

Oh, Those Eyes!

By David Christopher

It was an age of moral innocence and sexual ignorance. The Fifties. Doris Day and Rock Hudson were the perfect pair of chaste lovers. No one even dreamed that she was a battered wife or that his homosexual affairs would eventually kill him.

If all the families were trying to emulate “Ozzie and Harriet”, college life at the small mid-western college that I went to was more like “Mickey and Judy Putting on a Play”. It was a far cry from the campuses of the Sixties or today. We were completely insulated in a cocoon of academia and spiffy social life. The outside world and reality made very little impression on us, especially those of us in the Drama Department. Even Sex wasn’t talked about, much. I’m sure it was done, but not by me – there was no shame in being a virgin in those days. My education was strictly out of books and lectures – but that changed during Spring Break my Junior year.

Several of my friends were discussing a trip to New York City during our break to see some Broadway shows. I was ecstatic! I had only been there once before with my parents and I had fallen in love with the city. In the beginning of our planning, there were three or four people who wanted to drive and I had to choose whose car I would ride in. But as we neared zero hour, every one of my once adventurous friends copped out, and I was the only one who still wanted to make the journey.

Although I had no transportation, I was still determined to get to New York, even if I had to hitchhike. Then, in a Chicago paper, I happened to see a personal ad, reading “*Going to New York City, need passenger to share expenses and driving. Car is a new convertible. Call Kurt at*” I ran to the phone and dialed the number, convinced that this was my ticket to Broadway. Kurt turned out to be an advertising man, who sounded nice over the phone, but he said that he’d already accepted someone else as a passenger. Close to begging, I asked if he could possibly take two riders and he agreed to meet with me during his lunch break. I rushed into Chicago, rode up to the 24th floor of the Prudential Building and met the man who was to change my life.

His appearance didn’t impress me particularly, besides seeming to be clean cut and pleasant. He was in his thirties, with a crew cut, and he reminded me of George Gobel, a popular comedian of the day. After a short but friendly interview, we made a deal that if I didn’t bring too much luggage, he could fit

me in and we'd share the expenses three ways. It happened that he was leaving one day after my spring vacation started, so it worked out perfectly. Fate was definitely smiling at me.

So off to "Theatrical Mecca" I went. My life centered around the theater, and Broadway was where it was all happening. In those days Chicago was a barren desert, as far as theater was concerned, only hosting road shows from Broadway. And now I was going to be able to see the Original! I couldn't have been more excited.

When the car arrived to pick me up, I was delighted to see that it was a shiny green Pontiac convertible. The top was up because it was a cool spring morning, but I knew that the trip was going to be very comfortable, as well as exhilarating. My fellow passenger was a scruffy youth, older than me, but still with a collegiate appearance. His name was Buster and that fit his personality. He wasn't very friendly, even from the start, very self-absorbed. He had no interests in New York City, except that he had family there and was summoned back because of a wedding that he didn't want to go to. He complained about it the whole trip.

Kurt, however, was very congenial and seemed as excited about going to the Big Apple as I was. During our long trip, Kurt and I gabbed away, while Buster sat in the back seat and smoked. Not much happened during the ride to New York, except that Kurt and I formed a bond, mostly because of our dislike of Buster and our anticipation of The City. We didn't stop over for a night, but drove 20 hours straight through, sharing the driving three ways.

When we arrived in New York, we dropped Buster off at a subway station and Kurt deposited me at the Sloan House YMCA on 34th Street. He gave me a phone number of where he was staying and invited me to make the return trip with him, *sans* Buster. I was delighted, because I hadn't really thought about how I was going to get back to Chicago. He said to contact him before the end of the week to make arrangements.

Sloan House was very different from what I expected. It had more the feel of a huge dormitory than a hotel, even though everyone had their own room. There were lots of rules, like having to sign in at the desk to get your key and forbidding guests in the rooms. But it wasn't like college, because the men were all types and ages, from Skid Row bums, to squeaky-clean Bible thumpers. My room was the size of a closet, with just a single bed and a dresser. It was on the 10th floor, with a window over-looking a grimy airshaft, but I didn't care; I was just using it to sleep. The rest of the time I was going to explore New York and see as much theater as I could fit in.

And theater I saw! Although there were no performances on Sundays then, I attended eight plays in seven days, by seeing Wednesday and Saturday

matinees. My first Broadway play was Noel Coward's *Fallen Angels*, with Nancy Walker. The best drama I saw was Julie Harris playing Joan of Arc in *The Lark*. And the best musical by far was *My Fair Lady*, with Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews. It was opening week, so I had to wait in line from 5:00 AM to get a standing room ticket, and it was well worth it.

But the play that led to my Life Lesson was *A Most Happy Fella*. In that musical, a handsome leading man stands center stage and sings the haunting ballad, "Joey! Joey, Joey!". I remember being moved by the song, but enjoying more the peppier numbers, like "Big D, Little A, Double L. A. S". It wasn't until that night after the show that the song "Joey!" entered my personal life.

I wanted to explore Greenwich Village, so after the play I took a subway down to Christopher Street and wandered around looking for "beatniks". I ended up at a rustic bar called *The Ninth Circle*, which had sawdust on the floors and a long bar with a brass rail. I sat on a bench along the wall at one of the tables and ordered a beer and a hamburger.

Suddenly, sitting next to me, on the same bench but at the adjoining table, was a good looking young man in a tee shirt and jeans. This was not the current style of dress in my circle, so it looked quaintly Bohemian to me. He was very friendly and introduced himself as "Joey". I commented that I had just seen a play that had a song in it with his name in the title. As our conversation continued he moved closer to me and put his hand on my leg – I couldn't have been more startled. As he cheerfully chatted on, he kept his hand there and rubbed my leg, getting closer and closer to my crotch. I totally panicked! My emotional reaction was so powerful that I knocked over my beer. I apologized, hastily called for the check, and stumbled out the door.

I couldn't fathom what I was feeling. I wasn't appalled by what had happened, I was more shocked – and yes, thrilled! But I couldn't understand why? Remember this was in the Fifties and in those "I-Like-Ike" years, the subject of homosexuality just wasn't discussed or written about like it is today. There were no Gay Pride Parades; no After-School Specials where Scott Baio falls in love with his high school chum, no tales about the happy homosexuals in San Francisco, no hilarious and sensitive plays by Harvey Fierstein, and certainly no "Queer As Folk". Oh, there were a few depressing novels in which the guilt-ridden queers always committed suicide in the end, but I hadn't read any of them. I was completely ignorant of this aspect of life, and yet the touch of Joey's hand on my leg had sent chills up my spine that blew my head apart.

Somehow I got back to the "Y", went to my cubicle and spent a sleepless night reliving the event. I couldn't get the incident out of my mind. Little did I know that Sloan House was a hot bed of homosexual activity, and that liaisons of that nature were going on all around me.

During the remaining three days of my New York holiday, I must have seen lots of the city and I certainly went to whatever plays I had tickets for, but all I remember was wandering around singing to myself, "Joey, Joey, Joey!". I went back to *The Ninth Circle* every evening, hoping, yet dreading, to meet up with Joey again. I never did.

On the day I was to leave New York, I went to an apartment on the Upper West Side, to meet with my driver, Kurt. I had never been in a Manhattan apartment and I was excited about seeing one. If I expected it to look like Margo Channing's apartment in "All About Eve", I certainly wasn't ready to have the man who answered the door talk like Bette Davis. He was extremely flamboyant, a type which today I would classify as "an old Queen". He introduced himself as Oliver and welcomed me to his "humble dwelling". I was agog at the grandiose décor. There was lots of gilt furniture, a plush purple carpet, large paintings and marble statues – I'd never seen anything like it in the Midwest, or even in my imagination. He ushered me in and began interrogating me about my New York experiences. I was intrigued by him and his place, thinking it was very "theatrical", but I made no other connections. Kurt entered with a friendly greeting and said that he was in the bedroom packing and wouldn't be long.

Then, coming out of the bedroom behind him, I saw a vision that made me go numb. A blond boy, about my age, in a pair of shorts and a turquoise shirt, stood there with his hand on his hip and a smirk that said, "I'm aware how good looking I am, so enjoy!". And his eyes – oh, those eyes – were huge and deep blue. I felt that I would fall right into them. I couldn't imagine why I was so entranced with him, but he seemed like the most perfect thing I had ever seen and I couldn't stop staring at him.

Kurt turned to go back into the bedroom, saying "Come on Eric, we have more to do in here". He touched the shoulder of the boy, who immediately followed him with a grin on his face. Oliver then continued our conversation about the plays I had gone to, most of which he had seen, too. I was torn between talking about my favorite topic and thinking about those blue eyes. As we were discussing "Get Me To The Church On Time", I kept hearing echoes of "Joey, Joey, Joey!".

Finally, Kurt came out of the bedroom with his arm around the boy. Oliver suggested we all go out for lunch before Kurt and I started our long journey back to Chicago. As we were leaving, Kurt came up to me and said quietly, "I hope you don't mind that we're gay." Now this may seem incredible, but I had no idea what he was talking about. The word "gay" only meant happy, to me, so I couldn't figure out why I should mind that they were happy. I thought, perhaps, that they were taking drugs to make them "gay", but I also

knew very little about drugs.

During our meal, conversation was awkward, with Oliver valiantly trying to keep it going with witty chatter. The boy seemed sad and sullen and Kurt embarrassed, with little to say. Although I made no inferences about what was going on between these men, I was painfully aware of the effect that Eric's blue eyes were having on me.

After lunch we packed up the convertible, and I sneaked my last looks at Eric. Then just before we drove away, I happened to notice Eric behind me, in the side-view mirror. He didn't know I was looking at him and he pointed at me, giving a thumbs-up sign to Kurt. I couldn't imagine what he meant. Then the car pulled out into the New York traffic, leaving the beautiful Eric waving on the curb.

After we had gotten through the Holland Tunnel and onto the New Jersey Turnpike, Kurt began what would become my most important college course. He started simply with, "So, you liked Eric, huh?" I didn't know what to say. I think I said something stupid, like, "He seemed very nice." But Kurt wouldn't let me get away with that. He pressed and pushed until I confessed to him that I found Eric magnificent but that I couldn't understand why.

"You're gay, too", he said nonchalantly, "Don't you know that?" This was followed by my admitting ignorance of the word and his explaining it. And on and on it went. His making revelations to me, about me and about the vast underground world of the homosexual.

I told him about "Joey" and about all the feelings I'd had when I was growing up that had confused me. He told me that I was a member of a very large, exclusive club that had members in every city in the world. That I could go anywhere and always find friends who would accept me into their group, just because I was one of them. He said that those not "in the club" were called "straight" and were ignorant of how many gays there were in every walk of life. He told me that a high percentage of the great Artists in the world were gay, citing people like Tennessee Williams, Michaelangelo, Walt Whitman and Noel Coward.

I asked him how he had met Eric. He told me that he had picked him up at a "gay beach" and that they had spent most of the week together. *The Ninth Circle*, he said, was a gay restaurant, and that there were hundreds of gay bars and restaurants in New York City. He explained that Joey would have been my friend, too, if I had let him. That his touching my leg was his way of letting me know that he was "in the club". This sent a chill of regret through me that I still feel today.

This conversation went on through Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana. I was utterly fascinated. I can't say that I felt any guilt or regret about being gay,

because Kurt presented it in such a rational and guilt-free manner. I will always thank him for this.

I'm sure you would like to hear that Kurt also introduced me to the wondrous world of sex, but no. As we took separate motel rooms over night, he confessed to being exhausted from his week with the blond "godling". That part of my education came later and is a different tale. But I can easily say that that trip changed my life for the better, and formed in me a "gay pride" that was way before its time. I never saw Kurt again after he dropped me off, but he will always remain my favorite college professor.