

## 25

**LAST BRUNCH AT CASA DEL MAR  
SANTA MONICA  
JUNE 1, 2008**

On Sunday, June 1, 2008, in the fifth-last week before Larry collapsed into two unconscious weeks in Intensive Care, Mark and I walked down the strand of sandy beach from the Santa Monica Pier and the Hotel California to the Hotel Casa del Mar where the Navy housed enlisted sailors during the World War. It was there Larry met us for brunch and introduced his friend Derrick who was a quiet older man and avid hiker who would soon on July 13 drive the dying Larry the three miles from his home to Cedars-Sinai Hospital Emergency, two miles from the French Quarter restaurant. Larry tried to be congratulatory that my gay history book—much of which was, because of his and Jeanne’s contributions, about him and her as well as their pals Embry, Legrand, and Earl—had won a ForeWord Small Press Best LGBT Nonfiction Award at the BEA. It ticked him a bit because he felt the ForeWord Award had a certain out-of-the-ghetto cachet he envied in that its discernment came, he judged, not from the usual gay-award circuit party of vested comrades, consorts, and cronies, but from independent critics, staff, and judges at a straight literary magazine.

If it was jealousy of the kind slapped out by his circle of French Quarter accomplices, he, with his own several book awards, was trying to be very careful to tamp that emotion down because his long list of friends had become a short list, and he didn’t want to lose his brokered link to Jeanne. He ought to have been pleased because he and she and I for the previous two years had been close with our heads together about the oral-history content of my book.

At that brunch on the last day of the BEA, a mere seven street miles from the French Quarter, he could not help but grumble and stew about his lawsuit. Because he again asked our opinion, we both urged him, perhaps too politely in front of his friend, to stop the suit because it would destroy his reputation.

The “S&M High Priest” listened, staring out the big glass windows at the ocean, like the defeated and defrocked fallen priest in *Night of the Iguana* contemplating a long final swim to China, and said nothing. So we changed the subject and reminded him we were to be married on June 20. It brought a smile back to his face, and, as our little procession left the restaurant, we took pictures of each other standing on the grand staircase at Casa del Mar.

We did not know we were witnessing the Passion and Death of Larry Townsend. None of us knew then that we would never see each other again, and I’m glad we hugged and kissed goodbye.

On June 8, I wrote to Jeanne:

Larry called today to make sure he was still in our good graces after ignoring the book award....He wants us to design his books and promote him [in contests]...and yet he himself rarely bothers to enter contests because he thinks he’s either beyond competing, or that he might not win, when the irony is he actually could win if he would organize himself....I fear he will be very sorry for naming all the bookstores as defendants in his vainglorious lawsuit against Herbert at Nazca Plains Publishing. For pennies, and for revenge, he risks losing the good will of book buyers in the ever-shrinking world of gay bookstores. It is a kind of King Lear Madness, but I cannot deliver him from his diktats about how the world is shit.

On June 13, back in Northern California a week before our wedding, a pickup truck crashed T-bone into Mark and me in our parked Volvo precisely next to the seatbelt strapped over my right shoulder. It was like a small bomb went off. Glass blew everywhere. Mark, in his seatbelt, was thrown against the steering wheel, but unhurt. I was trapped inside the car by the smashed

door, and almost instantly, a dreamy young fireman reaching in through the window was holding my dazed head and telling me to stop moving, and I said, “I can’t surrender,” and he held my face tight in his hands, and said, “No one likes to give up control.”

Holding my head steady, he asked an old question that suddenly that summer had a very new answer. Pointing at Mark, he said, “Who’s he to you?” I said, “My husband.” He said, “Cool.”

And he pulled me out the window of the wreckage and sent me off with EMTs in an ambulance. What wedding doesn’t have its ups and downs? The accident triggered Jeanne and Larry’s feelings. That day, she wrote: “I love you both so very much.” For our June 20 wedding, Larry sent us grooms a bouquet of fifty red roses.

He must have enjoyed our previous visit, because on June 25, he invited us to please drive back to LA to go with him to the 4th of July Car Show he attended annually in Santa Barbara, but we were still too shaken by the accident to drive so soon on freeways. He went anyway, with Derrick, and came home complaining he couldn’t breathe.

On June 27, Jeanne, stressed by her own illness, penned a sad picture of the self-disappearing “Daughter of the Elephant Girl” whose wilting and withering worried Larry, the “Son of a Spy,” who felt his “leather wife” was a mirror of his own decline. She wrote to me:

Incidentally, this is apt to be my last communication for awhile. I am in severe pain about 50% of the time; merely uncomfortable the other 50%, and deeply depressed... about the state of the country/world all the time. I simply have no energy. [She could not be there for him, nor he for her.] I am having the same problem with my right arm as my left. Plus, those crippling headaches have been coming out of nowhere, for no apparent reason, and laying me low for up to 36 hours....Before my spine collapsed and my leg died, I was able to wear four-to-five-inch heels...now, of course, [wearing them] I would look like a troll.

Like Didion characters, they were a done, done, and undone Los Angeles couple divorcing while straddling fault lines at the end of things.

Jeanne mused:

I increasingly think of my mother's last weeks and the comment of the hospice workers about "Failure to Thrive." I find myself slipping into that place and must fight very hard to stay away. This requires making some major changes as I am able.

That same day I responded to her and mentioned how our suitcases were packed because north of San Francisco we were on notice to be ready to evacuate because of the worsening climate firestorm raging in the forests near our home, and that we were hoping the air would be clear and clean enough for the San Francisco Pride Parade, celebrating gay marriage, the following Sunday.

On June 28, Larry emailed good wishes, and distress:

Jack. Just got the new *Gay San Francisco* book. It looks great. (Do you know this is the first time we have been under the covers together?) Other news: After 25 years, *Honcho* is dropping my column. Claim they can't afford to pay me. Ah, well, that's the way of it. Durk [Dehner] should send out the press release [publicizing supportive news of the lawsuit]. So far, no response from that a-hole [publisher] in TX. [And then he mentioned his latest disability impacting his writing.] My hands are worse than ever, but fortunately the voice recognition software is working. [He closed on a love note of affection.] Hope you are both recovering from the after-effects of the accident, the excitement of your marriage, life in general. All best wishes to you both. Love, Larry

It was sad to be a witness to their suffering, and to their competition in the crying game. Because their distress continued to distress me, Mark reassured it was okay that these suffering elders, this estranged Hollywood couple, was using me as a plot

device, a go-between, as in “Tell your friend LT.” Jeanne’s emails to me were really emails to Larry. It helped that she and he were gracious about my stenography of their words. Jeanne gave enthusiastic permission to quote her in my books. She wrote, “Quote me! Quote me!” about sharing her emails and thirty hours of taped conversations. Two years earlier when I was researching and writing *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, I had asked her for her personal experiences around leather life in Los Angeles, and she, a woman scorned and still smarting from her erasure by Faderman and Timmons’ in *Gay L.A.*, wrote on September 5, 2006: “As for an eyewitness, that would be me.”