

## HOW I PAID FOR COLLEGE

By Marc Acito

### Chapter One

The story of how I paid for college begins like life itself—in a pool of water. Not in the primordial ooze from which prehistoric fish first developed arms and crawled onto the shore, but in a heavily chlorinated pool of water in the backyard of Gloria D’Angelo’s split level ranch in Camptown, New Jersey.

Aunt Glo.

She’s not my aunt, really, she’s my friend Paula’s aunt, but everybody calls her Aunt Glo and she calls us kids the LBs, short for Little Bastards.

Aunt Glo yells. Always yells. She yells from the basement where she does her son the priest’s laundry. She yells from the upstairs bathroom, where she scrubs the tub to calm her nerves. And she yells from her perch behind the kitchen sink, where she stirs her marinara sauce and watches us float in the heavily chlorinated pool of water.

Like life itself, the story of how I paid for college begins with a yell.

“Heeeeeey! Are you two LBs gonna serenade me or what?”

Paula and I both mouth to each other, “Ya can’t lie around my pool for nothin’, y’know.”

I roll over on the inflatable raft, giving a tug on my *Property of Wallingford High*

*School Athletic Dep't.* shorts so they don't stick to my nuts. (I wear the shorts ironically—a tribute to the one Purgatorial semester I spent on the track team.) I reach over to turn down the radio where Irene Cara is having a *Flashdance* feeling for like the gazillionth time today and turn to look at Paula.

Shards of light spike off the water, so I have to shield my eyes with my hand to see her. Paula's poised on her floating throne, her head tilted "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille" upright, her eyes hidden by a pair of rhinestone-studded cat lady sunglasses, a lace parasol over her shoulder to protect her white-white skin. She wears one of Aunt Glo's old bathing suits from the fifties, a pleated number that stretches across her flesh like those folds you see on Greek statuary; it's more of a birdcage with fabric, really, the desired effect being a Sophia Loren/Gina Lollobrigida/Anna Maria Alberghetti kind of va-va-voom sensuality. Frankly, though, Paula's a couple of vooms wide of the mark.

She takes a sip from a virgin strawberry daiquiri, then eyes me over her sunglasses to say, "What can we do? We've been summoned for a command performance." Then she throws her head back, unhinges her wide jaw and lets flow the opening phrase of "Ave Maria" in a voice so warm and pure you want to take a bath in it. I join in, harmonizing like we did at her cousin Crazy Linda's wedding, our voices mixing and mingling in a conversation that goes on above our heads and into the thick New Jersey air. A pair of nasty looking dogs on the other side of the chain link fence barks at us.

Everyone's a critic.

But not Aunt Glo. Aunt Glo's a good audience and (since Paula's mother is dead and her father works so much for the highway department) a frequent one. "Such voices you two have, like angels." She always tells us that. "Oh, son of a bitch, look at the time," she yells. "Now shaddap, will ya, my stories are almost on."

I can't see her through the screened window but I know she's lighting up a Lucky and pouring herself a Dr. Pepper before waddling down to the rec room to watch *Guiding Light* and do her ironing.

Aunt Glo.

Paula deposits her glass on the side of the pool and twiddles her tiny fingers in the water to clean them off. "*Honestly*, Edward," she says, flinging a meaty arm in the air, "it is so *patently unfair*." (Paula has a *tendency to speak in italics*.) "I'm simply *wasting* my talent this summer, *wasting* it!" Forever cast in the roles of post-menopausal women, Paula is continuing the trend this summer by playing Miss Lynch in the Wallingford Summer Workshop production of *Grease*.

I lay my head down on the raft. "You're right, Sis," I say.

She's not really my sister, but she might as well be. Apart from the difference in our complexions, we could be twins: Paula is the pure white twin; I'm the evil dark one. Otherwise, we're both all long, curly hair, thick eyelashes and high body-fat ratio.

I also call her Sis because she uses her nun costume from our production of *The Sound of Music* to buy us beer, on the entirely correct theory that no one would ask a nun

for ID

Paula snaps her parasol shut and rows over to me using the handle end. “The problem,” she says, “is that I’ve got a 19<sup>th</sup> century figure. If I’d been born a hundred years earlier, I would have been considered *desirable*.”

We’ve had this conversation before. Some of us are born to run, others are born to be wild—Paula was born to wear a hoop skirt.

I feel the tap of a parasol on my shoulder. “Look at *these*,” she says, mashing her boobs together like she’s fluffing pillows. “And *this*.” She turns sideways to grab a hunk of her fleshy butt.

“In the case of an emergency water landing, your seat cushion may be used as a flotation device,” I say.

Paula tips my mattress over with one of her thick 19th century legs.

I bob up to the surface and try to capsize her by grabbing her tiny feet. “No, no, no, *please*, Edward,” she says, “the hair, the hair, I’ve got to be at work in an hour.”

“Fine,” I say, backstroking to the shallow end, “but as far as the 19<sup>th</sup> century goes, I’ve got two words for you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah: No Anesthesia.”

I can hear her deep, chocolaty laugh as I look up at the high tension wires criss-crossing the baby blue sky. I love making Paula laugh.

I step out of the pool. “You’re looking at this *Grease* thing all wrong, Sis. Think of us as guest stars, like Eve Arden and Frankie Avalon in the movie.” (Fully aware that I wouldn’t make a convincing Danny Zuko, I opted to play Teen Angel instead.) “Let everyone else knock their brains out learning the frigging Hand Jive; in the end you and I are still going to come in and steal the show with our finely-wrought comic interpretations.”

Paula sighs. She knows I’m right.

“Besides, I, for one, have more important things to deal with.” I’m speaking, of course, about my audition for Juilliard.

Juilliard.

Now in case you live in Iowa or something and don’t know anything about it, perhaps I should explain that Juilliard is the finest institution for acting in the entire country, the Tiffany’s of drama schools. Everybody famous went there—Kevin Kline, William Hurt, Robin Williams—and ever since I starred in *The Music Man* in the ninth grade I’ve known I wanted to go there, too. I’ve already got one sure-fire contemporary audition monologue (Mozart in *Amadeus*, a prankish man-boy I was born to play), but I need to come up with a classical one, too. So I’ve bought myself a brand new *Complete Works of Shakespeare*—a really nice one, with a velvet cover and gold leaf on the sides of the pages—and I’m going to spend my entire summer reading it. Plus work on my tan.

Paula parks her inflatable barge in the shallow end and extends her hand for me to help her up. She frowns at me, like I’m a dress she’s trying to decide whether or not to buy.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She sighs and pats herself with a towel. (Always pats, never rubs. Rubbing is tough on the skin.) “Can you keep a secret?” she asks.

“Of course not,” I say. “But when has that ever stopped you?”

She extends her pinky finger. “Pinky swear.”

I link mine with hers. “Fine. Pinky swear. What is it?”

She looks around like she doesn’t want to be overheard. “Do you remember how I told you about the night I let Dominick Ferretti take me behind the pizza oven?”

“Yeah.”

“I lied.”

“What? Why?”

“I didn’t want you to think I was some kind of priss,” she says. “You and Kelly have done practically *everything*.”

This is an exaggeration. It’s not like my girlfriend Kelly and I have gone all the way yet or even gone down on each other, but I guess compared to Paula’s nun-like existence, we’re something out of the *Kama Sutra*.

(Incidentally, I never believed that story about Dominick Ferretti.)

“You’re not a priss,” I say, “you’re, uh...”

“Go ahead, say it. I’m too fat to get a boyfriend.”

Let the record show: She said it, not me.

Paula flops down on a lounge chair like she's Camille taking to her sickbed. "What am I going to do? What kind of actress can I *possibly* hope to be if I'm still a *virgin*?" she says, grabbing me by the hand and yanking me down next to her. "Edward, you have to help me."

I adjust my shorts again. "Uh, listen, Sis, I'm totally flattered, but I don't think Kelly would..."

"Oh, don't be *daft*," she says, giving me a shove. "You've got to help me with Doug Grabowski."

Doug Grabowski? Doug Grabowski the football player I convinced to try out for Danny Zuko? Doug Grabowski who used to go out with Amber Wright, the single most popular girl in school? That Doug Grabowski?

"What about him?" I ask.

"Do you know if he has a girlfriend?"

Paula's capacity for delusion is astounding. It's partly what makes her such a great actress. "Uh...I don't think so," I mumble, as I try to figure out how to tell her she stands a better chance of being crowned Miss America than landing Doug Grabowski.

"*Splendid*," she chimes and she pirouettes onto the lawn in a manner that unfortunately calls to mind the dancing hippos in *Fantasia*. "I've got it all planned out: The four of us—you and Kelly and Doug and I—are going to go into the city this Saturday to see *A Chorus Line*. I can't imagine Doug's ever seen it and he must, he *really, really* must. If he's going

to spend the *entire* summer hanging around us instead of those knuckle-draggers from the football team, then it's our duty, really, to expose him to the finer things in life, don't you think?"

"Well..."

"The poor boy must be positively *starved* for intellectual stimulation."

"But..."

"Oh, Edward, it's going to be a night we'll remember the rest of our lives," she says, thrusting my clothes into my hands. "Now all you need to do is drive over to play practice and ask him."

"Me? Why not you?"

Paula clicks her tongue. "I don't want to appear *pushy*."

God forbid.

"Besides, not all of us have rich daddies," she sniffs. "Some of us actually have to *work*." She slips her tiny teardrop feet into a pair of pink plastic jellies and sashays towards the house.

"I work," I call after her. "What do you call choreographing the kids' show at the workshop?"

She turns and points her pink feet, ballerina style. "I call it *play*," she says. "Making calzones in a 120 degree kitchen while Dominick Ferretti makes lewd gestures with a sausage—that's a *job*." With a regal toss of her head, she throws open the door. "Now get

dressed and get over there,” she commands, sending me inside to change. “My loss of innocence is *depending* on it.”