

*Excerpt from the collaborative novel, Stuck*

*Carl Pelofsky*

*I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is 50% illusion.*

And that's what it was, I'm certain, 50% illusion. The other 50%, well, your guess is as good as mine, but it can be difficult to truly know. But I've thought about it, the illusion, the charm, the perspicacity? Is that the word? I can't be sure.

The spring and summer of 1968, I'm sure it was, because that's the year we lost Bobby Kennedy. On his way to the presidency, I'm quite certain, lost like his brother, tragically, and only a few months after Martin Luther King met his. But we all live each in our own bubble, don't we? I mean, that's what they say, isn't it? A bubble? So that's where I was, in my own bubble. The world collapsing around me, the country grieving and in turmoil. I knew about it, it's not like I wasn't aware, but it wasn't where my mind lived. My mind lived in the Half Moon Theatre, Poughkeepsie, New York. That's where I became a star.

It began a few years ago, when I met Sal, a part-time life insurance salesman and full-time dreamer. That's how he described himself. It was on his business card, something he had made at a novelty shop. I knew it was hokey, I knew he was a con-man, but a good con-man is good for a reason, and that was Sal. Full-time dreamer. I was 24, but even then I knew I was being taken for a ride. He would have been laughable had he not been so damned compelling, he would have been dismissed out of hand had I not been vulnerable, but as it was, I bought it all,

hook, line, sinker. Isn't that what they say? I think it is. It's a fishing thing, and I don't fish. Never have.

Sal was the kind of man who didn't photograph well. His kind of handsome couldn't be captured, couldn't be taken. But I had it, I knew it. And so I went with him, me and Sal, and its own way it was spectacular. Nothing genuine, nothing true, just sheer, reckless abandon. My own separation from all I knew to be of this world was deliberate, intentional, carefully crafted. I decided I would love him, and I decided I would love him for at least one year, but no more than three. And then I would return to this world, the world I knew, our world, the one that included feelings that Sal didn't acknowledge: disappointment, frustration, despair.

It was not surprising that Sal was chosen to direct the play at the Half Moon Theater. Who better to create and inspire a fiction than a man who knew nothing else? I had been in a few productions, mostly in school, a few at the First Presbyterian Church, one down in Hudson Valley. So to be cast in a lead role wasn't called into question much, at least not as far as I remember. I'm sure there were some who whispered when I wasn't around, about me and about Sal, but as far I can remember I never heard it, or even knew about it.

*Straight? What's 'straight'? A line can be straight, or a street. But the heart of a human being?*

Most of the work of the director happens early on, but I'm sure that's widely known, isn't it? People know that, I'm certain. The early spring, then, was Sal's time. His energy, his enthusiasm, his intense, critical eye, these qualities of Sal fueled us all. He asserted himself during rehearsal, bombarded us with notes after. He was meticulous. Nothing got past him.

From time to time we reminded ourselves that we were, in fact, performers at the Half Moon Theater in Poughkeepsie, and that we were 83 miles from the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway, but most of the time we didn't concern ourselves with that. That was Sal's doing really, the deception. Maybe that's too strong, maybe not deception, maybe delusion. Yes, I'm certain that's the word.

The show went up on May 5. I remember it like it was yesterday. It's not unusual for an actress to be nervous, we know, but *terrified* cast it more accurately. Yes, that was it: I was terrified. We played to a full house, family and friends, and could it be the *New York Times* theatre critic? Not likely, but certainly possible. One never knows. The Half Moon would occasionally find its way onto its pages.

It was about three o'clock when we realized that Sal wasn't in the theatre.

Compulsive, he seemed to work around the clock. We wondered when he found the time to attend to his day job, his clients, their lives. We believed he was being

paid to direct the show, but pennies no doubt. Nothing to live on. But now, the day of the opening, he was nowhere to be found.

Maybe he ran to get something to eat, we thought. There was a deli a block away, the Poughkeepsie Stage, a copy of the more famous Manhattan establishment, that Sal frequented. Maybe he was there, we thought. We milled about, ran lines, simulated the blocking backstage. Some found the Yankees game on the television, anything for a distraction. And then thirty minutes before curtain, the crowd began to make its way in. There was a buzz, a palpable excitement, and again, I reminded myself, 83 miles, 83 miles. But when you are in the moment, whether it's at the Ethel Barrymore, the Half Moon, the First Pres, it doesn't matter. 83 miles is a minute. It's a breath, a step, close enough to touch. Where was Sal? It didn't matter to us anymore. Full-time dreamer, that's what the card said.

*What you are talking about is desire - just brutal Desire. The name of that rattle-trap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another.*