

A Season of Consequence

By Michael Parra

It was the best birthday present a guy could ask for. I got the job! Western Athletic Clubs had spent millions on its newest facility, an elite sports complex in a San Diego suburb, top of the line; and I was chosen to run the Mind-Body Center. Despite the fact that I had campaigned hard for the directorship, my stomach was in knots now that I was confirmed. The new post meant saying goodbye to San Francisco, the people and the projects I cherished and very likely the end of my primary relationship. I'd already given Paul two years, longer than any prior lover, and as smart and generous as he is, I was never sure he was the one-and-only intended for me. I hadn't even told him I was a candidate for the position and now it was a done deal. Half my day had vanished in a flurry of phone calls hammering out relocation details while my guts twisted with guilt and anticipated confrontation. This was supposed to be a romantic weekend. I flung my bag onto the passenger seat, so much for relaxation.

The City retreated under low, January skies that swallowed the south tower of the legendary bridge. My little Mitsubishi darted over the Bay, jammed with all sorts of festive extravagance: chocolates, cabernet, my guitar...enough distractions to keep my mind off the irksome truth, that somewhere along my travels I'd grown old. My actual birthday was the next day, and I had elected to make it a small affair, just my brother and our boyfriends, a half-centenary double date. I figured that I had about ninety minutes to discard my anxious mood and arrive in a celebratory frame of mind, ready to play the Happy Birthday Boy.

The lullaby of tires on wet pavement hushed my thoughts even as it hissed a warning to watch for brake lights and sloppy lane changes. Another cold, rainy birthday, five decades of them now. Why couldn't I have been born a couple of months earlier, say in November? Maybe then I could have made the drive with the top down. Autumn is a trickster, not just for its unpredictable weather but because it toys with your emotions, all that golden light, barnyard color, the harvest, baked desserts and comfortable sweaters. Autumn is an easy time of year, but its gentle beauty is deceptive. The season comes gift wrapped in memories, insidious sentiment, the more so the older you get. Winter is far more straightforward: wet, cold, barren...death. You can't trust winter any more than you can its predecessor, but at least with winter you know where you stand. Winter is a season of consequence too perilous for spontaneity. It is a time when you turn your back to the wind but you face your aspirations head on.

Those with plans endure the cold.

The welcome hills of Marin County rose high on the west side of the highway as they shed their grassy slopes of housing developments and upscale strip malls. The freeway narrowed to two lanes in each direction as I climbed the grade over Petaluma and breezed past Rohnert Park's sprawl. I had reached the height of my performing career in this town, declining dance company contracts in favor of freelance work. More memories, ancient history now, of dressing room chatter and pre-curtain jitters. In defiance of conservative theater tradition I had grown my hair long. My rebellious curls were the envy of many women, dark, thick waves cascading over my shoulders. The wardrobe mistress matched my ponytail ribbon to my midnight blue tunic.

"Prince for hire", she goaded me.

"You bet. Have tights, will travel."

Most years I'd made this drive to the River in bright sunshine. I remember one sweltering, summer afternoon at a place called The Willows, slumped across a lounge chair on a great lawn that rolled down to a dock and the River so still you couldn't tell which direction it flowed. There wasn't enough of a breeze to stir a leaf on the colossal trees overhead, and the prize cheese in my gourmet lunch was a puddle in a brown paper bag. I fantasized renting the entire three-tier lodge for a themed party, a Mid-Summer Night's Dream perhaps with masked revelers frolicking under dramatic pools of colored lights, or a twilight game of badminton in southern, turn of the century attire, broad brimmed bonnets for the ladies and white suits for the gentlemen. I invented elaborate art games, "Art in the Garden" parties I dubbed them. That was a year of business plans and tough financial decisions. Despite my enthusiasm, the enterprise never achieved commercial success. However, I did manage to host a miniature art party at my apartment.

One August evening, as a birthday gift for my brother Ric, I conjured an elegant menu and fashioned various art activities to accompany the dishes: appetizers with a tambourine dance, salad with drawing stations encircling a still life. Between courses I rang a bell and directed guests to their next collaborative creation.

I served dessert with sweet, golden wine under the potted maples on the back deck, and wove a story where each person took their turn adding to the plot. I pressed the play button on the portable stereo, recorded rain, wind and thunder cracked; and in ominous tones, surrounded by blue glass candles, I started us off, "It was a dark and stormy night..."

After navigating the nasty stretch of traffic congestion that is modern Santa Rosa I took the River Road exit, slowing as the route narrowed to a single, winding lane each way. Twilight tapered my vision

to the double yellow line that threaded through thickening woodland. As I rounded a sharp curve, a skittish doe, red-eyed from my head lights' glare, bolted across my path. I swerved onto the shoulder just in time. The SUV in my rearview mirror wasn't so fortunate. In backward glances I witnessed the animal slam into the grill and drop into the rolling dark. Sounds of tires squealed behind me, the wooded area off to my left sickeningly illuminated by lunatic, bouncing headlights. The beams came to rest low on the forest floor.

I pulled over and listened. There were no cries for help, only rain drumming on the canvass overhead and my heart thumping in my ears. Then I took charge, hands scrambling for the umbrella somewhere beneath my feet, an oath to keep a flashlight forever in my trunk from now on, my loudest voice calling out to the blackness and the wet.

A middle aged woman in a mustard colored rain coat was sloshing around her crippled SUV. She appeared uninjured though drenched, and was swearing furiously in what sounded to my ears like German. Her car lay in the brush about forty feet from the road, tilted severely onto one side, as though its elevated half rested on a tree or a small boulder, some reason unseen and probably expensive.

"No thanks Mike," Pamela told me after introductions and my offer to call the automobile club, "Your phone won't work out here and the car can't be repaired tonight anyway. I'm better off dealing with it tomorrow." She opened the passenger side door and switched off the wayward headlights. "I'd appreciate a ride into town though. I need to get home to my son. He's disabled and waiting on dinner. Can we get this thing into your car?"

She gestured in the direction of a wheelchair folded up for storage in the back of her van. We left it there because the thing would have only fit in my convertible with the top down, but managed to wedge her four bags of groceries in among my birthday gear. In order to accommodate everything I had to slide the passenger seat up to the dashboard, so Pamela rode into town with her legs pressed to her chest, rain water trickling from her hair onto her knee caps.

"I must look a fright", she laughed as she pulled a wet, dark blonde strand off her forehead. I turned my eyes back to the road, or what I could see of it through the rain.

"Well you're in much better spirits than I would be in your shoes. It seems like you have enough to deal with without adding a broken down car to your troubles. Will your husband come get it?"

"Ha! Now there's a man that wouldn't be much use at a time like this, even if he were still around. No, he left Steven and I just after the last flood, five years ago, seems longer. Oh, I'm just up this hill. Make a right at the next street. Better go slow, there's not much of a sign."

"I've never seen the River flood", I said, skirting Pamela's marital woes, "but I saw pictures of it in the Willows' lobby. It looked like the water rose over the deck. That's three floors above ground level."

"Well that place sits pretty low, but yes, it was terrible...hard times for everybody."

Hard times still, I thought. As far as I could see Guerneville had never fully recovered. At least one popular resort called Fifes, the site of many large summer events with hundreds of people lodging in cabins and camp grounds had closed along with the only dance club in town; and the haggard, handful of small businesses huddled along River Road looked disheveled, desperate. I recognized aging faces of service personnel, hangers on who took work where they could find it, the same dozen or so guys each season, first appearing as a short order cook in one establishment and then tending bar some other place the next summer. In the side parking lot of the liquor store, a sad clan of downtrodden, wild-eyed miscreants, River Rats the locals called them, loitered in increasing numbers. The surrounding countryside was as renowned for secreted, meta-amphetamine labs as it was for vineyards.

I mentioned none of my cynical observations to my passenger, who was more likely than I to suffer the creeping demise of a beloved place.

"Does this rain make you worry about high water now?"

"Nah", Pamela answered quickly, "We're okay. It's been fairly dry. The rain cuts down business though. You visitors are scarce enough this time of year without bad weather."

The rain was less troublesome under the trees that sheltered Pamela's modest hillside home, but sap and pine needles made the already slick stairs treacherous. Both of us juggled heavy, paper grocery bags in each arm. As she fumbled with her keys, Pamela looked back over her shoulder to see me recover from a stumble. I did so gracefully, with a 180 degree spin still balanced on one leg, a perfectly executed en de dans pirouette. Thank God for my twenty plus years of ballet training.

"Are you a dancer?" she asked setting her bags down on the kitchen counter and then louder toward the back rooms, "Steve honey, I'm home." The subsequent silence seemed expected.

"Uh," how to answer that question, always asked in innocence, that quakes a mature dancer down to his existential core, "I use to dance professionally."

"Looks like you were pretty good."

Were.

"It was my entire world, a charmed life, for a while, but that was a long time ago. These days I'm a fitness trainer. I turn fifty tomorrow."

"Happy birthday. It's an important moment," she added looking about her humble surroundings with a resigned settling of her shoulders,

“recognizing the end of one dream and summoning another that’s still...promising. Are you planning a big celebration?”

“Not really. My partner, another trainer, wanted to throw me a party but I decided to run from the awful truth, so I came up here to retreat, well, hide is a better word for it.”

“Do you mean that you two are business associates?”

“No, we’re a couple, though we sometimes also work together. When Paul and I first met, we considered opening a personal training facility, a small gym. He even enrolled in a business planning class.”

“I think that arrangement would be ideal.”

“So did I, but it didn’t pencil out, not enough revenue to support two administrative salaries. We would have had to train just as many clients individually as we do now, plus run the business, take care of the equipment, fold towels, you know, that sort of thing.”

“Oh yeah, I know about that,” she said switching on a table lamp in the adjoining living room. “I run a hotel. Laundry isn’t a chore; it’s a way of life. So, you decided not to do it?”

“That’s right. Oh, we’ve collaborated on small jobs, led seminars together and the like; and we take little vacations like this one, but our big dream died stillborn. Abandoning it kind of left us...adrift.” I wanted to confess my news about the job in San Diego, but I kept silent. Paul should be the first to hear of it. Pamela could see I was keeping tight lipped about something.

“You know Michael; embarking upon a relationship in the later half of your life has a lot going for it, but it can be tricky. It’s hard to know where it fits in. Home, children, career, by our age we’ve already done them. All those aspirations, once clear markers of progress, have become happy memories or disheartening disappointments. Either way they’re mostly in the past. They no longer provide convenient guideposts for the effort demanded by relationship. Not that coupling is any easier for the young, but it is more...um, urgent. For the young, relationship is more of a priority and less of a choice really.”

“You mean that at our age it’s easier for us to say, I’ve gotten this far on my own; so why bother with a partner?”

“Yes, as we mature we may not want to do the work required of relationship. Besides lethargy, there’s reluctance to devote the resources: time, money, patience, an absolutely essential willingness to compromise...”

“Then what does that leave us Pamela? When a couple’s self-image and life goals are established independent of one another, what is the value of relationship other than to simply enjoy one another’s company?”

“Well there’s a lot to be said for making the enjoyment of one another’s company the priority in relationship, but that, my friend is a

slippery slope. In the absence of creating something together, of constructing a...mutual heritage, one might find commitment, uh, evasive."

"It's sort of like saying let the good times roll, because the minute things get dull or difficult there's nothing holding you together." As if to guide me away from an ill advised path, Pamela put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Can I get you a drink?"

Our conversation had strayed into uncomfortable territory, and I took it as my cue to leave. However, the dialog lingered in my mind as I drove down the hill and back onto River Road. I passed Club Fab, once the site of pulsing disco lights and indecent foam parties, soap suds up to your waist and not much else. Dark now for good, a dream ended.

I found promise in the crunch of gravel beneath my wheels, slowing to arrival at a familiar, favorite spot, the circular drive of the Highlands Resort. The rain had paused and while unloading luggage I could smell the wood fire burning beside the baby grand in the common room. Ken, the owner of the resort, had trimmed the eaves of the buildings with strands of small, blue lights, nice touch, quietly exciting like a full moon night. Ken had been here as long as I could remember. I had always thought him older than me, perhaps in part due to his responsibilities, his position as owner, perhaps due to his receding hair line. More likely we were about the same age. It was the sort of recognition that happened to me with increasing frequency these days, that someone I thought of as older was actually my peer.

Perched on the top of a hill, ours was the only room at the resort that overlooked the large, rectangular swimming pool and its surrounding lawn. No one used the pool in winter. The sense of privacy was vast. Empty, serene, blue radiance from the water below and overhead the twinkle lights traced the roof edge in tandem with a naked wisteria vine. I was alone and king of all I surveyed. I owed this moment to my brother who introduced me to the Highlands long ago. We use to sit in the hot tub out back between the overflow parking area and the camping meadow and fantasize our retirement here. How much would it cost to buy the place? Retirement seemed a long way off then, twenty years away at least.

That would be now.

The Pool Suite was empty but Paul's luggage was open in the second room. The gas fireplace threw a welcome glow across the bed. No bouquets, banners or balloons, but a big basket with a bow greeted me on the corner table. Through the purple cellophane I could make out wine bottles and boxes of crackers and cheese. A lone note rested beside it. "Michael, meet us at the Triple R, Dinner at 7:00? XXOO, Paul."

I walked down the steep hill in a solitary, umbrella canopied world, romanticizing a tremendous reception at the restaurant, but the eatery was its usual, January quiet. Only two booths were occupied. Ric and Mario, attired in bright Hawaiian shirts and blue jeans, sat across from Paul. Proud of his physique and blue eyes, he was wearing a tight, sky colored sweater I hadn't seen before. I bet he'd spent an hour choosing the outfit. He set down the menu and his reading glasses and beamed at me through his close cropped, salt and pepper beard. There was something mischievous about Paul's grin that always reminded me of an eight year old. The three waved me over to their corner four top where cheerfully gift wrapped boxes overflowing with ribbon shared the table with a half-eaten order of crispy onion rings.

"Hey Birthday Boy!"

"Mike, you don't look a day over, oh, I dunno, say forty-nine?"

"How much is that in internet years?"

"Whatever it is, it's got to be larger than his posted waist size."

"Size does seem to be one of the things that change online."

The predictable quips flew fast and furious until the round of cosmopolitans arrived.

"Is there anyone else joining us?" I asked, perhaps a little too eagerly.

"No, just us," my brother answered between swallows. "Why? Were you expecting someone?" His raised eyebrow glance darted between table mates. Did he wink?

"Uh, no, not anyone in particular; I just thought some of my other buddies..."

"Mike, you really should have let me throw you a big party." Paul interjected. "This isn't like the Milly Awards. Your position in life has changed. Your friends have changed."

"Milly Awards?" What's that?" Mario asked.

Ric leaned into the conversation for a rapid fire history. "Mike won an award from the city of Mill Valley, a 'Milly', kind of the high point of his dance career, or excuse me, his *director* career. Anyway, it was a big, fancy event, cocktails, dinner, black tie, the whole nine yards. The mayor was the presenter. Mike made a speech, like that. Anyway, Mike invited everyone he knew but only a handful showed up."

"Oh no, you mean like, what if you threw a party and nobody came?"

"Exactly."

"How many people did you invite, Mike?"

"Seventy-five. It wasn't so much honoring me personally as it was the programs I produced for cancer survivors and developmentally

disabled people, and things like holiday performances at senior homes and drug rehabilitation centers.”

Already the details of that time had grown fuzzy, but I remembered the mad dash between group exercise studios to lend fledgling teachers and choreographers an experienced hand, and the long rehearsal hours of social turmoil as more than forty personalities under my care struggled to produce art. I juggled community with my every gesture, sometimes oblivious to my own status, but most of the time I was keenly aware that all eyes were upon me. I was the maestro. I was special then.

“Mike, how many of your seventy-five invitees attended?”

“Four.”

“Oh, uh, excuse me Waiter, could we have another round of drinks?”

“It was a spectacular night anyway. It's just...I pictured the hall filled with my friends and when so many didn't come, well...let's just say I try not to expect much from people any more. Hope demands constant replenishment, but disappointment is cumulative.”

“Spoken like a true romantic, Babe. I Hope you aren't too disappointed with this birthday. I know this doesn't compare to a Caribbean cruise or a trip to Barcelona.”

“Paul, this is the perfect gift.” I said, feeling like a snake as I recalled the Director salary I'd negotiated just that morning and added, “Maybe one day I'll earn enough to treat us both to Europe.”

“Oh, Barcelona's not all that much.” said Ric, my younger brother who had traveled the world and earned more working in the pharmaceutical industry than the rest of us put together. Paul and I slumped silently in our seats as the waiter took food orders.

Although my finances had steadily improved since my decision to disband the dance company and make fitness my full-time career, all too often the margins of our romance matched the confines of our wallets.

Even so, ours was a very active pairing, alternating activities between entertainment and home improvement. We did the things you always dream about but never quite get around to on your own. Paul went from never having set eyes on a ballet to seeing every major troupe that visited San Francisco, all the while assisting my transformation of a Victorian carriage house into a first class, home gym. It was an exhausting pace, one that only recently showed signs of slowing as my fitness studio neared completion. I'd been saying “one more piece of equipment” for as long as Paul had known me. He longed for the day when we could slow down and enjoy our success.

“Mike, there isn't a trainer around that wouldn't consider your studio perfectly adequate and complete just the way it is. You don't need that expensive apparatus. The money could be put to better use.”

It was true that Paul possessed better budget skills than I, but the gulf between us on this issue was greater than mere money. It was a matter of world view, of differing approaches to life. Paul was the practical one. Reconciled to the reality before him, he built his dreams from the ground up, one step at a time. In contrast, I played the grand visionary, skipping through life with my head in the clouds most of the time. Our love affair was in the play of extremes, where more often than not, we balanced joyfully in the middle.

"Ric, I thought you liked Barcelona." I said between mouthfuls of lasagna.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful city and so are the people, but I think you'd have a better time in London."

"Isn't that where you took your mother?" Mario asked.

"Sure did, first New York then on to England. The best part about it was that with her wheelchair we never had to wait in lines anywhere we went; though I have to say, the British are better about that sort of thing than the Americans."

Mom's deteriorating mobility was a sore spot for me. She had healed well from the operation that restored blood flow to her lower legs and feet, but rather than celebrate her refurbished limbs she gave up walking, preferring sedentary existence to the hard work of movement. I was a trainer, a healer of sorts, with a reputation as an expert; and yet my own mother...if only she'd comply with my suggestions, if only she didn't *resign* herself to old age, if only I could afford to visit her more frequently. Well, San Diego would put me a lot closer to Mom than I was now. Maybe I could turn things around next year.

"It was a sweet thing for you to have done Ric." Paul said. "Your mother wouldn't have been able to do it without you. Navigating an airport alone in a wheelchair is daunting. She still hasn't seen your new house in San Francisco has she?"

My brother shook his head no and waved his empty martini glass at the waiter.

"Hey Mike," Mario asked, "How's work going at the health club?"

"Well, as a matter of fact there have been some very promising developments. Just today I, uh, I..."

"Here you go boys," the waiter interrupted with the third round of cosmos, "and yours is on the house Honey," he said placing the glass before me, "Happy birthday!" Paul had switched to water after his first glass, but the rest of us valiantly plowed ahead toward oblivion.

"Looks like we'll be in fine shape for dancing tonight." I said, swaying slightly in my chair as I checked my watch. "I think this place is the only game in town this evening, gentlemen. It's country western night Babe, but there's a pool table in the back."

Rhythm didn't come naturally to Paul. Three-quarter time especially mystified him, a shame because as a ballet dancer I lived and breathed the waltz, but Paul tried. This past summer he swallowed his pride and accompanied me to ballroom class at Sundance Saloon; and just last month we successfully spiraled around the floor for an entire song.

"Mike, wasn't this where you learned to two-step?"

"Yes indeed, an old boyfriend taught me."

"Oh really, which one?"

"Relax Paul," Ric reassured him, "Mike didn't keep any of them long enough to matter."

I pushed my chair away from the table and threw back my cocktail. "Come on, anybody want to try west coast swing?"

I awoke the next morning to the thump of Paul's upended heels hitting the wall. He was upside down in the corner, yoga mat stretched out upon the floor, fireplace blazing and misty sunshine slanting through the window blinds. The scent of coffee tickled my nostrils but turned my stomach. Propping myself with every pillow within reach, I sat up and waited for the room to stop spinning. Happy Birthday.

"Well, one thing is certain. I definitely feel older."

Paul dropped out of the headstand, red faced and angry eyed, "I don't want to hear about it. You are legitimately old enough to know better."

I vaguely remembered Paul pleading with me to slow my alcohol consumption during the evening. I guess he abandoned all hope about the time Ric and Mario joined me for karaoke, Aretha Franklin's version of You Make Me Feel like a Natural Woman. Not pretty.

"Hey, you could have enjoyed the fun, at least tried..."

"Why were you so late arriving here yesterday?"

"Uh, lots of reasons. First, I got a late start."

"Why? Was there someone else with you?"

"No, I was alone, thank you. I just had a lot of phone calls to make. Some accident blocked traffic near Santa Rosa for what felt like forever; and then I stopped to help a lady who had hit a deer and crashed. Satisfied?"

"You don't need to get cranky."

"I'm not cranky. I'm just warning you to back off!"

One of the best things about growing old is the proficiency one gains in declaring personal boundaries. Compromise becomes infrequent, unnecessary and less and less desirable with age. In youth our barriers are permeable, but emotional territory, after we have claimed and reclaimed it for decades, erects borders that are not easily redrawn.

I could see Paul count his breaths, or whatever it is yogis do to calm themselves.

“Look Michael, before one of us says anything he might regret, why don’t we table this conversation for later. There are a few things I want to do before your birthday dinner tonight, when I’d like you to be a bit more mindful of your drinking please; and I think you could use some down time as well. You could take yourself out to breakfast at that little converted train depot; maybe buy yourself a something for your fiftieth.”

“Fine,” I spat the word. I showered and dressed in silence, managed to down a cup of coffee despite my stomach flip flops and grabbed my car keys.

West of Guerneville the river widened as forested ridgelines gave way to an undulating, grassy horizon. Alongside the road bare branches bejeweled with surplus raindrops glistened. I drove with the top down, sunshine warm against my back and clean wind whisking away my hangover.

If I found intimate relationship uncomplicated at this age, it was because the entire endeavor came with greater jurisdiction. Not to say that we were jaded, but what demands Paul and I made of one another were few and circumspect, another blessing of maturity. We held our expectations in check because we cherished control, had grown accustomed to it and feared its loss.

River Road sliced straight through the tiny outpost called Duncan’s Mills, where wooden boardwalks and Gold Rush era facades lent a handful of gift shops and art galleries the bucolic charm of slower days. If you sneezed at forty-five miles an hour you’d miss it. It was almost lunchtime and I was the restaurant’s only patron. The screen door squeaked open and banged shut. I marveled that they could keep the place operating at this time of year.

A handsome, young waiter sat me by a window shaded by a row of tall Monterey Cypress. Across the parking lot, dairy cattle grazed a high, steep hillside. Their black and white coats contrasted brilliantly with fresh green under hoof as though an artist had painted them there. Prime real estate.

“Cows with a view...” I flirted, but received only a polite smile with my orange juice. Two more guests entered, a gay couple I judged by the look of them, early thirties, fitted pants, matching sweaters, good shoes. Their disinterested glance took me in along with the furniture. The well groomed pair ended up sitting at the table next to mine, from which they proceeded to torture my eggs benedict with chatter about famous people I did not know, singing music I didn’t like, on television shows I’d never seen.

Call it birthday gluttony. I mopped up my excess hollandaise sauce with the last bite of toast, and as I stood to pay the bill I felt the constriction around my waist release with a pop. I was not about to

search the floor for the wayward clasp. Glad for the long coat I'd chosen for the drive, I wrapped it tight about me and left the restaurant with my dignity if not my pant's button, praying that I'd make it out the door before my trousers slid down to my knees.

"My life is no longer tethered to the mirror", I reassured myself. "Only another dancer would call me fat." Still, I did have a professional image to maintain. The waistline that I use to ignore with impunity now ebbed and flowed like a tide meter, my water line rising and expanding with every glass of wine.

I strolled down the boardwalk to Worldly Goods, a great place to shop for heavy, alpaca sweaters, hammocks, scented candles and rustic furniture. The center isle was blocked by a large, incongruous assortment of vividly colored swim suits. The counter girl was a buxom thing in her late twenties, long raven hair, too much jewelry and eyeliner. She giggled over some comment made by the customer standing before her, an attractive, bearded fellow about her age, wearing a beanie cap and a tight t-shirt.

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "how much is that tall cabinet outside on the porch?"

When her eyes finally focused on my face she wrinkled her nose as though a foul odor had inexplicably invaded her shop. With a sigh and a voice that sounded like an exasperated, high school sophomore illuminating the intricacies of internet protocol to her pathetically outdated father, she informed me, "It's called a Pie Safe. It's from New Mexico and it costs four hundred dollars."

That's a lot of money for one birthday, I cautioned myself as I again contemplated the cupboard. Handsome in the distressed and discarded way of old things that gain charm through obstinate survival, it might have been red or blue once. Now it was more peel than paint, with a hinged door that closed but would never again shut. Barn wood I guessed, and just the right size for my pantry, but what would I do with it in San Diego? The thing had seen better days and its limited usefulness was very likely finished. They'd be lucky to get two hundred for it, I reasoned, a piece like that, so far beyond its prime. Few people would even give it a second glance. I ran a finger along a weathered joint and wondered at the furniture's history, the stories stacked upon its shelves. The cabinet was built solid, but it might not have many years left.

That made the time remaining all the more precious.

By sunset, clouds had reclaimed the sky, and a light rain began to fall as Paul drove the two of us towards dinner. Ken had recommended the Dell Hotel restaurant, just a couple of miles downstream and across the river. Ours was a short but quiet ride. Paul and I had side stepped rather than resolved our early morning confrontation, and I still hadn't

divulged my career plans. I was grateful that my brother and Mario were joining us again this evening. Perhaps their presence would defuse the inevitable, awkward scene that would accompany my announcement. Paul checked his wrist watch for the hundredth time. He was anxious about something. Did he know? Had someone, somehow tipped him off about my leaving? I switched on the car stereo to lighten the mood.

"Mike, that new belt looks great with those pants. Don't you want to tuck in your shirt to show it off?"

"Hmm, not really, maybe in a couple of months."

"Listen, I'm glad you had a good time shopping this afternoon, but don't you think you went a little overboard? When are you going to wear seven pairs of swim trunks? We're lucky to get two hot weekends a summer."

"Well, to tell you the truth I didn't have our weather in mind when I bought them. Look Paul, I've got something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Is this the turn Ken told us to take?" We made a left at an old Quonset hut that served as the local cinema and crossed over the river on a corrugated metal bridge. I cleared my throat and marshaled my nerve.

"You see Paul; I've been thinking a lot about my life lately and...wow, look how many cars are here. The parking lot is jam-packed! How strange for a winter night. This place must have great food." Paul didn't wait for me to finish. He squeezed my shoulder and disappeared into the restaurant. I gathered my coat and my wits about me, set my shoulders and prepared to give him my news. This was going to be tough.

"SURPRISE!" the birthday cheers of over a hundred people overwhelmed me as I entered the dining hall. Just about everyone I knew was there, dressed in their finest party wear, evidently not just for dinner, but for a series of coordinated activities. My former assistant director was herding guests into teams. I saw my family sitting by the two-story, floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the River. The Parras were all together except for my brother Ric, who along with Mario was busy arranging yoga mats in a checkerboard pattern for a Pilates mat class.

Friends grinned at me from the other end of the hall where a vase of flowers stood ringed by a dozen chairs, each stationed with its own easel. One of my former students was frantically sketching the arrangement with a block of charcoal in one hand, a dark smudge across her cheek. Another waved a paint brush at me. "We're having an Art Party in your honor, Michael. Do you remember that Musical Chairs, Still Life? Hurry up guys, just another thirty seconds to go before we switch stations!"

To my left, the bar area was roped off, commandeered to serve as a German style buffet. A middle-aged woman with dark blonde curls and substantial arms dished up sausages and potatoes from large silver

chaffing trays. The food looked warm and welcoming and the hostess gave me a bighearted smile.

"Pamela! How good it is to see you, but what are you doing here? Did you get your car out of that ditch?"

"Happy birthday Michael! This is my restaurant. My husband and I bought it before Steven was born." The kid in the wheelchair was a skinny, blonde teenager wearing a bright red and white visor that matched his fleece jacket. The boy's entire torso drooped over to one side, as though his body lacked the strength to pull him upright. He blinked at us through thick spectacles on a head overly large for his frame. "Now I run the place on my own, and yes; it took longer than I thought it would, but I got the car up and running this afternoon. Oh, wait until you taste the chocolate cake I made you!"

After at least an hour of embrace after embrace, I found myself near the windows and my family. By then the music selection had changed from the thump of disco to the twang of country western.

Apparently Pamela's son recognized the tune. He rode his chair onto the dance floor, circling in patterns that changed direction with each chorus. He was dancing!

"I've never seen Steven act so freely with strangers." Pamela said as she brought my mother and me cake, "He's not usually so courageous or comfortable in front of a crowd."

"Is that chocolate?" Paul called to us from across the room. He arrived at the table a bit out of breath, mopping his brow with a napkin. "Pilates is not as easy as it looks."

"Aren't you going to miss your group's next activity?"

"I think we're on a ten minute break. Doesn't your mom want to participate? These games are fun!"

Pamela handed Paul a small cake plate and a fresh napkin, "Paul, I've never seen anything like this party. We could sure use more life and art around here. I'd like to sponsor a festival like this on a regular basis, maybe once a quarter or even monthly in season. Will you think about it?"

"Certainly I'll consider it. I'll need help though." Paul raised his fork in my direction and then looked down at my mother's toe tapping to the beat. ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three.

"Mrs. Parra," Paul inquired sweetly, "I've recently mastered the waltz. May I have this dance?"

"Oh no Honey, my feet. Besides, I'd look ridiculous hanging on to you like some old..." Steven rolled by within arms reach and snatched a piece of his mother's cake before wheeling back to the dance floor. "Oh, well, okay, I guess I can give it try."

Paul did a decent job making my mother look good. Then the song ended and his brow furrowed when the music shifted to common time, a two-step.

“Mind if I cut in Mom?”

I didn't say anything more when I took the lead. I could see Paul was concentrating. His lips moved as we danced: slow, slow, quick, quick. About half way through our third orbit around the floor he spoke up, “You were about to tell me something in the car as we got here. It sounded important.”

Right at that moment the music stopped and I stood in the middle of the room gaping at my partner. My mouth was a desert...empty, dry, dangerous.

Then out marched my brother and Mario, heralded by the popping of champagne corks. They carried the front of a long box shrouded in a white sheet while Ken foisted the back end. The three men would have resembled pall bearers at a funeral if it weren't for the giant red bow tied around the middle of their cargo. They stood the box on its end as Paul joined them at the front of the room. “I'd like to take a moment on this auspicious occasion to thank all of you who contributed to this gift for Michael on his birthday. Maestro, from all of us to a very special man, happy fiftieth!” He grabbed the top corner of the sheet and unveiled the birthday present to a deafening round of applause, the pie safe I'd seen earlier.

The poor, scuffed cupboard looked out of place surrounded by highly polished restaurant tables and chairs. Its sides curved gently outward and it was missing a doorknob. Beneath the glaring overhead light it seemed smaller than it looked in the familiar confines of the shop, fragile and less...respected in this bustling place. The cabinet teetered a little towards one side as if unsure of its footing on strange ground, but it was appreciated here. Dozens of my friends admired it, carefully touching the pitted wood, cherishing the individuality of its splendor, its worn but independent spirit. To them its story meant something. It belonged in the warmth of this place and these people.

Winter withdrew a pace.

I felt Paul's fingers entwine around my own.

“Michael, what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Nothing Babe, I...lost my head for a minute and I need to make a few phone calls when we get home, that's all. Thanks for the wonderful party and the gift. It's the best present a guy could ask for.”