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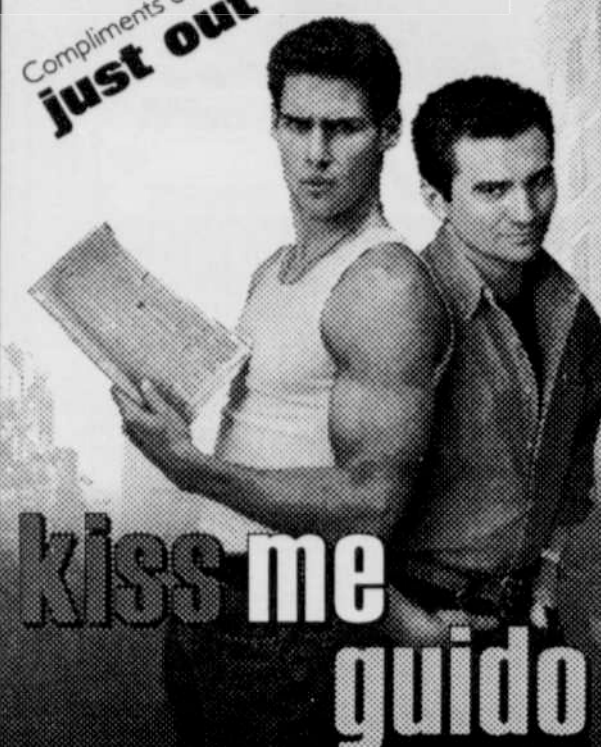
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ENOUGH ABOUT ME

The price is steep

Comforting himself with a KFC tote bag,
this writer contemplates a record of his lost innocence

by Mark King

When I was 19 years old, I vacationed in Los Angeles and won a car on *The Price Is Right*.

I have a video of the entire episode, and it gets trotted out and viewed from time to time. On the tape I'm impossibly cute—it was 1980, mind you—with a tall, lean body and a freckled face. There is bright orange hair on my head, blown dry to late-'70s perfection and parted in the middle between two feathered, astoundingly symmetrical sides.

Portions of my *Price Is Right* story are deeply ingrained from repeated tellings, as frozen in my delivery as they are on that old Betamax videotape. Hearing Johnny Olsen shouting, "Mark King! Come on down!" and galloping down the ramp to the bidding station in front of the stage; jumping up and down, my sprayed hair jolting above me in two feathered clumps and lazily floating back down to my head like an orange sheet snapped over a bed and slowly descending.

Or when I win the very first prize that comes up for bids—an Amana range. "And to the winner of that range goes," I can hear Johnny Olsen saying, "Kentucky Fried Chicken in an insulated tote bag. It's so nice to feel so good about a meal!"

"And the original retail price of that range is... \$689, and Mark, you've won it! Come on up here!" Bob Barker declares, and I scramble up for a chat with him before playing the game.

Bob asks me where I'm from, and I tell him I'm a college student. "Really? What year?" he asks. I say I'm a senior—a lie, I was a sophomore, but couldn't have told you my middle name at that point—and say that I'll go "right on to graduate school to get a master's in arts management."

Today when I see the tape, I want to wipe the idyllic grin off that skinny boy's face and correct the error I made 17 years ago. I had it all wrong. "Well, Bob," I would say instead, "I'll be moving here to Los Angeles to fail as an actor while working for a heroin-addicted mail order sleazebag. Then I hope to make it big as a phone sex artist for a few years."

"That's marvelous!" Bob would reply.

"There's even more, Bob. I'll go on to watch some friends die horribly of a disease we haven't even heard of yet, fight my drug addiction, and then spend years searching for life's greater meaning. You have anything up for bids that might help me with that?"

But back to reality—or, at least, *The Price Is Right*.

Johnny Olsen announces what I just might win—a shiny new Pontiac Coupe! The audience absolutely screeches, and the camera flashes to my lover, Charley, whistling with his fingers in his mouth, wearing the same jeans and T-shirt as me. We were in that early, wearing-matching-

outfits stage of our relationship. Every choice I pondered during the game would feature a shot of Charley squirming in his seat, fraught with excitement and looking every bit the handsome husband.

On stage, Bob inspects the car with me. "Just look at these wire wheel covers here, Mark. Say tell me," he questions as he puts the microphone to my lips, "do you have a girlfriend back home?" No, Bob. But your camera man must adore my homosexual lover, because he's given him every reaction shot since I stepped up here.

"Aw, several!" I offer with a laugh and an adorable but practiced shrug.

"Well, you'll have several more if you win this car!" Bob says.

The game is something called "Lucky Seven" and Charley screams out every last thing for me to say and do. After going step by step through the game, with tension building and Bob reminding me every three seconds how close I am to winning, I get to the last question. After Charley's prompting I give the winning answer, the audience goes nuts, and the camera man goes to Charley as he explodes from his chair and dances about.

"You've won that car!" Bob shouts.

If I had won a fur coat, Charley would've jumped to the stage and thrown it on, so help me.

I sold the car to my sister and the Amana Range went to my brother. I kept the insulated Kentucky Fried Chicken tote bag—my lone trophy from the event—and store it in the laundry room. It's nearby if there's a showing of the video, and it makes a great prop during the viewing.

"Mark at 19," is what I should call it. Within a few short years of "coming on down," there would be enormous differences between that video boy and myself, shaped by life events that would throw a wet blanket on my aw-shucks optimism. I've tried to recover from them, to regain the hopeful, expectant glimmer found in the eyes of the kid from *The Price Is Right*, with mixed success.

He was fearless; I have reservations. He believed; I suspect. Seventeen years in the life of a gay man living at the dusk of the sexual revolution and during the dawn of a terrible disease does manage to bring about some striking changes.

I have a few stories about those times, too. Some of them aren't very attractive, and I definitely haven't shared them at parties. I wonder if they have any value, if they define something more than myself, if they sound familiar. I've spent a lot of time trying to decide if that which came before actually has helped me, if it "made me a better person," if it was, in fact, a gift.

And wondering, of course, if the price was right.



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Written by Tony Kushner

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