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LUNCHING WITH LARRY: HANGED, DRAWN, AND (FRENCH) QUARTERED IN WEST HOLLYWOOD LAY IT AS IT PLAYS

You haven't experienced *echt* Los Angeles if you haven't entered a restaurant entourage with a star like Larry Townsend who knew how to make an entrance while ignoring the attention. Larry may not have been a giant of American literature, but he was a giant of a man. In his 1972 *Handbook*, he says he's a barefoot six-foot-one and 190 pounds. By 1985, the author in boots, coming in at six-foot-three and 240 pounds, was an inch taller than drag actor Divine at 300 pounds, and two inches shorter than Rock Hudson at 215 pounds. His natural air of superiority appealed to his readers in search of a master. He was an alpha male who was always head of the table and driver of the car. I never knew anyone who took so many people to brunch or to supper. Intent on keeping connected in gay LA, he and Fred were sociable members of a group of gents who regularly dined together at a variety of restaurants. From his Air Force training, he had the military command presence of a big cop in his height and build and aura. He was a larger-than-life character who not only loved opera, he *was* opera. Even so, in terms of sustainment, without Fred Yerkes, there would have been no Larry Townsend.

Hollywood is a strange country where appearance is reality that feeds the dreams and fantasies of the gay soul like no other city. Even before Joan Didion, who also started as a self-help columnist, captured its salacious straight and gay characters in her 1970 social-disaster novel *Play It as It Lays*, Larry's characters were selling their souls in his 1969 novel *The Faustus Contract*. He was a keen observer of his own gay LA, and a great tour director who

like many an American male felt most free to talk while gripping a steering wheel. I loved the dark starry nights in Los Angeles when the docent Larry would drive Fred and Mark and me to supper to show off their favorite restaurants, and then drive us the long way home.

They were welcome "old faces" at the steak-and-lobster Café D'etoile, favored by Anne and Christopher Rice, where we sat jammed shoulder to shoulder in its close French café style seating with well-heeled, large, carnivorous gay men at 8941 Santa Monica Boulevard. They liked Mark's with its American-nouvelle cuisine spun out to tables by cheeky waiters at 861 N. La Cienega Boulevard, and Chez Jay, the steak-and-seafood beach-bar dive at 1657 Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica where Larry had been a regular since just after its founding in 1959, and they knew his name.

Those nights of "fine dining" were tea parties compared to Larry's years of long brunches at the French Quarter coffee shop which opened in 1973 inside the French Market at 7985 Santa Monica Boulevard, and closed in 2015. It was there in LA where all the world's a soundstage that the vicious circle around Larry held court they could never resist as frenemies because attitude and strife and co-dependency defined them and they could not quit each other.

Larry's cast of sitcom regulars for thirty-five years was the quartet of Barney, Embry, Legrand, and Earl, with guest-appearances by Larry's Fred, and by Embry's first and second sequential mates. Because of LAPD persecution, everyone in the core group had an arrest record.

As a member of the revolving audiences invited to their table, I could write fiction playing them as five characters in search of an author. Having collaborated separately with each one of them on several major projects on page and screen, including Mark and me shooting six S&M films with Earl and Legrand on location in Europe in 1989, I liked them, their experience, and their stories. Roger Earl, for instance, was for years the dresser at NBC-Television in Burbank for the singer Dean Martin from whom Earl borrowed ten-thousand dollars to bankroll—unbeknownst to Martin—the 1975 filming of the Earl-Legrand leather epic, *Born*

to Raise Hell. Working with Martin in Las Vegas, Earl managed to make a nemesis out of Dean's co-star, Liza Minnelli. Larry should have been the group's ideal autobiographer, but he wasn't top enough to do it, and they weren't bottom enough to let him.

His first personal revelations, tied to the pre-publication of his first *Leatherman's Handbook*, appeared in his interview, "Larry Townsend Talks about His Life as a Gay Novelist," in *Vector*, October 1971. When the East Coast Eulenspiegel Society founded in 1971 approached the West Coast writer in 1974, he sent that seminal S&M group his personal essay "The Compatibility of Contrast" for its *Pro-Me-Thee-Us Newsletter*, No. 3, in which he explained his autobiographical timeline in helping establish the culture of defensive leather politics in Los Angeles. In 1983, he wrote a resume of his career in his "Introduction" to *The Leatherman's Handbook II*. Years later, he owned up that his book *Leather Ad-M*, and not *Leather AD-S*, was mostly autobiographical.

However, even casting about for literary equivalents in order to peg them, like the Algonquin Club, which they were not, might gloss over the original historical contributions of these talented folk who created at least three gay classics of transforming energy during a sexual revolution of radical change: Larry's *Leatherman's Handbook* (1972), Roger Earl and Terry Legrand's ground-breaking S&M film *Born to Raise Hell* (1974), and John Embry and Jeanne Barney's magazine *Drummer* (1975). They were serious, ordinary looking, older-generation people, mostly within ten years senior to me who listened to their small talk of mutual self-absorption that was fascinating until it became exhausting.

Thinking always of how to create desk jobs for themselves and how to cash in on the new leather culture, they skipped past the divine opportunities for sex at the height of the 1970s sexual revolution and chose to schmooze in safe bars and emcee leather-bar beauty contests. The men played at light S&M games enhanced by alcohol. They were not heavy players having mad passionate love affairs and out-of-the-body drug experiences in the rough-and-tumble classrooms of licentious bars, sex-club orgies, and risky street cruising—where authentic underground leathersex and art spontaneously combusted the way that street fashion often

inspires haute couture. Unlike the leather poet Thom Gunn who lived the leather high life and went stoned to bars and baths and orgies to turn sex into literature in *My Sad Captains* and *The Man with Night Sweats*, they were not really S&M players personally involved with their leather topics. In 1973, *The Advocate* reported in "S&M: A Weekend Game":

> S&M is "a game to be played on the weekend," according to Larry Townsend, one of the best-known writers on the gay "leather" scene. Townsend, who has a Master's Degree in psychology, and has worked as a counselor and specialist in personnel motivation, *denies that he is deeply involved himself in S&M practices* [Italics added].
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> He has, however, written a number of books and other publications on S&M in which he speaks with the authority of seemingly detailed knowledge and displays an extensive command of history.

Jeanne's dive into this leathersex scene was social and political and gendered. She stroked its art, entertainment, and public relations. The Robert Opel photograph of herself that she published in *Drummer* pictured her with Goldie Glitters of the Cockettes, illustrating Opel's cover feature on the Cycle Sluts, a genderfuck group of bearded men in *Rocky Horror Show* leather-and-lace drag who were kin in Los Angeles to the Cockettes in San Francisco. Jeanne even put the Sluts on the cover of issue 9 to the distress of male-identified subscribers complaining about, in terms of today's cancel culture, genderfuck queens occupying a male sanctuary magazine.

It did not help that the group took its name from Barbara Streisand who was not everyone's diva. Camping in black-vinyl boots and chaps with plastic chains, she starred in a three-way porn film titled *Cycle Sluts* inside her 1970 movie, *The Owl and the Pussycat*. On movie nights in leather bars, it was one thing to laugh at clips from that film, but it was another to find leather satire, suitable for a put-down in *Blueboy*, creeping into the only existing gay men's adventure magazine. It was not sexism. Subscribers did not complain when the evolving *Drummer* finally

felt secure enough to introduce two women, the leather pioneers Cynthia Slater and Pat Califia, in my "Society of Janus" feature in *Drummer* 27, February 1979. By comparison, *The Advocate*, the magazine for affluent white males worshiping divas, did not add the word *lesbian* to its masthead until 1990.

Jeanne's miscalculation, disrupting the very leather homo-masculinity that sheltered her under its wing, unseated her authenticity with readers. Two issues later, it wasn't cause and effect exactly, but she quit as editor under cover of John Embry moving LA *Drummer* north to San Francisco. She, who was basically an advice columnist like Larry, lost what influence she had in *Drummer* where she was never again welcome. And from which she withdrew. Like Nathaniel West's fictional advice columnist, Miss Lonelyhearts, did she internalize the infectious problems of her readers which caused Miss Lonelyheart's depression, alcoholism, and infighting?

Larry genuinely liked holding court in sociable leather bars where his fans found him open and charming. No devotee of drugs, he often told his cautionary tale of how he—a chocoholic—once got so stoned in San Francisco on brownies he did not know were from a recipe by Alice B. Toklas, that after he left the dinner party to go to do "sex research" at the Glory Hole venue at 225 Sixth Street, he had to lock himself into one of the many blowjob cubicles the size of a small phone booth till the world stopped spinning. Frankly, if anyone ever needed a hit of acid to evolve himself, it was Larry Townsend. Concerning altering his mind, he wrote in Chapter 17, "The Social World of Leather," that he preferred San Francisco leather bars where they served liquor "while all the leather bars in Los Angeles get by on beer licenses."

Priding himself on keeping control with his limit of two alcoholic drinks, he preferred to play privately at home, boosting the scene with a modicum of poppers for the slave as he wrote in Chapter 9, "Booze and Drugs," in his first *Handbook*, and in Chapter 13, "Drugs, Booze, and Health," in his pre-AIDS *Leatherman's Handbook II.*

> Moderation in all things...Of the lot [alcohol and drugs], I am most comfortable using and having my partner use alcohol. In great excess it can have a debilitating effect. In lesser quantities, it can serve the greatest range of needs....Marines [during Vietnam, 1961-1975] being by far my favorite choice...I found...it frequently took a little time, a little talk, and a little booze to bring out the best in them...I tried to hit the area around the USO just about the time it closed on a Friday or Saturday night.

At the French Quarter, the group's glamour status was driving their flashy cars into its parking lot. Larry had his Corvettes and his luxury vans. Jeanne tooled around LA in her hot yellow Pontiac Solstice sports convertible. They drove the streets and wandered the freeways like characters Didion updated in *Play It as It Lays* with her magical thinking out of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a novel she returned to again and again. Rarely entertaining each other at their homes, their custom was to drive to the neutral ground of the French Quarter where their exhibition matches were so much more fun than bickering over drinks in a private home. Each was a person of value. Each had a story of survival. But together were they bad for each other? The author, the editor, the publisher, the film director, the movie producer? Did Fitzgerald know their type? Did he foreshadow them in his x-ray novel of people trapped in their own privilege?

> They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

In this tale about the rise and fall of a specific gay generation, these experts at domination and submission were into everything with each other except sex and surrender. They played "Musical Chairs" with their enmities, and when the music stopped they were all left standing holding the bag of quarrels and isolation that marked their final years, and caused them all to die estranged from each other.

When poet Ian Young reviewed Larry's Hollywood novel, *Stalked*, in 1999, he transferred to Larry the Yeatsian keyword *slouch* that Joan Didion had relocated to LA in her *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. He revealed a glimpse of how Larry's true blood ran in the rough bestiary of his Hollywood life, his friends, and frenemies.

> The story is about Ryan Franklin, a young Hollywood actor who gets stalked by a...drifter called Glen Leach. When Glenn slouches into Ryan's pampered Hollywood lifestyle, things get very ugly....There is not a single likeable character; everyone is selfish, jaded, amoral, and sexually driven.

The French Quarter was a gay space with a New Orleans Dixieland theme. It functioned as a lobby and dining room for the virtual Grand Hotel that was West Hollywood pop culture on permanent Mardi Gras parade. It was camp. It was touristy. It was local. It was like a dinner-theater set for a musical-comedy version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was perfect. It was the place to see and be seen. It was where they plugged in. It made them feel visible, younger, still in fashion, and, sometimes, grand. No place in LA symbolized them singly and as a group more than this habitat, the chosen public environment of their endangered species.

And talk about the queer roots of WEHO at the French Quarter! For thirty-five years, I have subscribed to the show-biz bible, weekly *Variety*, and have been given some vintage issues by friends. In 1933, toward the finale of the 1920s Pansy Craze, *Variety* reported on this one-mile unincorporated county strip of Santa Monica Boulevard stretching several blocks between what became the French Quarter, and what was then United Artists Studio at the corner of Santa Monica and Formosa Avenue. Because of the influx of female impersonators, the strip was dubbed "Flounce Row." Because it was show biz, *Variety* reported that the drag queens and kings were appearing in floor shows at joints called "pansy parlors" of the kind that were illegal inside the City of Los Angeles itself, but not illegal outside in that tiny unincorporated area of the County of Los Angeles. It was a county island of queer

castaways surrounded by the urban ocean of straight LA. It was where Larry lived and died. It was a beating gay heartland that in 1984 was at long last incorporated as the city of West Hollywood.

As older media folk filling page and screen with the liberating leather discovery that men in their thirties could be hot, they were voyeurs escaping the isolation of their homes in a gay space revered in LGBT history for hosting meetings by early gay activists like themselves from its opening in 1972 to AIDS activists in the 1980s. As gay elders, they liked that politicians such as Governor Jerry Brown often showed up for meetings and rallies with activists who could deliver the gay vote. In fact, Larry often brought his activism home. On April 11, 1973, *The Advocate* published a wonderful photo of Larry working on a political campaign. Groomed camera-ready like a suave 1950s movie star, he was pictured hosting the doomed future San Francisco Mayor George Moscone who was assassinated alongside Harvey Milk in 1978. The photo caption read:

> State Senator George Moscone (D-San Francisco) speaks at a cocktail party in the Los Angeles home of outgoing H.E.L.P., Inc., President Larry Townsend (right) and Fred Yerkes on Friday, March 9. The get-together was arranged through the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club of San Francisco and was co-hosted by Jim Foster, president of the club. "The gay community needs a champion," said Sen. Moscone, and he pledged to act as such if he is successful in his campaign for governor of California in 1974.

At the French Quarter, the male half of Noah's Ark streamed around and through the tables of the noisy restaurant where anti-war activist and gay-rights ally Eartha Kitt, the Broadway star famous for her songs "C'est si bon" and "Santa Baby," could be spied eating an Insalata Caprese with students from Lee Strasberg's Method Acting School just across the street. The bustling arcade of first-floor boutiques like "Baby Jane of Hollywood" sold movie posters and memorabilia, and "Dorothy's Surrender," just to the left of the front door, sold rainbow trinkets, and greeting

cards, and some of Larry's publications in spinner racks. Larry's friend, publisher Dave Rhodes's business office for his gay tabloid *The Leather Journal* took up three-quarters of the second floor. While dining, many a man kept a knowing eye on the hot muscle parade entering the medical storefront operated at the rear of the first-floor tables by the popular doctor Walter Jekot who in a fascinating Hollywood scandal was indicted on twenty-seven counts charging he was doing a brisk walk-in business prescribing steroids to the muscle crowd we loved for whom nature was not nurture.

Open from eight in the morning to three the next morning, the restaurant was a runway of styling exhibitionists of every race and gender in drag or leather or muscle-shirts who made for an always interesting floor show for the diners who in that Hollywood Babylon liked to survey the passing trade that was often for hire. The actor Thomas Jane, action-hero star of *Boogie Nights* and *The Punisher*, said that in his early days in Hollywood in the 1980s, he, like James Dean in the 1950s, was not adverse to walking up and down Santa Monica Boulevard waiting for someone who would buy him a sandwich.

Larry had bought a sandwich or two as the cost of doing business. He needed pictures to sell his words. He used the French Quarter as a convenient casting couch to recruit handsome vanilla talent willing to pose in leather to illustrate his mail-order brochures and his S&M booklets. The ritual of simply sitting repeatedly at their usual tables empowered their social pleasures: hailing old friends, snubbing enemies, and judging new faces standing by the maître d's plaster-cast fountain. Otto Dix could have painted them sitting at those main-floor tables covered with white cloth under glass. From there they could spy on the foot traffic passing by the murals of Leo Meiersdorff, the New Orleans painter who had bedizened the jazzy walls of the long hall to the toilets where two stalls and three urinals were as busy a dating game as all gay toilets everywhere.