

TOMAH and I

Chapter One

He was just six years old when I first met him. I saw him coming through immigration at JFK Airport, in 1992, his two mothers holding each of his hands. His face was filled with awe as he looked at the throngs in the airport, through his large, round, pink glasses. After they got their luggage through customs, the three of them came up to me. I hugged Cathy, who was the only one I knew, then was introduced to Christine, his biological mother, and finally presented to Thomas (which they pronounced "Toe-mah").

He was smaller than I expected for a six-year-old, but I didn't have much experience with children that age. Naturally, he was shy meeting a six-foot stranger who spoke English, for he spoke only French. So, he clung to his mother and just looked up at me. I was afraid that we would have a hard time connecting – how wrong I was.

They had arrived from Limoges, France, to spend a month with my partner, David Munro, and me in our house in Cranford, New Jersey. I had met Cathy Dumazeau (pronounced "Ca-tee"), about 5 years before when she was an au-pair for a French businessman. He was on an exchange program in New Jersey for a year and brought his high school age son with him. In order for the boy to keep up with his French school classes, while going to the much inferior American high school, Cathy came along to give him the lessons he'd need to master when he returned to France.

David and I were planning a trip to Paris and he was taking classes in French at the Alliance Française in New York. But I decided to study on my own. When I told the businessman that I needed help with my French, he introduced me to Cathy. She had plenty of time on her hands while the boy was in school, so she said that she'd love to teach me French.

Cathy and I became great friends and spent lots of time together that Spring. However, precious little French was studied, because mostly we talked in English, laughing, gossiping, and going to the movies. Since she happened to be a lesbian, that made our friendship even more agreeable. I was sad when she had to go back to France.

Soon after she returned, she met and fell in love with Christine Gagnol, who was married and had an infant son, Thomas. Christine wanted to leave her husband for Cathy, but in order for them to get custody of Thomas, they had to meet secretly for a year until the divorce was final. It was an exceedingly difficult year for them, but they managed and finally were able to live together with Thomas.

Since I had kept in touch with Cathy (who became an English teacher) by letters, she asked if they could come and stay in our house for a month in the summer. They could visit us and spend time in New York City, which Cathy loved but Christine had never seen. Of course, I was delighted and that's how I met Thomas.

The drive from JFK was uneventful, except for the laughter and excitement that abounded from the adults. Thomas was sitting quietly between his mothers in the back seat, unable to join all the babbling in English. I can't imagine what he must have felt.

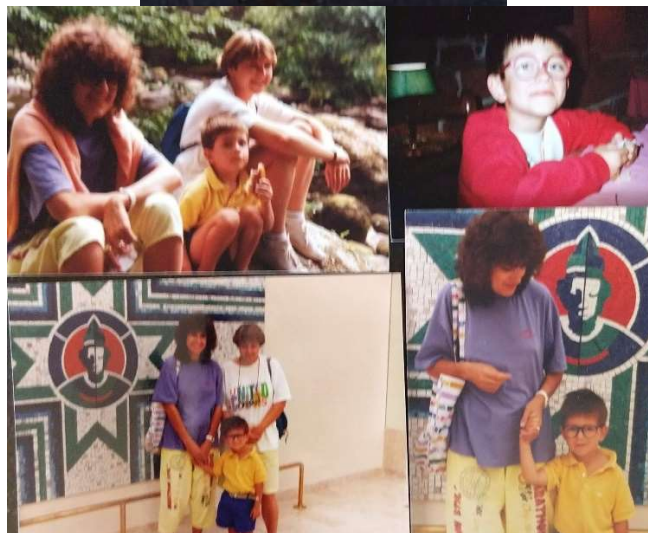
When we arrived at our house in Cranford, the first thing I did was take Thomas up to the attic to show him his room. The top floor had a room with a bed, which we never used, but I had made it into what I thought a 6-year-old boy would like. I found some posters of Disney movies, like *Bambi* and *Pinocchio* that I hung on the walls. I got a bed spread with pictures of Disney characters on it, as well as some fanciful pillowcases. At a garage sale, I even found some stuffed animals, which I had no idea he would like, but thought they cheered up the room. It turned out to be a big success, giving Thomas a place in the house where he might feel at home. His mothers were tickled that I had made the effort and it looked like Thomas was too.



Over the month of their stay, I got more and more comfortable with Thomas, and we had fun together being silly. I do not believe he understood any English, but we pantomimed a lot and laughed together. I was impressed by his intelligence and maturity even then. I remember going with the family to the Metropolitan Art Museum, and Thomas would linger in rooms when we were ready to move on, because he was fascinated in a painting or sculpture. I

could tell that he was quietly studying things and would comment reactions to Cathy or Christine in a serious way. So even then, I was aware of his high intelligence, even though I didn't pay that much attention, since he was just a kid. But he didn't act like any six-year-old I'd ever seen.

There was a summer theater that I was involved with, Plays in the Park, and although the play I had been in that year, *Dracula*, was over, I took the family to see *Annie Get Your Gun*. Now imagine a boy that young, who doesn't understand much English, sitting through a musical like that. Fidgety? Sleepy? No way! He sat engrossed for the whole play. At intermission and on the ride home, he asked a million questions of his mothers, who explained the plot as best they could. He seemed to understand what was going on and was enchanted by the whole experience. He was a show queen in training, and I was tickled to give him his start.



Chapter Two

Four years went by before I saw Thomas again. It's 1996 and Cathy and Christine come for another NJ/NY vacation and they again bring their 10-year-old son. When he got there, he still didn't speak English to us, but I knew that he was studying it in school. I would say things to him that I knew he understood, but he didn't feel confident enough to respond in English very often. But we had much more fun together that visit. I was able to go into New York more often with them, and I really loved watching his fascination with everything. He had fallen in love with the city, a love that never faded. He was so cheerful on that trip, still loving his attic room, although I didn't decorate it so much this time.

We did a trip down to Princeton with them, and I remember him loving the campus, especially the stone lion in front of the library. Unfortunately, they missed the play I was directing at Plays in the Park that year, and there weren't any playing while they were there. But to compensate I gave Thomas a tape of the *Annie Get Your Gun* cast album. I learned later that he played it non-stop when he got home.

The Disney's film of *Hunchback of Notre Dame* was playing, and at the Disney store on Times Square I bought him mug of Pheobus, the hero. But he told me later that he really wanted the Esmerelda mug. I can't say a bond was happening between us yet, but I certainly enjoyed his company.



Chapter Three

In the Spring of 2002, I got a phone call from Christine. She said that Tom (no more Toe-mah) wanted to come to stay with us by himself this time, for a month in the Summer. She told me that he was next to her in the kitchen, dancing to the *Annie Get Your Gun* tape. She also said that he had a Marilyn Monroe obsession, doing a school project about her. I asked if she was telling

me that he was gay, and she laughed and said, "Absolutely!" She confided in me that she wanted him to have some male, gay influences, since the only gay people he knew were women. I said we'd be delighted to have him visit us. So over that summer David and I became his "Fairy Godfathers".

As the time of his arrival approached, I have to say that I became rather nervous. This was going to be a big responsibility and I really didn't know this French teenager at all. Without his mothers to take care of him, as they had previously, I worried that I wouldn't be able to cope with a teenager for a whole month. I knew he spoke English now, but was it good enough without a French translator. Would I be able to fill his summer days and nights? I was suddenly going to be a parent, with absolutely no experience in that role.

With some trepidation, I picked him up at the airport. When he came down the aisle, with a huge smile on his face, and began talking in perfect, almost accent-less, English, I knew my fears were unfounded. We were already chatting away in the car back to New Jersey, like old friends. His English was interestingly American, rather than British. I asked him about that, and he told me that he learned much of his English from American movies. He had many disagreements with his English teachers at school, who wanted him to speak British, and he refused. His mothers supported him on this.

So, our month as surrogate parents began. I was lucky that my job was teaching in my own acting studio, so I had most of the days free to cavort with Tom. Often, we went into Manhattan, seeing B'way shows. I was amazed his sophistication and sense of humor. After we had seen several musicals (his favorite) I asked what else he wanted to see. He surprised me by suggesting *Private Lives*, because he knew the British actors in the roles (Alan Rickman and Lindsay Duncan). I worried that the humor would be difficult for him, but he got all of Noel Coward's jokes and laughed in all the right places.

One of the first nights together, he asked me what my favorite play was. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, I told him. He said that that his mothers loved it too, but he'd never seen the movie, and could we watch it. Oh dear, I thought, that's a bit heavy, even for a bright kid. But I obliged and when it was over, I asked him if he had any questions, fearing the mystery about the imaginary child would have gone over his head. His only response was, "Not really. It reminds me of Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*. You know, Theater of the Absurd and with the two married couples." This is a high school kid!

Although I wasn't doing any play that year at Plays in the Park, I took him to see *Jekyll and Hyde*, which of course he loved. I also took him to some rehearsals for *Crazy for You*, and he was hooked. Fortunately, an actress friend of mine, Carol Straffi, was in the cast and was able to take Tom to lots of rehearsals. Even though he had to leave before seeing the actual performance, he was ecstatic and became a devoted Plays in the Park-er, for years to come.

But my favorite experience with him that Summer involved a play that I was working on, *Barrymore*. I had given myself the task of learning the lines of this basically one-man play, and by time Tom was with me, I'd pretty much completed it. What I was doing now was running the play with anyone who would help me. I played the legendary actor, John Barrymore, and there was an off-stage character, a "prompter", who had many lines, but was never seen. I needed someone to read that role, as well as follow me in my part, to really prompt me. Tom was delighted to do it, so many an afternoon we spent in my den running the play. It was a huge help to me, and I know he enjoyed doing it too.

At a professional theater that I worked with, the producer heard that I was working on this play and asked me to do a reading for him. I had Tom as my "prompter" and we went to the theater and did the play for him. He was impressed and I was hired to open his next season with the play. I would never have been able to do that if it weren't for Tom's help.

In my "Fairy God Father" role, we had many serious discussions, too. One involved Tom's wanting to become an actor, professionally. As an acting teacher of many young people with the same desire, I had only negative advice to give. I was all too aware of the tremendously hard life it is for a young actor, with mostly disappointment at the end. I told Tom this, advising that he look for a career that would insure much more financial stability. I could tell he was heart-broken at my reaction. But he told me years later that he realized what good advice it was and appreciated it in retrospect. Ah, the life of a parent.

At another heart to heart we had one day, I told him how I felt like a father to him. To which he replied, "But you're really my grandfather's age." Oh, dear!



Chapter Four

My friend Carol had become very close to Tom during the rehearsals of *Crazy for You*. She had also never been to France and was afraid to go alone. So,

I decided to accompany her to France, with a stay in Paris, then on to Limoges, where Tom lived with his mothers. I love showing people Paris and Carol was duly impressed with that glorious city. (Although for my taste, she spent too much time in churches.) When we reached Limoges, Cathy, Christine and Tom were delighted to show us around. What fun it was being with them in their hometown.



I don't remember much details of that trip, but I do recall that when I asked Tom if he was coming back to New Jersey this Summer, he sadly said that his mothers wouldn't let him come, unless he had a job. So, when I got to back home, I asked the producer of Plays in the Park if there was a job Tom could have while he was in New Jersey this Summer. He suggested that he run the follow spot for the show that I would be in that season, *The Wizard of Oz*. Therefore, Tom arranged his trip to be over the period of that show, and he was able to come.

What an exciting Summer it was. Carol was also able to get Tom a job working in her summer camp painting sets, so his days were not as free for us to cavort. And, of course, the nights were filled with *Oz* rehearsals, and I was playing The Wizard. But we still got into the city to see some shows, including Bernadette Peter's *Gypsy*. I was so proud of him, up there in the lighting booth, moving that heavy follow spot around, and I know he was proud of himself for doing it and feeling a real part of the show.



Chapter Five

Tom was able to visit two more summers during his high school years and when he began Engineering School. He became close friends with our good friends, Tom Lynch and Barry Monash, and in 2005 he stayed at their home instead of ours. That year he worked in a bookstore in the town they lived in. They also visited him in France in 2006, when he didn't come to the States. Over these years, our friendship never wavered, but I don't have much memory of what we did together. Of course, we saw some Broadway shows and I know he came to Plays in the Park whenever possible. I know he saw my production of *Kiss Me, Kate*.



One exciting theatrical meeting began in 2003, when we took Tom to an Off-Broadway play, *Flesh and Blood*, that featured our friend Chris McGarry. After the play, we were outside on the sidewalk talking to Chris, when Tom wandered over to the star of the play, Cherry Jones, who was talking to her friends. He immediately started praising her performance, and charmed by his accent and enthusiasm, she continued the conversation with him. He then brought her over and introduced Ms. Jones to us. I am a huge fan of hers and was thrilled to meet her.

Two years later, Chris was understudying the male lead in *Doubt* on Broadway with Cherry Jones. We took Tom to the play when Chris was doing the role. When we went up to his dressing room after the play, we passed Ms. Jones' dressing room, and she immediately remembered Tom. She invited us in, and we had a lovely talk with her. She even found out that my uncle had been the photographer who had taken her high school photos in her hometown of Paris, Tennessee. All because Tom chatted her up on the sidewalk in Greenwich Village.

Chapter Six

At the end of his college years, he was to go on a work/study program to be an intern for a company in his field. He chose a company that had an office in New York City, because it was his dream to move to there. Now here is a man who speaks perfect English, top of his class, who loves the United States. But the US government would not issue him a visa! No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't do his internship in New York. So, he had to go to another office of the company, in Sydney, Australia. You can imagine how this broke both our hearts. So, many years went by when we didn't see Tom. While he was there, he met and fell in love with a terrific guy, Andrew Chapman. They now have a great apartment in Sydney and are happily married.

In 2013 and 2016, Tom and Andrew were able to visit New York and we had two lovely reunions where we got to know Andrew. They rented an apartment in Greenwich Village, and we were able to see them often. Tom had great pleasure showing Andrew the city, the way I had shown him when he was a youth. One of their visits happened to coincide with Cathy and her current partner, Monica Perez, on their trip to New York. So, all of us went out for a riotous dinner together. It was so great to see Cathy again after all those years.



But best of all in 2017, David and I took a cruise which ended up in Sydney. We stayed a week and had a wonderful time in Tom and Andrew's beautiful apartment. They gave us a splendid tour of Sydney, including a grand tour of the Sydney Opera House. We loved the city, but most of all it was such a pleasure spending time with grown up Thomas. What a fine man he has become. He seems completely happy in his life in Australia with his charming husband. I couldn't be more pleased – I'm as proud a Fairy God Father as I could possibly be.



