

LEAP
YEAR

LEAP YEAR

a novel

Peter Cameron



1817

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

LEAP YEAR. Copyright © 1990 by Peter Cameron. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

FIRST EDITION

Designer: Karen Savary

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cameron, Peter.

Leap year: a novel / by Peter Cameron.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-016252-X

I. Title.

PS3553.A4344L43 1990

813'.54—dc20

89-45637

90 91 92 93 94 CC/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PART

I

The calendar is based on noting ordinary and easily observable natural events, the cycle of the sun through the seasons with equinox and solstice, and the recurrent phases of the moon. The earth completes its orbit about the sun in 365 days 5 hr. 48 min. 46 sec.—the length of the solar year. The moon passes through its phases in about 29 ½ days; therefore, 12 lunar months (called a lunar year) amount to more than 354 days 8 hr. 48 min. The discrepancy between the years is inescapable, and one of the major problems for man since his early days has been to reconcile and harmonize solar and lunar reckonings.

The Columbia Encyclopedia, Third Edition

CHAPTER

I

David was the first person to arrive at Lillian's spring cocktail party. Technically spring had started on Monday, but Lillian and her friends were celebrating its commencement four days late.

Lillian was in the bathroom opening seltzer bottles over the bathtub. She was wearing a raincoat. She had dropped the case of bottles and preferred to have them explode in the bathroom rather than on her guests. David sat on the toilet and watched.

"So who's coming to this party?" he asked.

"The usual," said Lillian. "I haven't made any new friends in the past six months. I haven't made any new friends in the past ten years, come to think of it."

"The nineties are going to be the decade of friendship," said David. "Everyone's just going to have a lot of really good friends. The whole notion of lovers and partners and spouses will fade."

"That leaves me two years to fall in love," said Lillian.

"Is Loren coming?"

"Of course," said Lillian. Loren was David's ex-wife. They had been divorced for about a year. Lillian was friends with them both, which was sometimes awkward.

"What about Gregory?" David asked. Gregory Mancini was Loren's boyfriend. He worked for ABC-TV and was over six feet tall. Height was a sore spot with David, who was only five foot six. Loren was about five eleven and very beautiful.

"I guess so," said Lillian. "Unless he got called away on business."

"As a rule I hate people who get called away on business," said David, who was never called away on business. He worked for an in-flight magazine called *Altitude*. He had until recently edited garden books for a small publishing company, but a big publishing company bought the house and fired everyone.

"Is Heath coming?" Lillian asked. Heath was David's boyfriend. No one had known David was bisexual until he had recently announced he had a boyfriend named Heath. It was all very mysterious. Apparently Heath had been David's temporary secretary over Christmas while Lydia Aronso, his real secretary, went home to Costa Rica. Heath was a photographer when he wasn't temping or tending bar, which he did at night.

"Heath is at Lar Lubovitch," said David.

"What's that?" asked Lillian.

"It's some dance thing at City Center," said David.

"He could come over after," said Lillian. "Did you invite him?"

"Of course," said David. "But Heath doesn't like my friends."

"How does he know? He's never met us."

"He just has this feeling," said David.

"So do I," said Lillian. She opened the last bottle of seltzer and held it at arm's length while it fizzed. "I have this feeling I don't like our friends either. Let's just stay in the bathroom all night."

David got up off the toilet and kissed Lillian. Her face was moist with seltzer spray. She reminded him of a passenger on the *Maid of the Mist*, the boat that sailed around Niagara Falls. He had been to Niagara Falls on his honeymoon with Loren. Just for one night, on their way to Canada. That seemed a long time ago now.

| | | | |

Loren arrived, alone, about ten-thirty.

"Where have you been?" Lillian asked.

"At the airport. Gregory had to go to L.A., and I took the cab out with him."

"How romantic," Lillian said. "Listen, I've got to talk to you."

"Okay," said Loren. "Just let me get a drink."

They rendezvoused in Lillian's bedroom. A glamorous older woman Lillian didn't recognize seemed to be trying on all the coats that were piled on the bed.

"Hi," Lillian said to this person.

"Greetings," the woman said.

"Did you lose your coat?" Lillian asked.

"Oh, no," the woman said. "I'm just trying them on. It's part of my therapy. I'm a shopaholic. It's good for me to try things on and not buy them. I mean, no matter how much I like these, I can't have them. This one's gorgeous."

"It's mine," Loren said.

"Is it?" the woman asked. "Where did you get it? How much did you pay?"

"Could you excuse us?" Lillian asked.

"Certainly," the woman said. She took off Loren's coat. "If you paid more than three hundred dollars, you were ripped," she said.

"A friend of yours?" Loren asked when the woman had disappeared.

"I think she came with Adrienne," said Lillian. Adrienne was Lillian's sister. Her brother was named Julian, and they all worked together at a PR firm. They all hated each other.

"So what's up?" Loren asked. "You look great. Have you lost weight?"

"No," said Lillian, who had spent much of her adult life trying to lose twenty pounds.

"Are you still going to that exercise class?"

"Occasionally," said Lillian. "I drop in to see how out of shape I am. But you'll never guess where I went today."

"Detroit," Loren guessed.

"Wrong," said Lillian. "A sperm bank."

"A what?"

"A sperm bank. You know, where they sell sperm."

"What do you want with sperm?"

"What do you think? I want to get pregnant."

"From a sperm bank?"

"No, not ideally, but this is not an ideal world."

"You're crazy."

"I just went to get some information."

"How did you even find a sperm bank? Do they really exist?"

"They're listed in the yellow pages."

"Under what?"

"Sperm banks," said Lillian.

"You wouldn't really do it, would you?"

"I don't know. My biological clock is ticking away, and I'm running out of options."

"You're only thirty-five. You can have a baby till you're forty. Plus the whole idea of biological clocks is absurd. It's something men invented to make women hysterical."

"You only say that because you've had a baby. You've fulfilled your reproductive cycle."

"You make it sound like going to the bathroom," Loren said. "Anyway, what happens at a sperm bank? You pay for a wad and they stick it in you?"

"Well, that's the basic idea, but it's not as gross as you make it sound. They 'introduce it to your reproductive system.'"

"Sounds pretty gross to me."

"Well, it just depends how you look at it. I mean, when you think about it, sex is kind of gross. Although, not having had any in about a million years, how could I know?"

"Oh, Lillian," Loren said. "It's just hormones. Don't do anything rash."

"Sometimes I think I'm like I am because I've never done anything rash."

"What's wrong with how you are?"

"Well, I'm not exactly the happiest girl in New York."

"I wonder who that might be."

"Sue Simmons never seems to be depressed."

"Come on," said Loren. "Let's stop being antisocial. Let's see if we can find some men to dance with."

"So where's your boyfriend?" David asked his ex-wife as they descended in the elevator. They had departed from Lillian's party simultaneously.

"Flying to L.A.," said Loren. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"At the ballet," said David.

"Are you seeing him later?" Loren asked.

"No," said David.

"So what are you doing?"

"Going home," said David. "Going to bed."

"Alone?" asked Loren.

"No," said David. "With General Noriega."

"Is Noriega cute? I haven't seen pictures of him."

"He's gorgeous," said David.

On the street they stood for a moment. They could hear Lillian's party up above them.

"Well," said Loren. "Do you want to share a cab or something?"

"We don't live near each other," David said.

"Don't be so literal. That doesn't mean we can't share a cab," said Loren. "I don't mind going out of my way."

"You don't?" asked David.

"Not for you," Loren said. She raised her arm and whistled.

"We'd like to make two stops," Loren told the cabdriver. "The first is on the West Side and the second is in SoHo." She gave him the addresses and leaned back against the seat.

"What do you want to talk about?" David asked.

"I don't know," Loren said. "I just wanted to see you. I never see you anymore."

"That's usually what happens when you divorce someone," David said.

"Actually, I was kind of in the mood to sleep with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean sex, necessarily. I just want to sleep with you. In the same bed."

"I don't think that's a very good idea," said David.

"Don't you ever miss sleeping with me?" Loren asked.

"Sometimes," David said.

"Do you sleep with this guy?"

"Sometimes," David said.

"I can't picture it," said Loren. "I can't picture you in bed with another man."

"Then please don't try," said David.

"I can't help it. You have to admit it's weird. To suddenly turn gay."

"I didn't suddenly turn gay."

"You mean you were always attracted to men?"

"I'm attracted to Heath. It's no big deal."

"Are you in love?" asked Loren.

David looked out the window at the dark park and his reflection in the glass. Behind it, he could see Loren's own beautiful reflection, leaning forward, waiting for his answer.

|||||

When Judith and Leonard Connor, Loren's parents, simultaneously turned sixty, they decided to take a year off. They would spend 1988 away from their usual work, away from their life and friends in Ackerly, Pennsylvania, and apart from each other. After thirty-eight years of marriage, they both desired a rest. Leonard, who had recently developed an interest in Buddhism, decided to pursue enlightenment on the subcontinent of India. Judith, a gynecologist, moved to Manhattan. She sublet an apartment in Washington Heights and worked three days a week at a Planned Parenthood clinic.

On the evening of Lillian's party, she was babysitting for her granddaughter, Kate. Judith had picked Kate up at Loren's apartment on Greene Street, and after an early supper at John's Pizza, they took the A train uptown. Kate liked sleeping over at her grandmother's because Grandma had a waterbed.

As they hurtled up the west side they read an old copy of the *New York Times* they found beside them on the seat. Kate couldn't yet read, but she was adept at deciphering pictures.

"What's going on here?" Judith asked, pointing to a photograph of some GIs relaxing in Honduras.

"They're soldiers," said Kate. "Girls can be soldiers if they want." Kate was learning nonsexist role identification at daycare.

"That's right," said Judith. "Do you want to be a soldier?"

"I'm too small," said Kate.

"But what about when you're bigger?"

"I don't know," said Kate. "They look hot."

"What do you think they're doing?"

"They're guarding something. Probably the president."

"Who's the president?"

"Ronald McDonald," said Kate.

"Ronald Reagan," corrected Judith.

"Oh," said Kate. "That's what I meant."

"These soldiers are in Central America," said Judith. "Do you know where that is?"

"In the center?" asked Kate.

"Well, yes," said Judith. "It's between North America and South America. It's south of here." She motioned her hand back toward Columbus Circle. "It's downtown," she said. "Way, way downtown."

They arrived at Bennett Avenue just in time to watch "Jeopardy." Judith and Kate reclined on the waterbed. Kate was occupied with a book of photographs by Diane Arbus, which belonged to the man from whom Judith was subletting. Kate looked at it every time she came over. Judith, who thought the pictures a little inappropriate for a four-year-old, kept forgetting to hide it.

Kate waited for a commercial before speaking. The only time Grandma got impatient with her was when she talked during "Jeopardy." "Look," she said, pointing to a picture of a topless showgirl, "she's almost bare naked."

Judith looked at the picture. "Well, I guess she is," she said. "Doesn't she have pretty breasts?"

Kate outlined the woman's breasts with her small finger. "Do you have pretty breasts?" she asked Judith.

"All women have pretty breasts," said Judith. "That woman's are big and pretty; other women's are small and pretty."

"I don't have breasts," said Kate. "I have ninnies."

"What are ninnies?" asked Judith.

Kate pulled up her shirt and pointed to her nipples. Judith kissed her bare stomach. "I can hear your pizza in there," she said.

"What's it saying?" asked Kate.

"It's singing," said Judith.

"What?" asked Kate.

"Shsh," said Judith. It was time for Double Jeopardy. She lay with her ear pressed to Kate's stomach. "Who was Emma Bovary," she said to the TV.

| | | | |

Later that night, somewhere south of Judith's and north of Honduras, David and Loren's cab emerged from the park and headed west.

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"Are you in love?" repeated Loren. "That's not a particularly cryptic question."

"But it's hard to answer," said David. "At least for me it is. Are you in love with Gregory?"

"No," said Loren. "But I'm happy with Gregory. It's just the opposite of with you."

"And which do you prefer?" asked David.

Loren smiled. She reached out for David's hand but couldn't find it. She stroked the stuff of his coat. "It depends what I'm in the mood for. Whether I want to be happy or loved."

"I would think being loved would make you happy," said David.

"It's not that simple," said Loren.

The cab stopped in front of David's building. Loren found David's sweaty hand in his pocket. She held it. "Kate's at my mother's," she said. "No one will know."

"Anyone getting out here?" the driver asked. "What about the second stop?"

"We've changed our minds," said David. "There is no second stop."

Ms. Mouse, the cat, greeted them at the door. She had belonged to Loren, but when they got divorced she remained in the apartment with David. Loren picked her up.

"I don't think she remembers me," she said. She looked Ms. Mouse in her small, serious face. "Do you remember me?"

Ms. Mouse yawned. Loren put her down and began walking around the living room, checking things out. The only time she ever saw the old apartment was when she came by to pick up or drop off

Kate. David and Loren had joint custody. "You've got a message," she said, indicating the green Cycloptic blinking eye on David's answering machine. "Can I play it?"

"Okay," said David. He was in the kitchen, peeling an orange.

Loren pushed the play button. A man's voice said, "Hi. It's me. I thought I'd call and see if you were home. It's ten-thirty. I just got out of Lubovitch. I felt like coming over, but I guess not. Maybe we can do something tomorrow. Call me. Bye."

"That was Heath," said David.

"I figured," said Loren. "He sounds sweet. And young."

"He's twenty-six," said David.

"Are you going to call him back?"

"No," said David. "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"If I weren't here, would you call him?"

"Maybe."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No," said David. He gave her a piece of orange.

"I promise I won't listen if you call him. I'll stay in the bathroom."

"I'm not going to call him. It's late." David sat down at the kitchen table. Loren got a glass out of the dish drainer and filled it at the tap. "There's seltzer in the refrigerator," said David.

"Water's fine," said Loren.

"How are things at the girl's bank?" David asked. Loren worked for the New York Bank for Women. She called it "the institution whose time has come and gone."

"Oh, please," she said. "It's Friday night. I don't want to talk about work."

They sat there for a moment, then Loren stood up. "Let's go to bed," she said.

| | | | |

After they made love, they lay in bed, holding each other. Some of Loren's long hair was in David's mouth but he didn't want to move his head. Finally he sat up and looked at Loren.

"Well?" he said.

Loren smiled at him. "Let's not talk," she said.

They were just about to fall asleep when the phone rang.

"Who could that be?" David said.

"Maybe it's Heath," said Loren. "You should have called him."

"I'm not going to answer it," said David. "It's probably a wrong number."

They sat up in bed and listened to the answering machine.

"Hi," said Lillian. "It's me. I guess you're not home. I thought you were going home. Where are you? Maybe you're at . . . oh, I don't know. I just wanted to talk to you. Everyone's finally left, and I just wanted to talk to somebody. I wanted to talk to you. I'm sad. I'm sorry, this is stupid. I was just lonely. I hate parties. Remind me never to give another party, okay? I hope you're okay. I'll talk to you later. Good night."

"Poor Lillian," said Loren. "You should call her."

"I'll call her tomorrow," said David.

They lay back down, but something had changed. They lay in the darkness trying, but failing, to sleep.

CHAPTER

2

For her two-hundred-dollar sperm bank consultation fee, Lillian was sent six donor resumes. Instead of being identified by a name, each report had a number, plus a list of statistics: age, weight and height, hair and eye color, I.Q. There was also a self-evaluated temperament profile, where the donors rated themselves (numerically) on such characteristics as passive/aggressive, stable/unstable, artistic/analytical, humorous/sober, practical/romantic. Lillian spent an evening studying these forms. She worked out a system whereby donors scored points for respectable ages, tolerable heights, and high I.Q.s and lost points for excessive weight and personality defects. Number 72428 emerged at the top of the heap. He was twenty-six, six feet tall, brown hair and green eyes; both his I.Q. and his weight were an attractive 165, he was stable, slightly aggressive, artistic, fun, romantic, and, Lillian knew, too good to be true. Number 72428 was obviously lying.

She set aside the forms and went to bed. And as she lay there, alone, she thought, Is this all wrong? Do I really want to have a baby? And the answer was yes, more than anything, yes, and she fell asleep and had a dream. She was pregnant and floating in warm ocean water; instead of weighing her down, her blossoming stomach buoyed her. The water was clear and shallow, and she floated on a current toward a small deserted island. As the island got closer she could see it wasn't deserted; there was someone on it, waving her in,

and the closer she got the more familiar the person looked. The surf deposited her gently on the shore, and David leaned down to help her up.

I I I I I I I

The next day Lillian met Loren for lunch at Burger Heaven. Their waitress was an older woman whose hair looked as if it had just been done. All the waitresses in Burger Heaven looked like that. There was something tribal about them. Lillian wondered if they all lived together.

“So what happened the other night?” she asked once they had ordered.

“What night?” asked Loren.

“After my party. You and David left together.”

“Did we?” asked Loren.

“Yes,” said Lillian. “So nothing happened?”

“What are you talking about?” said Loren.

“I just wondered if anything happened between you and David.”

“No. What could have happened? We’re divorced. Everyone keeps forgetting that.”

“I just wondered because I called David after the party and he wasn’t home.”

“Maybe he was at his boyfriend’s,” said Loren.

“Maybe,” said Lillian. “I just wondered.”

The waitress delivered their beverages. “Enjoy,” she told them.

I I I I I I I

In Heath’s photographs everything is out of focus, but some things are more out of focus than others.

“These are interesting,” the woman viewing his portfolio said, “but they look kind of unfocused.”

“That’s the way they’re supposed to look,” said Heath. He had dropped into this gallery on his way to work. He worked as a bartender at a restaurant in Tribeca called Cafe Wisteria. He always referred to it as Cafe Hysteria. Every night on his way in he tried