

22

THE KING LEAR OF LEATHER “DO YOU STILL HAVE SEX?” LEATHER WEDDINGS

Writing in the *Bay Area Reporter* for over thirty years, leather columnist Mister Marcus (1938-2009), whose email was the trenchant HatchetQ@, noted that the death of his Los Angeles peer was a loss to the “leather universe.” Larry Townsend, big and tall, was a dominant personality who lived life large as a mercurial twentieth-century writer and photographer whose gusty moods could have been charted by the National Weather Service, and whose Rolodex of friends and frenemies might well be turned into a plot with arias like the operas he and Fred attended for years. Six weeks after Larry died, Terry Legrand wrote asking how he might purchase Larry’s season tickets. “I’m asking because he was an avid opera fan as I am. He would give me any tickets he did not use during the season.” I connected him to Larry’s niece. He was too late.

At the Los Angeles Opera, the season after Larry died, a new young couple in stylish clothes, not knowing whom they replaced, smiled as they sat down taking their turn in a treasured pair of permanent seats surrendered only in death by Larry and Fred, the gay couple who through the years rarely missed a production. The incoming millennials would not have known what hardly anyone knew about the man behind the Great Man: the cordial cynic Fred Yerkes, a former accountant at Disneyland Corporation and then a tax expert at Capital Records, who retired in 1995 to manage their domestic life, and their thriving mail-order business office located in the West Hollywood apartment (Suite 502) they owned at 1850 N. Whitley Avenue.

That was also the address where on September 30, 1996, shortly after Fred's retirement, Larry registered their nonprofit "G. Elisabeth Mueller Corporation" named, with typical Townsend drollery, after his current Doberman, Mueller, who was the black dog I photographed with him in 1995. His use of "Elisabeth" was a camp nod to Mel Brooks' 1967 movie, *The Producers*, that satirized Hitler as "Adolf Elisabeth Hitler...who was descended from a long line of English Queens." The film was fresh in Larry's mind because that year it was big news in small talk when it was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry of American films that are culturally significant.

Larry and Fred were two men in love, with a wish to marry, ideally in a ceremony like the one celebrated in Robert Opel's historically important article, "*Drummer Goes to a Leather Wedding*," featuring two LA leather grooms kissing on the cover of issue 7, July 1976. One time in 2002, after a late supper at his nephew's wine-country restaurant in Healdsburg where three of us dined on Ralph's signature Chicken Paillard, we four were kidding around outside on the town square under a dripping awning in the cold on a rainy night, no one wanting to part, and Larry and Fred, together then for thirty-nine years, were being very warm to Mark and me, together for twenty-three years, and from out of nowhere I asked the other couple in badinage, as one does, "Do you guys still have sex?" Shock! Deer in the headlights! Laughter! A flash. A photo. Fred. Eyes rolled up. Camping.

The answer lay, of course, in the *Handbook*, Chapter 10, "Of Friendship and Lovers" in which Larry, described that long-term couple, "Len and Augie," fictional stand-ins for him and Fred:

These two men have lived together long enough that their love no longer depends upon whatever sexual interactions they have. Neither is there any problem of hurt feelings when Len "does his thing." I was at their home for dinner a few months ago, when Len described his most recent exploit. He did this in Augie's presence, and far from displaying any ill will, his spouse contributed a few details when Len omitted them. I think the experience

illustrates the ease with which the two of them maintain their nearly ideal marriage combination.

Despite his conservative bull-elephant bellowing and belligerence, I remember Larry fondly. He was my dear friend minus sex. At the beginning of our relationship, before I knew many details of his biography, he screamed at me only once when he telephoned and his Caller ID came up on my landline, and in my surprise I asked him, “Who’s Irvin Bernhard?” He shouted, “You’ve been snooping!” So said the Air Force spy. (With Larry, your mileage could vary.) I hadn’t been snooping, not even as a journalist: “It came up from your phone.” “Fred was supposed to have changed that ID on this line years ago!” I knew he had a birth name, but I was fine knowing him by his chosen name. He apologized next day by fax, and the incident warmed our relationship. In LA, he finally got my San Francisco message that we were to be friends, never frenemies. What was interesting is that he believed his birth name was some kind of a fraternal secret even though, as a point of local controversy, it had been published many times in the LA press, but that was long before there was an internet where nothing is hidden. And what difference did it make?

So, what about the heart of this man born conservative who served as a government spy and then studied *us*? On January 29, 1975, he wrote in his “We, A People” column in *The Advocate* that he was miffed when readers dismissed him as a “Communist SOB.”

He admitted that

they had, however, made an interesting point. As a life-long Republican, who had yet to change party affiliation, I was regarded by the “radicals” as being just slightly to the right of Attila the Hun...and by gay activists who thought all gayfolk should be “left-wingers”....Now let me make it clear that I do not consider our early activists to be disreputable. I disagree very strongly with the politics of some, if not most, but I respect their courage. All of us are benefitting...from the developments that are following their initial breakthroughs...that could not

have come to pass if someone had not broken the ice and started the whole thing going...

People tend to use the labels “conservative” or “liberal,” “Democrat” or “Republican.” Yet these no longer define any absolutes (if, in fact, they ever did).

He ended with a grand finale. “While we seem to have found more friends in one party more than the other,” he declared in precise words, “there are good guys in both.”

If there is a lesson in the cautionary tale of the life of Larry Townsend, it bears repeating that gay men must be careful like straight men not to become angry old men.

In 2008, his professional life was ending as stridently as it had begun with a distrust of politically-correct politics and publishers who wanted to “steal his writing.” He thought of himself as a keen part of the LA entertainment industry with its focus on intellectual property and copyright disputes. Thirty-three years before, establishing his lifelong affinity for lawyers whom he clung to, he had bought ad space in *The Advocate* of July 19, 1975, to vent his ire, and piss on his territory. Headlined “Don’t Be Ripped-Off,” his 1975 anger foreshadowed his 2008 lawsuit against piracy of his work.

At the present time, four imitations of my privately printed *Treasures of S&M* are being widely distributed mostly through the eastern...United States. I would like my gay leather brothers to know that these are not authorized editions, despite the fact that my name appears on some of them. They are lacking large portions of my original material, and...the [Mafia] hoods who ripped them off used heavier paper to make the books look thicker, but they are little more than half the length of the originals.

[He then jumped on the marketing opportunity.] Although I do not normally advertise my private-edition materials, I feel I must do so now to offer my readers an alternative. [He then listed several bookstores and distributors and wrote in ALL CAPS:] THESE ARE THE ONLY LEGAL, AUTHORIZED OUTLETS FOR

MY MATERIAL. [For his big finish, he added in ALL CAPS under his written signature] AND A “P.S.” TO THE HOODLUMS: All of my materials have now been reprinted with copyrights. If you steal anything from me again, I will file a complaint with the FBI.

In 2006, Larry, Jeanne, John Embry, and I mobilized to fight off one ravaging wolf of a Midwestern publisher-distributor who, disregarding copyrights, thought that *Drummer*, out of print since 1999, had become gay community property he could reprint and sell the way Larry’s books had often been pirated. At that time, Jeanne Barney wrote me about Larry’s disarray:

I know that even Larry can’t remember what he published and when—when so many were published so frequently under so many different titles.

Because of this, I began urging Larry to do his housekeeping and to write a bibliography of his feature articles, columns, interviews, books, and photography. It seemed he hadn’t updated his records since his first listings of his novels in Chapter 15 of his 1972 *Handbook*. Mourning Fred’s death, he was not in the mood to tally his own life’s work while his personal life as a dependent, disoriented, and despondent widower fell apart.

In 1972, Larry also began writing the first of his hundreds of mail-order brochures whose catalogue lists can provide a bibliography with vintage thumbnails written by the author.

GL 142. *The Gooser*. \$2.95. First gay novel by Larry Townsend. A mad tale with a touch of humor set during the American Revolution. (Original title: *The Gay Adventure of Captain Goose*)

GL 150 and GL 149. *Leather Ad :”M”* and *Leather Ad “S.”* \$2.95 each. A leathersex double-header. Two young men place ads in an underground paper, one as “M,” one as “S.” Reviewed and recommended by *GAY* (NY) and called the “primers of S&M” by *The Advocate*

PR 259. *Billy's Club*. \$1.50. A brutal saga of hustlers, murder, and rough sex; set in contemporary Hollywood. (The author's best?)

So on June 27, 2007, in order to activate Larry's responsible self-defense, I wrote to my acquaintance Sam Streit at the John Hay Library at Brown University:

Last January in Los Angeles, Mark and I over a five-day period at various restaurants extolled to Larry Townsend the virtues of you and Brown—especially since his partner of forty-four years, Fred Yerkes, died suddenly last July 7, 2006. Apparently our conversation and continuing advice has percolated in the intervening months, and LT called tonight asking for your phone number.... We told him the general info of our good experiences with you and Brown about which he asked specifically to reassure himself... LT, as advised, is interested in leaving Brown the copyright to his works, etc....So I thought to give you his email so you could make contact. I also gave him your email; but he prefers telephone. To be proper, I have cleared this with him so there are no surprises. He is heartily looking forward to getting your email and/or a call.

Sam responded that same day:

As to Larry Townsend, I'll be happy to talk with him. Curiously, and I wonder if he has forgotten this, we had an ongoing relationship with him for a number of years. He sent us copies of most of his publications (though not films) and sent us new ones as they came out. But, the most recent imprint date seems to be 2003. As you know he is pretty prolific and we have almost 120 entries for him in the library's online catalog. In fact, we quite spiced up the national bibliographic databases by contributing cataloging data for his various works. In any event, I'll be in touch.

I responded minutes later:

So nice to read your words. LT wants to take his relationship to you beyond where it has been in order to fund larger matters such as Brown owning the copyrights to keep his work in print on page or online forever. My Mark Henry, after much convincing of The Townsend, will be building a simple website for LT later this summer; Mark has had LT prepping his own materials for the last five months. In January, for instance, Mark photographed all of LT's many literary awards to help toward the end of illustrating the site.

A week later on July 4, 2007, I urged Larry:

By the way, have you thought anymore about “The Papers of Larry Townsend” which could be twenty linear feet comprising unsorted boxes and files of original mss, letters, photographs, drawings, etc. collected and archived at John Hay Library Brown U? And your endowment with funds for your papers so they can be collected, shipped, and catalogued by a hired graduate student. Just following up because your life's work is so valuable and such a window into both leather and the LA gay scene since the 1950s. A treasure trove to be mined during the next hundred years plus. Sam Streit is the man at John Hay, Brown, to talk to. Call if you like. We always love to hear your voice.

Archive placement was important to him, but he was conflicted. He had heard the rumors of politically-correct separatist staff and volunteers purging LGBT archives of both gay male and S&M material. Because of his lifetime of harassment and discrimination, he had reasons to believe the gossip. He figured queer life was continuing to conspire against him even as his sun was setting. In his depression, he could not motivate himself to commit his life's work to any institution. Nor, for that matter, could Jeanne. In 2020, her archives were scattered to the winds of eBay.