

Dragonflies on the Stairs

GARY PEDLER

It was the only Victorian left on the block. On either side stood apartment buildings, one from the turn of the last century, the other from the nineteen eighties, both nondescript in different ways. These filled their lots completely, running right up to the sidewalk, while the Victorian was set back, leaving enough room for a camellia bush and some roses. The blank sides of the two buildings created a box into which the smaller structure fit, and it seemed all the more beautiful, with its delicate corbels and dentils and finials, in contrast with its plainer, bulkier neighbors. The house was boldly colored, the main body yellow, white on the bay windows and trim, small amounts of blue and green on the moldings and panels. During the day, it was a house that made passersby turn and look, especially now in December when the camellia was in bloom. More like a tree than a bush, rising up almost to the second story, the camellia was covered with pink blossoms and pressed up against the house like a bouquet against a woman's breast.

On this winter evening, the house didn't draw much attention, the prolonged twilight of the streetlamps draining it of most of its color. Through the leaves of the camellia, an observer could glimpse the rooms on the first floor—pictures on walls, brass chandeliers with curving arms hanging from the high ceilings—and a person moving about, circling something, perhaps a table, and arranging things there.

"You'd better keep an eye out for them." Carl, the cook in the household, was in the kitchen preparing a sauce for the halibut. "It's hard to see the numbers on the door at night."

"I'm sure they can find us," Alan said. He took up a post in a chair in the bay window all the same. He didn't want to watch for their guests, but even less did he wish to run the risk of being proven wrong later and having Carl say, I told you so. Who exactly was he keeping an eye out for, anyway? A man he hadn't seen in thirty years and a woman he'd never met. Alan watched a couple pass under the streetlight. He tried to make out the man's features, the realized he was too young. So many people nowadays were too young, much younger than he.

Another couple emerged from the right, where he couldn't see as well because of the camellia, and started up the front steps.

"Hello, stranger!" Alan cried, opening the door.

Louis presented Alan with two bottles of wine, one red, one white. "I wasn't sure what we were having for dinner," he explained.

Rona gave him a small gold box. "An early Christmas present," she said.

Alan deposited the bottles and the box on the hall table, then asked if he could take their coats. Carl always complained about his not doing this promptly. "You keep guests standing around in the hall forever," he would scold. But so often there were complications, in this case, the wine and the gift.

"What would you like to drink?" Alan asked. "We have white wine open, or I can open your red." This was the other thing he never did soon enough, according to Carl, offer guests something to drink. The guests obligingly chose white.

Joining them and being introduced, Carl said he would get the wine, Alan should entertain their guests. Mixed messages, Alan thought. Sometimes Carl wanted him to perform these sorts of tasks, and at other time, for reasons that weren't always clear, he decided to take them on himself.

"Here's to old friends." Alan extended his glass toward Louis when they were all seated in the living room. "And to new ones," he added with a nod to Rona.

While they sipped their wine, Alan thought, I hope this wasn't a mistake. He'd found Louis' name last spring on a website that helped former high school classmates get in touch with each other. Within hours of sending him an e-mail, Louis shot back a long, enthusiastic response. He seemed pleased to hear from his old friend and said he'd tried to discover Alan's whereabouts for years but never managed to. When Louis had driven up from Southern California to Napa for Thanksgiving, he and Alan used this chance to see each other again. Yet Alan was aware Louis was talking the least of the four and seemed strangely subdued. Now Louis stared at him for a long moment and said, "You look exactly the same."

"Do I?"

"Exactly." Louis managed a smile. "You must have a picture of yourself stashed in the attic."

Alan smiled back. "Like Dorian Gray?" He enjoyed being told he looked young for his age, but not through a comparison with this particular figure.

"It's uncanny, isn't it?" Carl said. "I'm aging fast, and Alan just stays the same year after year. No one believes he's forty-five."

“What do you think, Louis? If I traveled back in time and took a seat in Ms. Felker’s English class, anyone would notice?” A vision of the classroom rose in Alan’s mind: the green chalkboard, the rows of desks with seats attached, the other kids, loud, rambunctious. Ms. Felker stood at the front, her short hair, boyish manner, and unmarried status suggesting something about her in retrospect he hadn’t grasped at the time.

“You could almost get away with it,” Louis said.

Alan wished he could return the compliment, telling Louis he looked just the same, too, but he couldn’t. Not that Louis looked bad. His hair had receded, but he wasn’t actually bald. His brown eyes were bright, intelligent. The thin mustache and goatee were becoming, though this look had gone out of style in San Francisco several years ago, and it was now mainly blue collar workers, whom fashion trends seemed to reach last, who had goatees. Louis had grown rather stout, his stomach curving out, but he carried his extra weight well enough. He was nicely, if unadventurously, dressed in khaki pants and a dark blue shirt. The Gap, thought Alan, or Banana Republic. His voice, too, had changed. Alan remembered it as the voice of someone always excited and amused (to be amused had probably been their main interest at thirteen, fourteen), or ready to become so if given the least bit of help. Now it was level, adult, conventional.

“You have a beautiful home,” Rona said. Her eyes roamed around the double parlor, over the marble mantelpiece, the oriental carpets, the sherry-colored curtains, the prints and engravings on the walls. “You always hear how even a shack in the Bay Area costs half a million dollars. How did you manage to buy a place like this?”

Alan took a close look at Rona. The face of an aging girl rather than a ripening woman; straight, lackluster brown hair that, as a gay man, he longed to find a way to redeem; a sweet smile she made use of a little too often. "A lot of good luck," he said, "and a bit of a slump in the real estate market."

"The problem is," Carl said, "this place is worth so much now, if Alan and I broke up, we'd have to sell it. Neither of us could possibly afford to buy out the other."

"That's the only thing that keeps us together," Alan joked, "the high price of real estate."

Louis managed to stop staring at Alan long enough to take in his surroundings. "These Victorians are great." His gaze moved upward. "I love the high ceilings."

"I don't think I'd be happy living in anything else," Alan said. "Sometimes I just sit in one of the rooms and look at everything, all the wonderful details. I actually—" He broke off, about to say something too personal, but it would have been more awkward to retreat. "I hug the house sometimes." The others chuckled. "I do, I hug the side of a window, a door jamb. I just love this house. I thank it for being here, for being so beautiful."

"I used to know a guy who lived in a Victorian on Masonic," Louis said. "I always liked spending time there."

"An old house comes with these wonderful little mysteries, like why one of the banister railings is upside down."

Carl shot Alan a surprised glance. "I never noticed that."

"It even has dragonflies on the stairs."

Carl made first a puzzled sound, then one of comprehension.

“There are dragonflies etched on the glass panels on the front door,” Alan explained, “and when the streetlights are lit at night, you see them on the stairs. I’ll show you later.”

“Is there a ghost?” Rona widened her blue eyes, eager to be scared.

“No, not yet,” Carl said dryly. “I think Alan will be the first and only ghost. I’m sure no one in the long history of this house has been as attached to it as he is. The only way he’ll leave this place for good is feet first.”

Louis and Rona exchanged a glance at this, unsure how to respond. Alan and Carl’s Siamese cat sauntered into the room, providing a welcome distraction.

“Such a pretty kitty!” Rona bent down and extended her hand. “What’s its name?”

“Fiona,” Carl said.

“I’m glad I’m not the only female present! You’ll be my ally then, won’t you, Fiona?”

Sometimes Fiona took an interest in guests, other times she didn’t. Tonight, she failed even to break her stride. With a disdainful glance at Louis and Rona, she sauntered out of the room, not to be seen again for the rest of the evening.

“You guys own a house, too, don’t you?” Alan said.

“Yes, but it’s just a tract house,” Louis said.

“I don’t imagine there are many Victorians in Thousand Oaks,” Carl remarked.

“No. Tract houses are basically it.”

“I want to see it anyway,” Alan said. “Did you bring pictures?”

“They’re right here.” Rona fished several envelopes out of her purse and passed a photograph to Alan.

Looking at the picture, Alan discovered their home was, indeed, just a tract house. The garage was disproportionately large and thrust toward the street as if it were the most important feature. Beyond a big, useless, water-guzzling front lawn, the rest of the house shrank from contact with the outside world, with no front porch and small windows on the street. The photograph included enough of the houses on either side to show they were virtually the same—the worst crime of all in Alan’s mind.

In the photograph, Louis and Rona stood before the front door flanked by two children, an Irish setter sprawled at their feet. “That’s Sabina,” Rona said, “and that’s Oliver, or Ollie, as we call him, and that’s Goofus, our crazy dog.” Everyone in the family, including Goofus, wore a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt. “This is the picture we used on our Christmas cards last year. We always have a theme. I was thinking maybe we’ll do cowboy shirts this time.”

More photographs of the children followed. Ollie practicing his trombone, Sabina in her cheerleader’s outfit, Ollie’s thirteenth birthday party, Sabina’s sixth grade graduation. Carl looked at these politely, but as Rona produced more and more, Alan imagined a gauge in his partner’s mind that read, “Interest dangerously low.” Fortunately, Louis intervened with, “OK, Rona, we know you could talk all night about our terrific son and daughter, but let’s move on.”

Removing photographs from another envelope, Rona said, “These are of the trip we took this summer. We started out in Las Vegas.”

“Oh, Las Vegas,” Alan said. His eyes fell on an image of the Hotel Paris, with shrunken replicas of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe squeezed up against the standard Las Vegas megalith. When

Alan had visited Las Vegas with Carl a couple of years ago, he'd expected it to be like Disneyland, tacky, but fun. Instead, he found it tacky and not nearly as fun as it imagined itself.

"Where did you stay?" Carl asked.

"The Rio Suites," Rona said. "That's our favorite hotel there. Every room is a suite. We love having all that space."

"I hate Las Vegas," muttered Louis. Alan looked at his old friend in surprise. That was exactly what he'd wanted to say, but it had seemed impolitic.

"Well, that's where your son and daughter want to go on their twenty-first birthdays, to Las Vegas," Rona said tartly.

"Is it?" Louis looked surprised.

"They say they want to go somewhere they can drink and gamble the minute they're of age." To Alan and Carl, "Las Vegas is fantastic. I go there with a few girlfriends for what we call Sluts Weekends. You should see us carrying on. I love that you can go out at three in the morning, and there are still people walking around everywhere, heading places."

"It's like New York," Carl said, who had enjoyed Las Vegas much more than Alan, "a city that never sleeps."

"You have trip pictures, too, I understand," Rona said.

"Why don't we look at them after dinner?" Alan wasn't so sure now that he wanted to show his guests pictures of the trip he and Carl had taken to France that fall. He didn't want them to feel he was showing off. You saw the Hotel Paris, and we saw the real thing.

A quarter of an hour later, they were seated in the dining room. This was Alan's favorite room in the house. A cabinet filled with

books stood against one wall. Its glass doors reflected the dining table set with Carl's china and the silver Alan had inherited from his grandmother. The four people at the table looked at each other. The pair of candles that provided the only light in the room seemed to watch them in turn, like two bright eyes. Outside in the windy night, the camellia caressed the front of the house, making little rubbing and scratching sounds. One pink blossom pressed against the window, as if kissing it. Beyond the soft sphere of candlelight, leaf shadows swept back and forth across the floor. A vent in the wall exhaled waves of warm air.

"Tell me more about what's happening with your job," Alan said to Louis. "The software company you work for just got bought out, right?"

"Yeah, the usual whale swallowing the minnow scenario. Ibex told us they weren't going to make any changes in our department, but of course once the sale was over, it was clear they were going to change just about everything."

Louis spoke more readily about this subject than any other, yet he talked in a way that made Alan feel kept out of his friend's mind rather than let in. His words were a smooth hard surface, and Alan's attention slipped off. Louis had asked Alan scarcely a single question about himself. After staring at him at the beginning of the evening, Louis tended not to look at him much, his eyes more often directed at Carl. Alan had made a point of mentioning "my partner Carl" in his first e-mail. Now he wondered if Louis wasn't comfortable with his being gay.

He and Louis used to inhabit essentially the same world. They'd lived in the same town, gone to the same school, had many of the

same friends, watched the same silly shows on television. As adults, their worlds seemed very different. Maybe seeing Louis again hadn't been a good idea, and he should have left their friendship in the past where it belonged.

Alan asked how it had been for Louis to be back in Napa over the holiday.

"I feel like an outsider there," Louis said sadly.

"That's how it is for me, too," Alan said. "When I walk around downtown, I expect to see a familiar face, but of course, I never do. I hardly know anyone who lives in Napa now."

Soon, Alan and Louis were reminiscing about their days in junior high.

"Remember that awful student teacher we had in English, Mr. Lane," Alan said, excited, "and how he made us write a vocabulary list every week, and we started doing ones with fake words and fake definitions, and he didn't catch on for the longest time?"

"Do you still have that spoof of *TV Guide* you wrote? I thought that was so funny. I could never have done anything that clever." Louis had that let's-make-each-other laugh gleam in his eye that Alan had relished when they were young.

"I'm sure it would seem incredibly lame if we read it now."

"I bet it wouldn't," Louis said. "You were always really smart. I made a point of noticing what books you were reading and tried to read a lot of them myself."

"You did?" Alan hadn't known this.

"Sure. It's because of you I read the entire *Forsyte Saga*."

Carl threw up his hands. "Oh my God, you must hate him for making you slog through that!"

“You’re the reason I took French in ninth grade. I said to myself, ‘If Alan is going to take French, it must be the best plan.’”

Again, Alan was surprised. “Is that true?”

Rona checked her watch. “Guys, it’s great watching you two stroll down memory lane, but we should leave soon. We’ve got to get up early tomorrow for the long lovely ride back to Southern Cal.”

Alan was disappointed. It had only been toward the end of the evening, when he and Louis talked about their shared past, that he sensed a glimmer of their old connection.

Before Louis left, there was one thing Alan wanted to be sure he said to him. “I apologize for not answering the letter you sent me after we went away to college. That was rude. Rude and just plain stupid.” He saw in his mind’s eye the two pages of Louis’ careful handwriting on binder paper, caught the faintly jocular tone. By college, he’d considered Louis a figure from the parochial home-town life he’d left behind. He was out in the larger world and thought he would meet other people who would be more worth having as friends, people who were smarter, more talented, better-looking. Over the years, he would find the larger world didn’t yield these superior friends as readily as he’d imagined.

“Don’t worry about it,” Louis said gently. “That was a long time ago.”

“Carl,” Rona said, “you must give me the recipe for that eggplant soup.” Carl said he would write it out for her, and she followed him into the kitchen. The two old friends were left alone. In the silence that followed, Alan brushed at the bread crumbs on his placemat.

“How are things with your job?” Louis asked.

At last, Louis was showing an interest in his present life. “You’re

not the only one whose work involves computers. That's what I seem to spend most of my time doing at the library, showing people how to use them. That and keeping the homeless people in line."

"When you told me you were a librarian, I thought, the perfect job for Alan, all peaceful and orderly."

Alan shepherded the crumbs into a small box-shaped area. "Is that the best reason to take a job, though, because it suits you? What if you have all sorts of limitations, and the job just reinforces them?"

A small laugh from Louis. "So, you think you should have become a trapeze artist instead?"

Alan frowned, looking at the placemat. Who am I?, he wanted to ask Louis. Can you give me any help figuring that out?

At forty-five, Alan knew he couldn't change into a completely different person, but he did want to go back to being more like the one he used to be. Louis had known him when he was sassy, self-confident, before the grinding down of his teenage years. Louis had been his best friend then, and Alan hoped that young self still lived in his mind. He wanted Louis to tell a story about him at that age, one good story with some lines of dialogue, a telling moment of behavior, hopefully about some event he himself didn't even remember. Then, he thought, he would see that young self more clearly, have a sharper sense of its reality. He didn't ask Louis to tell such a story, however, afraid this would seem odd, narcissistic.

"Carl seems nice," Louis said. "Very smart."

Alan gazed at the window, which gave back a watery reflection of the room, their two faces. "Carl is one of the brightest people I've ever met," he said. I just wish I were truly in love with him, he

wanted to add, or that I had been at some point in our relationship. A *mariage blanc*, the French called it, safe, stable, but with all the passion bleached out. Another situation in which he'd chosen something that suited him. "Rona seems nice. Very good-hearted."

"She saved my life," Louis said solemnly. "I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't met her. I was in such a dark place when we met."

Alan gazed into Louis's brown eyes and thought of the story his old friend had told in that first e-mail of dropping out of school, his failed first marriage. In some ways, he guessed, the saving was still going on, day by day.

Before they could say anything more, the spouses returned. Louis asked if he could use the bathroom before they left. Carl offered to show him where it was and give him a quick tour of the upstairs. Alan stood in the doorway to the dining room and listened to Rona talk about what school was like for her children.

"Kids have to do so much homework now, even in elementary school. At least ours are lucky enough to have Louis to help them. I certainly can't. When they ask me a question, I usually have to say, 'Talk to your father. He's the smart one.'"

"I'm sure you have your own things to offer," Alan said.

Rona brought out that smile again, though this time the sweetness was cut by something slightly sour. "I'm glad you think so, Alan. I'll have you talk to Louis the next time he needs to be convinced."

Time passed, and still Louis and Carl didn't come down. Alan wondered if they'd gotten into some kind of argument, but this seemed unlikely. He could hear their voices off and on, speaking in

normal tones, though he couldn't make out the words. Finally, the two men came down. Carl directed a smile at Alan he found difficult to interpret.

A flurry of end-of-the-evening remarks. "Thank you so much for the wonderful dinner," "Our pleasure," "Drive carefully." Alan had a glimpse of Louis and Rona walking up the street, a chip of white moon overhead.

"Well!" Carl exclaimed, closing the front door. "That was an interesting evening."

"Did you think so?" Alan had expected him to say he'd been bored.

Carl amended himself. "Some of it was interesting. Like the fact that your old friend Louis is bisexual."

Alan had started down the hall. At this, he stopped and turned. "Bisexual?"

"It was pretty clear he was attracted to me, for starters," Carl said. "Didn't you notice the way he couldn't take his eyes off me the whole evening? Then when I was showing him around upstairs, he seemed nervous to be alone with me, but at the same time he clearly wanted to keep the conversation going."

"What did you talk about?" Alan asked. They moved into the kitchen, where Alan started putting away the leftovers.

"The house, mainly. He said how much he loved Victorians, how he'd always wanted to live in one. That's a dead give-away right there. What completely straight man ever says he always wanted to live in a Victorian?"

"Come on," Alan said, still not convinced. "You think so much in stereotypes."

"I'm pretty sure one of the paths in life Louis didn't take was to become gay and live in a Victorian in San Francisco."

Alan shot Carl a skeptical look. Still, he knew that some of his partner's pronouncements, far-fetched at first glance, did turn out to be true.

"Then we talked about you," Carl said.

"Oh?" Alan was on guard.

"For one thing, Louis told me he'd always wanted to read your journal when you were young. 'Alan was always writing in his journal,' he said. I imagine he was mainly interested in finding out what you were writing about *him* and whether you had a crush on him, too."

"What do you mean?"

Carl let out a sigh and gobbled up the fragment of chocolate cake someone had left on a plate.

"Sweetheart, it must have been obvious even to your feeble brain that Louis used to have a big crush on you. He read books because you were reading them, he took French because you were taking it, he thought you were so clever and so this and so that."

Alan stopped ladling the soup into a container. The possibility of Louis having a crush on him had never entered his mind.

"If Louis had a crush on me, why was he ogling you the whole evening?"

"Maybe he felt he had a clean slate with me. You'd already rejected him, after all, back when you had your hair in pigtails."

Alan turned the kaleidoscope of memory so the shards assumed a different pattern. He pictured Louis and him at thirteen, eating lunch on the lawn near the Ninth Grade Bench; saw Louis look at him,

laugh gleefully at something he said. Had he looked and listened with love? Had Louis paid him the kind of obsessive, dotting attention he himself had lavished on Frank Sitwell, Sam Scholes? The thought made him sad and happy at the same time; sad that he hadn't answered that last letter in college, even guiltier than before. But happy, too, flattered, touched. Perhaps Louis had told him a sort of story about himself after all.

Arms folded, Carl stood in the doorway to the kitchen looking out at the double parlor. "Just think, if things had gone differently, you could have been living in your beloved Victorian with Louis instead of me. And maybe it wouldn't make that much difference. The house is your true love, after all."

Alan gave an irritable rap to the colander he was clearing of vegetable debris. "You're the one who wanted us to buy a house."

Carl gave him a look compounded of love and resentment. "I had to find a gilded cage to put you in," he said quietly, "or you might have flown off." Then, turning away, "Good night, Alley." One of his many nicknames for him, coined in their happier days.

Alan turned away, too, saying, "Goodnight, Carly."

After he'd put all the dishes to soak, Alan turned off the kitchen light and passed through the dark living room, the dining room. These rooms weren't truly dark, only darkened, for with the curtains open, the streetlights cast a pale light on the walls, the shadows of the camellia foaming over it. Alan loved the house most at times like this. Its furnishings dissolved in the gloom, the particular colors it was painted, all the things that came and went over the years. At night, he could sense the house in its most enduring form, the shapes of the

rooms, the solidity of walls and ceilings, the openings of windows and doorways.

Alan paused at the foot of the stairs. Falling through the glass panels on the front door, the streetlights painted magic-lantern images on several of the white risers, faint and slightly blurred. First a lily pad with a snail at its base; above, a half-dozen pairs of dragonflies, some bending to the right, some to the left, a couple diving straight up or down. He was sorry he'd forgotten to show these to Louis and Rona. As if to make up for this, he spent a moment contemplating them himself. Then his eyes drifted up the stairs, up the steep wooden flight that turned sharply near the top and dissolved in the gloom. He pictured all the people who might have used these stairs in the long life of the house. A woman in a gown of stiff black silk. Another in a short tight skirt from the Twenties. A man in a World War II uniform. An Eisenhower-era businessman in a suit. A Flower Child in love beads and bare feet. The house had been passed from one of these figures to another, as he would have to pass it on himself one day—if Carl was right, only after he was dead. *We'll have to sell the house then!* That was Carl's first threat whenever one of their break-up-or-stay-together fights, more frequent lately, reached a certain pitch. His first threat, and the only one he needed to make. *Sell the house.*

Bending down, Alan caught one of the dragonflies of light on the palm of his hand. For the first time, he could imagine one of his arguments with Carl taking a different direction, imagine himself saying, "All right, we'll sell the house if we have to, we'll just sell it." He resisted the temptation to let his hand close over the dragonfly, to

feign capture, possession; instead, he let it slide off intact. Before him, the figures silently ascended and descended the stairs like the angels on Jacob's ladder, overlapping in ghostly fashion. Placing one hand on the smooth varnished wood of the banister, he, too, began to climb. □