

## 24

**SUDDENLY THAT SUMMER:  
JUNE AND JULY 2008  
GAY MARRIAGE ON AND OFF AND ON AGAIN  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, TOM OF FINLAND  
TAXICAB CONFESSION  
“I CAN’T BREATHE!”**

On May 15, 2008, the Supreme Court of California issued a decision legalizing same-sex marriage in California. It was to take effect on June 16. Suddenly that summer roared off to a grand start. Mark and I, together for twenty-nine years, planned our wedding for June 20 which was also my sixty-ninth birthday. Larry, who had no one to cuddle and comfort him, rejoiced with us saying again he wished he and Fred had been able to marry.

We knew the anti-gay clock was ticking on our human joy. The unforgivable Mormon Church in Utah immediately began occupying California politics. It interfered, and spent twenty million untaxed dollars to back California Proposition 8 which had been quickly written by Republicans to overturn gay marriage in the state. The anti-gay propaganda blitz succeeded. Gay marriage in California became illegal again on the day of the election, November 8, 2008—except for us 16,000 couples, 32,000 people, who managed to get hitched while the four-month window from June 16 to November 8 was open, and stay hitched by law when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Proposition 8 on June 28, 2013.

That decision was five years after the fitful summer Larry, grieving Fred, died entangled in a public legal and social drama so stressful to his life and career that the lawsuit seemed almost a performative act of attempted suicide by the willful widower.

On May 25, 2008, for the Memorial Day holiday, Mark and I drove to Los Angeles for a working vacation to attend the annual Book Expo America at the LA Convention Center to debut my new book, and to visit with Larry and brunch with friends like Jeanne Barney, and my sometime writing partner David Hurler, the video artist Old Reliable, who weeks later would be permanently disabled with a drug-induced stroke after his ex-con hustler boyfriend betrayed him by moving a forty-six-year-old homeless female junkie off Santa Monica Boulevard into his apartment; and with pioneer archivist Durk Dehner and Steve Sharp of the Tom of Finland Foundation at 1421 Laveta Terrace in Echo Park; and with our beloved friend and collaborator Mark Thompson, former editor of *The Advocate*, and his soon-to be husband, Malcolm Boyd, the saintly Episcopalian beatnik coffeehouse priest and author of the 1965 bestseller, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?*

Larry, author of the 1968 bestseller, *Run, Little Leather Boy*, could have associated himself with these diverse creative talents in the gay mainstream of LA, but he refused our invitation. They were a bit too arty and vanilla and queenstream for him to give them the time of day—especially because Thompson had dared exclude him from that 1992 anthology, *Leatherfolk*. He did, however, join us to stroll the BEA aisles where hundreds of publishers represented thousands of new books, including my *Gay San Francisco* to which Jeanne and Larry both contributed so much and for which Larry had written an “Introduction.”

He was fretting personally because weeks before the BEA, he alleged he had invited an editor of the *Gay and Lesbian Review* to lunch so he could buy a display ad in the magazine; but, he said, the editor snubbed him and never called. He felt there was no end to the mainstream rejection of his kind of erotic gay pop culture. Everybody’s sexual sadist was nobody’s social masochist. He was mad as hell and wanted to sue all the bastards.

Distressed by his legal fight and estranged from his local friends, Larry welcomed any distraction and company who might levitate him from his own gravity of the kind that causes stars in the cosmos to collapse. Mark and I were staying in our usual suite at the Hotel California, a little gem, a surfer-themed hotel that made us feel young, at 1670 Ocean Avenue, one block

south of the Santa Monica Pier. We liked the place because of the Eagles' album, *Hotel California*, which I quoted for the title of my memoir-novel, *Some Dance to Remember*. To swing his moods, we chatted up the hotel and its lost gay history as a diverting garden path to walk him down, calm him down, and nurture his flickering life force. He was a part of my life. He was winded and wounded. A quantum of solace, the amount of compassion one human can show for another, was owed him.

In terms of forgotten "Gay L. A." literary heritage and "Gay L. A." pop-culture walking tours, this Hotel California motor inn at 1670 Ocean Avenue was originally the palatial Hotel Arcadia and Bath House (1887-1904), then the transient Langdon Hotel during the desperate wartime housing shortage (1940s), and is now—since 2019, after years as the Hotel California—the surfer-tourist Sea Blue Hotel. This Santa Monica inn is the "End of the Trail," the last stop on the fabled "Route 66" of novelists John (*Grapes of Wrath*) Steinbeck and Jack (*On the Road*) Kerouac and of the Eagles' hitchhiking song "Standin' on the Corner in Winslow, Arizona." This "Main Street of America," documented in Bobby Troup's famous travelog song "Get Your Kicks on Route 66," begins its storied road trip in Chicago, stretches 2500 miles of straight and gay cruising and no-tell motels, and finally dead-ends literally in the Tongva Park public sculpture across the street from the Sea Blue Hotel front door and its gay history.

The inn itself sits at the top of the Arcadia Terrace Steps (1911) which lead down to Appian Way and the original Muscle Beach built by the WPA in 1934. Before Muscle Beach was forced to move to Venice Beach in 1959—because outraged local puritans loathed its liberated sex appeal and queer presence—that world-famous outdoor gym-platform in the sand by the Santa Monica Pier was for years a gay magnet for sex tourists. It pulled Larry and midcentury gay men with cars, cash, and cameras to the pop-up gayborhood to admire the unemployed and nearly naked gymnasts, bodybuilders, muscleman bikers, and Hollywood stuntmen who often rented by the hour.

As a quintessential gay space, Muscle Beach was a recruiting station for photographers who focused the gay gaze to create the beefcake fetish of the iconic blond California Look: "Bruce

of LA” who influenced Herb Ritts and Robert Mapplethorpe; Bob Mizer in his AMG studios’ *Physique Pictorial* magazine who influenced Larry; and Jim French who could not resist moving his Colt Studio from New York to LA. Muscle Beach is so iconic in gay culture that Larry’s friend, Tom of Finland, immigrated from Finland to LA to draw his platonic ideals of blond leather muscle. Among Larry’s peerage of gay pulp-fiction authors, he was aware that half a dozen pulp novels featured the words *Muscle Beach* in their titles like Guild Press’ *The Boys of Muscle Beach* (1969).

I told Larry that during the wartime summer of 1943 when racist white servicemen on leave in LA started the anti-Latino “Zoot Suit” race riots, Tennessee Williams, who championed Hispanic culture in his plays, cruised down the stairs daily to Muscle Beach through the grounds and victory garden of the Langdon when he lived just one minute across the street at 1647 Ocean Avenue. His crowded rooming house was next to the Dawn Hotel which, remodeled in 1959, became one of Larry’s favorite restaurants, Chez Jay, at 1657 Ocean Avenue. Larry admitted that after dining *Chez Jay*, he sometimes cruised the Arcadia Steps as a *digestif* until he met Fred in 1963.

Trying anything to buck up the depressed Larry, I told him that Tennessee while writing a Lana Turner picture at MGM fought with the moguls—the way Larry himself fought with publishers—and kept on with his creative life sitting out his contract living *la dolce vita* on the beach while drafting *The Glass Menagerie* and drawing 250 dollars a week. (In 1996, encouraging Larry even then to lighten up and look at himself, I titled my introduction to his *Leatherman’s Handbook*, 25th-Anniversary Edition, as “Leather Dolce Vita, Pop Culture, and the Prime of Mr. Larry Townsend.”)

I tried to humor him, telling him Tennessee hired civilian trade and U.S. servicemen lounging on the Arcadia Steps the way his Mrs. Stone solicited Roman hustlers draped across the Spanish Steps. Showing him around the gardens of our hotel, I tried to raise his spirits to keep him creating despite adversity. I told him how the prolific Tennessee had made these local gardens into the detailed gardens featured in his short story “The Mattress by the Tomato Patch,” which he drafted on this spot in 1943 while

sitting in the very gardens which he described in recognizable detail long before the Langdon became the Hotel California.

Larry half-listened to my literary cheerleading about the local color of this lost gayborhood and the 1940s gay-roots importance of Tennessee Williams to leather culture. I wanted him aware and proud and grateful that in creating Stanley and casting Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, Williams revved up the 1950s pop-culture archetype of the intensely masculine post-war blue-collar rebel bikers in leather who were Larry's bread and butter. I didn't tell him that Tennessee wrote better S&M stories than he did, like "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseuse."

Literature offers vicarious and cautionary experiences about coping with life, but Larry, who was not an intellectual all-rounder, did not read or learn from literature—unless he was looking for a property he could adapt. I didn't dare tell him about Tennessee's poem "Mad at Night." It opens: "Old men go mad at night / but are not Lears." It ends: "And old men have no Fools except themselves." Why should he be interested in leftover bits from my 1966 doctoral dissertation on Williams who like Larry died writing and fighting to survive?

He was way more fixated on schooling us two driving around for hours in the back seats of his Cadillac Escalade while he told us the history of his life. The act of driving seemed to hypnotize him. He had never before been so open. Those five days of rides were a moving confessional of Hollywood flashbacks as he drove us down LA streets streaming past straight and gay addresses that triggered his nostalgia. We knew what was going on. He was like an old taxi driver spilling his life story to the last passengers he would ever have. His monologue was casual with personal detail. Trained in the Catholic seminary to hear confessions, I made mental notes because I did not want to take out pen and paper and make him self-conscious. His taxicab confession was the candid interview everyone wanted from The Townsend, and its free associations infuse this memoir.

In 1992, Bob Wingate, the publisher of *Bound & Gagged* magazine, met Larry for the first time, through LA video director Bob Jones whose young "S&M punk" sex tapes Larry sold mail-order for years until they argued and had a falling out. Jones,

pointing out Larry's constant dyspepsia, told Wingate that "Larry was disgruntled that, for all his fame, no one had ever actually done an interview with him." Wingate said:

I told Larry I'd be happy to interview him for *Bound & Gagged*, though *B&G* had never been an interview-style publication. I did the interview, and several months after it was published, Larry started writing a regular column for *Bound & Gagged*, which continued until we ceased publication in June, 2005.

Wingate's clever cover copy proclaimed Larry's marquee name: "*Bound and Gagged*, January/February, 1993. Issue 32; 'Carnivores & Vegetarians in Bondage Frenzy' PLUS Larry Townsend Grants First Interview!"