

A fictionalized memoir about the funny romance in summer stock performing. A would-be Romeo learns to avoid the local guys while trying to hook up with the local gals and to survive runaway horses and arrows. From international theater in Edinburgh, Scotland, to radio, TV and film, Cosgrove jumps from one-line parts to leading man and back again.

THE CAST IS DYED

by Don Cosgrove

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THE CAST IS DYED



DON COSGROVE

*A fantasy of charm and dreams.
A story we all wish we had lived ourselves.*

In The Cast Is Dyed, seasoned actor Don Cosgrove takes you to the beginnings of his wildly diverse career when he was playing a cavalry-soldier in Custer's army — at an outdoor historical summer theater in Mandan, North Dakota. A college kid from the big city (read South St. Paul), Don gets his first taste of the outside world, the craft of professional theater and the adventures to be had in the seventh largest city in North Dakota in the early '60s. In this semi-fictional actor's bildungsroman (a coming-of-age romance), a would-be Romeo (in both senses) learns to avoid the local guys while trying to hook up with the local gals and to survive runaway horses and an arrow to the chest while attempting to convert an outdoor drama into an artistic comedy. From the pastoral setting of Mandan to international theater in Edinburgh, Scotland, to radio, TV and film, Cosgrove jumps behind the scenes of a his broadly varied roles, from one-line parts to leading man and back again.

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CHAPTER ONE:
“ROMANTIC LEAD”

ACT ONE: Scene I:

TIME: 1960, early summer, first week of presenting the play

THE SCENE is the wings of a large outdoor amphitheater. A young man dressed in an 1870s U.S. cavalry uniform is peeking at the audience. He turns, notices and speaks to you.



So anyway here I am, a romantic lead of a big stage production, a professional actor who rode gloriously into an arena on the back of a splendidly prancing animal named Stars, who had pretty girls getting paid to make goo-goo eyes at him (you're wondering, at me or the horse, aren't you) strutting around in a uniform of a hero in the U.S. Army, destined to die a violent and dramatic death in a far wilderness outnumbered ten to one, surrounded by bloodthirsty enemies out after our scalps (as we were after theirs)... figuratively and literally.

I've searched out and picked up horse droppings backstage and relocated them onto the stage floor — which was the ground, the earth, dirt — as set-dressing. I'll be going out soon to clean up the area, to pick up the poop by shoveling it into an old wooden wheelbarrow to start the play. I was cast as a garrison prisoner. And it was the pinnacle of my artistic calling to-date.

I also got appointed Prop Manager, the guy in charge of “poop props,” among others. I will use the dry horse turds as a dirty joke to replace chocolate candy at a fancy dinner party during the show. That's right. Classy guy, eh?

Oh, I heard the cue song *My Funny Valentine* warning the cast that the show starts in exactly thirty seconds! I've got to get moving because I can't see my wheelbarrow! I had to be first on stage to shovel up the feces I spread there forty-five minutes ago. What an honor. (I don't know why I was being facetious about this; I really was thrilled to be exactly here and to be doing exactly this.)

My Funny Valentine, twenty-seven seconds to go. But where was the damned barrow and shovel, I remembered I left them right... Oops, I saw them, way over on the other side of the stage. They often seemed to be on the opposite side, a trick regularly played on me by my fellow actors. Out of sight of the audience I race around the back, upstage of our set's 110-foot-long wooden backdrop stockade.

I heard *Sweet Comic Valentine*, only twenty-one seconds left...

If I didn't make it in time, I could saunter in through the gigantic fort doors upstage center, halfway around, and pretend that was where I was supposed to enter to start my dignified job as official pooper-scooper. Run, man, run, time's a wasting.

You Make Me Smile with My Heart, fifteen seconds.

I'm not going to make it. I avoided a fellow actor who tried to trip me — another nightly game we played — and started to skid to a halt to enter the center fort doors. They aren't open. Help! I can't open them from the outside...

Your Looks Are Laughable, twelve seconds!

Unphotographable, ten seconds!

Stop looking at your wristwatch, which you're not supposed to have on since they didn't use them back in 1876 — the unforgivable sin of anachronism. I yanked off the watch while hustling around behind the backstage dressing rooms.

Not If You Care for Me, three seconds.

I shoved the watch in my pocket as I scurried in the wings behind the George Armstrong Custer house set and onto the stage slip-sliding to a halt — Safe! — beside the wheelbarrow. Did I take that long? I'm not surprised, but I silently cursed Johnny if he's shortening the song by a second or two every night just to make a fool out of me.

Yet You're My Favorite Work of Art, minus two seconds!

Not too bad. As I started scooping up the scat, I cast a surreptitious askance glance at the audience to see if they noticed my inept and breathless entrance and my annoyance with Johnny, and then quickly looked elsewhere as if searching for more brown rounds to add to my collection. Of course they noticed, stupid, I was the only moving thing to look at on stage and movement grabs the eye and won't let go. Couldn't hide a six-foot frame even if it is only a hundred forty-five pounds. I used it as an acting challenge to wring as much romance and stage business as possible out of the fecund fecal matter — does that conjure up an elegant image? No.

On stage the lights had already dimmed and come back up. *My Funny Valentine* stopped a few seconds ago — an eternity in stage time — signaling the start of our seventy-actor, forty-horse extravaganza on a one hundred-ten-foot-wide, fifty-foot-deep stage in our two thousand-seat Custer Memorial Amphitheater, a bigger arena than any Broadway house.

It was an interesting opening, if not exactly what the writer or director envisioned.

Moving my wheelbarrow caused these brainless entrances that became a running gag, to the actors anyway, throughout the summer. It might not have been as much fun for the audience, I feared, largely because most of the excitement took place off-stage, out of sight of the spectators.

The segue from the pre-show musical medley to the opening strains of *My Funny Valentine*? It's a favorite of mine and chosen by our talented young organist Johnny Ellis to be our "places" cue song announcing to the cast the impending dimming of the lights and the start of the show. And to this day I believe that Johnny shortened *My Funny Valentine* on purpose each time just to see what I would do when caught unprepared, with shorter and shorter lengths of time to get on stage.

Look who backs me on this:

VOLTAIRE, French seventeenth-century writer and philosopher:

It is necessary to always aim at being interesting rather than exact, for the spectator forgives everything except dreariness.

Come in on cue with the proper prop? How dreary. And as long as we're in a quoting mood here, how about:

MULTIPLE COMEDIANS:

Comedians don't walk through funny doors, they walk through doors funny.

Or...

BERTRAND RUSSELL, twentieth-century British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner: *I am never more serious than when I am being humorous.*

Or even...

EDMUND KEAN, nineteenth century British character actor: *Dying is easy; comedy is hard.*

Our *Trail West* director George Poletes, beloved and respected by all — a youthful father figure for some — was already well on his way to becoming a billiard ball at age 28, only seven years or so older than many of his actors, including me. I know we got along fairly well because he'd say to me, "Oh, there's that Darn-Old Duck," (nice little pun there; my name's Don) and I'd quickly hunch down and look around to see who's throwing something at me; then we both had the good sense not to laugh because after the first dozen or so times it wasn't that funny. He didn't direct the opening of the show as a comedy, but he never suggested I cut the goofy stuff and just get on with it either. I figured I'm walking through the door funny, so I gave myself permission to keep doing variations of that opening until told to stop. I even keep the hurried entrance going long after the others gave up with the moving barrows and tripping me.

I never was asked to quit. *Don't Change a Hair For Me.*

But back to the main theme: I am... an *Actor!* And thus began my paid, *paid* acting career; it was off Broadway, *way* off Broadway — actually about as far off Broadway as you can get, in an outdoor drama called *Trail West* in Mandan, North Dakota. It told the story of the events leading up to George Armstrong Custer's last stand. And I'm being compensated with coin of the realm. A little.

I am of standard height — eventually I'll get to standard weight, standard looks and standard voice — so I get cast a lot in standard roles. Which is okay with me, because the key words are "cast a lot."

SCENE II—WHITHER THE WITHERS?**TIME: 1960****THE SCENE is our outdoor theater's wide stage, with a floor of dirt, a ceiling of sky and walls of air**

One discovers early that when children and animals are on stage, especially big animals and small children, few look at the adult actors or even know we're there — at least at the beginning of a scene — which of course is crushing to the average semi-mature thespian ego.

The first scene with dialogue in the show — we haven't even seen Custer yet — introduces us raw recruits to our transportation and us actors to our competition for audience attention: the horse, a basic tool of the cavalry of the time. Sergeant O'Rourke is played with a comic Irish brogue by great actor and soon-to-be great friend Bob Naylor, who sports an impressive handle-bar mustache, and a soft and (the girls tell me) sexy voice. He stands center stage in front of a horse and a small group of neophyte troops. The horse is chosen for the scene because she is so well behaved. Happily, she ends up being mine for the summer.

Bob was a good-looking, oval-faced, brown-grey mustachioed, soft-smiling, soft-spoken intellectual, somewhat older and more mature than most of the rest of us callow collegians. More than one young lady from our cast tip-toed around the fact that handsome Bob had a wife back in Sioux Falls. Some boisterously country-clogged rather than tippy-toed around it. Bob was a talented performer and South Dakota jazz saxophonist who had a fine Irish accent for the opening scene:

SERGEANT BOB: Right, that there's the withers, the highest part of the horse's back. Can you see it there, shorty? Just in front of the saddle.

SHORT CORPORAL RON, jumping up to look: The whifers?

SERGEANT BOB: The withers, Wuh, not Whu; and T-H – withers. And did you know now that this horse's front legs are attached directly to her spine.

PRIVATE DON: They don't have, what, collarbones?!

SERGEANT BOB: Nope, they don't, Private Driscoll. *That's me.* But they sure have muscles, ligaments and tendons.

PRIVATE DON: Tell us about tendons.

SERGEANT BOB: Well, they're just the... That's things that... Well they attach the legs to that there backbone, ya ninny! I already said that. Now that's enough for today. Ten Chut! Right Face. Forward Harch!

Since I need to go back to my odiferous wheelbarrow, I take a *Left Face* and screw up the formation, running into everybody, and then I can't

help laughing. It did not endear me to the Sergeant, but it did to the audience. Kind of a Three Stooges bit that was never cut either.

But it's funny how it works. After we ran into each other a few times and we got good laughs, the actors anticipated it, of course, which screwed up the bit. Now we're fake. When it's unexpected it's authentic and works.

So I stopped doing it and the rest of the troop realizes that they expect it and improv doesn't work that way, because now they're running into somebody who isn't there. Hard to do convincingly and humorously. Mixing it up brought it back toward true comedy. In the movie one would hope the cameras were running the first time. We eventually made it seem like the first time, every time. We were actors, after all. And all acting is storytelling; but it does matter how you tell the stories, doesn't it?

CHAPTER TWO: POOP PROP PRISONER

TIME: 1960

THE SCENE is about the background of Trail West, only the interesting parts

We started the show wearing black Wellington boots, light blue trouper trousers with a yellow stripe down the side of the legs and a Seventh Cavalry dark blue denim shirt, the uniform worn by all the troopers. Only my shirt had a big white “P” on the back. Not for Private Driscoll, or for Prop, or even Poop, but for Prisoner. For me. It was just mentioned briefly in the script why I’m a jailbird: “girl trouble.” Oh well.

Trail West was a spectacular outdoor drama in Mandan that we presented within a stone’s throw or two from the actual Fort Lincoln from which “Golden Hair” Custer led his troops to their unnecessary demise. But the history and plot line of the show is not what this book is about. It’s about the trials and tribulations of a local actor in Summer Stock and elsewhere, how he got there, and from there, here.

You might be interested in how I got myself into this factual and metaphorical mess, and I’m going to tell you eventually, because I’m betting you’ll think it’s funny and fascinating and enlightening — and from that slack-jawed look on your face you look like you could use some enlightenment. Ha ha. This book is about ways you can avoid a similar predicament, if you want to. I wouldn’t have missed the experience for the world, though my world was rather small at the time. Summer theater helped me stretch my world out some, for which I would always be grateful.

But as I remember that fateful summer, I find that I don’t remember myself, my *self*. I’ve changed. Okay, haven’t we all? But who/what was I before the changes began? And how did I get from there to here? Let’s see if we can find out together.

CHAPTER THREE:
AUDITIONS, A LITTLE MANDAN HISTORY AND HORMONES

TIME: 1960, spring, before being cast in the show
THE SCENE is a small-town auditorium

Tryouts were held in Mandan and St. Paul, where director George was teaching, to cast the dozen or so lead roles and about the same number of secondary parts. Professional actors from all over but especially all three sets of twin cities—St. Paul/Minneapolis, Bismarck/Mandan, Fargo/Moorhead — and Chicago were auditioned. I was reading in St. Paul with an actor I didn't know, and at the end of his line he shouted out, "Cue! Cue! Cue!"

What? I shot him a quizzical look. He was frowning but laughing. Director George stopped, swiped his hand across his balding pate, sauntered over to look at the guy's playbook and it indeed had "Q, Q, Q" handwritten in there after the line. And you read what's in front of you. The director, or perhaps the author, had indicated they had a question at that point. I wanted to blame the actor because he was after what I already considered to be my part, but I really couldn't.

More than half of the leads were cast from St. Paul/Minneapolis and the small colleges where George directed and taught. The "Q" fellow was disgustingly handsome and quite a good line reader, and, as I said, had the temerity to audition for my part. He had come to St. Paul from Chicago for the first tryouts. But the last tryout was in Mandan, and I was already there because I was just cast. They can't send me back now, can they? No. I never saw him again. Whew.

THE SCENE is the interior of an old car, moving.
SFX (Sound Effects): Old car rattling along.

The trip from St. Paul to Mandan was uneventful. So much so that the driver could tie the steering wheel to the door handle and go to sleep at 60 mph. The lay of the land was straight and billiard table flat and the highway took advantage of it. No turn or level change between Fargo and Bismarck.

LOCAL SAYING: It's so flat you can watch your dog run away for two weeks.

THE NEXT SCENE is the interior of a small vintage office with a young woman at the front counter.

SFX: Cylinder press running in background.

When we arrived in Mandan, the first order of business, after untying the steering wheel of course, was checking in at the show's production office in an old Victorian brick building where the *Mandan Daily Pioneer* was published. The owners, the Tostavans, were a charming and friendly older couple, leading backers and administrators of the *Trail West* production. They told us, well, more like bragged, that Mandan, for the white man, dated from 1804 when the Lewis and Clark expedition wintered at Fort Mandan. The area was already named for the Mandan Indians. Most of the locals are proud of that heritage; they'd been around at least a few decades longer than St. Paul, the Native Americans a lot longer of course. St. Paul dated officially for the white man from 1841 or '49, depending on whether you insist it be just a bar called Pig's Eye in a twenty-person village or a real incorporated city after being named the capital of the Minnesota Territory. One could make a vague argument for the early 1800s, but that argument is for historians, not memoir/fiction authors.

*Mandan, Where the West Begins. / Out where the handclasp's a little stronger,
Out where the smile dwells a little longer, / That's where the West begins.*

I assumed a typo in line three: "smile" should be "smell." Lots of horses and cows around here, like where I grew up around the giant stockyards in South St. Paul, Minnesota.

The *Trail West* front office was a surprisingly small one in that old brick building with the familiar rumble of the presses in the background and the odor of ink and nostalgia in the foreground. A decade earlier my brother Bill and I walked down the steep hill from our private religious grade school to a similar smelling, even older newspaper building in South St. Paul to pick up our local sixteen- to twenty-four-page *South St. Paul Reporters* to deliver, folding them tightly for the toss from the public sidewalk onto the porch or front steps of the small, largely post-bellum tract homes along Seventh Avenue South.

But it wasn't the Mandan office alone that caught my attention; it was what was in it. No, not the printer's ink. (I tried to name my writing company *Writers' Inc.* some years later, but the name was already registered, because it's a good one, with a nice little play on words.)

KAREN: Hello. Welcome to Mandan.

OTHER ACTORS: Thanks. Nice to be here. Yeah.

DON: Hi. What's your name?

KAREN: Uh, Karen. But Mrs. Tostaven, she and Mr. Tostaven run our paper here; anyway, she's General Manager of the *Trail West* company. She'll be out in a minute, but I've got some of the information for all of you right here.

Karen was the only one in the building that didn't have ink stains on her fingers, so I figured she was a refined lady. She wasn't one of those "babes" you could imagine on magazine covers when she gets a little maturity on her. She was, however, delightful, with softly sculpted features, a world-class smile, a laugh that made it all the way to her eyes, an impudent dimple, short brown hair, not beautiful but inordinately cute, unknown... and available. How did I know that last? Sometimes you could tell even by momentary eye contact, couldn't you? And sometimes you could be embarrassed by wrongly interpreting that glance. Her youth was even more emphasized when she stood up from behind the newspaper counter. She was short. Later, when we got to know each other better, she told me, with a laugh, "I'm not short, I'm fun-sized." And she was.

There was also a *Trail West* board member, Steve Birkus by name, there to welcome us, but he didn't seem quite as welcoming as Karen and the Tostavens. Matter of fact he was immediately frowning, watching Karen and me as we got immersed in more than the necessary business repartee. Did he not trust imported actors from "the Cities"? Did he know Karen's dad, very likely, and want to protect her? Was he hot for her himself, the dirty old man? Who knew?

DON: So, are you going to be in the show? *I was nothing if not a sparkling conversationalist.*

KAREN, chuckling: No, no, I just handle the phone and sometimes the tickets from this office. *Infinitesimal pause.* I hadn't planned to, anyway.

DON: You should, although I certainly don't know what's needed. Do you sometimes show strangers around the town occasionally?

KAREN: No... There's not much to see ...

DON, disappointed: Oh ...

KAREN, quickly: But I could. Maybe.

DON: Maybe? When does "maybe" happen?

KAREN: Oh, well... *Another beautifully-timed pause.* It could happen when I'm done here, usually about eight, after the paper is put to bed. *Blushing a little.* I mean, locked down.

DON: Funny how you can lock things *down* and lock them *up* too, isn't it. *Shared laughter. A little.* Okay, there's no rehearsal tonight, so you lock things up and I'll be down about eight, okay?

She was pleasant and open and appeared confident, much more so than I felt inside. Later, to the guys I predicted success, (how disgusting was *that?*), and I was successful, depending on how you define success. Lack of success would have taken me down a notch or two, which, looking back, I confess that I needed. It also would not have been nearly as much fun. Don't get me wrong. I'm no Hollywood hustler, or even St. Paul hustler for that matter. Since we can't really see ourselves objectively in life's mirror, I'll offer you a brief description of me given a few years later by a talent agent:

AGENT: Don, one of the reasons you get so much on-camera work is that you aren't too old, you aren't too young; you aren't too short, you aren't too tall; you aren't too fat, you aren't too skinny; you aren't too ugly, you aren't too handsome; you aren't too... anything. You're just the friendly next-door neighbor, everybody's spokesman and that everyman type gets cast a lot.

Also remembered is the character description "of middling stature and undistinguished appearance" from the first college lead I had at eighteen.

Thanks. I think. If genius is being unique, what the hell is an undistinguished everyman? Seems to be the embodiment of both damning with faint praise and praising with faint damns, doesn't it? But I got "cast a lot," and that's what's important. But that was later. Now I wondered how young was Karen? A year out of high school, and so at least eighteen. I mean we weren't talking about potential legal problems here. I was fairly young myself, between sophomore and junior years in college. Although a couple of years means a lot at that age, doesn't it? But females are usually more mature than males, so maybe it was the fact that we were sophisticated urbanites while she, they, were to one degree or another innocent ruralites. Is there such a word? There is now.

THE SCENE is an exterior, sidewalk in Mandan

Walking out of the newspaper office after we got our schedules and were assigned our temporary housing for the summer, I thought about the positive vibes from Karen. I thought to myself: "Hey, this summer is starting off pretty well, I..." But then an odd thing happened. Four or five

local guys about our age were walking toward us and wouldn't yield any of the sidewalk, much less the traditionally approved half of it. We got out of the way, and, looking back, I wondered if they do that to everybody, or if they were on a walkabout from a school for the blind, or if they were unhappy with our even being there. They looked around when we did, and it looked like they wanted to discuss the lack of space in Mandan. We swiftly went on our merry and cowardly way. We would indeed meet these petty tough guys many more times than we wanted to as the summer progressed. Later that night, I thought they looked straight out of Central Casting: they were the perfect stereotypes of the tough, rural country gang, down to what we call "farmers' tans," sunburns that stopped at the sleeve and collar line. I'd have hired them on the spot.

I connected with the delightful office girl, Karen, for the town tour — she was right, there wasn't much to see — and the next day at a kickoff party on the banks of the Missouri after an early rehearsal. Why was she nervous? Still later we went to grab a bite at Ohm's WestBreeze Café on the west end of town, which I couldn't do very often because of the starving artist pay.

DON: Here, I got it. How much...? Hey, is this really our bill?

KAREN, frowning, snatching it from my hand: Let me see. That does seem a lot. No, it's right. We ordered the... Yes, it right on. I'll get it.

DON, grabbing for the bill: No, you don't have to do that.

KAREN: Why not? I'm the only one with a real job.

I gave an embarrassed laugh, she a nervous one. I got the impression she didn't assert herself like that too often. I think she was uncomfortable too. She knew what the cast was paid, down to the penny, I assume. She never told me but... We didn't wrestle over the check. Too bad.

There were a few walks along the Missouri and Heart rivers too. No one had to pay for those. Then our relationship blossomed above youthful indiscretion. Why indiscreet? I don't know; the "older" actor sweeping into town to sweep her off her, in her words, "staid security." Not seeing myself as a sweeper, but more of a shoveler, I rejected the notion outright. With a smile, she diplomatically veered off to another subject. I could like this girl.

Revisiting the old haunts several decades later I find the Café is significantly smaller than I recollected; but then what could ever match the size of our romantic memories? Am I also significantly smaller? We'll find out.

THE SCENE is early summer, the Amphitheater after a Saturday rehearsal

After a few more delightful get-togethers with Karen, I got roped into a “serious” talk with one of the show’s backers, a board member no less. The same fellow, short and pugnacious Steve Birkus, who “welcomed” us by frowning at check-in and who I assumed took me for big city fast operator.

STEVE, *cornering me privately after an evening rehearsal*: Uh, Don, I just wanted to give you a heads-up on Karen. *He was looking and acting nervous, pulling on his ear, shifting his weight from foot to foot, not looking at me, but trying to sound tough.* You might want to be a little careful.

DON: What? How do you mean, “careful”?

STEVE, *somewhat anxious*: Uh, well, I heard that you were ... seeing her. You’ll probably want to go easy because she’s just an immature young thing and it won’t look good for you or *Trail West* if there was... trouble.

DON, *confused, why was he nervous?* Trouble? What... Oh, I’m not, that is, doing ... *looking and acting nervous, pulling on my ear, shifting my weight from foot to foot with no one to stand on them to stop me, trying not to sound tough.*

STEVE: I’m not saying you... I’m just saying... to be... cautious. Her dad won’t take it kindly if there’s difficulty, if ya know what I mean.

DON: Okaaay. No, but... Good. Yes, I do. Good. Thanks. *And I beat a hasty retreat.*

In retrospect, I wondered what business it was of his, and I realized the implication was strong that perhaps I should leave Karen entirely alone, which of course caused me to increase my attentions.

I learned later that many would have looked elsewhere for excitement upon receiving such an invitation to keep hands off. Is it theater that fosters anti-authority amidst the spinelessness that was an outstanding trait of mine? I don’t know why it should. But given other events...

(It takes guts to go out in front of a crowd as one does in theater; it also takes some guts to challenge authority. Maybe that’s the connection, because surely it wasn’t just hormones.)

Karen and I used to go with the cast, and occasionally by ourselves, down to the banks of the Missouri River where we swapped life histories and stories and laughed and had innocent good times. We also hung out at The Owl, a bar/restaurant which became *Trail West’s* de facto in-town gathering spot. The fact that she was under the local drinking age of twenty-one never came up, happily. She impulsively twisted her napkin

when asked what she wanted to drink, smiled and said “nothing,” then later laughed and whispered in my ear, “Well, maybe a beer.” She mixed her beer, oddly enough, with tomato juice! Karen apparently didn’t really like the taste of beer. She really didn’t drink much alcohol, so please don’t accuse me of corrupting her. Her dad feared it though, on one level or another, and increased his attention to both of us in relation to our increasing focus on each other.

THE SCENE is the basement apartment of three Trail West actors

Her father, a short, stocky, serious, stern looking fellow, eventually came to the basement apartment where three of us guys were staying and sent word down that she’d better come out. How did he know she was there? I suppose he could have known the landlords and asked them to track his daughter?

I didn’t know why he didn’t come down himself and catch us... how? Certainly not *in flagrante delicto*, if you know what I mean. (I love the translation, “while the crime is blazing.”) I was basically careful and a coward — proven by the yellow stripe on my troop trousers — again telling the truth where others could get away with bragging that they were in an advanced stage of *dishabille*. I guess I was basically respectful of her virtue too, believe it or not. Believe it. It was not the fatherly warning delivered through Steve Birkus that controlled our relationship.

Her dad may have been afraid that the three of us roommates from the big city, Bob Mooney and John Warren and I, might have given him a hard time? Or worse? Maybe. He obviously didn’t know us. And he had the entire city on his side. I felt shame when Karen waved a reluctant goodbye while slowly walking sideways up the basement stairs to eventually face her dad. I hung back, telling myself that the reason was to not cause a scene and embarrass her. Or...

The next evening, when our paths almost crossed during a rehearsal break, she gave a little wave and turned away. But not before I noticed a small but nasty bruise on her lower cheek. I barged up to her and asked her where she got that, perhaps a little too loudly. She was embarrassed and turned to go when I grabbed her arm and pulled her away behind one of the set walls. I stopped and glared at the bruise. Was it from her dad? I sure didn’t want it to be, but if it was, he and I needed to talk, at least.

KAREN, looking around: Thank you for caring. But it... *Looking up at me abruptly.* Oh, you think my dad...? No. No! I tripped over my dog when we were messing around. *Feeling her cheek.* The coffee table won the fight, I guess.

DON: *Chagrined.* Oh. Okay. *Suspicious.* You sure? *Caring.* Does it hurt? I just was afraid that...

KAREN: I know what you thought. You're a nice guy, Don. No, he isn't like that. No at all, believe me. He's a great guy ... too.

DON: Good. Could the three of us great people get together and just talk for a little while, sometime later?

KAREN: I'd like to but... I think we'd better hold off for a while. Maybe sometime...

DON: And when does "maybe sometime" happen?

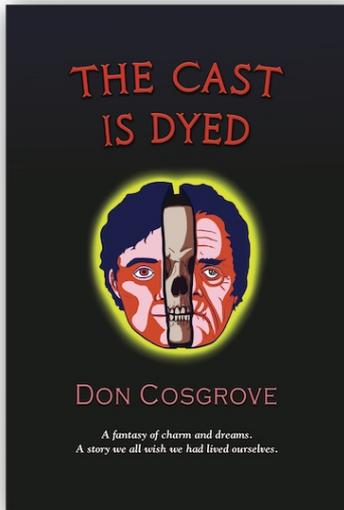
KAREN, *recognizing the reference, trying not to smile, and almost succeeding:* No, I don't think so. Let it go for a while, don't you think?

DON: No, I don't, but I suppose I understand. Be careful. Probably see you at the next rehearsal. From a distance.

I did. And that was it. Though I checked as well as I could from a distance, I didn't see any more bruises. I guess I had to believe her in the choice between her dad and the coffee table.

Anyway, Karen and I had some good times. She was a lovely if brief introduction to Mandan and summer theater who will learn to get out from under her parents eventually.

What did I learn? That it was her decision.



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