His back seemed miraculously healed. Personally, I fear the pot-pushers and always use complete sentences in my negotiations with them, for which they scorn me and sell me nice little bags of lawn cuttings mixed with oregano. But Fred quickly found a little nickel bag that satisfied him, and the whole group shared a nice fat joint as we walked down to Houston Street.

By the time we got to the Raccoon Lounge that night, we were in stitches, high as billy goats humping our little purses and knapsacks. Still, I was tired and thirsty. Mostly thirsty. I sat with Spoydie for a while and we talked about other things, other plays. He was smart and read a lot. (He probably should have been the one trying to write.) The women played pool.

“Let’s just pick something, and you’ll write a play about it,” Spoydie said.

“It’s not like that,” I said morosely. “It’s not just another – action item.”

“Well, sure it is. You need inspiration – you need a subject. How about your family? Don’t you have a million sisters?”

“I don’t want to write about my family,” I said. I have nine sisters, which is another story, the short version of which is, that’s eight sisters too many, at best. Fred was with the girls, at the pool table. I watched jealously as he chalked up Eva the K’s cue-stick, then bent her over the table and showed her how to put a backspin on her shot.

“Something else, then,” Spoydie said. “An adventure. A wild ride. Something unpredictable.”

“That’s a style, not a subject,” I said.

“Maybe you need to get out of town – go crazy, go off alone somewhere.”

I hated traveling. I hated staying put, too, but at least that took less energy. “It’s hard enough writing, when you lock yourself in a room, and don’t let yourself out,” I explained. “If I was someplace else – god forbid, someplace interesting – I’d be too absorbed in the new landscape.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think if you were inspired – if the bug bit you – you’d write wherever you were, no matter what was happening.”

“Spoydie may be correct on this. You’ve got to make something happen,” Gerry Tangier said. I had told him to meet us there. He was the one guy from our college group – most of whom became the theatre group – who had given up. By this, I mean he had left the old college theatre dream behind and gone ahead and gotten a job with real people, real New Yorkers whom we didn’t go to college with. He too was an actor in college and in the same fraternity as Spoydie and shared an apartment for awhile with Ida, and Carson played on a softball team with him and Gwendolyn dated him once as she seems to have done with all the males of the species, minus me. Gerry is a bartender at an upscale bar on the Upper East Side. He makes good money, which he needs – because he spends a lot of money on drinking and drugs. He was going to be in the theater company for a while right after we started, but got disillusioned and jumped ship. Now he’s thinking about going back to school for a degree in psychology.

“Yeah, I know, I know,” I said, playing my pathetic card. “I’m not doing anything.”

“It’s not that, Sligo,” Gerry said. “You’re doing plenty – but the one thing you’re not doing is killing you. You need to be writing. It’s the only way you’ll be happy.”

“Sligo’s happy when he’s drinking,” Spoydie observed. “He’s not continuously unhappy.”

“Okay, fossil-boy,” I retorted feebly.

“Don’t be touchy – I’m just giving you my opinion.”

“And my opinion is that you need to get back in touch with your inner-dinosaur.”

“Ouch. Oo. Ow. Sligo lets loose a flurry of counter-punching,” Spoydie said.

“And you need to get laid, of course,” Gerry said. “That would take some of the pressure off you. You’re definitely suffering from deadly semen build-up.”

Gerry’s an interesting guy—he’s smart and doesn’t care what people think. He’s big, too —six foot three, a former prep-school wrestler from Vermont with blonde hair and red skin. He’s a straight shooter: my other friends will hear a desperate note in my voice, when I’m looking for reassurance, and they’ll tell me what I want to hear, but not Gerry. He seems incapable of lying (to other people, at least— he’s been in therapy for years, to learn to stop living in denial – because he loves therapy, can’t get enough of it. His words.)

“Yeah, I do need to get laid. Badly,” I confessed to Gerry.

“Why don’t you come up to my bar? I’ll set you up with this drunk chick – she’s a late-nighter.”

“Well –”

“Her name is Violet. She’d sleep with Satan. I’m telling you, man, she’s what you want for your current condition.”

“Am I Satan now?”

“No, but you will be, if you don’t get laid soon.”

When we finally split the Raccoon Lounge after midnight, I ended up walking Eva the K back to the train station – she lives up on the West Side. We went down the stairs together. I told her how nice she looked.

“Sure, I look great,” Eva the K said. “It’s not that you’re drunk.”

“You’re drunk, too,” I said. I fingered her collar, caught a fold of her blouse fabric in my fingers, and murmured pleausrably.

“But I’m no pushover.” She played with my hair. “I don’t let it overwhelm me just because you have nice hair.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Go ahead—let it overwhelm you. I started sliding my hands over her hips to the small of her back. She stopped their progress, and held my forearms in her hands in front of her and squeezed, like she too was interested in buying me, but first had to kick the tires.

Just to buy time – and get through the awkwardness of wanting her but not knowing how to stay it – I asked her more about *The Playboy of the Western World*. It’s one of those things I’d always *acted* like I’d read – who knows, maybe I had, in college, with a brain full of drugs and 2% wavering concentration. “You read it, right, Eva?” I asked her, still bunching and unbunching the material on top of her shoulder nervously.

“Of course I read it,” Eva replied.

“My father loved that play. Give me it in a nutshell.”

“Don’t you want to read it?”

“Sure, of course. Just give me the quick lowdown.”

“OK, here goes,” Eva the K said, frowning. “It’s set in this tiny lost village in the West of Ireland. It opens with this local girl, daughter of a pub-keeper, lamenting how boring her life is, and that she’s fated to wed this fat young pious boor from the village. A stranger stumbles in, a young man, who claims to have committed a heinous crime in another village, faraway. Everyone – the girl, her betrothed, the other girls in the village, her father and his drinking buddies, the local widow, they all try to guess his crime, so he tells them it’s that he’s murdered his abusive father. They already liked him – it’s such a small village, they idolize all outsiders anyway – and then everyone adores him even

more for being so violent and profane and lawless and godless as to kill his own father, so then they try to guess how he killed him. When she's left alone with him, the daughter flirts with the stranger, and then the meddling local widow stops by and gets him alone and flirts with him too, the fiancé has sent the widow to the house to get her between the playboy and his intended. The stranger is very satisfied with his new life as a violent, homicidal hero to these villagers.

"He's a liar and a fake," I said gleefully. "I can write that kind of character. I've had experience!"

"Those things can be strengths, if you make them lively enough," Eva said, taking a deep breath and then plunging back into her re-cap. "In the second act, he gets even more attention and gifts from the local girls, the fiancé tries to bribe the playboy to leave town, and then, surprise, surprise, his father arrives, he's not really dead, the playboy just hit him in the head with a shovel and then ran off, but the widow sends the father off in the wrong direction to try to find his son, because she's falling for the son, the playboy, himself, and doesn't want the father to drag him back home."

"Right, right," I said eagerly, pacing the dark subway platform. "Misdirection, an interloper, setting up a big lie – got it!"

Eva the K kept going. "In the third act, the playboy competes in athletic contests in the village and wins everything, with his new self-confidence and strength born of all the adulation he's received, and his father returns and they argue and then the son leaves with his father and the girl, the pub-keeper's daughter, is bereft and the widow is too, but she's more experienced and used to heartbreak."

“Jesus,” I said in spite of myself. “It sounds great.” I had been swept away in the story, and now, too late, remembered my seduction attempt. Eva had a smile on her lips – that made me think this had been her plan all along. Was I just being paranoid because of the weed? For a great reader, I was stumped at reading people sometimes.

We heard the train coming – the breath of it puffed ahead, in advance, you could smell and feel it before you see it. Eva the K pushed me away, then looked at me searchingly and we did the quick fake-kiss, cheek-to-cheek thing. She pushed through the turnstile. Wasn’t that a hot, blood-pounding sexual stare I picked up through the moist magnification of her lenses? Or was it something else entirely, her absent stare, her mocking look, just distorted and untranslatable in the glass? I stored away that look. That was some look that Eva the K had.