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A MOVING AND REVEALING  
NOVEL ABOUT LOVE  
BETWEEN A TEENAGE BOY  
AND AN OLDER MAN

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# KEVIN

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WALLACE HAMILTON

AUTHOR OF  
COMING OUT

## WALLACE HAMILTON

A contemporary gay novel about the love between a teenage boy and a mature man, Kevin expands the tradition of Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front Runner* and Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy*. This is the story of Kevin, a fifteen-year-old survivor of a broken home and series of foster parents, with no past of his own to offer him the possibility of a future. Having been reunited by the welfare department with his natural mother who soon lapses back into alcoholism, he begins to live off the streets precariously, confused about where his life is going and afraid of the things he is exposed to. While hustling the waterfront he meets Bruce, a successful man of thirty-five from a socially prominent family whose respectability and past suffocates him and renders his life one of quiet desperation.

How they begin to fall in love, misunderstand and hurt each other, deal with the enormous social disapproval of their liaison, and survive the attempts of society to split them up makes this story of their love-with its fears and its joys, its incongruities and its exuberance-engrossing, funny, and above all, moving.

KEVIN  
Books by Wallace Hamilton  
Christopher and Gay  
David at Olivet  
Coming Out  
Kevin



WALLACE HAMILTON

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The author expresses his appreciation to Michael J Lavery for his counsel on the legal aspects of this story.

For John at Tyson Street

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# ONE

Kevin Stark sat alone in the waiting room of the welfare office and tried to imagine what his younger brother might look like.

He knew what his mother looked like. Three years ago he had seen her for an hour or so when the caseworker had taken him to visit her in the hospital. She had had stringy auburn hair. Her eyes looked worn and watery. Her jaw was slack. She had hugged him, smiling, and her eyes had glowed with warmth.

But Dennis? He had only the vaguest memories of a small child, a high-pitched voice, a shock of dark hair, the smell of dirty diapers. Then Kevin's mother had gone to the hospital. Kevin had been sent to one foster home, Dennis to another. Kevin was four. Dennis was two. He had no memory at all of his father who had walked out before Dennis was born.

But now after eleven years, Kevin, his mother, Millie, and Dennis were going to be reunited. Miss Gotter, the caseworker, had called his foster home and told him that everything had been arranged. And he would have a stepfather named Jake.

Kevin shifted uneasily in his straight-backed chair, wondering about these strangers who were coming into his life. How would his mother cope? What would Dennis look like at thirteen? Who was Jake? He began feeling homesick already—for his foster parents—for his tree-lined neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. Even Laureldale Junior High School looked pretty good, now that he was leaving it.

He glanced around the waiting room at the chairs, the table shoved against one wall with a pile of old National Geographics on it, the green walls, the window with chicken-wire glass. Then he noticed above the table the picture set in a curlicued gilt frame.

It showed a row of city houses, clear as a photograph, painstakingly sketched. Kevin thought the artist must have worked on a hot summer afternoon. He could almost hear the hum of flies and the rustle of leaves on the big tree that shadowed the street.

In the foreground was an open carriage with high spindly wheels and a horse. A man and woman sat in the back. The man wore a suit coat with a high collar and a tall top hat. The woman beside him had on a flowing dress that reached down to her ankles. She held a parasol over her head and her face was shadowed, but she looked beautiful.

Opposite the couple, on a little seat up front, sat a boy about Kevin's age. Kevin studied him carefully. He wore a military-looking cap, set straight on his head, but beneath the cap was a face with regular, delicate features that stirred in Kevin an uneasy desire. He let his mind drift into the picture until it seemed he could take his place beside the boy and they could all ride down the tree-lined street and out into the country. He and the boy could wander off together and be by themselves.

He looked at the caption beneath the picture, printed in a flowing script: "Houghton Street. 1880." Houghton Street? He had been on Houghton Street, a line of storefronts carved out of the old buildings he saw in the etching. Hamburger stands. Dry cleaners. Hardware stores. Chinese take-outs. All with garbage cans out in front and trucks servicing the stores. Kids playing on the sidewalks and jostling old ladies with shopping carts, coming back from Laundromats.

But in the picture, the houses looked as if they had just been built, each with a graceful stoop. No garbage cans around. No trucks. The people were dressed up. He wondered how a city could look like that, what it would be like to walk its streets and know its people, what it would be like to be the boy in the carriage. He knew for sure that whatever Miss Gotter had arranged, it wasn't going to be anything like that picture of Houghton Street. It wasn't even going to be anything like Laureldale. "

He remembered how, just that morning, his foster mother, Mrs. Crimmins (he always called her "Mrs. Crimmins" because she was so old she was almost like a grandmother to him) had packed his



bag carefully, with his recently washed and ironed shirts on top so they wouldn't get mussed, and his new belt—the one with the eagle buckle that his foster father had given him—neatly rolled in one corner.

He said good-bye to his room where he had lived for three years, the longest he had stayed with any foster parent. It was the small enclosed back porch of the bungalow. He had liked feeding the squirrels on one of the window sills and when he was waking up in the morning, looking up at the sky through the branches of the pine tree outside his window. He had carved his initials—K. S.—high on the side of one of the rafters when he heard that he was going back to live with his real mother. He wanted whoever lived there next to know it had been his room.

Mrs. Crimmins walked him three blocks down to the bus stop. He knew her arthritis had been bothering her that morning because her lips always tightened when the pain came. But she didn't say anything as she plodded along beside him; then stood and waited with him for the bus to come, her eyes a little more moist than usual. As the bus to the city came, he hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. She put a small paper bag in his hand just before he stepped on the bus and waved good-bye.

Riding into the city, he opened the paper bag and found a peanut butter and bologna sandwich, the way he liked it with plenty of mayonnaise, and a big red apple. He ate the apple on the bus, but he tucked the sandwich in the pocket of his windbreaker to save for . . . well, whatever was coming next.

Now, in the waiting room, he felt hungry. Carefully he pulled the sandwich out of his windbreaker and opened the plastic bag. The aroma made him think of Mrs. Crimmins's kitchen—all the sweet sharp smells that filled the bungalow when she was cooking. He held the sandwich in his hand for a moment, blinking his eyes. Then he started eating, his eyes intent on the picture of Houghton Street, and the face of the young man in the carriage.

Miss Gotter stood in the doorway of the waiting room wearing a gray dress, her hair pulled back severely, the mole over her left eyebrow giving her a kind of astonished expression whenever she was trying to be businesslike, but sympathetic. She looked as if she couldn't believe what she was saying, but what she said was simple enough. "Come into my office, Kevin, and meet your mother and brother."

"Okay," Kevin crumpled the sandwich bag, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed Miss Gotter as she waddled down a long green corridor.

Millie Stark had a hat on. Her hair was done up. The dress she was wearing looked as if it had just been bought. But Kevin recognized his mother. She still had the worn look around her eyes, the slackness around her mouth, and the veins on her hands seemed to stand out more than ever.

She rose from her chair and hugged him. "Oh, Kevin, it is good to see you again."

He hugged her back. Her perfume was heavy, but there was no slur to her voice, and her arms were firm around him. "Good to see you, too."

She held him back, her hands on his shoulders. "Let me look at you, you're such a young man!"

Kevin felt bashful. "I guess so."

Her voice had a lilt. "Oh, it's going to be all right, now. We're all going to be together."

Kevin thought that, yes, maybe it was going to be all right.

Miss Gotter said, "And, Kevin, this is your brother, Dennis."

The boy stood there beside Miss Gotter's desk, looking at Kevin with watchful eyes under a shock of dark hair that hung down over his forehead. He was short and slim, with hands a little big for his body. His mouth had a kind of pout that might come from stubbornness, or just too many teeth. But the eyes were what he most noticed about Dennis. They reminded him of some forest animal, alert, half-hidden in the underbrush, undecided whether to bite or run.

Kevin held out his hand. "Hello, Dennis."

Dennis's grip was solid. "Hello, Kevin," but he quickly withdrew his hand.

The house they were going to live in, Kevin learned, was on Burkett Street, just off Houghton, close to downtown. In the taxi, Millie, sitting in the back seat between her two sons, told them they would be

going to a new school and that she had made the arrangements with the principal, Mr. Johnstone. She told them about Jake, who was a retired bus driver; he was a real fine man and they would like him. She told them they'd like the kids on the block, too, because there were no colored or anything like that. After a while, she seemed to run out of things to say and the three of them rode on through the city streets, silent as three strangers.

The taxi driver turned onto Houghton Street and its garbled monotony of houses, shops, and traffic. But ahead, Kevin saw a stone steeple that towered above the neighborhood. In a few moments they passed the church, a massive pile of dark masonry, and beside it, a wall of the same masonry. Through an iron gate, Kevin could see a graveyard that covered half a city block. The gravestones, monuments and mausoleums were gray and ghostly, flecked with the white of melting snow. Towering bare-branched trees arched over the lifeless space.

The taxi turned on Burkett Street. Millie stirred. "We're almost home, boys."

Home? Kevin thought. Looking down the street, he decided it was going to take some getting used to.

The houses on Burkett Street were narrower and smaller than those on Houghton. The sidewalks were littered with garbage cans, plastic trash bags, and old newspaper. Women sat on some of the front stoops smoking and talking. A couple of men were working on an old car, cans of beer in brown paper bags sitting on the hood of the car, the front tires on the pavement beside them. Some kids were pitching pennies against the wall of one of the buildings. Other kids were careening around on skateboards, their voices high-pitched, taunting each other. They were different from the kids he had known in Laureldale. They moved faster; they spoke louder; and they walked with a kind of strut, hands clenched to their sides, ready to become fists. Kevin felt uneasy.

The taxi pulled up in front of a three-story brick house with faded green shutters and a white stone stoop of three steps leading up to a paneled front door. "Here we are," said Millie. Kevin gripped his suitcase.

The front door opened. Standing framed in the doorway was a short stocky man with a big belly, a red face, and slicked-back gray hair. "Hi, yuh-all." He spoke with a gravelly southern drawl.

"Boys, this is your Uncle Jake."

Jake held out a thick workingman's hand. "You must be Kevin, eh?"

"That's right," Kevin took the hand and felt the pressure of calloused strength. He noticed the man's eyes were small and bloodshot.

"And you're Dennis, aren't you, big boy?"

Dennis straightened his shoulders and with a sideways grin took Jake's hand with exaggerated heartiness. "That's me!"

"Well, all'o yuh come on in."

The living room was darkened by drawn window curtains that let in only a feeble amount of daylight. Against one wall, a big television set flickered colored images. In front of the set was a large easy chair covered with dark brown plastic. The only other furniture in the room was a couch, and a coffee table in front of it. The place smelt of beer and old clothes.

Jake settled himself down in the big easy chair in front of the television set, while Millie took her sons up two narrow flights of stairs to an attic room that went the length of the house with two small windows front and back. The ceiling was low.

"I've tried to fix it up for you two real good," said Millie, her voice still steady but with more conviction than Kevin had noticed before. He looked around. One cot and chest of drawers was at the front windows. The other cot and chest was at the rear windows. In the center of the room was a mottled rug and against the wall, two straight-backed chairs. On the wall behind them was an old movie poster of John Wayne in a Western hat with his arm wrapped around the neck of a horse.

"I want the place by the front windows," said Dennis, his voice high and insistent.

“No, Kevin is the oldest. He gets first choice.”

Kevin hesitated a moment. Then he said firmly. “I’ll take the front windows.”

Dennis just looked at him from under that lock of hair, and wordlessly took his suitcase to the cot at the back of the house. Kevin felt a twinge of anxiety, but he took his suitcase to the front cot.

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Kevin woke up. He didn’t know why; it was still dark outside. But there he was, wide awake. For a moment he didn’t remember where he was. The bed was strange. The street light coming in the window was harsh. The traffic sounds were ominous. Then he remembered he was on Burkett Street with Millie, Jake, and Dennis.

It had been three days since he had moved from Laureldale. He still wasn’t over the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. Everything was closing in on him. The streets were walls, the buildings ready to fall in and suffocate him.

All he had now was his mother. But she seemed to drift around the house, carrying a glass of liquor in her hand, doing this, doing that, but not really doing anything while Jake sat in his big chair in front of the television set, surrounded by newspapers and beer cans, and seemed to dominate the whole house.

He watched Dennis play up to Jake, getting him new beers from the fridge, laughing at his jokes, even sitting on his lap to watch TV programs. He watched how Dennis moved around the living room when Jake was there with a strut, his back arched, and his ass stuck out behind him. He watched how Jake looked at Dennis with a sparkle in his eye that never showed when he looked at Millie, or at Kevin.

Not that Jake was ignoring him. Jake gave him the bluff man-to-man treatment, telling him stories about the old days when trolleys ran down Houghton Street, and Jake, as the motorman, had made the circuit all the way out to Grover’s Road from the center of town. Jake grew misty-eyed when he talked about trolleys. “Drivin’ a bus is like drivin’ a cow,” he’d say sadly, “but a trolley . . . then you felt you were really doin’ something.”

Still, Kevin felt uneasy talking with Jake. Something about the heavy jowls, the strength of the hands, the occasional flash in his eye. Kevin knew he’d never want to see Jake get mad, and he wouldn’t want his mother to see it, either.

Staring through the window into the night sky, Kevin heard a fire-siren in the distance. He stirred restlessly in his cot and wondered what would happen if there was a fire in the house. He had a sudden vision of flames coming up the stairwell into the attic and himself climbing out the window and hanging on the ledge two floors above the street. Would he jump? Or just cling to the ledge in hopes that someone would rescue him? And what would happen to Dennis? Maybe he wouldn’t wake up. Maybe he’d be caught in the flames. He thought about that. Then he thought how he’d be blamed for not rescuing his kid brother and how his mother would cry and carry on and would always look at him after that with a silent accusation. He could say he tried. Yes, he could say that. But she wouldn’t believe him. He wouldn’t believe himself.

He barely noticed the smell at first, but then it grew stronger, a sweet-acrid odor that reminded him of bananas. He raised his head a little and sniffed out the window, wondering where the smell was coming from. But the breeze from the window was fresh, and he realized that the smell was coming from inside the house. It smelled as if somebody had been painting, but he knew that his mother and Jake had gone to bed at about the same time he had, and nobody had been doing any painting before that.

Then he heard a sound from the other end of the attic, a gentle rhythmic sound like breathing, but the sound itself was the crinkling of paper. He lay still, puzzling over what he smelt and heard. He half-suspected that Dennis had some kind of machine going that might blow up the attic. He sat up in bed. “Dennis, what are you doing?”

Silence. The paper-crinkling had stopped.

“Dennis?”

“Yeah?” The voice was muffled.

“What’s goin’ -on?”

“Nothin’.”

“Something stinks.”

A heavy sigh. “Go on back to sleep.” The words were slurred.

“Are you sick or something?”

“Nothin’ wrong with me. I’m feelin’ fine . . . just fine.”

“You drunk?”

Dennis giggled. It was an eerie sound there in the darkness. Kevin felt fear again, but now it was mixed with anger. Who was this little punk, this street-wise freak, who seemed to surround him with a lot of hints and play-acting about mysteries he didn’t understand, and wasn’t sure he wanted to understand?

He reared out of bed and crossed the attic room. The odor grew heavier as he came toward Dennis’s cot. “Whatcha got there?” “None of your fuckin’ business.” The voice was high and insistent again, but neither of their voices had risen much above a whisper. “Lemme see.”

“No, you don’t,” and Dennis burrowed himself under the covers. Kevin yanked down the covers, exposing Dennis’s nude body, clearly outlined in the dim light. In one hand, close by his side, Dennis held a small paper bag. In the other hand a spray can.

“What the hell? ...” The odor was almost sickening in Kevin’s nostrils. “What’s that stuff you got there?”

“Paint.”

“What are you planning on painting?”

“Nothin’.”

“Well, what are you doin’ with it?”

“I sniff it in the bag. It gets yuh high.”

“You’re out of your tree.”

“Try it.” He raised the paper bag. “Go ahead.”

“Not me. And Jake will beat your ass if he catches you doin’ crazy shit like that.”

Dennis pulled the covers up. “Jake ain’t gonna do nothin’ to me.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know,” said Dennis dreamily. “I know guys like that. I know how to handle ’em.”

“Where’d you get that stuff, anyway?”

“I bought it.”

“Where’d you get the money?”

“I can get money any time I want it.”

“Yeah? How?”

A pause. Kevin could sense Dennis looking at him and he felt very uneasy. When Dennis spoke, his voice had a languid disdain. “Laureldale is nowhere. You ain’t lived in the city.”

Kevin flared. “Laureldale’s a good place. Better’n here.”

“Yeah?” A soft giggle. “You’ll learn.” Dennis put the bag over his nose and mouth. He inhaled deeply.

Kevin went back to his end of the attic, opened the window wider, and lay down on his cot. But he still couldn’t sleep. His mind drifted back to the picture of Houghton Street that he had seen at the welfare office. He thought about the boy in the carriage. He imagined himself walking down the street, climbing into the carriage, and sitting down beside the boy. He could sense the warmth of the body next to him, the coolness of the breeze around them, and its rustle through the shading tree. He knew that beneath the boy’s strange clothes was flesh, just as surely as he had seen Dennis’s body when he had stripped the covers on

his bed. If he could only . . .

“Hey, Dennis ...”

There was a silence at the other end of the attic. Then: “Yeah?”

“That stuff you got. Does it make you see things?”

“Sometimes.”

“Does it make you feel things?”

“Oh . . . wow!”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m in it.”

Kevin thought for a long moment. Then he got out of bed. “Lemme try some.”

“How come? You were all uptight about it.”

Kevin walked toward the other end of the attic. “I said, lemme try some.”

He heard that soft, eerie giggle again in the darkness, and then the slurred voice. “0...ka...ay.”

As Kevin approached the bed, he sensed Dennis’s eyes on him. His voice was now languid. “You gonna suck me, first?”

“Suck what?”

“My dick.”

“Get off it.”

“Go ahead. A lot ’o guys do. I dig it.”

“I ain’t sucking your dick no way. Now gimme the bag!”

“0...ka...ay.”

Dennis held up the bag and Kevin took it. “What do I do with it, now?”

“Man, you really are square! Hold it over your nose and mouth and breathe. Ain’t yuh ever done it before?”

“No.”

Dennis giggled again. “Go ahead.”

The smell was almost overpowering as Kevin put the bag to his face. He sniffed, coughed, and gagged.

“Take it easy. You’ll get used to it.”

Kevin held the bag away from his face. “How do you breathe this shit, anyway?”

“It ain’t shit. It’s the best.”

Kevin hesitated. But he thought about—the boy in the carriage—and slowly he brought the bag up to his nose. He sniffed, gingerly and began to feel dizzy. He sat down on the foot of Dennis’s bed and stared at the shafts of street light coming in the windows at the other end of the attic. The lights seemed to tremble a little. He took another sniff, deeper, this time. He grew intensely aware of his arms and legs; they seemed to be weighed down with heaviness so that even the slightest movement was an effort. The bed under him seemed to sway. “Quit moving around, Dennis.”

“I ain’t movin’ none.” A giggle. “It’s gettin’ to yuh.”

Kevin breathed in the bag, almost greedily this time. He heard his own heart beat. The pulse kept pounding in his head. He thought he could feel his hair growing, as if the force of the blood was rushing it out of his skull. The walls of the attic room around him seemed to expand and contract like a slow moving bellows, and he felt as if he were inside the lung of some great animal.

He tried to think about the boy in the carriage, but the image was blurred and it seemed to be receding further and further into the picture until it was half-hidden in the foliage of the big shade-tree.

He tried to rise from the bed, but half-risen, he felt the room lurch, and he fell back.

He put the bag to his face again, and breathed deep.

“Want some more?” Dennis asked.

“Yeah . . . yeah . . . gimme some more. ...”

# TWO

Gino Scala sat next to Kevin in English class. He had his problems with spelling. In Gino's compositions, serious had a "c" in it, nephew had an "f," and he couldn't even attempt to spell silhouette. Everytime he got into a spelling crisis, he'd nudge Kevin and Kevin would bail him out.

Gino was impressed. "You know a lot, don't you?"

Kevin shrugged. "Out at Laureldale, I used to read a lot."

"Yeah, and . . . and you remember."

"What I read," Kevin hesitated. "But sometimes here in the city, I don't think I know anything at all."

"How do you mean?"

"It's strange around here."

Gino looked at him with big dark eyes. "I can clue you in."

Gino lived further down Burkett Street in a row house similar to Kevin's, with a mother who weighed over two hundred pounds and wheezed and three younger sisters. But Gino had the cellar. His mother couldn't get herself down the steps to the cellar and he terrorized his younger sisters by telling them there were giant bats in the basement. He had the place all to himself.

One day in mid-March the snow was melted and there was a hint of spring in the air, Gino invited him down to his refuge. There was an entry through metal doors, flat with the sidewalk and fastened by a big padlock. The key to that padlock was Gino's most cherished possession because he could get in and out without being seen by his mother or sisters.

Gino unlocked the padlock and escorted Kevin into the pitch blackness below. Gino turned on a dim overhead light and Kevin saw a long room as narrow as the house above, with a hot-water tank and furnace at the far end. The ceiling was low. The walls were of rough stone, glinting with mica like the wall around the cemetery. The place looked as old as the city, and it smelled dank with just a trace of the odor of garlic.

Gino flung himself on a pile of old mattresses in one corner of the room, and turned on a transistor radio. "C'mon. Sit down."

Kevin settled himself on the mattresses, cross-legged, facing Gino. "Some hideout you got here."

Gino lay back and rubbed his crotch. "I'm gonna bring some chicks down here and fuck 'em."

"Oh?" Kevin shifted uneasily.

"Yeah. I think about that. I come down here, and I play the radio, and I think about that."

Kevin felt distaste, but he squared his shoulders. "Yeah, I think about that, too."

"All that pussy. ..." Gino seemed lost in fantasy as the radio music pulsed. Then suddenly he raised himself on one elbow. "Hey, that kid brother of yours is heavy."

"Dennis? What makes you think so?"

"I dunno. Just looking at him, you know he's been around. You two just got together, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Gives you a hard time, huh?"

"I can't figure him out."

Gino shook his head. "A lot of crazy things go on in this city, and I think Dennis is into all of them."

"He's only thirteen."

"More like sixty. He was in a foster home, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. Like me."

"Where'd he live?"

"Rowland Street. Down by the docks."

"Ever been down there?"

“No.”

“Don’t go.”

“Why not?”

Gino shook his head. “Anything around Riverfront Road is a place to stay away from.” He sighed. “Trouble down there. Nothin’ you want to get into.”

“You been down there?”

Gino hesitated. “Yeah. Once. I needed money.”

“Money? Down there?”

“Never mind!” A sudden flash of anger. “Just don’t go down there, yuh hear?”

Kevin was startled. What was down at Riverfront Road? But he didn’t want to push Gino. He wanted Gino as a friend. But what Gino knew ... he could find out, and the determination was beginning to grow in his mind.

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When Kevin got home from Gino’s late that afternoon, he found Jake sitting in his big chair in front of the TV set, his hand wrapped around a can of beer. It took Kevin a few moments to realize that, although the tube was flickering in front of him, Jake wasn’t seeing anything, or hearing anything, or feeling anything. Jake was zonked out.

He went into the kitchen and found his mother stirring a pot on the stove with one hand. In the other hand, she held a glass filled with her customary “seven and seven”—Seagram’s Seven Crowns with Seven-Up as a mixer. The bottles were on the shelf beside the sink. He assumed that something edible was in the pot. His mother looked at him, sloe-eyed. “Where yuh been?”

“Over at Gino’s.”

“Not good enough to come back here, huh? Here I got supper almost ready and neither you or Dennis’s anywhere around. I dunno what’s gotten into you kids.”

“I’m here.”

“Sure . . . sure . . . just come on in here to eat and run.” She took a sip of her drink. “Ain’t we good enough for yuh?”

“Ma ...”

“Hangin’ around with those wops. Pretty soon it’ll be niggers.”

“Ma ...”

“And after all the effort I spend try in’ to give you a decent home.” Kevin wrapped his arms around his mother’s waist. “Ma, I know what you done, and it’s good, and I’m proud of you, gettin’ out of the hospital and all. ...”

Millie embraced him with one arm, the glass still held in the other hand. “There, now, Kevie. I know you’re a good boy and you love your mother. It’s just . . . just . . . that life gets to be too much. ...” She began to sniffle. “Just . . . too . . . damn much.” She turned away from him and wiped her nose on a dishrag.

Kevin heard the front door open and Dennis’s voice, breezy as a spring day. “Hi-ya, Uncle Jake.” And he heard Jake grunt and snort. Dennis’s voice again. “How yuh like it, huh?”

“Great . . . great . . . where’d you get it?”

“Somebody gave it to me.”

Another grunt from Jake. “C’mere and give your Uncle Jake a big hug.”

Millie sighed. “Well, ’least something is waking Jake up.”

In a few moments, Dennis appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, wearing a bright red windbreaker. “Look what I got.” And he turned around like a fashion model.

“Real nice.” Millie said, and then, after a pause, “Where’d yuh go, gettin’ a thing like that?”

“A friend of mine gave it to me.”



“What did you take it for? You don’t need going ’round, ’cepting charity. We got ’nough money to buy you things.”

“Wasn’t charity. I earned it.”

“How’d yuh earn it by?”

Dennis was airier still. “Doing errands. Things like that.”

“Sounds fishy to me.”

“Nothin’ fishy about it. I got friends down on Rowland Street and they give me jobs to do.”

“I want you to stay away from those docks, yuh hear? Bad things go on down there.”

The trace of a smile crossed Dennis’s lips. “You wouldn’t want me to desert my friends, would you?”

“Listen, young man, I went to a lot of trouble gettin’ this place so

we could live in a respectable neighborhood.” Millie’s voice was rising. “And I don’t want you hanging around with that trash down by the docks!”

Dennis’s voice fairly purred. “All right,. Mother.”

“Now go wash up. Dinner’s nearly ready.”

At that moment, Kevin made up his mind what he was going to do the next afternoon, and he was going to do it by himself.

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The Riverfront bus went along Houghton Street, but Kevin walked several blocks down from school before boarding it. He didn’t want any of his schoolmates seeing him headed for the riverfront.

He walked to the back of the bus and sat down, keeping his shoulders hunched and his eyes looking out the window at the passing streets and traffic. He did not know what he would find once he got to the docks. He didn’t know what he’d do when he got off the bus. But he was determined to find out about Dennis’s street-wise power, and he was convinced that it had to do with the docks.

But it wasn’t just Dennis he was curious about. He felt mysteries about himself that had lain dormant at Laureldale. Now the very strangeness of the city seemed to stir his awareness, pique his curiosity. What power might he find down at the docks?

The bus turned a corner and headed down the broad cobblestoned expanse of Riverfront Road, lined on one side with heavy-set brick warehouses and on the other with pitched-roofed piers with stretches of river between them. Down the center of the street were railroad tracks and in the distance some freight cars. Over the roofs of the piers, Kevin could see the cranes and funnels of freighters at dock and, beyond, the masts of an old sailing ship.

At the corner of Riverfront Road and Rowland Street, he reached up and pulled the cord to get out. But when the door opened, he held back and didn’t get off until several blocks later. His hands deep in his pockets and his shoulders still hunched against the brisk air, he started walking along the sidewalk in front of the warehouses. He dodged trucks pulling in and out of loading docks, watched big men heaving boxes off them into the cavernous interiors of the warehouses. One of the men stopped for a moment, noticing Kevin. With just the trace of a grin he asked, “Hey, kid, watcha doin’ around here this early?”

“Nothin’.” Kevin mumbled and hurried on, feeling stared at.

At a corner further down the Road, Kevin passed a bar, its double doors standing open, its beer smells seeping out onto the street. Kevin peered inside and saw a row of men in work clothes standing along the bar, each with one foot on the rail, their rumps in one repetitive line. He felt a vague excitement, stirred by the beat of the jukebox music. He wanted to go in and take his place with these men, close to their strong bodies. But he knew they’d throw him out; he was just a fifteen year-old kid.

He knew he wouldn’t be for long. He had to shave, now, at least twice a week, and he kept examining his chest to see if any hairs were coming. At least he had hair around his dick. He was proud of that. And

his voice had a low resonance and didn't crack anymore. But he was still a gangly 120 pounds and knew that no one would take him for a man. He envied how men moved so compactly and in control of themselves. Kevin was never quite sure his arms and legs would do what he wanted them to do, and he was inclined to stumble over things and upset glasses on the table. He imagined upsetting a glass of beer on the bar and he cringed.

Further down Riverfront Road, he caught sight of a man sitting in a parked car. The guy's eyes were fixed on him as he approached, trying to walk casually under a scrutiny that seemed to strip him of his clothes. As he passed within a few feet of the car, he heard the click of a door-latch, saw the man lean across the driver's seat and hold the door open several inches. Kevin broke step for just a moment (hearing Mrs. Crimmins's warning voice—"never get into a car with a stranger") and kept on walking. But he held his head higher and his shoulders straighter as he moved. He felt, not quite knowing why, that he was appreciated.

He knew there were men in the world who liked other men, and sometimes liked kids his age. One of the teachers he had had at Laureldale was known, behind his back, as "Miss Thing." If you were concerned about your mark in his math class, it didn't hurt to flirt a little. After all, the girls did their share with male teachers.

"Miss Thing" gave the guys a chance. But "Miss Thing" was frail and shy. The men down at the docks exuded power like sweat. Their animality excited him.

He wondered at himself. Why was he excited? He knew he wasn't "Miss Thing," but he didn't know quite what he was. He could only feel a warmth intensified by lurking fear.

What had Dennis found down here? What were the hidden games he played? He glanced down Rowland and some of the other side streets. Beyond the warehouses were lines of small row houses not very different from those on Burkett Street, but dirtier, dingier. The streets themselves were littered with paper, old boxes, old tires, garbage cans. Kids of all ages played stickball, arguing long and loud, or just stood by lamp posts or fire hydrants yowling. A few mothers were also yowling, chasing their kids around and swatting them on the butt. Somewhere in the street melee, Dennis had played his part and learned the things he knew . . . the things that Kevin now knew he did not know.

Further down the road, he found himself across the street from a big sailing ship iiding at its berth beside a pier. Its masts, spars and lines etched a filigree against the bright afternoon sky. Its prow, sleek as a marlin, seemed to point its bowsprit directly at Kevin. He felt himself beckoned.

His eyes intent on the ship, he started across the expanse of Riverfront Road, giving an occasional glance to oncoming traffic. But just as he got to the railroad tracks he heard an ear-shattering whistle, and looked up to see a train engine, its single lamp-eye as big as God's, bearing down on him. He jumped back. The massive engine passed in front of him, hauling two freight cars. High up in the engineer's cabin, a man peered down at him. "Watch were you're goin', kid!"

When the freight cars had passed, Kevin, his pulse still racing from the scare, crossed the rest of the road with caution and stood at the water's edge, staring up at the ship whose bowsprit was now high above his head. The ship's name, painted in heavy gold letters near the prow, was Mirabelle.

He wondered what oceans had sent their waves against that prow. He tried to imagine her far out to sea, sails full of the salty wind, masts creaking, lines straining, as she broke the water heading for some port at the other end of the world. He could see himself belly-down on the bowsprit, watching the dolphins and flying fish, as the ship brought a load of cinnamon and ivory back from Zanzibar. Once landed, he'd sling his seabag over his shoulder, push his way through the thronging melee of unloading, and head for one of the waterfront bars for a long evening's drinking with the rest of the crew. He'd be a man, a man among men.

But now the pier was boarded up and seemingly deserted. A gangplank stretched from the side of the ship down to the pier. If he could get onto the pier, he could get up to the ship. But there seemed no way.

Then he saw a solitary figure go around the far side of the pier and disappear. He hesitated a moment and then sauntered along the road till he came to the place where the man had gone. He found a short stretch of loose wood fencing. Pulling the planks toward him, he peered out over the river and the pier siding. Close by there was a gap in the siding. Putting one foot on a piling stuck deep in the water, he swung himself into the siding gap and stood blinking, trying to accustom his eyes to the dark immensity of the pier's interior. At the far end toward the river, a few shafts of daylight came through windows. High over his head, he could see other glimmerings of light through roof vents, but the light seemed to lose itself in the vast emptiness.

Slowly, feeling his footing on the rough planking, he made his way. He wondered about the guy he had seen come into the pier, but he could only hear his own footfalls echoing. He started across the pier to the other side in hopes of finding an opening to the gangplank that led to the ship. But after a few hesitant steps, he stopped. At the far end, silhouetted against the shafts of daylight, figures moved. Two. Maybe three. He could not be sure. All he knew was that people were inside the pier, and he did not know what they were doing. He felt a tingling of fear as he heard footfalls behind a partition at the near end of the pier and a barely audible murmuring. More people.

He started walking again, deeper into the darkness. He felt drawn into the mysteries of the pier as he felt drawn to the Mirabelle. The excitement permeated him, stirring his heart beat, the pit of his stomach, his groin. He was aware that he was walking toward a column, just visible ahead of him. As he passed, the column seemed to divide in two. One part moved close, and he felt the pressure of a hand on his crotch. He recoiled in fright, but he felt his penis strain to erection. The hand touched his crotch again, discovering his excitement. He moved away, but the figure drifted along beside him like some predatory ghost.

"Lemme alone!" he whispered.

"What's the matter?" The voice was low, masculine, and, to Kevin, ominously exciting.

"Nothin' . . . just ..."

The figure next to him seemed massive, but the inquiring hand was gentle. "You're hot to trot, aren't yuh?"

Kevin drew back and put his hand down to guard his crotch. "Bashful?" The voice grew weary. "No need to be bashful around here."

"I'm just trying to get to the ship."

"Well, now, that's a new story."

"It's true!"

"All right. All right, but on your way, take five to drop your pants."

"Five? . . ."

"Ten, if you're good chicken."

"Ten . . . what?"

A pause. Then a sigh. "Say, haven't you ever been here before?"

"No."

"My God, a virgin!" The man was chuckling. "With a hard-on."

"I don't have a hard-on." Kevin felt panic rising. "And I'm not going to drop my pants. Not for you or anybody!"

He started to run through the cavernous darkness as if he were pursued by some ghost of himself, evoked by the man's voice. He ran toward the Mirabelle, his eyes on the shafts of light in the pier's siding, but he lost his balance on the rough planking. His ankle twisted and he lurched forward, slamming his leg and shoulder against the wood. Pain coursed through him. He cried out, but quickly stifled the sound. Still, it echoed.

He lay there on the planking as the pain beat through him. As he tried to get to his feet, he heard

footfalls again, coming from ahead this time, and in a moment he was aware of a figure standing over him, then kneeling down beside him. Sobs welled up in Kevin's throat. He reached out and touched a hand.

"Did you hurt yourself?" The voice out of the darkness was high-pitched, with a Southern lilt. "Here, let me help you get yourself up." He felt hands under his armpits.

"No. I can do it."

But the hands stayed where they were, slowly raising Kevin. "Steady, now."

Swaying on his feet, the pain still shooting through his leg and the sobs still in his throat, Kevin hung on to the body next to him. Arms came around him and cradled him. He buried his head on the shoulder next to him—the soft cotton of the tee-shirt, smooth skin, and the faint odor of cologne—and wrapped his arms around the other's neck to steady himself.

Kevin felt the arms around him slide slowly down his back until they rested on his buttocks. Despite the pain, his penis stiffened, close against the man's thigh. He bridled and pulled away. "Thanks." he mumbled. "Thanks."

He swung around and saw the patch of daylight behind him, the hole in the pier siding where he had come in. He hobbled toward the daylight, his eyes scanning the darkness for figures that, in his imagination, were growing immense. They lurked all around, hovering, waiting. . . .

He weaved his way past the columns, and stumbled on till he came to the siding. The sunlight was harsh on his eyes, and the world outside the pier seemed brusque in its reality. He turned, glanced into the sheltering darkness and for a moment thought of going back to the big bodies that had caressed him. But then he straightened his shoulders, stared down at the piling, the ledge, the fence, and the river water below. He gauged the distances, put his good foot on the piling, and swung the other to the ledge. The pain made him gasp and he swayed over the water. In sudden desperation, he grabbed the fence post and hung there for a moment till the dizziness passed. He eased his way through the opening of the fence and he was on Riverfront Road.

He clambered onto a bus, limped to the back, and slumped in the furthest seat. He tried to make himself invisible so that no one would ever know he had been to Riverfront Road. But he knew.

# THREE

Riding back on the bus, Kevin felt that he had visited another land, as silent and mysterious as the Mirabelle herself. He didn't know the language or the customs. He had just seen a glimpse of the trading—"drop your pants for ten"—but even the faces of the natives were invisible.

Was Dennis one of the natives? Was that how he got his windbreaker? Just dropping his pants? What else? Fantasies of naked bodies entwined in the darkness went through his mind—not just one or two, but dozens in some spectral dance—he felt himself being touched and held by man after man in their quiet strength. The threat and fear he had felt on the pier was fading. What was clearer in his memory was the warmth of those touching hands, probing his privacies, revealing his barely acknowledged sexual desire. Once stirred, the desire pulsed like pain. He wanted to go back. He wanted to find the man with the lilting Southern voice, feel his arms tight around him. Why had he been afraid? Why had he pulled back? Now he wished he hadn't. He had a suspicion Dennis never did. And Dennis had a windbreaker.

When Kevin got home from Riverfront Road, he found Dennis sitting on the front stoop of the house, wearing his windbreaker and staring at the pavement. His shoulders were hunched and he looked very small. Kevin could hear muffled voices coming from inside the house.

"Whatsa matter?"

Dennis shrugged. "I guess they've been drinkin' all day."

"Mom and Jake?"

"Yeah."

The voices inside the house grew louder and then there was a crash.

"Mom could be getting hurt." Kevin took a step toward the front door.

"Maybe she likes it."

"From him?"

"She's shacked up with him, ain't she?"

Another crash.

"I'm goin' in." Kevin said.

"What do you care? Let 'em fight it out."

But Kevin opened the front door and went in.

Jake and Millie were in the kitchen, screaming at each other. Jake's face was beet-red, the veins standing out on his neck. "Yuh stupid bitch!"

Millie, her hair stringing down over her face, eyes unfocused, held a crockery pitcher over her head. "An' I'm gonna crack your skull open, yuh hear?"

"Try it, and I'll break your goddamn neck!"

The pitcher came flying across the kitchen, wide of Jake, but Kevin had to dodge as it smashed against the wall and showered him with fragments. "Hey, Mom ..."

Her eyes sought Kevin out. "Whatcha doin' here?"

"Mom . . . cool it . . ."

"Cool it, my ass! Whatcha comin' 'round here for, anyway. Doan wantcha 'round. Nothin' but a punk faggot ..."

Jake lurched toward her. "Shut your fat mouth, Millie!"

"What I said!" Her voice was a shriek. "Nothin' but a punk faggot!"

Jake slammed her across the face with his open hand. She reeled back like a cornered animal, glaring and hissing. "Yeah, an' you are, too!"

Another slam. Millie crumpled.

Tears welled up in Kevin's eyes. "Jake . . . don't . . . !"

Jake's voice was low and curiously restrained. "G'wan, kid. Get outta here. Nothin' you should be seein'."

Kevin hesitated.

Millie, sprawled on the floor, screeched. "Outta here, faggot!" Kevin turned and fled.

On the stoop outside, he sat down next to Dennis. "Jesus." Dennis kept his eyes on the pavement. "My foster parents over on Rowland Street, they used to go on like that, too. Drinkin' up the lunch money, the clothing money, even the rent money. Shit. I learned how to get along."

"How?"

Dennis looked at Kevin from under his brows and that lock of hair. He sighed. "I guess you're gonna need to know."

Kevin felt a wave of anxiety. "Yeah? What'll I need to know?"

"How to get money."

"How?"

Dennis shook his head. "Jezuz, you really are from nowhere, aren't yuh?"

"I ain't stealing, if that's what yuh mean."

"Who needs to steal? They give it to you, man, give it to you." Kevin had a creepy feeling up his spine. "Who gives it to you, for what?"

"I'll show you, sometime."

"When?"

"Sometime." Dennis shifted uneasily. "It helps if you're a little drunk."

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Kevin thought about what Dennis had said that night when he was falling asleep. Then his mind drifted back to the pier. He could almost feel that hand on his crotch and the arms that had held him when he had fallen. There in bed his penis stiffened and his groin ached. But the memory of his mother's voice was lacerating. "Punk faggot!" The snarling words seemed so alien to the gentle fantasies that floated through his mind.

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The street lamps and the lights from the bars were dim and the shadows heavy around the trucks and the warehouse doors on Riverfront Road.

Dennis shoved a can of beer into Kevin's hand. "Here, drink it. You'll feel better."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Friend of mine at one of the bars."

"You know a lot of people around here, don't you?"

"Used to be my hang-out." He looked around with an imperial air. "Matter of fact, it still is."

Kevin sipped his beer. Its chill sharpness felt good going down, and seemed to soothe his tension, Dennis had been so casual about the whole thing. "You stand in a doorway, see? Or maybe you just walk up and down. And the john comes along in a car, and if he likes your looks, he stops and unlatches the door. So you sidle up, real easy, and you look in the car and if it isn't the monster out of the Black Lagoon, you get in the car. And then you gotta work it out, see? Right at the beginning. Try for ten. Always try for ten. You're straight, see? But you got a sick mother and all that bullshit, and for ten you'll let 'im blow you. And if he don't go for it, you make out like you're gonna get out of the car. Mostly, they come around after that. But if he doesn't, and it's late, and you like his looks, go for five. After all, he's gonna take you back to his apartment or something and maybe you can spot something you can steal. If he's gonna do it in

the car, that's cool. You can be back on the street in ten minutes. 'Course you got your rocks off, and sometimes it takes a half hour to get it hard again. But you can just pretend to get your rocks off, breathing hard and pumping around, and mostly the john don't know the difference. He'll pay anyway, and you're saved for the next one. Only thing . . . you gotta have it hard. No john's gonna pay for a limp dick."

Kevin had felt his penis go limper by the minute.

"And another thing. Always wear something white or light-colored, so they can see you."

Kevin had dutifully put on an old pair of white pants that were a bit too small for him. Dennis had nodded appreciatively. "Great. Shows your basket."

"What's 'basket'?"

"Your dick and balls, stupid. It's what you're selling."

Now, standing on Riverfront Road, his pants clutching his groin, Kevin's pulse raced. Somewhere on those darkened streets was a car, inside the car a man, a total stranger who would do things to him that no one had ever done before. He didn't know what would happen; he hoped that the john would be gentle.

Dennis looked around, his eyes half-shadowed by his brow and hair. "See that lamppost over there? And the warehouse sign right beyond it?"

"Yeah."

"It's mostly taken, but not many's out tonight. Finish your beer, and then go stand under that sign."

"Okay."

Kevin drained his beer can, burped, tossed the can in the gutter, squared his shoulders, and walked down the street to the sign.

He stood with his back braced against the side of the warehouse and watched the sporadic traffic on Riverfront Road. He followed the cars carefully to see if any of them slowed as they came toward him. One did, but it picked up speed again and passed him. Kevin watched its taillights disappear, and felt rebuffed. Maybe no one would stop. Maybe he'd be left standing there all night. He glanced down the sidewalk and caught sight of Dennis's slim figure sitting on the fender of a parked car, and felt reassured. Dennis didn't seem to be having any better luck than he was. His eyes, now accustomed to the dimness, noticed other figures standing in doorways or wandering up and down the sidewalk.

He saw a police car coming down the road and had a moment of panic. What would he say if it stopped? Just waiting for a friend to take me to my sick mother and all that bullshit? Nobody'd believe that. But Kevin need not have worried. The car kept right on going, apparently oblivious to the shadowed, waiting figures.

A station wagon passed. Then he saw the brake-lights gleam as the wagon came to a stop beside the parked car where Dennis was sitting. Dennis moved quickly to the window and in a moment opened the door and got in. The car sped away, leaving Kevin feeling very much alone.

He scanned the piers across the road and saw in the distance the masts of the Mirabelle filigreed against the night sky. The vision of the ship tugged at his awareness, drew his mind into another time.

Kevin was so caught up in his dream that he barely noticed the car standing by the curb next to him, lights gleaming, its front door ajar and motor idling. The reality sent a shiver through him. This was it.

He walked to the curb and peered in the window. A jovial voice said, "Hey, young feller. Want to go for a ride?" And Kevin promptly forgot everything that Dennis had told him.

"Sure." He swung the door open and got in the front seat.

The man was stocky, round-faced, and had curly gray hair. He reminded Kevin of a scout master he had known in Laureldale, with the same easy-going masculine assurance. As the car started to move, Kevin thought maybe they were only going for a ride; maybe the man was going to teach him how to tie knots or keep bees.

The man's voice again, low-pitched and strong. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

“Yeah, I just moved into town.”

“Always good to have a new face.” He stuck out a rugged hand. “Call me Harry.”

Kevin took the hand and felt a pressured warmth. “I’m Kevin.”

“Good to meet you, Kevin.”

Kevin eased closer to the man and tried to imagine what his body was like. “Where we goin’?”

“Oh, there’s a little place I know.”

Kevin was relieved. He didn’t feel like keeping bees that evening.

Harry turned the car onto a side street and parked in front of a dim doorway with a blue neon sign, announcing ‘The Savoy Hotel.’ As they entered the narrow lobby, Kevin could see Harry in full light. He was shorter than Kevin had thought, his shoulders broad, face ruddy and youthful, but the curly hair on top of his head was almost snow white. Kevin wanted to touch it. He wondered if Harry would let him.

The man behind the desk, gaunt with a stubble of beard, looked up. “‘Lo, Harry. Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Guess I’m slowing down in my old age.”

Kevin saw the gaunt man look at him and then turn back to Harry. “Nice ‘un, you got there.” He checked a row of keys on the wall beside him. “How ‘bout room 12? You always liked room 12.”

“Fine.” And with a certain ostentation, Harry handed his wallet

and keys and wristwatch to the man behind the desk, and received the key to Room 12 in return. “Have a nice evening,” the gaunt man said with a grin. He didn’t have many teeth.

“C’mon, Kevin,” said Harry and put an arm around his shoulder.

The elevator was small and it creaked. Harry kept his arm around Kevin’s shoulder as the elevator rose, and Kevin caught a tangy smell of some kind of aftershave lotion. On the third floor, the elevator stopped and the door opened.

“Ever been here before?” Harry asked.

Kevin shook his head as they stepped out into a dim-lit corridor that smelt improbably of sauerkraut. Room 12 was at the end of the corridor and as they got to the door, Kevin had a sudden urge to run down the fire stairs and out of the building. Something was going to happen to him inside that room, and he didn’t know what. For a moment, he didn’t want to know. But ... he wanted to touch that white hair. '

Harry turned the key and led him into a room just large enough to hold a bureau, a couple of chairs, and a double bed. Off to one side was a door leading to a bathroom. Kevin had never been in a hotel room before. He wondered how much Harry had paid for it.

Harry shut the door behind them and they looked at each other. Harry’s expression was quizzical. “You didn’t ask how much.”

Kevin shook his head again. “I forgot.”

Harry grinned, reached out a hand and-rubbed the back of Kevin’s neck. “I pay ten.”

“Okay.”

Ten dollars!

Harry stood back and looked at Kevin. “You’re one beautiful kid, you know that?”

Kevin shrugged.

“No. Maybe it’s better you don’t know that. Some of the kids, they get vain as a princess.” Harry took off his coat and started unbuttoning his shirt.

Kevin just stood there.

Harry looked at him, sharply. But his voice was soft. ‘Tell me, Kevin, have you ever done this before?’

Kevin felt alarmed, and he answered quickly. “Yeah, I’ve done it. A lot of times. I’m straight, but I need the money. My mother’s sick.”

Harry nodded solemnly, but there was a glint in his eye. He came close to Kevin, and his closeness



made Kevin flush with excitement. Harry's hands moved slowly. "First, let's take off your jacket ..."

It was happening. It was all happening. Whatever it was. And it wasn't very long before Kevin was standing nude beside the bed. The air felt fresh and good on his body but what felt better was Harry looking at him. He had never been looked at that way before. Somehow he could feel himself something of value, something to be admired, something to be paid for. He wondered how this could suddenly be. His body had just been something to hold his head up, and lately with all the growing, it hadn't been working very well. Now Harry was standing a few feet away, combing every part of his body with his eyes.

"Turn around slowly."

Kevin turned, cautiously. At a time like this, it wouldn't do to trip over his own feet. His back to Harry, he could hear his breathing above the muffled noise of traffic outside.

When he turned back to face Harry, the man had his shoes and shirt off and was unbuckling his belt. Now, thought Kevin, it's my turn to look, and he gazed at the big muscles of the shoulders and arms, the powerful chest with the scattering of salt-and-pepper hair across it, the nipples, unexpectedly pink. He wondered at the assurance of Harry's hands, the compact grace of his body as he took off his pants. He wondered if he'd ever be able to balance so casually, whether the muscles of his legs would ever grow so defined. As Harry slipped out of his jockey shorts, Kevin wondered more, for his penis, large and roseate, seemed to have the same relaxed assurance as his hands.

Harry drew close again. "I'll go easy with you, Kevin."

He knew this was the first time. He knew that Kevin didn't know what to do. "Thanks." Kevin murmured. "Should I lie down on the bed?"

There was the trace of a grin on Harry's face when he said, "It's more fun that way."

"Can I touch your hair, first?"

It was a full grin, now. "You can touch any part of me you want."

Kevin reached up and ran his fingers through the curls. "Do you Clorox it?"

"Don't need to. It's been that way since I was thirty."

"Wow." Kevin hesitated. "How old are you now?"

Harry chuckled him under the chin. "Nice little hustlers don't ask personal questions."

"I'm sorry. It's just ..."

"I'm thirty-five."

"That's not so old."

"Thanks."

Kevin felt himself flush and stammered; "I didn't mean it that way, either."

Harry cupped Kevin's chin in his hand. "You're a sweet kid." Leaning forward, Harry kissed him on the lips. Kevin had never been kissed that way before, by anybody. He wanted to kiss back, but he didn't know exactly how.

"Shall I lie down, now?"

"Uh-huh. And just relax. We've got time."

Kevin stretched out on the bed. It was soft under his back. He felt enveloped and somehow secure in the yielding warmth. He closed his eyes, but he was aware when Harry switched off the lights, and he was aware when Harry lay down beside him. His penis went to full erection.

He felt Harry's fingers on one nipple, then gliding over his torso with feather-light touch. He lay very still. He was straight. He had told Harry that. He was doing it for the money. Getting a hard-on was part of the act. That's what Harry was paying for. Dennis had told him that, and Harry was going to get his money's worth.

But . . .

Harry's fingers touched his penis, and everything in his body seemed to surge. Involuntarily, he raised

his hips to press against them and the touch grew stronger. He sensed Harry's body move and felt Harry's tongue on his penis. Then the encompassing warmth of his mouth.

Kevin shuddered to orgasm.

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Kevin walked back toward the bus stop on Riverfront Road with Harry's ten-dollar bill, carefully folded, in his pocket. He moved with a light step and he whistled softly. Ten dollars. He could buy a lot with ten dollars, like a double hamburger with a chocolate shake and still have a lot left over.

But more. It had been fun being with Harry. And the sex? He'd never felt that way before, just lying there and being swept along on great waves of feeling. Harry seemed to know all the places, all the ways to touch, to send shiver after shiver through his body. And for this thing happening to him, he had been paid ten dollars!

When he reached Riverfront Road, he looked around for Dennis, to tell him what had happened, but Dennis was nowhere in sight. Maybe he was still with a john. Or maybe he had gone home. He figured it was late and he hoped that Millie had passed out and wouldn't be up to squall at him. He didn't want to face Millie right now. He wanted to rest in the memory of Harry. He wanted to sneak into his bed and feel the shadowy lingering of Harry's touch all over his body.

The breeze off the river was chilly as he stood at the bus stop. He folded his arms tight and thought of taking a cab. He could pay for it. But he rejected the idea. Anybody who saw him pulling up on Burkett Street in a taxi would have questions. He didn't want anyone asking questions. No. No questions. Nobody was going to find out what he did . . . with men. If it had been with a girl, he could tell Gino. But a man? And that he liked it, too? Nobody was going to know that—except Dennis. And not even Dennis was going to know he liked it. Just the money.

Kevin watched the cars streaming past. There must be lots of Harrys in the world. What would they be like? He glanced at the figures barely visible inside the cars. Flash image after flash image. Sometimes a hat. Sometimes a shimmer of glasses. Sometimes two figures. But all featureless in the darkness. After Harry, the men in their cars had a mystery, and while he told himself he was waiting for a bus, he had a wistful hope that one would stop before the bus came. That might mean ten more dollars! His cock started to get hard thinking about it.

But the cars kept streaming by. Kevin began to feel bereft. He checked his pants and jacket to make sure they were fitting properly. He pulled a comb out of his hip pocket and ran it through his hair.

He hoped the pimple just below his jawline on the left side didn't show. He shifted his stance so his ass stood out a little more, the way Dennis did when he wanted to get something out of Jake. But the cars kept passing by.

Then he saw the lights of a bus coming toward him, a bus that would take him down Houghton Street to Burkett. He was tense and flustered. Why did the bus have to come so soon?

He was holding the coins in his pocket as the bus swung up to the stop and the door opened. Kevin put a foot on the bottom step, and then froze.

The bus driver's voice was rasping. "Well, are you gettin' in or ain't you?"

Kevin suddenly shook his head. "No." He wheeled away and heard the bus door slam behind him. The bus roared down the road, leaving Kevin feeling very much alone.

What he needed, he thought, was a beer. He walked slowly down Riverfront Road toward the warehouse sign that he had been standing under when Harry picked him up. He passed a corner bar. The doors were open and the lights poured out onto the street. He could see men inside, men whose bodies no longer seemed strange to him. Maybe one of the men inside would give him a beer.

Straightening his shoulders, he sauntered into the boozy warmth. But no one paid any attention to him as he stood there, just inside the door, shifting his weight from one leg to another. Still, he was acutely conscious of the men in front of him—conscious in a new way. The muscles in their forearms. The

backs of their necks. The thickness and tilt of their rumps as they lounged against the bar. All reminded him of Harry even though the men themselves—beefy dockworkers and warehousemen—bore little resemblance to Harry’s genial distinction. But they had the power Harry had, and the hard assurance that made for gentle motions. Hands that could crush beer cans held them delicately and lit cigarettes with casual ease. Kevin imagined their touch on his flesh could be light.

He saw an opening at the bar. He slowly insinuated himself in the gap, took out his ten dollars, and put it on the bar. He waited, letting his shoulder brush against the big red-headed man next to him. But nobody paid any attention to him, not even with the ten-dollar bill sitting there on the counter.

But the very presence, the bodies of the men, the smells of sweat and beer, the gruff low mutter of their voices seemed as mysterious and exciting as his experience on the dock by the Mirabeille. But here the figures were visible. Only Kevin himself seemed invisible, and nobody was telling him to drop his pants.

Kevin looked up. The bartender was standing in front of him, his big hands resting on the bartop. Kevin gulped. “Make it a beer.” And he flashed the ten.

The bartender sighed. “Listen, Sonny, how many times do I have to tell you kids to stay out of this place? And don’t give me no phony I.D., either. I won’t believe it, and the cops won’t believe it.” His eyes softened. “Come back in a couple of years and you can have all the beer you want.”

Kevin shriveled. He tucked the ten into his pocket, and retreated. But as he did so, he felt a pressure on his arm, and a cold beer can was thrust into his hand. The red-headed man standing next to him winked. Kevin smiled and murmured “Thanks.”

He left the bar and walked back to the sign on the warehouse, sipping his beer as he went, and took his stance in the doorway, making sure that the streetlight fell on his white pants. And he waited.

Another bus came by, going toward Houghton, but Kevin made no move to catch it. He was waiting for somebody like Harry. All the other things, like being queer and all. . . that he didn’t think about. It seemed as if Riverfront Road was another world where the rules just didn’t work the way they worked in Laureldale, or even on Burkett Street. As he leaned against the doorway, he felt his body at ease. The street lights, the passing cars, the chill breeze off the river, and the moonlit sky—even the experience he had had at the bar—all gave him a sense of assurance he had not felt before. He was puzzled! was this his home turf? No, he didn’t want to think about that. All he knew was that he felt good. And the beer made him feel even better. His penis stirred in his pants. He was getting ready for the next one. And he wished that the next one would hurry up and stop.

A late model Chevy pulled up and the curb-side door clicked open. He looked around. He was the only kid nearby. The guy in the car must want him. He moved slowly up to the car and peered in. A middle-aged man with glasses. Not bad looking. He noticed the flash of a wedding ring on his left hand as he held it high on the driving wheel.

“You want somethin’?” Kevin asked cautiously.

“Yep.” The driver’s voice was clipped. “You.”

“I come for money.” Kevin tried to make his voice sound like Dennis.

“I pay ten.”

Kevin got in and shut the door behind him.

The man dropped his right hand and started rubbing his own crotch and glanced at Kevin sharply. “I haven’t seen you around.” “I’m new here.”

“Good. Always like fresh chicken.”

“We goin’ to a restaurant?”

The man laughed softly. “Well, let’s just say . . . you’re gonna eat.” He started the car and put his hand back on his crotch. But he only drove a few blocks before pulling up in an alley and cutting the motor.

Kevin suddenly felt scared. “Where we goin’?”

“We’re here.” The man had sort of a wheeze to his voice.

“You mean ... in the car?”

“Yep.” The man unzipped his fly and out came this thing, big and stiff and green in the light from the dashboard. He shoved the seat back and fondled himself.

Kevin got nervous. Then he remembered what Harry had done to him. Maybe this man was just getting himself hot. He asked. “You wanna do me?”

“No,” the man said, “I want you to do me.”

Kevin’s panic seemed to clutch his throat. “No ... I can’t. I never ...”

The man’s voice was harsh, his face hard in the shadowy green light. “Listen, kid, I’m payin’ yuh, right?”

Kevin looked at the penis. It seemed to grow goblin-sized. “No!” His voice almost strangled. “Not for that!”

The man grasped Kevin around the back of the neck, and pressed Kevin’s head down. “C’mon, cut the bullshit. Get down on it.” Kevin’s face was only inches from the green thing, and he smelt an acrid odor. Panic burst over him like nausea. “No!” He wrenched loose.

“Crazy cunt!” the man snorted.

Kevin bolted out the door, his pulse pounding, and ran down the alley to Riverfront Road. He raced toward the bus stop, but there was no bus in sight. He looked back, afraid that the man might be following him in his car. In his search, every car grew suddenly sinister, dangerous, ready to open its doors like a shark’s mouth and mangle him. The lights, moving down Riverfront Road, seemed to search him out, pinion him to the warehouse walls, strip him of the darkness that clothed him, and leave him naked. Faggot! Queer! Cocksucker!

No! I’m not that! I’m just after the money! It’s money, yuh understand? ’Cause I got a sick mother ... or something.

But the car lights kept searching him out. Hard and shiny as the man’s glasses.

Kevin started running down Riverfront Road toward Houghton Street, the cars still streaming by him, their lights combing his back and leaving him only a shadow on the pavement. Hey, kid, ten dollars for your shadow.

Kevin spotted a taxi standing outside a bar, its top-lights gleaming like a beacon. He sprinted toward the cab. Once he got there, he clung to the door handle, panting, and peered in the window. The cab was empty, not even a driver in the front seat. Kevin yanked at the door handle and it opened. He dived into the back seat, slamming the door behind him, and slumped down until the shafts of the headlights through the back window went over his head.

In the darkness of the cab, with the noise of the traffic only a rumble, Kevin shuddered. He couldn’t get the green penis out of his mind. The pressure of the hand on his neck. The glint of the eyes behind the glasses. The wheeze of the voice, close to his ear. But mostly the green thing. It seemed to invade the taxi, coming in like the green slime out of a horror movie, pulsing and glowing in the closeness of the cab.

He crouched in the corner, and shook himself to slough off the crazy things going through his mind. He ran his hand along the inside surface of the door, over the latch, over the window handle, testing his senses. He took deep breaths. He blinked his eyes and stared at the steering wheel of the taxi. But then he saw the hand with the wedding ring on it and he started to shudder again.

He heard the front door of the taxi open. He was coming! He cried out as the door slammed. The cab driver stared into the rear seat. “What the hell . . . !”

Kevin wailed.

“What are you doin’ in there, sonny?”

The interior of the cab began to smell of beer.

“Get me out of here!” said Kevin.

“Got any money?”

Kevin thrust a trembling hand into his trousers' pocket and pulled out Harry's ten-dollar bill. He held it up to the cab driver.

"Okay," said the driver. (He had a big beefy face, but he didn't wear glasses.) "Okay, you got it." He snorted. "Some guys, they don't care what they do with their money. Givin' it to kids. Huh!" He heaved a sigh. "So . . . where do you want to go?"

"Houghton and Burkett. Just on the corner."

"Okay," said the driver, and started the cab.

As the cab turned on Houghton Street, Kevin knew he was safe, but he hated that man with the glasses.

# FOUR

“Hey, c’mon. We got a new place.” Dennis tugged at Kevin’s shirtsleeve. “Let’s get goin’.”

Kevin was puzzled. It was the first time Dennis had asked him to go anywhere. “Whaddaya mean, a new place?”

“Aw, Ma’s givin’ us shit about all the stink up here. The new place we got, nobody’s gonna give us shit.”

“Where’s that at?”

“C’mon, I’ll show yuh.”

It was dark when Dennis led Kevin down Burkett street to Houghton, dark as they plodded down Houghton under the gleam of the street lights and the headlights of the cars. Very dark when they climbed the fence around the graveyard and eased themselves into the eerie silence of the monuments and tombs.

Dennis gave a low whistle. Two figures came out of the darkness. As they drew near, Dennis spoke in a voice just above a whisper. “Yuh got the bags?”

One of the figures said, “Yeah. You got the can?”

“Un-huh,” said Dennis. “Red Devil Gold.”

“The best.”

The two figures in front of him were shorter than Kevin, and he assumed they were younger, about Dennis’s age, but they had a tough street-stance and their movements were catlike.

Dennis said, “This is my brother Kevin. I told you about him. He’s cool.” He turned to Kevin. “That’s Joe.” He pointed to the taller one. “And that’s Rico.” Rico was on the pudgy side.

Both said “Hi” to Kevin, their voices guarded.

“Let’s get goin’,” Joe said. “We found a place.”

Joe and Rico led the way through the headstones, vaults, and mausoleums, looming presences that seemed almost alive in the darkness. Joe and Rico moved easily between the stone bulks, with Dennis and Kevin following close behind.

Kevin said: “Man, you could really get lost in a place like this.”

“Yeah,” said Dennis, “but if the cops wanted to chase us, they’d get lost.”

“I get it.”

They passed by a small, windowless, stone house. Dennis whispered, “All they keep is bodies in there.”

Behind the house was a kind of open space covered with neatly spaced flat stones in front of a massive headstone with a dimly seen winged angel on top. To one side a vault, standing two feet or so above the ground. Joe and Rico sat down on the vault, and Dennis sat down beside them. Joe took the brown paper bags out of his pocket with loving care and spread them out on the top of the vault. Dennis produced the spray-can of Red Devil Gold.

Kevin took one of the bags, opened it carefully and folded down the paper about an inch from the top. He crumpled it gently to make it pliant, and held it out to Dennis who sprayed the paint in it—a soft hissing sound. With both hands, he brought the bag to his mouth and nose and began to inhale the fumes. In front of him, seated on the vault, the three other boys had their bags to their faces. In the dark quiet, all he could hear were the inhalations and the rustle of tree-branches above them.

Kevin began to feel light-headed and his body was permeated with an exquisite languor. He sat down on the vault beside Joe. Feeling dizzy, Kevin thought he sensed the stone beneath him move. But he knew that was crazy. He inhaled some more and the whole shadowed scene before him gently tilted. He focused his eyes on the big headstone with the winged angel on top. That was his reality fix. He knew for sure that that big stone thing couldn’t tilt.

With a heavy sigh, Joe lay back on the vault's lid. "Man, everything's going 'round and 'round and 'round!" A dim shaft of light from a distant street lamp fell on Joe's face and Kevin was startled at its beauty, smooth living flesh against the stone. Joe's body, close beside Kevin, was slight, but shadow and light defined the forms beneath the denim that stirred Kevin's desire. He shifted closer.

Dennis started to giggle—a ghostly sound in the darkness. "Hey, yuh know what this crazy john had me to do him last night?"

Rico's voice was slurred. "Go 'head, tell us."

"Well, he took me to his place and he wanted me bare-assed, so I got bare-ass. What the hell, for fifteen, I'll do anything! And he took his clothes off, too. And then he turned out all the lights. All dark like it is here. And then he lit a candle . . . one fuckin' candle. He lies down on the rug, see? And he has me take this candle and sit on top of him. Now, he says, drop wax on my nipples. Man, that was one freaky scene, me givin' him a drop on one side, and then a drop on the other side, and the candle flaming and all, and him moanin'. I'm sittin' on his stomach, see? And all of a sudden I feel this wet stuff on my back. The motherfucker's come all over me! Spooky, huh? But what the hell, he paid the fifteen."

Kevin thought of Harry, the gentleness and rightness of their time together at that hotel. And he thought of Dennis and "for fifteen, I'll do anything." Anything? He tried to imagine hurting Harry in any way and he knew he couldn't do it. Not for fifteen. Not for anything.

But the man with the glasses? Ha! Just a candle? A pan, maybe. Or a tub of boiling oil. And he'd hold it high over his head, all steaming, and then he'd start to let it drip, watching it sizzle on his chest and hearing him scream with pain. That's what he'd do. Except he couldn't do it now, because he was dizzy. The whole world seemed to be tilting. He put the bag over his face again.

The angel. The winged angel on top of the big stone monument. He concentrated on that reality fix. But the figure started to glow in the darkness, first red, then blue, then purple. It changed from an angel into a great bird whose wings strained at their stone rigidity. He thought about vultures and inhaled from the bag.

He looked down at Joe's body beside him. It seemed to glow as the angel glowed. But the colors were orange and yellow, bright in the darkness. Then they warmed to fleshtones. He wanted to reach out and touch the warmth, only inches away. But no. If he did that . . .

He heard Rico's voice. It seemed to come from a great distance. "I couldn't do shit like that, lettin' guys pick me up and all."

Dennis: "Aw, it's fun gettin' your rocks off and gettin' paid for it, too."

Joe stirred. "I dun it a couple o' times. Needed money an' all. It wasn't so bad." He yawned. "They really got off on my body. I never thought it was good for much. Skinny. But they really dug me and I liked that."

Kevin tried to imagine that glowing body beside him, lying on a bed, naked as he had been with Harry. He saw its forms, still as stone, and then the loom of another body crouched over the luminous flesh. He saw Joe's body, silver now, begin to undulate, the legs, the arms, the torso moving like waves in the moonlight, yielding as water. He felt himself part of the seascape, as liquid as the silver beside him. He yearned to flow into the light and meld with its radiance. But he could only see himself as murky as blood.

Dennis's voice was a stage-whisper. "Somethin's out there!"

Rico: "Whatcha mean?"

"Somethin'. I can't see rightly."

"Cops?"

Joe reared up. "Cops out there?"

Kevin dropped his bag. Then he peered into the darkness. "I don't see nothin'."

Dennis pointed. "Right by the tree."

"It's the paint you're sniffing," Rico said. "It gets to yuh."

Joe stuffed his bag in his windbreaker. "We better get out of here." Kevin was the oldest. "I'll go out

and see.”

Startled at his own courage, Kevin walked past the angel toward the trunk of the big tree. He felt dizzy by the paint fumes and his steps were unsteady. He stumbled against a headstone, muttered “Sorry,” and peered ahead for any sign of life. Light filtered through the foliage and moved across the monuments. For a moment he thought he saw a figure, but it was only a tall headstone. He reached the tree trunk and leaned against it to steady himself.

All around him, in the hush, were the stones. But beneath them? He felt himself suddenly surrounded. The top-hats. The long dresses. The clop of horse’s hooves beyond the wall on Houghton Street.

Slowly he sank down the trunk of the tree until he was sitting on the ground, the ground that held those myriad bodies.

He heard Dennis’s voice. “Hey, Kevin, is there anything out there?”

Kevin felt as if he betrayed the dead. “No. Nothin’.”

“C’mon back,” Joe said.

“I’m cornin’.”

Kevin struggled to his feet, but as he did so he heard sounds, and they seemed like real sounds—low voices and rustling in the bushes. People . . . they were coming out of the ground! Them! Somebody! Kevin froze, barely breathing, steadying himself against a tombstone. What would they look like? Coming out of the ground after all that time, would they be all worm-eaten? Or like they were in real life, dressed up and looking beautiful? Would they be coming on like ghouls, ready to hurt him, even to kill him and eat his innards? Or were they coming to find him, and take him away with them? They might take him into the country where the hills rolled, and the streams ran clear, and he’d have found another time when things were right.

Even if it meant ... if they took him, he’d be dead.

The voices drew closer. Kevin felt the ground sway beneath his feet, as if he were going to start floating away. Right then, he didn’t mind. He had nothing to come back to, nothing that he wanted or really cared about. Since he had left the Crimmins’, nothing much had gone right. He didn’t belong, not the way Dennis belonged. And the way he thought about it he never would belong.

He peered into the darkness, trying to locate the source of the sounds. He wanted to cry out that he was here, that he was ready to go with them, but the words wouldn’t come. He just stood, helpless, swaying, waiting. . . .

A small figure was suddenly visible in a shaft of street light. Then two larger figures. But they weren’t dressed like the people in the picture. Their tee-shirts and pants were close-fitting, and they walked with an easy prowl.

“Over there.” The small one said. “I hear ’em.”

Kevin was aware of the voices of Dennis, Joe, and Rico behind him in the darkness. He felt isolated, lurking by the tombstone, as if he were a ghost himself watching live bodies going through their paces.

Dennis’s voice, slurred. “He—ey, Kenny. Got plenty o’ shit here.”

The three figures passed close by Kevin, walked around the stone house toward the angel. Not knowing why, Kevin shrank back as the figures came by him. The larger figures emanated a power that seemed to Kevin like death itself. Maybe they lived in the graveyard, and stirred to life only at night. He could see only the barest outline of their faces, but he knew the larger two were older than he, older than Joe, Rico, and Dennis. Their faces, dim in the street light, had hard straight lines, and Kevin figured they had to shave at least three times a week. He felt the same fear he had felt with the man with the glasses. He thought of running out of the graveyard and leaving Dennis to cope with whoever they were. But he was Dennis’s older brother. To leave wouldn’t be right. Still, he lingered, invisible, by the tombstone, and listened.

He heard only scraps of muttered talk, the voices barely distinguishable from one another except for



the high-pitched sound of the small one—Kenny—who seemed to be trying to imitate the gruffness of the other voices and not succeeding. It was clear enough what was happening from the hiss of the spray can and the crinkle of paper. They were all getting stoned on paint, and the ramble of their voices made it obvious that it wasn't taking them very long, either.

Then, rising above the mumble, Kenny's voice sounded high and pleading. "Naw, I doan wanna ... no honest . . . lemme go. ..."

Kevin heard scuffling. Kenny wailed. There was rough laughter, and the voices grew louder with excitement. "Get 'im down . . . yah . . . me, first! . . . quit shovin' . . . hold 'im. ..." More wails from Kenny. Kevin shivered, pressing his body against the solidity of the tombstone.

Dennis's voice rang clear in the darkness. "Hey, Kevin! C'mon here. We got somethin' goin' on!"

Kevin made no move.

"Hey, Kevin! Where are you? C'mon!"

Kevin wanted to run, to get away, to lose himself in the forest of cool stone, but there was a keening energy to Dennis's voice that magnetized him, and pulled him, step by step, toward the voices.

Coming around the side of the stone house, Kevin saw the small figure, Kenny, spread-eagled on top of the raised flat gravestone, his bare rump a ghostly white in the darkness. Joe and Rico were at his head, the two larger figures hovered around his feet, their hands on their crotches, while Dennis stood at the side, holding Kenny's shoulders. Kevin could hear the low lost sound of Kenny, whimpering.

Dennis's voice was feverish. "Hey Kevin, yuh can have some. We're all gonna have some."

Kevin stood back. "Why don't you let the kid go?"

One of the large figures turned to Kevin. "Let 'im go? Shit, man, he loves it!" He swatted Kenny on the rump. "Don't yuh, faggot?" Kenny wailed. Another swat, the sound of flesh on flesh sharp in the eerie silence. "Say yuh love it, punk!"

Kenny sniffled. "It's okay. Go ahead."

"Say yuh want it!" Still another slap.

"Doan! Just go in."

"Spread it wide, baby. Yuh gonna take it all!"

One of the large figures at Kenny's feet moved forward. Resting his hands on the stone on either side of the small body, he stretched over it slowly like some enveloping specter. Kenny gasped, and the sound mingled with a guttural sigh of possession, as the figure sank down until Kenny's body was nearly invisible. Then with writhing rhythm, the figure seemed to be trying to pound Kenny's body through the stone and into the grave, while the others stood by like mourners gathered into the excitement of a ritual slaughter.

The other large figure, standing at Kenny's feet, said, "Hey, Max, don't wear him out. Save some for me."

Between gasps, the specter spoke. "Cool it, Amie, I'm just lubin' him up for yuh."

Dennis's high-pitched voice: "Grease 'im good, Max!"

Amie, standing in the gloom, said, "Shut up, kid, or we'll lay you out!"

"Not me, you won't." Dennis's voice grew even higher. "I got an older brother!"

Kevin felt himself looked at, and tried to lose himself in the darkness.

He heard Amie snort.

Max reared up above Kenny's body, and fell back on him with harsh barking sounds, his body lashing. Kenny cried out. Then everything was suddenly very quiet. All Kevin could hear was Max's breathing, Kenny's whimpering, and the sound of distant traffic.

They all took turns on Kenny's body. Amie. Then Joe. Then Rico. And finally Dennis, flailing away like some demented gnome, while Kenny lay still as a corpse. Kevin wondered how he felt, what the pain must be like. He hoped the kid had passed out, and didn't feel anything. But then he wondered . . . suppose

he hadn't passed out, . . . what would it feel like, having all those things inside him? His anus tightened at the thought, but he had a strange quivering in the pit of his stomach. Maybe . . . Max had said . . . maybe he liked it . . . maybe that whimpering was part of the act, just to get everybody excited. But . . . Jesus! Wouldn't it hurt?

"Hey, Kevin!" Dennis's voice again. "Your turn, now. It's all stretched and wet."

Kevin hung back.

Amie's voice: "Whassa matter, kid?"

Max laughed. "Hey, it's just like cunt, only tighter . . . yaaaah!" And he rubbed his crotch.

"I don't want it," said Kevin.

"The cutest little ass on the West Side ..." Amie feigned shock. ". . . an' you don't want it?" -

"I'll be a motherfucker!" Max chimed in.

"Maybe he wants to take it himself!"

"Maybe he's a faggot!"

Dennis fired up. "You lay off'm! He ain't no faggot! I'll whip your ass!"

Apparently unnoticed by anyone but Kevin, Kenny slowly got to his knees on the flat gravestone, and then eased himself to the ground. He stood, childlike, oblivious of everyone, pulled up his pants and fastened his belt buckle. His movements were trancelike, as if he were not quite alive or as if he nurtured some secret power in his bowel whose magic could not be shared. Untouched by the presences around him, he stood alone. Even Kevin, wanting to comfort him, held back. '

Rico, lolling on the gravestone, sprayed some paint into his paper-bag. "Hey, Amie, yuh wanna sniff?"

Amie snorted again. "Kid Stuff. Max's got a couple of joints." Dennis was excited. "Max, yuh got a couple of joints? Hey, do yuh?"

"Yep. Heavy shit, too. But you can't have a toke. Whatcha think I'm doin' . . . corruptin' the morals of a minor? Whatcha want me? In jail?"

"Aw, c'mon Max!" said Dennis, and Joe and Rico joined in the caterwauling. "C'mon, Max, give us a toke!"

Max stood by the gravestone, tall and shadowed, while the kids kept pleading with him. Finally he said, 'Tell yuh what ...'

A chorus: "What?"

He paused dramatically. "We'll split a joint . . . and then . . . we'll go over to the park . . . and beat up some faggots."

Everyone but Kevin cheered that idea.

Joe: "Fuckin' cocksuckers!"

Rico jumped up and down. "Slam! Bam! Pow!"

"Yeah, we'll get 'em with baseball bats, eh, Max?" Dennis piped. Even Kenny was roused. "We'll all jump 'em!"

Rico: "Kill the motherfuckers!"

With deliberate movements, Max extracted a joint from his pocket. He put it between his lips. Then—deliberately again—he reached into another pocket and pulled out a pack of matches. The matchfire was a sudden glare in the darkness as he lit the joint, and in that moment, Kevin saw Max's face clearly for the first time, the lean hard lines of his chin, the stubble of beard, the sharp pitch of his nose and the shadowed sockets of his eyes. Kevin felt a flash of fear. He would hate to be the faggot that Max was going to beat up.

But as the joint was passed around, Kevin's thought curled around on itself. Maybe the man with glasses would be there in Greystone Park. Yes, he hoped the man with the glasses would be there. And he didn't want Max to touch him, either. He'd do it all by himself.

He took a deep drag on the joint as it was passed to him and straightened his shoulders. "When we

goin’? ... I wanna go . . .” “Gotcha car here?” Dennis cut in. “Hey, Amie, gotcha car?” “Yeah.”

Rico was jumping up and down again. “We’re goin’ fer a ride! We’re gonna beat up some fags! And we’re gonna take a ride!”

Amie’s car was a strange looking thing parked outside the churchyard. Its chrome—and it had a lot of chrome—gleamed in the streetlights. Its back end was raised, like a cat in heat, with big rear tires.

Everybody piled in, Amie at the wheel, and the car started off with a roar. Kevin was in the back seat with Joe and Rico, and Dennis sitting on his lap, squirming. Kenny was sitting on Max’s lap in the front seat while Amie drove. Kevin could see a childlike arm wrapped around Max’s neck, and he wondered what Kenny was thinking. Was it always like this, with Kenny? How many times had it happened before?

The car caromed down Houghton Street, the radio blasting out a heavy beat, and headed toward Greystone Park. Kevin, high on pot and paint, felt he was headed for the moon and the banana-reek that filled the car only increased his high. The lights and music filled his senses as messages from outer space, pounding into his head from the end of yonder. He sat, inert, absorbent, as the pulsations thrust deep into his body. The car was moving fast toward Greystone Park . . . and faggots.

Kevin had never been to Greystone Park before. There were enough trees and playgrounds in Laureldale, without having to go down to center city. But to the rest of the kids in the car, it was apparently home turf. Amie parked the car near a stone gate with statues of soldiers in old uniforms standing as sentinels. Beyond were looming trees as big as any Kevin had seen in the graveyard.

Everyone piled out of the car, and Max led the way through the gate. Entering the park, like hunters on the prowl, the kids started talking in whispers, and moving furtively, close to the bushes that lined one side of the pathway. Kevin was puzzled. Except for a few solitary men walking dogs, the park seemed deserted. But Amie and Max, walking ahead seemed to know just where they were going, and they each picked up short lengths of tree branch as they went.

They passed a large statue of three men with guns (again, those old uniforms) who seemed to be charging right off their pedestal. Kevin glimpsed the inscription on the pedestal. “United in Glory.”

At a branching of the path, Max and Amie turned sharp right, and started walking with a quicker step, silent as cats, as the pathway sloped down through a rustic wooden arbor. As they went through the arbor, Kevin could see that the path ahead was narrow, with bushes on either side, dimly lit by an occasional street lamp. He heard Dennis’s voice, close by his ear. “They’re down there. That’s where they are. Down there!”

Kevin’s pulse quickened. Who was down there? Faggots. Strange two-legged animals with green eyes and fangs that drank blood and . . . yeah . . . come, too. But mostly blood. From babies.

Then he thought of Harry. Harry was . . . No, not Harry. Harry never drank blood. But the man with the glasses ... he drank blood, and Kevin could just imagine him bending over babies in their cradles. He tightened his fist and wondered where he could find a stick like Max’s.

Beyond the arbor was a small clearing on one side of the path beneath the overhanging boughs of a big tree. Kevin saw Max and Amie hunch their shoulders as they approached the clearing and stuck close to the bushes. The other kids followed. Dennis was beside him, breathing audibly, and Kevin felt the excitement growing. They were hunting monsters.

In the dim light, Kevin just managed to make out two of them, in white shirts, over by the big tree. One was kneeling in front of the other, and he figured the one who was kneeling was doing just what Harry had done to him. But those two were “punk faggots,” just like Millie had said he was. Jake had smacked her, because it was such an awful thing to say.

Max gave the signal. The kids surged forward, toward the big tree, toward the two men, and the kneeling man leapt to his feet. But Max and Amie were on him before he could get his balance and threw him to the ground, swinging their branchsticks while Kenny jumped on the prone body, wailing like a banshee. The other man started to run, but Joe and Rico chased him, with Kevin and Dennis close

behind. They downed him near a lamp post. Joe and Rico sat on him, Rico battered his face with his fists as the man struggled to free himself. Dennis kicked him in the groin and the man howled with pain. Kevin glimpsed the contorted face, and felt a spasm of guilt about what was happening, but at the same time, seeing his full quivering lips, Kevin felt a kind of joy. He was getting what was coming to him, the cocksucker! He pushed Rico aside and straddled the man's chest. He could feel the body writhe beneath him. The twisted face shone clearly in the street light—dark curly hair, a high forehead, and eyes blurred with tears. He smacked the face with his open hand and it twisted to the side. He clenched his other fist and smashed it into the cheekbone. The man cried out and his body arched, pressing against Kevin's buttocks. The pressure made Kevin shudder. The shudders grew more violent and climaxed in a sudden orgasm. Shock after shock coursed through his body. He growled with rage and brought both fists down on the man's face. The body beneath him quivered as he pulled back, his hands covered with wetness—tears, spit, and blood. Kevin gasped, wiped the wetness against his lips, and fought back sobbing.

Max gave another sharp whistling signal, and as fast as they had entered the clearing, the kids were off down the path, leaving their two victims on the ground behind them.

# FIVE

Amory Borden lay on the ground in Greystone Park and stared at the street lamp above him. He watched the bugs and moths circle the glass, around and around. One large moth kept banging his head against the glowing surface. He'd fall back and then, fluttering for a moment, he'd gather his strength to hit the glass again . . . head on. Didn't he know he was going to hurt himself?

Amory, the pain still pulsing in his face and groin, felt a wry detachment. Who was he to badmouth the moth? He was supposed to have a brain in his head. Ha! So what was he doing? Wandering around in the park in the middle of the night, hoping to get blown, hoping for a cock to suck . . . any cock, just so it was big and hard, hoping to find a warm body and a voice in the darkness. That was all. And after a few moments—his rocks off—he could go back to his apartment, watch television, and go to sleep.

But the park? Ridiculous! He could have gone to the baths. He could have gone to a bar. He could have gone and visited George and Gerald. He could have called up Bruce. It was over, but he could have called up Bruce. There was an afterglow.

But he had to go to the park. He'd tell himself: the anonymity . . . the adventure . . . the danger. The sudden passion in the middle of nowhere. And as quickly as it came, it was over, leaving only a warm emptiness in the genitals and a remembered tingle of the nerves. Such a happy prelude to the eleven o'clock news!

He had found sudden passion, all right. He had seen the livid hatred on the face of that little monster beating him with his fists.

God, there must have been dozens of them! Lilliputians binding Gulliver, and such cute Lilliputians!

And that other one sitting on my chest. He was staring down at my face as if he was going to kiss me or something. Then a kick in the balls and the angel smacks me across the face! Who are these little monsters? The Cupids of imagined danger? They had arrows, those cherubs!

Amory thought: something was going on before the angelic assault. Some guy was blowing me. Where is he now? Did they get him, too? He remembered the warmth of that mouth. He remembered the softness of the hair as he had run his hand through it in answering gratitude, and the gathering speed of their body's rhythms.

Then it had happened. The privacy of the public park invaded. The sanctity of gay turf violated. The devils ascendant. Or wanting admission? In their beating of flesh, were they trying to hammer down the gates? He remembered the other one, the one who had smacked him across the face. Oh, yes, he he had felt the hardness of the hand and the sudden burst of his vision, multicolored like skyrockets. But what had the hand said? I am here! Pay attention! But what the hell kind of attention could he pay when he was being kicked in the balls? Gawd, these egocentric little demons! What did they want?

Forget them. A brother might be hurt. He had to find out. But that would entail getting up, and Amory didn't want to get up. His face felt as if it had survived a cavalry charge. His groin pulsed with pain. He would lie on the ground, grovel in the dust, and eat worms. Bullshit! No bunch of teenaged ethnic punks could make him do that. He was a man. He was Amory Borden.

Suddenly Amory wanted to see Bruce. He wanted to be held. He wanted to sit in that big quiet living room, have a good stiff brandy and forget the pain and the hatred of those little demon faces. But, God, he must look a mess! He raised his hand and drew it across his face. His left eye hurt. His cheekbone. His lips seemed puffed. There was an ooze of blood on his jaw. Yes, he'd look a mess, all right. Bruce would be properly disdainful of his little escapade in the park. But who was Bruce to talk? He knew about Bruce's occasional expeditions to Riverfront Road and the trade he brought home. If Bruce had never gotten robbed or beaten up, it was only because he was lucky. So . . . Amory hadn't been so lucky, not tonight anyway. Too bad, it had been a good trick he'd found. But what had happened to the poor guy with

all those demons working him over?

Slowly Amory got to his feet and stood, one hand on the lamp post. His knees were shaky, and the ache was still sharp in his groin. But nothing seemed to be broken and he knew he could walk. He peered around the clearing until he spotted a patch of whiteness on the ground. Step by step he made his way to the sprawled figure with whom he had shared anonymous pleasures just minutes before. He knelt down beside him and, in the lamp light, saw his face clearly for the first time—a young face with heavy eyebrows and a stubbled chin—very butch. But now a wreckage of cuts and bruises with a streak of blood crawling down his forehead. His shirt was torn. A gash was dark on his shoulder.

Amory put a hand on his arm. “Where does it hurt?”

The young man opened his eyes and stared at Amory from light-years away. “Everyplace.”

“The little bastards!” He took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the blood on his forehead. “Can you walk?”

“I don’t know.”

“We ought to get you to a hospital. Should I get an ambulance?”

“Let me try ... to walk.”

“I’ll help.”

The young man lay, for a moment, motionless. Then slowly he turned on his side, and raised himself on one elbow, his forehead resting against Amory’s arm. “What happened? It was all so fast.”

“Bunch of kids, queer-bashing. Must have been a small army of them.”

Anger crackled in the young man’s voice. “Fuckin’ straights!” He sat up and held his head in his hand. “Gawd, I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck!”

“Can you see all right? Are you dizzy?”

“Yeah . . . yeah ... I can see. It’s just there’s nothin’ I want to see around here.” He hesitated. “Except you.”

Amory put his arm around the young man’s shoulder, and he rested his head against Amory for a few moments. “Why does it always happen to us?”

That face of livid hatred flashed through Amory’s mind. But as quickly as it came, Amory pushed it out of his mind. “Straights get mugged, too.”

“Yeah, for a good sensible reason . . . like money.”

“Did they get your wallet?”

The young man, painfully shifting his weight, reached around and felt his hip pocket. “Nope. It’s still there.”

“Huh. I guess we ought to be calling it political assassination these days.” He pressed his hand against the young man’s shoulder. “Do you think you can get up, now?”

“I can try.”

“I just think it would be a good idea for you and me to get the hell out of this park.”

“I know.” With a mighty heave he got to his knees. “I’m not comin’ back, either!”

Amory held the young man under the armpits as he got back to his feet. He swayed. Amory caught him. The young man wrapped his arms around Amory’s neck and held on, his head on Amory’s shoulder. Amory felt the body next to him shaking. Slowly, without either of them saying a word, the trembling subsided.

They walked up the path together, through the rustic arbor that now seemed devil-haunted and out of the park onto the street. For Amory, the traffic going by was a blessed, friendly thing. He steered the young man down the street to where his car was parked, and eased him into the front seat.

Amory winced at the harsh light of the Emergency Ward as they entered the hospital. He had the sense that everything about him and the young man was antiseptically revealed to the cold eye of the nurse at the desk and all the other white-clad figures that bustled through the area. He felt alien and leprous in the

sight of a multitude that could spawn those avenging demons in the park. At the same time, he wanted to batter his rage on the smooth surface of the admitting desk, spit in the face of the cold-eyed nurse behind it, gather the young man in his arms, and take him to the forest fastnesses of nowhere.

But the guy was hurt. And the cold white-coats could also heal.

In the emergency examining room, a red-headed young doctor easily dismissed Amory. "You're okay. Go home, have a drink and take some aspirin. And stay out of that damn park." He seemed not the least curious about what Amory might have been doing in the park, only that someone had been hurt. The doctor stretched the young man out on an examining table and began a delicate probing of his face and shoulders.

Amory, standing on the other side of the table, asked him, "Is there anyone you want me to call?"

The young man shook his head. "I live alone . . . with a cat."

Amory took his hand and felt an answering grasp. They parted as anonymous as when they had first met. There would be no revelation in front of that red-headed doctor.

In the hospital lobby, Amory found a pay phone and called Bruce. He hadn't called Bruce in ten days and he felt a twinge of guilt about it but now, as the phone rang, he prayed that Bruce was in . . . and alone, just as he had been the last time Amory, after one of their hassles, had gone out and gotten howling drunk at Flanigan's, an ancient Irish bar that, contrary to the laws of God and the Church, had gone gay. He'd called from the police station, wondering if Bruce would speak to him after the vicious things he had said. Bruce had been home. Bruce had come and gotten him. And the sex they had had that night defied all laws of physiology.

Bruce ... be home now!

But the phone rang and rang, desolate as a cry in the night. He could go home, take his aspirin and drink, and fall into bed. But he cringed at the thought of a night alone. Not this night! Now he regretted the gesture he had made at his final split-up with Bruce when he put the house key on the polished coffee table and announced that henceforth they would just be friends. Too bad. The high cost of drama. He needed that key, now. He needed Bruce, now.

# SIX

That evening, Bruce Andrews took his Aunt Charlotte to dinner at the Avignon, a small French restaurant off Jefferson Square in center city. It was a weekly event he always looked forward to. Ever since he was a child, he had known Aunt Charlotte as the family's free spirit and had been able to confide in her as with no other relative.

Even now, in her mid-seventies, impeccably groomed and dressed, Charlotte still radiated a gaminlike insouciance that led Bruce to expect that at any moment she might kick off her shoes and swing from a convenient chandelier.

He suspected now that Aunt Charlotte had known he was gay ever since he had spent a summer with her at her cottage in Maine when he was fifteen and had his first gay affair with a youth named Julian. But then and now she seemed unconcerned with—indeed, oblivious to—Bruce's sexual preferences. Yet she was unfailingly cordial to the young men whom Bruce brought around to meet her, from the very first—Julian—to the very latest—Amory. She especially liked Amory and on occasion flirted with him shamelessly. Amory returned the compliment with that quirky sideways grin of his that was usually reserved for moments of intimacy with Bruce.

When Bruce and Amory had split up, Charlotte had given a sadyed shrug and patted Bruce's hand. "Amory was such a nice young man" she'd said, and Bruce agreed. But there was no need to explain, not to Aunt Charlotte, anymore than there had been a need to explain under just what circumstances they had lived together for a year and a half. Nor did Charlotte ever ask him when he was going to get married—a regular refrain from other members of the family, which he always deflected with some fatuous remark about waiting for the right girl.

Now as he sat across the table from Charlotte, watching her toy with her filet of sole, her fork shaking slightly with the tremor of her hand, her face pallid even in the candlelight. Bruce realized that Charlotte's health was failing. He made a mental note to ask Miss Harkins, her housekeeper, about it, and what the difficulty might be. But even as the thought crossed his mind, Charlotte breezily lit a cigarette and started off on some off-color story about the city's pompous and ineffectual mayor, a scion of the Establishment that she had known since childhood. Charlotte was, in that flickering moment, her old self again.

But when the meal was finished, she rose from the table slowly and moved to the doorway with hesitant steps, her hand resting on Bruce's arm. It had been a long time since anyone had leaned on Bruce for support. Amory had been an independent sort—affection, yes; dependence, no. Regardless of his concern about Charlotte, he rather liked the feeling of being strong and protective. His father had been so with him, but it was not likely that he was going to have a son to give his strength to, and he felt one of those periodic twinges of loss. At least there was Charlotte.

He guided his aunt to the car and drove her back to his apartment on the tree-lined Victorian quiet of Gallatin Place for an after-dinner brandy. Gerald Sanderson and his lover, George Matson, were expected over. Gerald and George could put on quite a vaudeville show when they were in good spirits. He hoped, for Charlotte's sake, that they would be in good spirits that evening.

They were. Knowing both Bruce and Charlotte well, aware that Bruce was still recovering from his split-up with Amory and that Charlotte was looking increasingly frail, they had an intuitive feel for the situation and outdid themselves. George started it off with an entry line from Bette Davis as he surveyed the opulent somber Victorian furnishings of Bruce's floor-through. "Whatta dump!"

With Gerald playing straight man (he played straight man every business day as a partner in a downtown law firm), George went through his repertoire of anguished heroines from late-show movies as the brandy flowed and Charlotte's eyes lighted with amusement.

Gerald then took the stage with a long shaggy-dog story about a client who had a shaggy dog, and a



landlord who had a bellicose wife with a special loathing for shaggy dogs. He recounted the litigation with a lawyer's love of the recondite legal phrase, preferably in Latin, and punctuated with a fluttering of the eyebrows reminiscent of Groucho Marx.

But Bruce noticed that Charlotte, despite her amusement with the George & Gerald show, was tiring and with delicate casualness suggested he drive her back to her apartment. Years before, Charlotte had prided herself on being the last to leave any party, but now she looked up at Bruce with a sadness in her eyes and said she'd just as easily take a cab. But Bruce would have none of it. Leaving George and Gerald with assurances that he'd be back shortly, Bruce escorted Charlotte to his car.

In the car, Charlotte mused. "George and Gerald are entertaining." A pause. "Tell me, did Helen meet them before she died?"

Bruce shifted uneasily. Helen was Charlotte's older sister . . . and Bruce's mother. "No. I don't think she'd have been quite ready for George and Gerald."

"No. I suppose not," Charlotte sighed. "Helen always fretted to me about why you didn't marry Sally Richardson or one of those other girls. Strange how parents can be so . . . myopic about their children."

"Call it selective vision." He tried to keep his voice casual. "I've always been grateful for you."

"What aunts are for," said Charlotte.

There were tears in Bruce's eyes as he kissed her goodnight and watched her walk slowly into the entrance of her apartment house. But he knew Miss Harkins took good care of her. And he was only a phone call away.

When he got back to his flat on Gallatin Place, Gerald was on the phone. "Hold on, Amory. He's back." And he handed the phone to Bruce, with a watchful glance in his direction.

Bruce took the phone. "Hello?"

"Bruce, this is Amory." The voice sounded as if it came from the dark side of the moon. "Can I come over?"

"Sure. You sound like hell. What's the matter?"

There was an audible catch in his voice. "I got mugged."

"Serious?"

"They checked me at the hospital. I'll live. But..."

Bruce felt a welling of affection. "C'mon over. There's tea and sympathy and plenty of brandy."

"Thanks, Bruce."

When Bruce hung up the phone, George heaved a great sigh. "I feel a reconciliation coming on."

"Cut the shit," said Bruce.

"What happened?" Gerald asked.

"Amory got mugged."

"Riverfront Road?"

Bruce shook his head. "He doesn't go there. His hangout is Greystone Park."

George sighed again. "Reckless child."

Gerald was judicious. "Perhaps we'd better go."

"Don't worry," said Bruce.

"We must take flight," George was doing his Katharine Hepburn number, "and leave the lovebirds to their fortunes. Come, Gerald, hasten into your bombazine."

George and Gerald polished off the last of the brandy in their glasses, bid Bruce farewell, and disappeared into the night.

Bruce was tidying up the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Amory, when he entered, was just recognizable. A mark over one eye, a swelling under the other, lips swollen, shirt torn and muddy, hair disheveled. He walked into the living room and sank onto the horsehair loveseat with a groan.

Bruce surveyed him, fighting the urge to take him in his arms. "Boy, you really got it, didn't you?"

“I truly did.” Amory’s voice was slightly slurred. But Bruce recognized it as a slur of fatigue, not alcohol.

“Brandy or? . . .”

“Brandy.”

“Coming up.”

Brandy in hand, Amory told his story in slow-paced phrases as if the incident had happened in some distant time.

Bruce listened and thought about the times he had risked such attacks, on Riverfront Road or Jefferson Square. But he said nothing as Amory relived his trauma. He knew the energies that compelled Amory to seek out darkened danger and how the danger itself heightened the sexual relief. But looking at the battery that had been done on Amory’s handsome and well-loved face, he knew that that assault might have caused death and he felt bleak. He mourned Amory. He mourned himself. But as he listened, his face was impassive.

Amory concluded, “We don’t deserve this shit.”

Bruce shrugged. “When you go out looking for it, you’re likely to find it.”

“You should talk. The mogul of Riverfront Road!”

“I haven’t been down there in months.”

“What’s the matter? Lost your taste for chicken?”

Bruce swirled his brandy. “We are not discussing my sex life. We are reviewing your disasters.”

Amory’s eyes hooded, and then they softened. “Bruce, I’m not up to a hassle.”

Bruce felt a pang of shame about his frosty sanctimony. He crossed to the loveseat, put his arm around Amory, and murmured, “I’m sorry.”

Amory put his head on Bruce’s shoulder, pulled back quickly with an “Ow!,” and then, with caution, put another part of his head on Bruce’s shoulder. He sipped his brandy with the glass held in both hands as if it were a child’s milk-mug.

Later, working gingerly, Bruce got Amory’s clothes off and put him in the shower, rubbing his shoulders and back with practiced hands as the hot water steamed around their bodies. He felt Amory’s muscles gradually relax beneath his touch.

But in bed, Amory lay close, and Bruce could feel his body go through spasms of trembling.

“Bruce ...” Amory whispered, as if demons hovered just outside the apartment. “Why do kids do things like that?”

“I dunno. I guess they find out things about themselves that they can’t handle.”

A silence.

Amory stirred again. “There was this one kid, the one who hit me ... I didn’t see much of his face. Just his eyes. Strange, looking into his eyes, while he was hitting me.”

# SEVEN

Kevin sat in Mr. Graham's history class next to Gino Scala and tried to concentrate on what Mr. Graham was talking about: the Reconstruction after the Civil War. But all he could think about was the uniforms of the Civil War soldiers—the pictures he saw in the textbook. They were just like the statues of soldiers he had seen in Greys tone Park. He didn't want to think about those statues but he couldn't get them out of his head.

“United in Glory.” Sure, war. Preserving the Union. All that. Did they go around beating up fags? No, that was just for kids . . . stoned kids. Men went out to preserve the Union. Kids . . . they just fucked up. Kevin felt a twinge of misery. He had Jelt that misery off and on ever since the attack in the park two nights before.

Easy enough to say they'd forced him into it. Easy enough to say he was stoned and didn't know what he was doing. But he knew that was bullshit. He had smacked that guy on the face because he wanted to. What made him do it? Oh, yes, he could think of the man with glasses. But the guy he had smacked wasn't wearing glasses. Hell, it might have been Harry! Only he knew it wasn't Harry. But the guy he smacked ... he might have been a Harry to somebody else. And he had hit those lips. Remembering now, he could almost feel them on his cock and know what it felt like.

Kevin shifted his position and crossed his knees. He didn't want Gino Scala to see what was going on between his legs. He forced his attention back to Mr. Graham, pacing up and down behind his desk at the front of the room, talking on and on in a mellow voice that seemed to soothe his anxiety. He remembered when he had first come to the school a month before. He'd thought of Mr. Graham as just another teacher. He was tall, sandy-haired, and had a funny frown when he searched for a word. But Kevin gradually began to realize that all those strange thoughts that had been going through his head . . . about Houghton Street . . . about the Mirabelle . . . about the graveyard . . . were things that Mr. Graham knew about. In Mr. Graham's class, Kevin began to listen very carefully, and catch the images of horses and wagons, soldiers in dark uniforms, Sailing ships and steamengines that Mr. Graham evoked.

But more. For Kevin, Mr. Graham himself took on a special importance as he looked forward to his classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at eleven. Coming out of class, Gino had said, “You really dig that guy, don't you?”

“Who?”

“Mr. Graham.”

Kevin felt himself flush.

“You never take your eyes off him.”

“What he has to say ... I dunno ... I dig that.”

“Him, too,” Gino said with a grin.

Kevin had to admit to himself that Mr. Graham wasn't just another teacher, and he yearned for contact beyond the three weekly classes, but he was reluctant to go up after class and ask some stupid, ass-kissing question. All the other guys would label him a brown-nose and give him a hard time.

He wondered where he lived, how old he was, whether he was married. What did he eat for breakfast? Did he have a lot of books on history? Did some of them have pictures? He'd like to see pictures like the one of Houghton Street.

He hesitated, and then let the thought surface. He wondered what Mr. Graham looked like when he was in the shower. How did he scrub himself? Did he have hair all over his chest? What did his cock look like? Did he have big muscles on his shoulders and arms? He wondered at the body underneath all those clothes standing up there behind the desk.

He recoiled. That wasn't any way to think about any teacher, not even Mr. Graham. Teachers never

had sex; they were all too old, too tired, and had too much on their minds.

Still, maybe Mr. Graham . . . sometimes . . . once in a while . . . might. ... He wasn't that old.

And if he did . . .

Kevin felt curiously awed and stirred by the possibility, even if he did it with a woman.

But maybe he liked guys.

No. Nothing like that. Mr. Graham wasn't like that old queen out at Laureldale High.

Mr. Graham's voice: "After the Civil War, the whole tempo of life began speeding up. The railroads were easing out the slow-moving canal boats. Telegraph lines were linking the country together with fast communication. But remember, there were no automobiles, no telephones, no radios, no movies, and no television ..."

Gino murmured, close to Kevin's ear. "Man, whatta drag!"

" . . . and most movement took place at the pace a man or a horse could walk. Think about it. Now, just about a hundred years later, we're exploring the planets, but let your minds drift back and try to imagine how it must have felt to move so leisurely through the environment, an environment much more natural than what we live in today. Horses are animals, not engines, and they moved mostly on dirt, not paving. The basic building materials were wood, stone quarried from the earth, and clay made into bricks. Few metals, and no plastics. We've come a long way since then . . ." He paused, and the trace of a wry smile crossed his face. " . . . and I'm not sure that maybe we weren't better off back then."

A girl piped up. "But a lot of people died. Babies. And mothers too. Much more than now."

"True," said Mr. Graham.

A black boy spoke up. "And there wasn't much for black folks, either, no matter what Lincoln did."

"He started a process," Graham said.

"Some process! We had to wait a hundred years for Martin Luther King!"

"True."

"And what did they do without television!"

Graham grinned. "They talked to each other, and sang, and made their own music on pianos and banjos. And they read books."

Gino shook his head and whispered, "What's a guitar without amps?"

But Kevin found himself holding up his hand. "But what's so bad about that? People talking and singing."

A boy's voice from the back of the room. "What have they got to talk about if they don't see the six o'clock news?"

Mr. Graham had a way about him, stirring up a discussion and then leaning back for a while and letting it roll. Kevin wondered what he was thinking as the discussion bounced around the classroom. He seemed so cool about it, but there was a twinkle around his eyes. He had a feeling that Mr. Graham liked teaching. He couldn't imagine why.

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It was just luck that Kevin ran into Mr. Graham coming out of the faculty offices at lunch hour that day. He gulped. It wasn't so much courage as reflex that made him say "Mr. Graham ..."

The teacher stopped and looked at him. He seemed taller up close. "Yes, Kevin? ..."

"It's about the Mirabelle ..."

"The Mirabelle?"

"Yeah, that sailing ship tied up on the riverfront."

"Oh, I know the one you mean."

"Well, it's sort of like what you were talking about in class today. Only it's there." Kevin stammered. "I even ... I mean, I tried to get up on the deck, just to see what it was like, but I couldn't. But still . . . yuh know . . . just seeing it there by the pier with all the masts and things, I had this feeling . . . about what it

would be like . . . yuh know ... a hundred years ago or whenever it was. ...”

He sensed Mr. Graham’s eyes looking at him intently. “It got through to you, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it did. What it’d be like back then.”

Mr. Graham rubbed his chin. “C’mon back to the office for a moment.”

Kevin was almost breathless. “Okay. Sure.”

He followed Mr. Graham into the faculty room, a big place with desks all around. Mr. Graham’s desk was over in one corner, littered with books and papers, with a straight-backed chair beside it. “Sit down.” Mr. Graham gestured to the chair. Dutifully, Kevin sat hoping that none of the kids he knew would see him through the glass partition and think he was brown-nosing.

Mr. Graham leaned back in his chair. “You know, Kevin, you’re one of the few students I have with a real sense of history.”

Kevin felt embarrassed. “Thanks.”

“Rare these days.”

“I guess, being brought up in foster homes most of my life ...” He groped for words. “. . . I keep wondering where I came from . . . keep trying to find out what it was like . . .” He shook his head. “My mother . . . she’s not much help.”

“In a city like this, history is all around you. They keep tearing it down, but a lot of it’s still around . . . like Jefferson Square, the houses around Greystone Park, the Mirabelle. All you have to have is the eyes to see, and the imagination ...” Mr. Graham grinned. “Of course it helps to know a few things, too. But you’re a bright kid.” Kevin gazed into the distance. “There’s a cemetery down Houghton Street. One night my brother and I went there to . . . well, just to look around. I mean, it was spooky and all, but I kept wondering, if all those people came out of their graves, wouldn’t that be somethin’? Yuh know, to ask ’em questions, find out how they lived, what they thought. Was singing and reading and playing games all that bad? I keep wondering about that. ...”

Mr. Graham laughed.

Kevin was flustered. “Did I say something foolish?”

“No, Kevin, you said something very wise, and you said it very well.”

“Oh. I didn’t mean ... I mean, I wasn’t trying ...”

“I’ve been in graveyards, too . . . thinking the same thing.”

“Were you spooked?”

“Nope. Just curious.”

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After school, Gino copped a joint and he and Kevin retired to Gino’s cellar to share it. As Gino lit, Kevin lay back on the mattress and stared at the ceiling.’

“Gino.”

“Huh?”

“You know, we only got two more years of high school.”

“Two years too long. I’m sick of all the shit.” Gino took a long drag on the joint and handed it to Kevin.

“You’re gonna graduate, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so. But after that . . . wow!”

“You ain’t gonna go to college?”

“And hang around here with my crazy sisters? Forget it!”

“Whatcha gonna do?”

“I’m gonna get me a job, split this dump, get my own place, and wheels, and a stereo, and fuck chicks.

That's what I'm gonna do." And he let out a thin stream of smoke. "How 'bout you?"

Kevin felt heavy. The weed was getting to him. "I dunno." He sighed. "Mr. Graham thinks I ought to go to City College, but I dunno how long I'm gonna last at home."

"Givin' you a rough time, huh?"

"They're drinkin' up all the money and fighting a lot.

"Yeah, but the last couple of days you've had money."

"Not from them."

"How'd yuh get it?"

Kevin was reduced to mumbling. "Errands, stuff like that."

"But ten dollars! Jezuz, I don't even remember the last time I had ten dollars."

Kevin regretted having ever told him about Harry's ten, and some of it had gone for cab fare, anyway.

Gino pressed him. "What'd your folks say?"

"I didn't tell 'em. I'd never even get lunch money out of 'em if I told 'em." Kevin sighed. "Dennis has a way of gettin' things out of 'em. But I can't seem to do it. Sometimes I think I don't belong anywhere . . . not anywhere at all."

"But when you can plug into ten dollars when you want to, that's something!"

"Yeah. Something."

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Ever since he had left Laureldale, Kevin felt his life had been getting out of control. So many weird things had been happening to him. He ached to be back with the Crimmins and snuggle down in his own bed in his own room with the trees outside.

He had gone back to see them once, but they had a new foster child, a girl of ten who was now in his room, and he felt strange and uncomfortable in surroundings that a short time ago had been as familiar to him as his own body. He was stuck with his mother and Jake, stuck with the city and school, stuck with Dennis, and, increasingly, he didn't like any of it.

But there was Mr. Graham. And there was Harry, at least for that hour or so. And there would be . . . who else?

"Fuck chicks." That was Gino's game. But it sure wasn't his. What he wanted . . . what did he want? His desire kept wandering in a fog of fantasy. There was Kenny's body stretched out on the tombstone. Harry at the hotel. The man with the full lips in the park.

His thought circled back to Harry, the shoulders he had held, the arms that had cradled him. Yes, he wanted Harry. But who was he to Harry? Nothing but a ten-dollar trick and he'd probably rented a halfdozen others since Kevin. The thought made him bitter. He needed those shoulders, wanted those arms. If not Harry, somebody else. And another ten dollars. One thing, though. He wasn't going to get in a car with anyone who wore glasses.

"Hey," said Gino, "yuh wanna go to the movies tonight?"

"Naw. I'm gonna be doin' something."

"What's that you're gonna be doin'?"

"Somethin'."

"Heavy date, huh? You gonna fuck her?"

"It ain't that," said Kevin. "It's somethin' else."

# EIGHT

Bruce knew the feeling. The mid-week ennui usually hit on Wednesday evening after dinner when television palled and books seemed stale. George and Gerald would be involved with duplicate bridge with a bevy of dowagers. He and Amory had usually gone to the theater that evening, or films at the museum. But Amory was long gone and he had no desire to prowling the city's cultural water-holes alone.

He stirred in his chair; then sat back in a moment of seeming fatigue; then he stirred again and rose to his feet. He moved as if sleep-walking, turning off most of the lights (but leaving low wattage in the living room and bedroom), putting on a jacket, checking his keys, and emptying his wallet of credit cards and all but twelve dollars in cash. The cards and the money he put between the leaves of a leather-bound copy of Milton's poetry that he had inherited from his grandfather.

He locked the front door carefully, tested the knob, and then walked across the street to his car. He concentrated on each particular act as if it were an end in itself, putting the key in the ignition, starting the motor, turning on the headlights, swinging the car out from its parking space. Each action seemed to have its own justification, unrelated to any goal or purpose. It was more sanitary that way.

Bruce prowled Riverfront Road as an experienced hunter, his headlights picking up flashes of white—a shirt, a pair of pants—in the gloomy alcoves and doorways of the warehouses. His vision growing sharper in the darkness, he could discern stance, some facial features, and even take a guess at the approximate age of the night's offerings. Some of them were familiar.

He had had the one under the second streetlight from the bar. A surly youngster with pimples on his shoulders, but capable of the most amazing erection. Bruce passed him by. Another one—tall, lounging in a doorway with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. For some reason, Bruce sensed danger and passed him by, too. He wasn't prepared for any hassles that night. The Amory-wound was still raw.

Two others. One looked about twelve. He kept moving the car slowly ahead past other white patches, past other bodies so still they seemed suspended in the night air. Why didn't he stop? Was this getting boring, too? Surely, one of those figures . . .

And then he stopped.

The figure was standing—not braced against a wall or doorway— but in the middle of the sidewalk, its arms dangling at its side with boyish awkwardness. The youth stood in all vulnerability as if he half-expected some car to run him down, some avenging angel to sweep him away. His face was shadowed, but Bruce thought he could see (or was it his imagination?) big eyes pleading for refuge. At least the stance of the body told him so. Bruce felt his every fiber respond.

He reached across the front seat and unlatched the curbside door.

A face peered in. Yes, they were big haunted eyes. Set in a face that, to Bruce, had a sensual beauty. The cheekbones were high. The skin smooth. The lips almost as opulent as Amory's. Bruce judged him in his mid-teens, but he seemed neither as brash nor as surly as other hustlers his age. His grace was almost childlike.

“Hello.” The youth said.

“Hello.”

A pause. Bruce expected something about price, but the youth just stood there, looking at him with those luminous eyes.

“Why don't you get into the car ...”

“Thanks.”

In a moment, the boy was beside him in the front seat, and Bruce felt an unfamiliar visceral excitement.

“My name's Sam,” said Bruce.

“My name’s Kevin.”

Bruce was somewhat embarrassed to suspect that the youth was probably giving his real name.

“Where are we going?” Kevin asked as Bruce started the car.

“There’s a hotel I know around here.”

“The Savoy?”

Bruce nodded. Young Kevin was not quite as naive as he looked. “You know the place?”

“I was there, once.”

“It’s convenient.”

The silence emanating from Kevin was almost palpable as Bruce turned the car off Riverfront Road and the lights of the Savoy became visible. Bruce swung into a parking place and cut the motor. But Kevin made no move to get out of the car.

“Here we are,” Bruce said, as he glanced at Kevin. He was staring straight ahead. His hands, resting on his legs, were clenched.

Finally the youth said, “Sam ...”

“Yes?”

Kevin seemed to struggle to get the words out. “Take me . . . home with you.”

Bruce was nonplussed. This was not ordinary hustler talk. A go-around at the Savoy let the hustler back on the street in an hour or so to pick up another john. The only reason why a hustler might want to go to a john’s apartment was to case the place for something to steal. But every intuition told him that Kevin was not the stealing kind. Then why the intensity of the plea?

“Well ... er ... I live quite a distance away from here.”

“I don’t care.” A pause. Then, softly. “I just want to be with you.”

Bruce looked at the boy. And the boy looked back, wordless. All Bruce sensed was urgency. He had a flash thought that perhaps the youngster was fleeing from the cops. But this was no young hellion. Why did he want a refuge? What was he escaping from—his own guilts? What could this child feel guilt about?

But the speculations faded in the overwhelming sense that he was needed, and Bruce had not felt himself needed very often. He started the car’s motor, swung out of the parking space and headed for Gallatin Place. Kevin moved closer until their legs touched, and he felt Kevin’s hand resting lightly on his knee. Never in his experience with hustlers had such a thing happened before.

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Kevin sat very straight on the horsehair loveseat, his feet close together, his hands folded in his lap, and looked around the room as if it were a museum. He spoke softly. “Comin’ here, it’s ... I dunno . . . it’s like coming into another time.”

Bruce shrugged. “Most of the stuff. . . well, it comes from another time.”

“Why do you keep it?”

Bruce grinned. “Because it’s old. It’s good. And it’s comfortable.” He ran his hand over the arm of the loveseat. “Besides. I like it.”

Kevin looked at him—those eyes again. “I like it, too.”

A pause. Kevin seemed tense.

“Would you like some juice . . . soda?”

“Soda would be fine.”

When Bruce came back from the kitchen with a can of Coke for Kevin and a snifter of brandy for himself, Kevin had taken off his windbreaker and was sitting gingerly against the back of the loveseat. His eyes seemed to follow Bruce’s every motion as he advanced with the Coke and handed it to him.

“Thanks.” said Kevin, and took a gulp as if he were parched.

Bruce flipped on the radio and low music filled the room. He settled himself in the armchair next to the loveseat, rotated his brandy slowly and then took a sip, looking at Kevin over the rim of the glass. In



the hush and the gentle light, Kevin looked even more beautiful. He thought he knew the breed—off with the clothes, on with the show, and back on Riverfront Road within an hour, with ten or twenty tucked in the hip pocket.

But aside from the windbreaker, lying beside him on the seat, Kevin made no move. He just sipped his Coke and looked at Bruce. Bruce was sure Kevin knew the rules of the game; he had been to the Hotel Savoy. But the boy seemed to be playing his own special variations, and Bruce wasn't quite sure what they were. All of which added to the excitement Bruce felt. He thought it was time for him to take charge, but the sooner he did so, the sooner the boy would leave and this time, curiously, he didn't want that to happen. He wanted more than an hour. Biding his time, he fantasized that they were simply spending a quiet evening at home, as he and Amory had done many times. He knew, of course, that the evening would not end with any great passion in bed. Part of the sport with hustlers was to lure from them some hesitant and awkward response that in their macho illusions they sought to withhold. Their trembling was a gain; their arms outstretched and grasping was a victory; the force of their orgasm was a revelation shared for a few isolated moments before the illusion swathed them again and they clung to the money as justification.

The sport, Bruce knew, could be deadly serious. Only in that isolated moment could many youths confront the revelation of themselves. Left hidden and gnawing, their own nature could destroy not only themselves, but the people around them in spasms of alcohol, rage, and despair. But in those isolated glimpses, they might gain the insight to act according to their natures—at a cost, yes—but nowhere near the cost of the denial.

Was it that they came to Riverfront Road not just for money, but to test their most secret suspicions—hoping that in their resistance to the sensory blandishments administered by the john they could allay those suspicions? If so, in Bruce's experience few suspicions had been allayed, most confirmed. Still, the resistance was there, and he pitied it most in youngsters whose need, revealed in countless ways, was so evident. He remembered his own adolescence and he tried to be gentle.

But still, the sport was there, and he was expert at the lure. He looked at Kevin again and wondered what resistance he would encounter.

Bruce got up from his chair, walked into the bedroom area and pointedly drew the window curtains. Then he returned to the living room and sat beside Kevin on the love seat, close, but not touching.

Kevin's eyes left Bruce's figure and focused, downcast, on the floor. His voice was barely above a whisper. "Should I get undressed now?"

Bruce tried to make his voice sound as casual as possible, but his throat was tight. "If you'd like."

"I'd like to get undressed for you, except ..."

"Except what?"

Kevin's eyes met Bruce's, and just the trace of a smile crossed his lips. "Except I think I'm too skinny."

Bruce returned the smile. "You look just fine to me."

"Do I?" The question was earnest.

Bruce covered one of Kevin's hands with his. "Yes."

"Wait till you see."

"I'm watching."

Kevin rose to his feet and stood in the middle of the living room, facing Bruce and looking at him intently. His eyes no longer seemed quite so haunted; they radiated a hesitant but luminous warmth Bruce had never seen in a hustler before, and what with the lilting music, the gentle lights, and the heat of the brandy within him, Bruce felt a little awed at what stood before him.

Kevin pulled his tee-shirt over his head and laid it on the arm of the loveseat. He was, indeed, skinny, but the shoulders were wide, and the biceps and pectorals were beginning to take shape on the smooth-skinned torso. Leaning down, he untied his sneakers, took them off, and put them side-by-side next to the

loveseat with his socks tucked inside them. He wiggled his toes in sweet relief as his bare feet relished the texture of the rug. Then, slowly, he unbuckled his belt and slid out of his pants and underpants with animal grace, his eyes still holding Bruce's. "Here I am," he said.

What Bruce saw before him was lithe but archetypal youth, ready for the solidities of maturity, but now caught in a hush of radiant expectancy. Kevin seemed to exult in the release of nakedness. He raised his arms, and, yielding to the music, began to move rhythmically around the room in a ceremony of joy, quite evidently making sure that Bruce could appreciate every tilt and advantage of his offering. Which Bruce did. And felt himself lured by blandishments as potent as any he had contrived. Kevin was leading the dance.

But then suddenly he stopped, standing motionless in front of Bruce. "I'm skinny, aren't I?"

"You're beautiful."

"You're just saying that."

Bruce raised his hand in defense. "All right. All right. I will not encourage your narcissism."

"What's that?"

"Vanity, child. Vanity."

"Me? I'm skinny." He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "I just want to be beautiful ... for you."

"So? ..."

"What? ..."

"I said that ... to me . . . you are beautiful." It was Bruce's turn to hold Kevin's eyes. "Believe it." And Bruce wondered just what the hell he was getting himself into. What was he saying to a Riverfront hustler that he'd probably never see again? All right. The game. The sport. The lure. But did he "believe it?"

Kevin spoke. "I want to hear you say that."

"I've said it."

"Nobody else says it. But ... I just want to hear it from you." My God, thought Bruce, does this con game come with the price? The thought was reassuring. This one has his own patented aphrodisiac. Perhaps it compensates for deficiencies yet unknown. But then, on second consideration, Bruce decided that he was peddling himself a line of bullshit. Economics was too easy an explanation for the magic that radiated in the room. Was there a possibility that the magic was some kind of reality? A noneconomic reality?

What stood before him was biological reality—and another life force. He was impressed with its strength, the power of Kevin's attraction, and his evident need.

But he did not appreciate the full extent of that need until they settled on the big four-poster bed, and Bruce felt Kevin's arms around his neck—tight around his neck—and his whole body straining for touch, for closeness. Bruce wondered at what he held in his arms, so vulnerable in emotional nakedness, so easy to wound.

Holding the slender vibrant body, Bruce almost wished he had picked up one of those emotionally shielded types who considered their money earned by just lying there. Plundering them had a joy of irresponsibility; those shielded youths were not easily hurt. But this one?

Bruce cradled the fragile body that nestled beside him, and let his hand glide over the planes and surfaces of its taut flesh. Kevin's penis stiffened. It was no great weapon, but almost demure in its neatness. Bruce touched it. Kevin's hips raised to press it against his hand. With that one gesture, and that response, the floodgates opened.

Bruce had never known—not with Amory—not with anyone—such an exultation. But as torrentially as it came, it passed, and Bruce was left looking at this huddled body, crouched on the other side of the bed, as distant as the stars.

The voice came out of space. "I gotta go."

Bruce felt himself frosted with the sound of it, but he kept his own voice measured. "Shall I drive you home?"

"I can walk."

Kevin slowly rose out of bed, his eyes averted from Bruce, and stood, running his hands over his naked body as if he were acquainting himself with some strange new thing. Desire, which Bruce had felt sated, still ran through him like a low charge of electricity as he looked at the body whose every part had been offered to him. Now it seemed as self-contained as an alabaster statue, and as classically beautiful. But what had suddenly happened?

As Kevin was putting on his clothes with deliberate, almost childlike movements, Bruce asked, "Would you like to come back again?"

Still no eye contact. "I dunno. Maybe."

"I'd like to have you." Bruce paused. "Save you hanging around on Riverfront Road."

"I'm not hanging around on Riverfront Road." The voice was harsh and intense. "Not any more."

"Then? . . ."

"Thanks for asking me."

"Think about it."

"I am thinking about it."

Bruce could sense a terrible anxiety in the boy and he began to understand. But he felt that anything he could say would only make the anxiety worse. He would have to wrestle with his own reality, and Bruce knew what misery there might be in the rite of passage. He ached for those fragile shoulders that seemed to be able to bear so little weight.

As Kevin finished dressing, Bruce put on his robe and took Kevin to the front door. He slipped a five and a ten into Kevin's hand and stood with his hand on the front door knob. But Kevin made no move to go, nor did he look Bruce in the eye. Then, in a sudden burst of energy, Kevin put his arms around Bruce's neck and kissed him—hard and open-mouthed on the lips. With a soft moaning cry, Kevin was gone into the city night.

Bruce walked into the kitchen and poured himself a stiff brandy. But even with the glow of brandy inside him, he found it hard to sleep.

# NINE

Kevin trudged through the center city on his way to Burkett Street. On a tower clock he noticed that it was ten minutes after eleven. Millie would be drunk; Jake asleep in front of the TV set; and Dennis would probably be lying on his bed, getting stoned on paint and jerking off. Kevin slowed his pace. There was no hurry, getting home.

It crossed his mind that he could have stayed with Sam all night, and nobody at Burkett Street would have cared. He could have slept next to that big warm body . . . and in the morning maybe. . . . His penis began to stiffen in his pants and his anus twitched. God! It had been like . . . like . . . he didn't know what!

Then his every fear surged, as it had when he had huddled in bed after it had all happened. He was one of them! Like the guys in the park. He had done what he guessed those other guys did with each other and he'd done it because he wanted to, not because he was getting paid for it. That was the scary part—how much he liked it. He didn't want anybody to know that, not even Sam. But he knew Sam knew and that meant he had to get out; he didn't want those eyes looking at him. All he wanted to do was bury himself in the musky warmth of Sam's body and feel himself consumed.

If Sam knew, who else? Would Gino guess? Or Max and Amie? Would the way he walked or looked or acted or spoke give them the clue to stretch him out on a tombstone? He shuddered, remembering Kenny's plundered body. Would it be his own next?

He walked along Jefferson Avenue, passing Jefferson Square, a block of trees and pathways and benches, with a statue and fountain in the middle. The fountain was lit in white light. Silhouetted in front of it, he could see male figures moving, and then disappearing into the darkness. He wondered what they did there. Was it the same thing they did in the park? Was it the same thing he and Sam had done together? Did they go home together, or do it right there in the darkness under the trees? Right in the middle of the city with the traffic going by in all directions? And kids like Max and Amie, hiding in the bushes with baseball bats? And . . . and . . . him, too, because he was tough and straight and nobody was going to call him a chicken like Kenny. He could smack a faggot, too. But what if that faggot had been Sam?

He stopped walking, his eyes focused on the luminous pallor of the fountain. He felt drawn to it, an eerie presence, yet playfully splashing with a seeming light-heartedness that belied the darkness around it.

He crossed Jefferson Avenue to the Square and, after a moment's hesitation, started down the tree-lined walkway to the fountain. He sensed more than saw that he was not alone, and the awareness gave him a curious comfort. He was just another figure among the trees, but those other figures were secret kindred. He felt that. After Sam, he felt that. But he walked with his shoulders hunched beneath his windbreaker and hoped that no one would notice him.

But as he approached the fountain, someone did. A kid, a little older than he was, in a leather jacket, with a stubbled chin and short dark hair. He was thin and his face looked skull-like in the white light. Kevin felt a flash of fear. But the young man's rasping voice was neither hostile nor particularly friendly. Just curious. "You workin' this turf?"

"I just came to look at the fountain."

"Hey, that's a new one!" The young man moved closer. "Yuh never been here before?"

Kevin shook his head.

The young man assumed an air of authority. "Well, this here is Jefferson Square. And that there ..." He pointed to the statue. "... is Thomas Jefferson. And this here ..." He pointed to the fountain. "... is Thomas Jefferson's piss-pot. An' if yuh hang around here long enough, yuh can find a john to blow yuh for ten dollars—five on slow nights—and it won't be Thomas Jefferson, either. 'Cause all that son of a bitch does is piss in the fuckin' fountain!"

Kevin peered up at the statue. The figure looked sort of like Mr. Graham, his history teacher, only taller, and he remembered Mr. Graham's voice as he had read the words out loud to the class: "We hold these truths to be self-evident ..."

"Course yuh gotta keep your eyes open. Sometimes it's undercover cops. They try to get yuh into somethin' an' then—pow!—they bust yuh. The bastards." The young man gave a sudden short bark of laughter. "But sometimes it works the other way. Yeah." His voice grew low and conspiratorial. "There was this queen, see, who used to work those bushes over there. All she ever did was give blow-jobs. Didn't even like to get fucked. Just blow-jobs. And she never swallowed it, either. Just spit it out in her handkerchief when she got through.

"So . . . anyway ..."

And now the young man was really savoring the story. "These two undercover pigs come along, and they spot Theodora—that was her name—in the bushes. They figure—huh—that's an easy bust, her being in drag an' all. So they sashay up to her and give her this line about how they're from outta town and they gotta get their rocks of an' all that shit.

"An' Theodora! Here she is with these two humpy numbers and she just . . . can't . . . wait. So they make a deal—fifteen for the two of 'em. Now right then, yuh see, the pigs should've made the bust. . . before anything happened. "'Cause with a bust, nothin's supposed to happen. But the pigs—Theodora's got 'em all hot, an' they figure—what the hell? Who's to know?—and down Theodora goes, pumps one of 'em dry, and spits it into her handkerchief, and then sucks the other one dry, and puts that in her handkerchief. An' then, happy as fuckin' clams, they make the bust! Without even payin' her or nothin'. An' that queen is really . . . really mad!

"At any rate, Theodora gets a lawyer, and the lawyer gets hold of the handkerchief and sends it to a lab." The young man cracked up and the next sentences came in gasps. "So it ends up . . . with the cops on suspension . . . for lettin' 'emselves get sucked off by a fuckin' man ... an' them married and all. And Theodora . . . she's back in the bushes the next night with a clean handkerchief stuck in her pocket!"

The shock that Kevin felt at the story, so matter-of-factly told, vanished, and he was laughing as hard as the young man as the two slapped each other on the back, just thinking about those fuckin' pigs. He had never laughed quite that way before. But then, why shouldn't a guy laugh like that when he's among his own people and on his own turf?

The young man's laughter subsided and his face grew serious. "You're a pretty good-lookin' kid, yuh know that?"

Kevin shrugged, his eyes on the ground. Then he thought about Sam, and he straightened up, looking the young man in the eye. "Thanks."

For the first time, the young man seemed to hesitate. Then: "Yuh wanna make out with me? It won't cost yuh nothin'."

It was Kevin's turn to hesitate; after the evening with Sam, he was exhausted.

The young man's voice grew softer. "I just made ten dollars. Yuh can have it, if you want."

Barely aware of what he was doing, Kevin put his two hands on the young man's shoulders and, leaning forward, he kissed him on the lips. "Keep it. I gotta go home."

Kevin walked out of the Square.

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Miss Gotter, the caseworker, sat on the couch in Jake and Millie's living room, her purse in her lap, her hair pulled straight back the way it had been at the social service office, with the mole over one eyebrow that gave her a funny look of astonishment, even when she was saying the simplest things.

Jake was in his big chair in front of the television set. Millie sat on the other end of the couch, facing Miss Gotter. Kevin and Dennis, neatly dressed and scrubbed, sat in straight-backed chairs brought in from the kitchen.

Kevin knew that Millie had spent the better part of the day cleaning up the house. It hadn't been

cleaned in months. Now everything was neat and in its place. Even the mess of newspapers and beer cans around Jake's big chair had disappeared.

Millie had made a big fuss when Kevin and Dennis had gotten home from school . . . about getting cleaned up . . . and putting on fresh shirts . . . and combing their hair. Millie even ironed a pair of Kevin's pants for him.

By five when Miss Gotter arrived, Kevin found it hard to recognize the house—or anybody in it, for that matter.

Sitting in the living room, Kevin looked at the figures and thought about a bunch of plastic mannikins in a clothing store window. Millie and Miss Gotter were the most plastic of all, smiling and nodding to each other, acting like they were having tea. Kevin wondered where the bottle of Seven Crowns was stashed, and figured the party would get lively if Millie were to bring it out and give Miss Gotter a good belt.

But Kevin just sat and listened and thought about Sam's cock.

Miss Gotter sounded as if she was reading out loud. "You see, it has always been the policy of the Department to reunite blood relatives whenever possible, and it seemed so clear in this case, Mrs. Stark, now that you've recovered your health, to bring the boys back with you."

"Oh, yes," said Millie, "I've been so pleased to have them."

"And it is so homelike here."

Millie glowed and Jake nodded. Dennis just looked at Miss Gotter under his shock of hair.

"Would you like to see the boys' room?" Millie asked.

"Why, yes. That would be very nice."

Millie was a mother right out of a TV series. "Boys, take Miss Gotter up and show her your room."

Miss Gotter rose expectantly. Kevin noticed she had a big rump and moved like a duck.

Dennis led the way, Miss Gotter followed, and Kevin brought up the rear, watching her waddle up the stairs. Kevin hoped Dennis had the paint cans well hidden in the closet and was grateful that they were doing their sniffing in the graveyard now. All Miss Gotter would be able to smell would be dirty socks.

Once on the third floor, Miss Gotter looked around at the sparsely-

furnished space, Kevin's cot at the front end and Dennis's cot at the rear. She smiled approvingly at the poster of John Wayne and his horse, and said she was glad that both boys picked up after themselves so well. (It had taken Millie a half hour not long before to put some order in the chaos.)

Suddenly Miss Gotter's voice got very clear and the words came out like 1-2-3. "Are you happy here?"

"Oh, sure." said Dennis, at his most angelic.

Miss Gotter turned to Kevin. "And you?"

Kevin remembered Sam. "It's okay. Sometimes it's great."

"How is your school?"

Dennis shrugged. "We get along."

"And your stepfather, Jake. Do you like him?"

"Oh, he's great." said Dennis. "You just have to know how to handle him, that's all."

A slight grin crossed Miss Gotter's face. Then her voice got soft again. "Your mother's health is not . . . strong. You boys are going to take care of her, aren't you, and not put too much of a strain on her?" "Oh, we take care of her." said Dennis.

"That's a nice red jacket you've got on. Did your mother give it to you?"

"I bought it myself." Dennis said with pride.

"Oh, do you have a job after school?"

"Sure . . . running errands, stuff like that."

Kevin fought to keep a straight face. "Stuff' like being blown on Riverfront Road!

“That’s very enterprising of you.” said Miss Gotter. “I’m sure your mother and Jake appreciate it.”

“Oh, they do.” said Dennis.

Kevin couldn’t help having a grudging admiration for Dennis. That kid was fixing to lie his way into Heaven!

Later, after Miss Gotter had left, and Millie had gotten out the whiskey bottle, and Jake had gotten out his six-pack, Kevin and Dennis were up in their room. Kevin asked: “Why did you give her all that bullshit?”

“Because that was the bullshit she wanted to hear.”

“But . . .”

“What the hell good would it have done if I’d told her the truth?” Kevin sighed. “Not much, I guess. She probably wouldn’t have believed it, anyway.”

Dennis gave Kevin a long, knowing look. “Hey, where was you last night?”

“Round.”

“Heavy date, huh?”

“Call it that.”

“How much didja make?”

Kevin felt anger at Dennis’s intrusion. “None of your business!”

“Too holy to talk about, huh? Yeah, I know the kind. Drop yuh like a hot penny. You’ll learn.”

Kevin tossed in bed, unable to sleep. He ached with the tensions that had been growing in the past twenty-four hours. The crawling realizations. The doubts. The unanswered questions. They all now seemed to encrust his memory of that time in the big four-poster bed with Sam. For an hour or so, close to Sam’s body, he had known what he wanted with a sureness that he had never felt before. But now? What cost would he have to pay for that knowledge?

What if Miss Gotter knew? Oh, sure, he thought she wouldn’t believe it if she heard. What did she know about it, anyway? The city. The government. All those big shots down at the welfare office. What did they know about Sam, about the pier, about the Square? What could they know about how he felt or understand what it was to him? And what business was it of theirs, anyway? It served those cocksuckin’ pigs right, getting caught by Theodora!

But what if some pigs like that had picked him up on Riverfront Road or Jefferson Square? Then, maybe, Miss Gotter would believe it, and the big-shots down at the welfare office, and the family court judge, and all that. And what would happen to him? He knew. He’d heard. They’d send him to an institution, a fuckin’ prison.

He snuggled deeper under the blankets and, for all his puzzlements, his mind drifted back to Sam’s apartment. It had been strange, that apartment, like something in the movies, dark and strange in the low lights—the heavy furniture, the paintings on the wall, the folds of the curtains covering the windows, the thick rugs that made the whole apartment seem quiet, even when music was playing. Strange, yes, but he had felt so easy about it as if, walking into the apartment, he was coming home and the only thing he wanted to do was take off his clothes and relax.

And there was Sam. It was easy to relax with him. He’d never seen anybody like Sam before, except maybe Mr. Graham. He talked, but there was a quietness about him, like the apartment itself. He felt he could tell Sam anything and knew he would understand. He hadn’t told him much, not with words, anyway. But in bed, yes, he’d told him everything without saying a word, and every gesture, every movement of Sam’s had made it clear that he did understand. Then why had he panicked? Why had he gone home when all he wanted to do was spend the night with Sam?

He had told himself that he wanted Sam to see him naked, but not all that naked. Now the phrase kept twisting in his mind. “Hot penny.” Dennis’s voice. “Drop yuh like a hot penny.”

Kevin ran his hands over his body under the blankets, feeling the flesh and bone—too much bone—

and figuring that that was all he had to offer Sam, all Sam wanted from him. What else could Kevin offer? Sam had asked him to come back, but did he mean it? Sure, for another roll-around on the four-poster, what else could he possibly want of Kevin? After a couple of more roll-arounds, he'd be just another hot penny in Sam's life. Dennis had said it with his sardonic weariness, "you'll learn." And what he'd learn was never to trust any john—only the money to be made on Riverfront Road.

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Miss Gotter's visit had a curious effect on Millie. Kevin noticed it the next evening. She smiled at Kevin when he came into the kitchen after school. She hummed to herself as she cooked dinner on the stove. And she didn't bum the hamburgers.

Kevin caught on, just as anyone in school would. Millie had passed her examination. Miss Gotter had given her a passing grade. After all those years in the hospital, Millie was making a home. At least that was what Miss Gotter thought. And if Miss Gotter could think that, Millie could, too.

The four of them had dinner together around the kitchen table for the first time in weeks, and Millie was almost sober as she served the hamburgers, sliced tomatoes, and mashed turnips with elaborate care, trying to keep her hands as steady as possible.

Kevin felt a wave of sympathy for this bony woman with the tired face and the darkened circles under the eyes. She seemed to be spending her last ounce of effort just getting through life and the alcohol numbed the pain of the effort, even as it made the effort more burdensome. Still, as far as Miss Gotter was concerned, Millie was indeed getting through life.

Kevin could think back to those times when he had visited her in the green-walled gloom of the hospital, and now he could imagine the fantasies she must have had about the home she would make for her children once she got out. He wondered what she saw now through the alcoholic fogs. Was the kitchen table decked out with fine linen, china and silver? Was Jake, on his motorman's pension, the good provider? Were Kevin and Dennis the model children, earnest in school and attentive to their mother? Seeing the glow in her eyes as she served the food, Kevin could almost think that was what she saw, the fantasies of the hospital come to life. What could he tell her—that Jake was a slob and her two sons whores? He could just hear Millie moaning out the last of her feeble hopes!

But somehow, in the course of that dinner, Millie's fantasies prevailed. She was the gracious lady of the house. Kevin found himself cutting his hamburger with a knife. Jake kept his paper napkin in his lap, not under his jowly chin. And when Dennis asked for the ketchup he said "Please." For conversation, Jake held forth on the trolley cars he had known. Even Dennis pretended to listen.

After dinner, Jake settled down in his big chair in front of the television set, with Dennis snuggled up in his lap. Millie washed the dishes and Kevin dried them. Her hands in the soapy water, Millie talked on and on about Miss Gotter and how it was all working out just fine. Kevin would say "sure, Mom" as he took the dripping plates from her hand.

When the last of the dishes were dried and stacked, Millie squeezed out the dishrag, dried her hands, and sighed. She put an arm around Kevin's shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "Everything's going to be just fine." Kevin felt like crying, but he didn't. She'd have asked him why, and he wouldn't have been able to tell her. He wrapped his arms around her emaciated body, held her for a moment and then drew away. She took her glass of liquor off the top of the refrigerator. "C'mon let's go in and watch TV."

Two hours later, she was as drunk as ever.



# TEN

Kevin walked up the stairs to the darkness of the third floor. The waning daylight guided him to his bed. He stretched out full length and looked through the window at the clouds, still catching the radiant pinks of the setting sun.

Millie was drinking herself to death. He knew that now. There wasn't anything that anybody could do about it either. It might take a year. It might take more, but it was going to happen. He had watched her that evening as she tried to keep her eyes focused on the television set, the glass going regularly to her lips, and she had seemed to shrink before his eyes into a huddled old woman.

Jake and Dennis had their eyes on the television set, paying no attention to her, the people on the tube were throwing custard pies at each other and Dennis was cheering them on. Watching Millie, a fleck of saliva glistening on her protruding lip, Kevin felt as if he wanted to yell, take her by the shoulders and shake her, grab the glass from her hand and throw it out the window. But what the hell, she'd just get another glass and pour herself another shot.

When she went, what would he have left? Dennis? Jake? He snorted with disgust, got up from his chair and headed upstairs.

Now, as he lay on the bed, all he could feel was emptiness, as if he were alone in the house and nobody was coming back. All he had was one slip of paper in his pocket.

He turned his head and looked across the shadowed room at Dennis's cot. On the floor there was a snowdrift of paper scraps. Dennis's phone numbers. This guy. That guy. The other guy. Each offering contact that Dennis blithely ignored in favor of the next guy. Always the next guy. "Because," Dennis had explained, "the last guy's always a phony. They give you a wrong number, or you call 'em and some woman answers or some shit like that. There's no last guy. Always the next. And he probably pays more, anyway."

Moving his hips, Kevin pulled his single piece of paper out of his pocket and looked at it. In the dim light, he read each number, one by one, not as information but as a talisman. The phone number was Sam's. He had memorized it from the phone on the bedside table, and written it down when he got home. Not that he needed to. He could recite the numbers to himself—in the shower, walking to school, going to sleep at night—anywhere.

But having the number was one thing. Actually calling Sam was another. If he hadn't been so freaky about it, saying he had to go, saying that he didn't know whether he was coming back or anything, maybe it might be okay. But now? Would Sam remember him? He might be busy or something. He might be with a woman. Kevin thought about that. An attractive guy like Sam with a car and a nice apartment could probably have any girl he wanted. And why would he care about a teenage kid?

But he had been on Riverfront Road. Maybe that was just for a change. And then back to his glamorous women. That could be it. There sure wasn't anything faggoty about Sam. He was even butcher than Mr. Graham. It was puzzling.

The next day at school, Kevin felt a mounting tension. Between classes he kept glancing at the pay-phone in the corridor near the principal's office. He wanted to call the number—just to find out if Sam was home—just to hear his voice—just to know he was there. At eleven, in history class, he kept looking at Mr. Graham, so cool, so self-assured, and kept thinking about his resemblance to Sam. It was easy, now, to imagine Mr. Graham in the shower.

At gym that afternoon, he looked at himself in the mirror in the locker room. It was a long hard appraisal, and he was oblivious to everyone around him as he made it. He looked at his hair, his face, the gradually expanding bulges of muscles on his arms, the wisps of hair on his chest. He opened his mouth and examined his teeth; then went back to review the hair situation again. He wished it were a little

longer. Still, he looked okay. Maybe Sam did remember him. Maybe Sam did think he was handsome. His confidence was growing when he left school that day.

But it faded fast when he got home. Millie and Jake were having one of their screaming matches and the house seemed to look dingier than ever. He drifted out of the house, unnoticed by either of them. He sat for a few moments on the front stoop and thought about going down and seeing Gino. But then he thought Gino would probably want to talk about fucking chicks and that was a drag.

Not going anywhere in particular, he walked down Houghton Street. Passing the graveyard, he peered inside the gate. The big trees shaded the stones. He could catch a glimpse of the stone house where the scene with Amie and Max had happened. He shuddered, remembering it. But now, in the gentle springtime afternoon sun, the place looked like an enchanted forest.

He plodded on, figuring that Millie and Jake would probably have calmed down in an hour or so, in time for him to get some dinner. Until then? . . .

A kid about Kevin's age was sitting on a stoop smoking a cigarette. Their eyes met and the kid said, "Hey, man, how's it going?"

Kevin stopped. "Lousy."

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean." He motioned. "Siddown and tell me about it."

Tell him? How could he tell anybody?—But he sat down, anyway.

The kid had a lean face, long stringy hair, and a jaunty way of holding his head. He smoked his cigarette, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, and when he took it from his mouth, the smoke curled up between his fingers. He wore a gold band on his little finger and as he tossed his head, Kevin noticed that he had a gold earring in one ear. Pretty freaky, Kevin decided, but his eyes were friendly, and at least it was somebody to talk to.

Or was there something more to it?

"My name's Lenny," the kid said. "What's yours?"

"Kevin."

Lenny held out his hand and Kevin shook it. Lenny held Kevin's hand just a beat too long, and Kevin thought that maybe it was some secret code. And that direct look—was that to make sure he got the message? But what was the message? Kevin felt a flash of panic. Did it show? After just one night? Or had it been there, all along? Lenny's direct look again. "You from around here?"

"Down 'round Burkett Street."

"That's a ways away." There was just a trace of disappointment in Lenny's voice.

"I been walkin'. Don't have much else to do."

"Yeah. Sometimes it's a drag. Like me, just sittin' here. But sometimes something comes along." A pause.

Kevin grasped at straws. "You think I'm 'something'?"

"Shit, man. I could go for you, big."

Kevin startled himself. He said, "Thanks."

"'cept, right now, you're just dragging your ass. No way to be, not if you're out for something."

"I'm not out for nothin'. And I feel like draggin' my ass."

Lenny grinned, only it was more of a leer than a grin. "Everybody's always out for something." A touch of disdain. "Even if it's only a girl." A hesitation. "You got a girl?"

Kevin shook his head.

Lenny breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, then, maybe I can help you!"

"Maybe."

"Don't tell me." Lenny held up a restraining hand and brushed it lightly against Kevin's forearm. "Let me guess. Now, just let me think. . . ." He stared up at the sky. "I got it! It's Mr. Smith, ain't it?"

Kevin was startled. "Who's Mr. Smith?"

“The basketball coach, every time you see him running around the locker room in his jockstrap, it drives you right. . . up . . . the wall! Am I right?”

Despite his gloom, Kevin grinned. “Guess again.”

“Would you believe Mr. Jones, the chemistry teacher who makes all that funny green gas in the lab, and it’s gettin’ so you get hard just thinkin’ about green gas!”

“No gas.”

“Oh, I got it. Your john has just taken up with a humpy little fourteen-year-old, and he’s putting you on the shelf because you’re gettin’ to be such an old man. Yeah, I know. Aging’s hell.” Lenny rolled his eyes to heaven.

Kevin burst out laughing, then he stopped. Did Sam have a fourteen-year-old on the string?

“I’m gettin’ close, huh?” Lenny’s eyes grew warm and he wrapped an arm around Kevin’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I won’t push you. But . . .” unexpectedly he camped it up, “. . . if you want to tell your Aunt Mary all about it, she’s right here. I’d invite you up to my room, but my ma’s in there, banging around in the kitchen. A week ago, she found me in bed with this other kid, and I think the old biddy is gettin’ suspicious.”

“Yeah, I can tell how she might.”

“But what the hell, we weren’t doing anything when she barged in. Just lyin’ there, exhausted. I mean . . . if you’ve been sixty-nining it for a half hour, a guy’s got a right to be exhausted!”

“What’s sixty-nine?”

Lenny gave Kevin a pitying look. “You haven’t been on the scene long, have you?”

Kevin gulped. “Mostly . . . just since night before last.”

“Night before last!”

Kevin nodded. But he was appalled at what he’d confessed.

Camp again. “Well . . . it looks like your Aunt Mary has a lot of things to tell you!” He leaned close. “Was he cute?”

“The greatest.” Kevin felt his eyes fill up. “Nothin’ like that’s ever happened to me before . . . ever.”

Lenny sighed beautifully. “Oh, God, I remember when I was thirteen . . .”

“That when it happened to you?”

“Put it this way, that’s when I really . . . really got into it.”

“Did you go to Riverfront Road?”

“Naw. That’s when I gave up Riverfront Road.”

Kevin ran his hand across his brow. Things were going a little too fast for him. Here he was, talking about Sam with a total stranger, and the stranger seemed to know all about everything. More even than Dennis. He wondered where he had been, all those years out in Laureldale where the big deal was skinny-dipping in Grover’s Pond.

Still, at least he could talk to Lenny, and Lenny could tell him things. Most important, Lenny was there, up front and no nonsense. Kevin didn’t feel lonely anymore.

“What’s sixty-nine?”

Lenny made a gesture with his two hands. “That way, you can suck his cock, and he can suck yours, both at the same time.”

“They got a name for that?” Kevin felt his and Sam’s privacy invaded.

“Sure. Fun, too.”

Kevin’s voice was barely audible. “I know.”

“Sounds like you are catching on, fast.”

“I have a good teacher.”

“When are you seeing him again?”

“Sometime, I hope.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“It’s just ... I dunno . . . why should he be interested in me?”

“Cause you’re young and beautiful. You got cute buns and a good head. What more would a man want?”

“A woman, maybe.”

“You mean, the man’s straight?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, if he’s straight, it’s your job to get him over it!”

“If he’s straight, I’m trying.”

As he and Lenny parted, Kevin was careful to remember the number of the house that Lenny lived in on Houghton street. “I’m usually around after school.” Lenny said. “And let me know how it turns out.”

“I will.”

“And good luck!”

“Thanks.”

Kevin started back toward Burkett Street, and he wasn’t dragging his ass anymore.

As he passed the churchyard, the bell in the steeple chimed six. Jake and Milly had probably calmed down, but he didn’t think very much about that. What he thought about was that Sam might be home. After what Lenny had said about him having “cute buns and a good head,” he thought that maybe he was ready to see Sam again ... if Sam was ready to see him. This time, he wanted to stay all night.

Kevin spotted a phone booth on Houghton just beyond the church, and reached into his pocket for a dime and the slip of paper that had Sam’s number on it. But as he got to the booth, he panicked and kept on walking. What was wrong with him? After all the pep talk Lenny had given him, was he chickening out?

He fought the panic, the racing heart, the shakes in his stomach as he walked block after block. Then, close to Burkett, he saw another phone booth. His last chance before going home. Stiffening his back, he set one foot after another in front of him on the pavement with measured strides until he got to the booth. He forced his hand to the coin slot, dropped in the dime, and pushed button after button until he heard the number ringing. It rang and rang. He let it ring eleven times until he hung up. He walked on to Burkett Street feeling bereft.

Still . . . now there was Lenny. He could talk to Lenny.

# ELEVEN

Kevin locked himself in the bathroom. He stripped off his clothes, but before turning on the shower, he ran his hands over his body as if he were making a strange new discovery. He had never thought much about his body before, except when it ached or got hurt. It just kept growing. But now it seemed to have a mysterious value. Men paid money for it. Even Lenny—not much older than he was—was attracted. His body was his new power, and he had never felt such a power before.

Turning on the shower, Kevin adjusted the faucets carefully. Then he stepped under the luxuriant flow of the hot water, moving his shoulders, catlike, against the pressure of the stream. He washed his hair and lathered his body meticulously. Tonight he was going out to Riverfront Road.

He had tried to reach Sam several times by phone without success and each time had felt more uneasy about it. Who was he to try to get mixed up in a busy man's life? He had grown steadily more restless. He wanted Sam, but if he couldn't have Sam, he wanted somebody. Maybe . . . just maybe . . . he'd find Sam down at Riverfront Road.

The man who picked him up on Riverfront Road wore a hat. Its wide brim shadowed his face. Only when Kevin got into the car did he realize that the man behind the wheel had a deeply lined face, weathered hands, and gray sideburns. He was old. Kevin thought he could have been somebody's grandfather. Even before the man shifted the car into gear, Kevin felt the urge to get out fast and wait for the next pick-up. But then the man spoke. His voice was husky and the words came slowly. "Would you like to come home with me?" Kevin hesitated. He felt repelled, but he was also curious. What would it be like to sleep with somebody's grandfather? He had never known his grandfathers. Had either of them looked like the man behind the wheel? He doubted it. Something about the way the man spoke—a casual gentleness—a slight lisp like Humphrey Bogart—and a rhythm of speech like Mr. Graham. He could not imagine his mother's father speaking like that.

"Okay," Kevin hesitated again. "I come for ten."

"My pleasure."

"And ... and . . ."

"What?"

Kevin was suddenly embarrassed. "Nothin'."

The man grinned. He had a nice grin. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

For a moment Kevin wondered how an old man could hurt anybody. Then he looked at the weathered hands. They were strong. He put his trust in the gentle voice. Still, he wondered what the man would want him to do . . . and could he do it? He felt none of the excitement he had felt with Sam, or even Harry. Yet he remembered what Dennis had said: you gotta get a hard-on—that's what they're paying for—the hard-on. He didn't think he could do it with this old man, not even for ten dollars. But he rested his hand on his crotch and hoped for the best when the time came, and he got out of his clothes. Just getting out of his clothes was a tum-on for him, especially if he was being watched and admired.

The man said his name was Grover. He did not mention a first name, and Kevin did not ask. He wasn't going to call such an old man by his first name anyway. Mr. Grover lived in an apartment building that seemed even older than he was. They went up five floors in a creaky elevator and into an apartment that smelled of pipe smoke and furniture polish. But when Mr. Grover turned on the lights, all Kevin could see was flowers—flowered curtains, a flowered slipcover on the couch in front of the fireplace, and vases of straw-flowers on the sidetables. All those flowers said one word—woman. He looked around half expecting an older woman to come out of one of the darkened doorways, and he wondered what he was supposed to do then.

But no woman appeared. He couldn't hear a sound from anywhere in the apartment. He and Mr.

Grover were alone. Now acutely aware of Mr. Grover's tall, gnarled, lanky presence, Kevin liked it that way. Mr. Grover was an impressive man in his easy-going way. But Kevin still didn't think he could get a hard-on.

Mr. Grover laid a casual hand on Kevin's shoulder. "How about a fire?"

Kevin looked at the big fireplace with tilework set in the brick. "Sure."

"Always like a fire in the evening. Takes the chill off."

The apartment seemed plenty warm to Kevin, but perhaps old people needed more heat.

Mr. Grover had the fire crackling in a short time and lowered the lights so that the light from the flames sent flickering shadows all over the room. He sat down on the couch beside Mr. Grover and wondered what was going to happen. He hoped nothing was going to happen in a hurry. He liked the fire; he liked the flowers; and he liked the sound of Mr. Grover's gentle husky voice.

Mr. Grover was apparently in no hurry at all. But Kevin knew he was being watched, and he had the warming feeling that he was being appreciated.

A weathered hand touched his knee. "Would you like a soda?"

"Yes. Thanks."

Mr. Grover disappeared through one of the doorways and came back with a soda for Kevin and a beer for himself. He settled down on the couch, took a sip of his beer, and let out a heavy sigh. "Things get too damn quiet around here. The radio—huh—blah-blah-blah. Threw it out."

Kevin looked around the room. "I don't see any television."

Mr. Grover sighed again. "Used to watch a lot of television with my wife."

Kevin glanced around at the darkened doorways. Yes—maybe she was sleeping. Maybe she's going to come out. "Where is she now?"

"Dead. Three months ago."

"Oh." Kevin felt the emptiness of the house suddenly grow chilly. I'm sorry.

Mr. Grover stared into the fire. "Now . . . I'm free. After thirty-five years, I'm free."

"For what?"

The older man's voice was huskier than ever, barely audible. "For kids. Kids like you. Now I can bring them home." He ran his hand over the back of his neck as if to ease a stiffening. "I hate hotel rooms."

"I know," Kevin said. "So do I."

Mr. Grover said nothing. The fire crackled in the silence.

Kevin rose from the couch and stood in front of Mr. Grover. "I'm a kid. I'm here."

The man reached out a long arm and patted his thigh. "That's all. I just want you here."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Kevin was flustered and tried to hide it. That's all? The man didn't want to have sex with him? Not even see his body? Was there something wrong with it? Where was all the power he had felt? It didn't seem to have any effect on Mr. Grover. He thought of running out of the apartment, leaving the old man to sit there with the memories of his wife . . . and all those other hustlers he had picked up. Let him wish he were back at the Hotel Savoy again. But did all those hustlers have better bodies than he did? Could they turn him on, and he couldn't?

Slowly, his eyes on Mr. Grover, Kevin unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall to the floor. He felt the warmth of the fire on his back and he shifted his stance a little to let Mr. Grover see the firelight play on the shapes of his torso. Mr. Grover was looking at him, yes, but his eyes had a distant look as if his body was a long way away. He leaned down, unlaced his sneakers and as he slipped out of them, peeled off his socks as well. The heavy rug in front of the fire place felt good on his feet. He straightened up. Mr. Grover was going to see soon enough what a good deal he had found on Riverfront Road.

He unbuckled his belt and let his pants fall to the floor. His penis was flaccid between his legs, but he felt a sweet release. The warmth of the fire now covered his body. Mr. Grover was watching him, and his eyes were now a little less distant. Yet, in the strangeness of the apartment, Kevin felt at home with himself. He lured Mr. Grover's eyes, testing his power. As the man's eyes grew more intent, he felt a flow of reassurance. He stepped closer, but Mr. Grover made no move. Still, he knew he was admired.

He swung himself onto the couch, pressing his back against Mr. Grover's shoulder and stretching his legs out on the soft upholstery. Keeping his eyes on the fire, Kevin said, "Tell me a story."

He felt the shoulder move. Glancing around, he saw that Mr. Grover was smiling. His arm moved around Kevin's shoulder and the strong hand rested on Kevin's chest. Kevin put his own hand on top of it, feeling the sculpture of the bones and sinews, the parchment of the skin.

Mr. Grover cleared his throat. "What kind of a story do you want to hear?"

Kevin shrugged. "Anything. Like about when you were a kid."

"That was a long time ago."

"But you remember, don't you?"

"Oh, yes." He took a sip from his beer can. "When you get thrown out of your home in Fort Bridger, Wyoming, and go on the bum at thirteen, it sort of sticks in the memory."

Kevin gulped. "Is that what happened to you?"

"Yup."

"I thought I had it bad. ..."

Mr. Grover stretched his lanky body against the back of the couch. "Oh, it wasn't so bad, come to think about it. I had Ole Ben, and the big rock candy mountain was just over the next range."

Kevin grew intently curious. "Tell me what you're talking about." A pause. "Who was Ole Ben?"

"He was my man, and I was his jockey."

"What does that mean?"

"We ... el ... 11, a lot of things, not all of which is generally known, and sure wasn't known in Baptist circles in the 1920s. But, if a kid's on the bum, he needs a man to take care of him, show him how to scrounge food, show him how to ride the rails, show him how to dodge the bulls, and let him know that somewhere out there is the big rock candy mountain, with all those cigarette trees and soda water fountains."

"Cigarette trees?"

"Oh, yeah, and the hens lay soft-boiled eggs."

Kevin sat up straight. "You're kidding me?"

"No siree. It's all right there on the big rock candy mountain. Only Ole Ben and I could never find it. Traveled all over. Wyoming. Montana. Colorado and Utah. Range after range of mountains. But we never found any rock candy."

Kevin puzzled. "Did he pay you?"

"Who?"

"Ole Ben."

"Pay me?"

"Yeah, to hang around with him."

The man threw back his head and guffawed. "Ole Ben didn't have a pot to piss in, let alone pay me anything!"

"But you stayed with him."

"Sure, I needed him." His voice grew softer. "Just like he needed me."

"Did you . . . well ..."

Kevin floundered. "Sleep with him? 'Course. I was his jockey. Besides, when you're up in a pass in the Tetons, you better have something to keep you warm or you'll freeze to death. What the hell, a boy's better than

a burro, and I guess I must have been a pretty passable looking boy. Least Ole Ben thought so, and that was all that mattered to me.” Kevin looked over his shoulder at Mr. Grover’s face, gnarled and lined in the shadows of the firelight. Yet, as he kept looking at it, smoothing out the planes and textures in his imagination, a boy’s face not very different from his own seemed to emerge. He felt stretched across time, and ran a hand over his own face to make sure it was as smooth as he had seen it in the mirror hours before. Still, the bony structure beneath his touch—forehead, cheekbones, jaw—seemed the image of what he saw beneath the old man’s face in the firelight. There was a boy inside that man.

The husky voice went on. “We used to hunker down under old blankets, newspapers, tarpaper, whatever we could find. I’d unbuckle my belt and some of the buttons on my fly, just so he could get in, and, snuggling against him, I’d feel that homy hand of his . . .

Kevin felt the man’s hand move down from his shoulder and close around his penis.

. . . go right down to my cock. I sort of liked it there. It was easier to go to sleep, him holding me.”

Kevin got a hard-on.

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It had happened so long ago. And yet it had happened right then. Walking back to Burkett Street from Mr. Grover’s, Kevin mused on the kind of strange rightness of it all. Mr. Grover had been Ole Ben’s jockey. Now, for an evening, he had been Mr. Grover’s jockey. But had it all happened back then? Once he thought about it, he realized that it must have. But it was hard to get over the conviction that the whole thing about men sleeping with men had been invented by a couple of kids on Riverfront Road a year or so ago.

Still, a couple of bums out West with no women to turn to. Who cared? That was one thing. But a man like Sam? That was another thing. A lot of people must care about Sam. Including women. Women he could have if he wanted to. Had there always been people like Sam? But if there had, who ever heard of them? He bet for sure that Mr. Graham wouldn’t tell him! He wondered if Mr. Graham had ever heard of the big rock candy mountain, and did he know of the kind of folks who dreamed about it?

Kevin thought about the sailing ship, the *Mirabelle*, down at the docks off Riverfront Road. Where had it sailed to? Bali? Zanzibar? Or an island in the South Seas with the big rock candy mountain? Who sailed on the ship? What would have happened to him on a voyage? Would he have been the captain’s jockey?

Kevin could imagine the captain, looking like Mr. Grover, standing at the wheel of the *Mirabelle*’s aft deck, his cap’s visor tilted down over his eyebrows, squinting at the billowing sails. And where would he be? Somewhere below decks, polishing the brass in the captain’s cabin, waiting. . . .

Was it like that, then? Was Mr. Graham just kidding when he talked about all those people in history being so righteous and square and straight? Mr. Grover had been there. He knew. Somehow, just the fact that he knew and he was old made Kevin feel a lot better. Somebody like him had been there. Somebody like him was part of the history that Mr. Graham was talking about, even though Mr. Graham never said so. The streets he walked on his way home had been walked by others like him, years and years before. It was just that they had walked silently, like the figures he had seen in Jefferson Square.

He thought about Riverfront Road differently, too. Now the masts of the *Mirabelle* were a towering presence. He belonged. All those silent figures told him he belonged. Millie. Jake. Miss Gotter. Even Mr. Graham. They never said so. Maybe they didn’t even know. But on Riverfront Road, he walked home turf. He stood in the archways of warehouses and waited for his kin, those stretches he could make back into his own history. Before Mr. Grover—even with Sam—he had never believed he had any. But now . . .

He peddled his ass. Yes. He peddled his cock and he peddled his mouth. He bartered his flesh for a new kind of knowledge. He bedded down with those silent figures and found them not so silent. Their voices stirred the postorgasmic hush. He plundered the memories of older men.

From a thick-set man with a slow deep drawl, he learned about wartime London. The wail of the sirens. The smell of rubble and death. The desperate chance meetings in blackouts or air raid shelters.



The whine and thud of bombs nearby. “You figured, then,” the man had said, “that if you were going to go, it was best to take a little warmth with you. Different now. We think we’ve got time.” He reached over and put an affectionate hand on Kevin’s bare shoulder. “Well, you’ve got time, young ’un. It’s just with me, everytime I feel a little chest pain, it’s like I was back in London again.”

He learned about New York City in the 1930s from a man who picked him up in a Cadillac—about the meat rack on Central Park West and how kids would go home with johns for a hamburger and a place to sleep. He learned about a bearded “Rasputin” who held sway in a cafeteria on Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village and wrote a column on gay life for *The Villager*. Kevin was in awe. “In the 1930s?” He tried to stretch his mind back, but the figures he

imagined were ghostly. Still, he was sure they were there.

He got picked up by a traveling evangelist from the back hills of Georgia who led him in prayer before they undressed. Later, after giving Kevin “a true gift of the Spirit,” he regaled him with tall tales of comholing in the back woods. “Nothin’ wrong with that. It’s just sodomy that’s a sin, ’cause it says so in the Bible.”

He learned about lumberjacking in Alaska and the use of a rainbarrel. He found out about a tatoo parlor on State Street in Chicago, and Walt’s Downtowner in Peoria. He wondered at the ubiquity of YMCAs.

As he learned, his vision of the city changed. He moved—invisible among the invisibles—identities masked, but there . . . and friendly. Lenny. Mr. Grover. The kid in Jefferson Square. Those other passers in the night, so clandestinely revealed. How many others? He used his eyes as he had not used them before, his gaze direct as Lenny’s had been direct, searching face after face for signals of recognition. Yet if he found a responding pair of eyes on the street or in the corridor of the school, he would hastily shift his vision. It was enough just to know that they were there.

Yet some of those responding gazes could be alarmingly insistent. Old Mr. Rocco at the candy store started giving him free candy bars and kept inviting him into the stock room until Kevin finally stopped going to the store at all, taking his trade three blocks further down on Houghton. One of the guards at the school, licking his lips, invited Kevin out for a Coke. But what most fascinated him, and at the same time made him afraid, was the streets. He caught one man’s eye on Houghton Street near the cemetery. He wore a suit, carried a brief case, and wasn’t bad looking. If the man had stopped a car on Riverfront Road, he’d have gotten in. But on Houghton Street? Kevin averted his eye and headed for home. But the man kept following him, even turning the corner onto Burkett Street right behind him. Kevin panicked. He couldn’t let the man know where he lived, have him pounding on the door in the middle of the night. He started running, dashed right by his own house, and hid in an alley next to Gino’s house, his heart pounding with fear. Peering over a garbage can, he saw the man pass by, waited a while longer and then, coming out and seeing the street was clear, headed back to his house. But, thinking about it later, he wondered why he hadn’t just stopped in his tracks, turned to the man, and said “Where do you want to take me?” He might have paid twenty and known all about New York City. But then again, Millie or Jake might have seen him pick the man up. He couldn’t handle that.

# TWELVE

It was late on a Saturday afternoon in mid-April when Kevin walked down Houghton Street to Lenny's. He wanted to show him the new shoes Mr. Grover had just bought him. They were brown leather; the first leather shoes he had ever had. Even though they hurt his feet a little, still he knew he'd get used to them and they'd last if he took care of them. He didn't want to make Lenny jealous, exactly, but he did want to show him that Mr. Grover was his friend—friend enough to buy him a pair of shoes.

He knew he didn't have much time. Millie would be expecting him home by six for supper. But he didn't want to go home any earlier, with all the yapping that went on around the house. He wanted to see Lenny. He thought maybe he'd find him sitting on the stoop. But when he got to the house, the stoop was deserted. Kevin looked around. Lenny was nowhere in sight.

He walked up the stoop and through the front door. There were four mailboxes and buzzers. The inner door ahead of him was locked. Kevin looked at the four buzzers. He didn't have any idea what Lenny's last name was. He thought of ringing all four buzzers in turn, but what would he say? Did they know a kid named Lenny who wore an earring? Yeah, and what would that prove about Kevin? He recoiled from the buzzers, walked out the front door, sat down on the bottom step of the stoop and waited. Maybe Lenny had been held up at school. Maybe he'd be here, soon.

He watched the traffic and the passers-by, the flow of the city before him, and he felt himself curiously isolated. He knew that as far as the women were concerned, as they trudged by dragging their shopping carts, he was just a kid like any other, sitting on a stoop and probably up to no good . . . plotting to snatch a woman's purse, roll a drunk, or shop-lift a grocery store. They wouldn't know the much more scandalous things he was involved with. He hoarded his secrets like agates, deep in the pockets of his consciousness, and stared at those passing women with a blank expression.

A couple of kids sauntered up the sidewalk. Young. Maybe twelve or thirteen. As they came to the stoop, both of them glanced at Kevin quizzically. "You waitin' for Lenny?" one of them said.

Kevin was wary. "Maybe."

The exchanged a look that made Kevin very uneasy indeed. "Hard up, huh?" the taller one said. "He'll take care 'o yuh."

Kevin's voice was dead-even. "I come for his chem notes."

The exchange of looks again. "Well, he's probably up there now. Why don't you ring the buzzer?"

"Which buzzer do I ring?"

"Try Jenkins." the taller one said. And the shorter one added. "Just hope his Ma ain't home. She's real antsy these days 'bout her little Lenny."

"Yeah?"

The shorter one broke into a big grin. "Yeah. Ever since she caught him at it . . ." And he pointed to the taller one. ". . . with him!" -

The taller one raised his fist. "Aw, shut up! I'll belt yuh, yuh hear?"

"It's true!" And the shorter one scampered down the sidewalk with the taller one in chase.

Kevin sat there, the fear churning inside him. As the fear subsided, he felt a vague excitement of desire. The presence of Lenny, somewhere in that house behind him—the earring, the hands, the pocked face, the sheathed body, and those attentive eyes—exerted a magnetic pull.

Pushing himself up off the step, Kevin climbed the stoop again and pressed the button under "Jenkins." He stood in the hallway, his pulse pounding, and counted the beats of time. The answering buzz at the door made him jump and he hastened to push the door open.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor landing and there, in an open door, stood Lenny.

"Hey, Kevin!" His voice had a crackle to it. "C'mon in."

“Hi, Lenny.” Kevin walked through the doorway cautiously. Lenny put an arm around his shoulder. “We’ve lucked out. The old lady’s gone to see her crazy cousin down at the shore. She won’t be back for hours.”

Kevin glanced at Lenny. He felt that churning fear again. “I just came over to talk.”

Lenny shrugged and grinned. “Okay. We’ll talk.” He led Kevin into the living room. A small room made smaller by a lot of heavy furniture with lace things all over it. On one wall, in a fancy gilt frame was a picture of Jesus, his eyes closed, a crown of thorns on his head. But as Kevin moved through the room, he saw Jesus’s eyes open. He recoiled. Lenny noticed and smiled. “You’d think the bastard would have the sense to keep his eyes shut, wouldn’t you? But, no. My mother’s a religious nut. She likes it. . . Him, watchin’. C’mon into my room. Nobody’s watching in there, ’cept Mick Jagger. And he don’t care about nothin’!”

Lenny led Kevin into an even smaller room with just enough space for a cot, a chest of drawers, a table with school-books strewn on it, and a poster of Mick Jagger’s pelvis with head attached. The atmosphere in the room was close, and the faint smell of body odor made Kevin feel as sexy as he had felt with Sam.

Lenny shut the door and sprawled on the bed, leaving room for Kevin at one end. A smile flickered across his lips. “Hey, where’d you get those shoes? Your boyfriend give ’em to you?”

Kevin shook his head. “No. Just a friend. Mr. Grover. He’s old, but he’s nice and he knows a lot.”

“But what about your boyfriend? I thought you really had something goin’ with him.”

“I did ... I guess. I’ve tried to phone him, but he’s never in. I miss him.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

Kevin sat down on the bed, careful not to touch Lenny’s leg beside him. He was intensely aware of Lenny’s body, so clear in outline beneath the clothing. “I dunno.”

Lenny shifted his body until his leg touched Kevin’s hip. His eyes were keen. “What does he look like, this boyfriend of yours?” “Taller than I am. Slim, but not as skinny as I am. Dark hair. Straight. And big dark eyes that sort of stroke you when he looks at you. His body, the muscles they stand out, yuh know, like a man. I guess he’s in his early thirties. Not much hair, ’cept below the waist. He’s got some moles down on the small of his back, and a scar on his belly that doesn’t show much. He says it was from a hernia operation. And he’s got the flattest belly-button I ever saw.”

Lenny’s hand slid down to his own crotch. “Man, you’re turning me on! Has he got a big dick?”

“Big enough. ’Specially when it gets excited.”

“You suck it?”

Kevin blinked, then nodded. “First time I ever did that. But he was doin’ it to me . . . and . . . and I wanted to do it back.” He hesitated. “It felt sort of funny at first, me doing it to him. But then I felt good because he was really getting off on it, and I wanted that.” Lenny slowly unzipped his fly and took out his stiffened penis. Kevin tried not to notice the naked flesh so close to him but inside his pants his own flesh was growing almost as erect.

As Lenny fondled himself, he asked. “Does he fuck you?”

“Uh-huh.” Kevin’s excitement grew. “The first time, I thought he was gonna go right through me. It was that deep.”

“Ye..ea...ah. Just spread out, and push out, and let everything in.” Lenny gripped his penis and it turned a darker rose. “Just thinkin’ about it . . .”

“And then, one time ...”

“Yeah?”

But Kevin couldn’t get the words out.

Lenny looked at him with gleaming eyes for a moment then he broke into a big grin. “No . . . kidding!”

Kevin flushed.

“You fucked him!”

“Uh-huh. I never came like that in my whole life.”

Lenny shook his head in admiration. “Man . . . oh, man, you’re a fast learner! I took months to get that far. But, then again, I was only twelve. I didn’t know much.”

“I didn’t know much neither . . . couple o’ weeks ago . . . before I met Sam. I dunno. He just brought me along and it was like I’d been there all the time. And now? Jesus, I guess I’m gay.”

Lenny gave him a languorous look as he lay there, propped up against the wall, stroking his own penis. “So what’s so bad about that?”

“Nothin’, I guess. ’Cept everything.”

“Relax.” Lenny kept looking at him. “Hey, how ’bout you takin’ me over there sometime and we’ll have a threesome?”

Kevin was cautious. “Maybe.”

“You’ve never lived till you’ve been middle-man in a threesome.” Lenny’s look grew downright lewd as he stretched himself with the easy deliberation of a cat. “All that pumping in and pumping out ...” His hand started to move up and down the shaft of his penis.

Kevin’s mouth was dry and he was beginning to feel a little lightheaded in the closeness of the room. Then, noncommittal, he said, “I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, you do that.” Lenny’s voice was soft. “We could really make out, yuh know?”

Kevin’s hand slid to his crotch. His erection ached in the tightness of his pants. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Go ahead. Take it out. What are you waiting for? Let’s see what you got ...”

Kevin’s hands moved, trancelike, to unbuckle his belt, undo his fly, and let his penis come free. It stood engorged, and pulsed when he touched it. This was his possession, the possession he had given Sam. Now it responded in this strange room, with a stranger’s eyes watching it.

Lenny’s voice, hypnotic, now. “He..ey, how ’bout that . . . just waiting to be touched . . . just waiting ... for some lovin’...” And his hand glided over until his fingers played gently over its skin. Kevin shivered. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He thought about Sam’s fingers. He thought about Sam’s mouth, as waves of excitement surged through him.

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It was nearly seven o’clock when Kevin finally got his clothes back on at Lenny’s. He felt drained and comforted. But when he saw the time, he also felt guilt. “I’m late.” he said. “Can I use your phone?”

“Sure.” said Lenny, and patted Kevin’s ass with an easy possessiveness.

Kevin dialed his home number, but Millie’s voice at the other end of the line was an almost inaudible blur. Kevin shrugged as he hung up the phone. There wasn’t much left on Burkett Street. He wanted to stay with Lenny all night, but then again, his mother was coming back from the shore. He figured he better head back to whatever was home.

He walked home slowly, thinking about Lenny and what had happened. This time, it hadn’t been for money. He had done it because he wanted to do it, and he felt good about it. It was as if he had entered a secret brotherhood with a guide his own age, and he knew he could rely on that guide when he needed him.

But there was one strange thing about sex with Lenny. Even though Lenny by touch and look could rouse him, he could not rouse him all that much. Having sex with Lenny was like having sex with himself. The same spare body, stringy muscles and expanses of hairless skin. Even their cocks looked alike. When he kissed Lenny, he felt as if he kissed a mirror.

With Sam he had felt the excitement and arousal of giving himself to another person, a different person. Having sex with Lenny, good as it was, made him ache for Sam.

Again he stopped at a phone booth on Houghton Street. Again he called the number. Again there was no answer. Maybe he had left town. Maybe something had happened to him—being sick—being picked up

by the cops—being beaten up in the park. The images slithered through his consciousness like snakes. Where was Sam?

“I called you, Ma! I called you just about a half hour ago.”

Millie, red-eyed, glared at Kevin sitting at the kitchen table. “Yuh didn’t do no such thing!” She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “An’ here I ’am, waitin’ ’round, not knowin’ where you are. Thinkin’ you’re drowned, or hit by a bus or somethin’.”

“I called you, Ma. But you weren’t listening.”

Millie’s voice rose to a high whine. “Don’t tell me nothin’ ’bout my listening! I know when I’m listenin’ and when I’m not listenin’! And I wasn’t listenin’, because you weren’t talkin’, yuh hear?” She took a sip of her drink. “Nothin’: Nothin’ I heard from you since yesterday morning. I swear, I dunno what’s happenin’ to you two kids. Dennis, he’s out somewhere. I dunno where. Haven’t seen him all day. An’ you . . . you go for days on end!” The tears started to gather in her reddened eyes. “An’ here I thought it was gonna be so good, all of us together after all that time! I used to dream about it in the hospital, and it was helpin’ me get well, just the thought I’d have my little boys with me when I got out. An’ it’s just not workin’ out!”

Kevin’s temper blazed. “All right! Why don’t you call Miss Gotter and tell her . . . tell her, it’s just not workin’ out?”

Millie froze. “No. No. I can’t do that. I’m your natural mother. It’s got to be right, ’cause I’m your natural mother. You’re my blood!” And the tears flooded.

Slumped in a chair on the other side of the kitchen table, Millie’s bony body shook as the sobs came. “I kept thinkin’ about it, all the time I was in the hospital.” Her eyes looked up at Kevin, barely seeing. “You know what that feels like . . . hoping?”

Kevin thought of Sam. He thought of the Mirabelle and the big rock-candy mountain. As his crying came, he swung around the table and hugged Millie, sank his head into her lap.

Her voice was a whip-crack. “Where did you get them shoes?” Kevin reared up, and stood away from the wreckage of a woman in front of him, the crying still shaking him. “What do you care?” “Care? You’re finding somebody else to care for you? Yeah, I care!” She took another sip of her drink. “I’m askin’ you, where did you get those shoes?”

“I was with Johnny.”

“Who’s Johnny?”

“A friend of mine . . . a friend of mine from school.”

“Yeah? Did Johnny buy ’em for you?”

Kevin floundered for a moment. “No. But . . . but his folks have money. And . . . they were buying him some shoes, and they bought me this pair, too.”

“So, we ain’t good enough for yuh, huh? So, you’re beggin’ other folks to buy you shoes?”

“I didn’t beg for nothin’! They gave ’em to me, yuh understand? An’ if you didn’t spend all the money on liquor, I wouldn’t even have let ’em buy ’em for me!”

— III —

Millie let out a caterwaul, and pitched her glass at him. She missed, and the glass splintered all over the sink. Kevin beat a retreat and ran up the stairs to his room. He took off his shoes, flopped on his bed and stared through his tears at the pattern of roofs and spires out his window. All he wanted to do was get back to Sam.

Was this it? Was this what he was? Was this what he’d always be? And never get married and never have children? Was it going to be one guy, and then another guy, and then another for the rest of his life? But maybe he could stick with Sam for a long time. That was what he wanted. He lay on his cot and prowled around the possibilities in his mind. He could just pack his bag and leave in the dead of night. That was one possibility. But what would Sam say if he showed up on his doorstep, bag and baggage?

And what would he do about school? Could he transfer without Millie knowing about it? Suddenly he felt entangled in that web of cords that bound him to Millie, his school, Miss Gotter, the whole adult world. He backtracked.

Suppose he went at it gradually, got her used to his being with “Johnny” a lot, and then slowly faded out altogether? Yeah, but maybe she’d want to meet “Johnny,” and then what would he do? He knew she should never meet Sam. She’d know then, about him and Sam, and she’d raise all kinds of hell, maybe even have him sent away to training school.

He had a crazy thought that maybe he could stir up a big fight with Millie and do a lot of wild things so that Millie, herself, would go to Miss Gotter and tell her she couldn’t handle the kid. And then Kevin could say, place me with Sam. Huh? What would Miss Gotter say? And what would Sam say, getting mixed up with the Welfare Department over some fifteen-year-old boy?

Why was it all so damn complicated? Because at the core of it was something so simple! He just wanted to be with Sam! Every survival impulse he had clung to that one want, rejected everything around him on Burkett Street. Why couldn’t people understand?

He was running the possibilities around in his head for the third time when Dennis came up the stairs, his face glowering under that lock of hair. He stood in the middle of the room, shaking his head. “Ma’s sure a bitch tonight!”

“I know.”

“She lit into you, too?”

“Yeah.”

Dennis walked over toward Kevin’s cot. “You’re lucky. You can get away.”

“Sometimes.”

Dennis picked up one of Kevin’s new shoes from the foot of Kevin’s cot. He examined it, feeling the leather. “Yeah, real lucky. And your john, he’s got money, ain’t he?” And he looked at Kevin intently.

Kevin felt that vague fear again. “Put that shoe down, Dennis.”

# THIRTEEN

Bruce sat across the restaurant table from Amory and tried not to act like a mother hen. But inside he fretted. Amory wasn't eating right. In fact he was hardly eating anything at all. He just sat there, toying with a chicken cutlet between sips of scotch and water.

Perhaps the beating in the park was haunting him. Perhaps he had had a fight with a new lover. Whatever it was, Amory looked fragile and Bruce was worried about him. Amory didn't have that much weight to lose before he'd blow away in a high wind.

At the risk of sounding ridiculous, Bruce said, "At least eat your creamed spinach."

Amory was cool and dignified, despite his drooping eyelids. "Creamed spinach does not go well with scotch."

"It's good for you."

"Oh, come, Bruce. If you want a child, get yourself a child." Bruce's voice was frosty. "I have no intention of becoming—how do we call it—'a breeder'. Eat your damn spinach."

Amory broke into a grin. "Yes, Daddy." And he ate some spinach, washing it down with the scotch.

Bruce was not amused. He expected some sly remark about Riverfront Road. But none came. Amory's eyelids just drooped again. Bruce felt more like a mother hen than ever.

Outside the restaurant, Amory put a hand on Bruce's shoulder to steady himself. "I guess I better take a cab home."

"Don't worry. I'll drive you."

"It's out of your way."<sup>v</sup>

"No trouble. C'mon."

In the close darkness of the car, Amory, voice slurred, said, "You need somebody. You know that? Not me, but somebody."

"What draws you to that conclusion?"

"I've been watching you. That's what. Ex-lover has been watching you. ..."

"And what has ex-lover discovered?"

Amory grew delphic. "That being cool isn't all that cool."

Bruce snorted. "Being hot isn't all that hot, either."

"Oh-ho, but I know you. I've been to bed with you, remember? You're hot. You're very hot. You are capable of activities ... I did not believe . . . were possible. Oh, yes." A small burp. "Passions profound and wonders unceasing." With a heavy sigh, Amory collapsed, his head on Bruce's shoulder.

After depositing Amory at his apartment, Bruce headed home. He told himself crisply that he had had quite enough of Amory's maudlin nostalgia, but in the privacy of his car, the admonition didn't work very well. In past times, he and Amory had had some truly magnificent debauches, and he got an erection just thinking about them.

But as he thought about it, he knew that the very abandon of their love-making was somehow enhanced and given special intensity by the fact that it took place in the family apartment, set about with heirlooms and made his own only by his mother's death. As he and Amory would entwine on the loveseat, he could remember his stiff-backed aunts sitting on the same seat. As they romped all over the living room, his ancestors stared at them from the walls. The two of them brought boisterous life to the big four-poster bed in which his grandfather had died. Bruce somehow rejoiced in this sacrilege against the family's lares and penates. He tried to free himself with an obscene defiance of the family code, and for a while he felt he had almost succeeded. Only when Amory left did the past seem to draw him back into its polished mahogany darkness.

With the desperation of a prisoner, he thought of selling every last heirloom, painting the whole place white, and purchasing only astringent modern furniture. But he could not bring himself to do it. Even that night, after dropping Amory off, he sat in his car, outside

the house and hated the lurking silence he was about to enter.

Once, just once, since Amory had left, he had felt the silent oppression dissipated the evening he had spent with that young hustler, Kevin. There had been others, many others, he had hauled back from Riverfront Road for ceremonies of mutual plunder, and there had been some glowing moments in the course of those rituals. But there was a quality in Kevin that he had found in no one else. A solemn steadiness of the eyes. And at the same time a flirtatious playfulness signaled by a bashful grin.

Why had he left so soon? Why hadn't Bruce pressed him to come back? He had, he told himself, but perhaps he had missed some leverage, some magic word that would have brought him back.

Where was he now? Riverfront Road? No, he had said he was never going back there again. But that statement could have been adolescent hyperbole or part of an aphrodisiac illusion. Perhaps he was there now, waiting to tell some other John the same story. Or perhaps he was just there because he needed the money.

Bruce checked his wallet and found it filled. He turned the key in the ignition, started the car again, and headed through the night streets to Riverfront Road.

After several tours up and down Riverfront Road, Bruce concluded that Kevin was not plying his trade that evening. Perhaps what the boy had said was true. Maybe he was finished with hustling. But then how would he ever find him? Bruce felt a sudden flood of loneliness. Kevin was getting to be a legend in his mind, an impossibly beautiful spirit-of-the-city, as unattainable as the forest-being in Green Mansions. He knew he was nurturing delusions, that the reality was probably as tarnished as any other, but he cherished it anyway.

But there was tonight, and the bleak silence. He swung the car back on Riverfront Road and sought the waning pleasures of young cock and ass.

He found it.

The youth wore tight white pants, reassuringly bulged, and a red and white striped shirt. His sandy hair was close-cropped and curly. He had a large nose, hooded eyes, and tight lips. He said his name was Jerry and he came for fifteen and it'd be worth it. Bruce was not about to quibble. The body looked as if it was still warm.

It wasn't the first time Bruce had dragged home rough trade, but Jerry seemed rougher than most. He walked into the apartment with a Cagney-like strut and surveyed the furnishings like an auctioneer. "Nice layout yuh got here."

"Thank you."

He turned and looked at Bruce directly, his hand on the bulge in his crotch. "I ain't got much time. Whatcha wanna do?"

Bruce shrugged. "Would you like a beer? A soda?"

"A soda's okay."

Bruce walked into the kitchen, took fifteen dollars out of his wallet and deposited the wallet behind the flour. Then he opened the icebox and took out a Coke for Jerry, and a beer for himself. This was no occasion for brandy.

Coming back into the living room, Bruce found Jerry examining a fist-sized glass paperweight from one of the side tables. As he handed the soda to Jerry, the boy held the paperweight up to the light. "How did the flower get inside all that glass?"

"The flower is made of colored glass."

"You're kidding ..."

Bruce drew close to him as he turned the glass in the light. The youngster exuded an animal vitality



that Bruce found sexually exciting, along with a faint odor of sweat and some cheap after-shave lotion.

“Yeah ...” Jerry said. “I guess you’re right. Yuh know, when I first saw it I thought right then yuh could smash the glass and pick the flower right out.” He weighed the glass in his hand. “Heavy, too. Where’d yuh get it?”

Bruce was noncommittal. “Been around a long time. I don’t remember.” He was not about to give Jerry the slightest hint of value.

Jerry put the glass back on the table and his eyes moved around the room again. “Man, you sure got a lot of crazy stuff here.”

“It sort of accumulates.”

“Guess so. When you get old.”

“If you want to put it that way.”

Jerry gave Bruce a quick glance. “No offense, man.” A half-smile. “Sometimes I feel old. Real old!”

Bruce returned the smile. The kid had a certain charm. But suddenly he was all business again. “I ain’t no faggot, yuh know?”

“Oh?”

“Naw. None of that shit for me. I got a girl. We’re gonna get married. Wanna see her picture?”

“Sure.”

Jerry reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and opened it to show Bruce a smiling, slightly overweight, brown-haired girl with a dimple on her chin.

“Very nice.” said Bruce.

“Lemme tell yuh, she’s great pussy, man, great pussy. That’s why I’m hustlin’, yuh see? So I can have some of that great pussy every . . . motherfuckin’ night!” He stood back from Bruce. “Yuh know how much furniture costs these days?”

“Quite a bit, I imagine.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph ... a fortune! But it’s gonna be worth it. Just for that pussy.” He looked at Bruce with curiosity. “Ever have pussy?”

“A few times.”

“Like ass better, huh?”

“In general.”

Jerry shook his head. “Can’t understand it. Can’t figure you guys out. With pussy, it slides in so easy . . . know what I mean? With ass ... all that grease and then yuh gotta push. Can’t figure it out, how come you guys make it so hard on yourselves.” A pause. His voice lowered. “Hey, yuh wanna blow me? I really get off being blowed.” “Why don’t we go into the bedroom and take off our clothes.” “Oh. Big gig, huh?” His eyes were wary. “Like I said, I’m straight.”

Bruce put an arm around his shoulder. “Just think of all that furniture.”

“A fortune it’s gonna cost me . . . and . . . and I can’t seem to save up to get it. Money keeps comin’ in . . . goin’ out ...” He walked slowly beside Bruce into the bedroom. “. . . an’ I dunno where it goes. Can’t seem to save ...”

“Maybe you don’t want to.”

Jerry bridled. “Sure, I want to! I wanna get married. I wanna have all that pussy.” He started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

Jerry’s face was rough-hewn and not well shaped, but there was nothing wrong with his body. Bruce, lying naked on the bed, let his eyes play over the supple forms of its muscularity. He duly noted that the bulge was not as bulgy in the flesh; it had apparently been supplemented with a crushed handkerchief. But it was still ample enough.

But more. The rough trade image seemed to have been shed with the clothes. When Jerry lay down on the bed beside Bruce, his voice was soft, childlike, almost pleading. “Just blow me, huh? I dig that. Just

blow me. I don't go for any of that other stuff."

Bruce only gave an answering mumble. He made no commitments. He had heard the same statements before and he assumed that this one was as false as the others, a ritual denial. Bruce's suspicions seemed confirmed when Jerry said, "Turn out the light, huh?" Clearly he did not want his eyes to know what his body did. Bruce turned out the light on the bedside table, but a rear-garden light made a glow on the bedroom curtains. Jerry's body was still vaguely visible and, to Bruce, more beautiful than ever. But the body made no move. It just lay there. Even its breathing seemed barely perceptible. Only a dog's bark in the distance broke the silence.

Bruce raised himself on one elbow, reached over and touched Jerry's flank. The flesh was warm, but he could feel a slight muscular quiver. It neither pressed toward the hand, nor moved away from it. The quiver was the only response. Fear? Guilt? Or desire?

Bruce moved his hand downward over the soft hair until he touched the flaccid flesh of the youth's penis, nestled between his legs. He let his hand rest there, with only the slightest pressure. But it was apparently enough. With a barely audible moan, Jerry stirred, his hips pushed forward and his penis began to come to life, swelling under the touch of his hand. Bruce had the usual weary thought; who does this child think he's kidding?

Jerry's legs moved apart, and Bruce's fingers explored the folds and crevices below. When he reached the anus, the muscles tightened and the hips pulled back. Bruce retreated. Time enough. Later. He moved back to the penis, now fully erect, and stroked it. Jerry's breathing grew more audible. Between breaths: "Go ahead. Go down there."

Bruce went down.

And he took his time . . . caressing . . . enticing . . . exploring . . . but being very careful to keep Jerry just below the verge of climax.

Jerry's legs were now spread wide and his hips thrashed as Bruce's fingers and tongue worked the penis and scrotum. The anus, no longer resistant, responded greedily to hand-touch, relaxing for insertion, claspings its muscles around the inquiring finger. The moaning now was high-pitched and keening, a lamentation of desire that almost sobbed in its intensity as Bruce's hand pressed further into the grasping flesh.

Bruce raised his body, carrying Jerry's legs on his shoulders high into the air, and his penis pushed through the yielding anus deep into the encompassing heat of the boy's body. The moaning broke into a cry as Jerry's hips heaved up as if to consume Bruce to his very root. Bruce thrust and thrust again to each answering spasm.

But just as he crested to orgasm, he felt a violent struggle of the body beneath him. "Get off of me, you son of a bitch!" He was toppled over on the bed. "Whatcha think I'm? Some goddamn woman?" Jerry leapt to his feet, his body silhouetted against the glowing curtains.

Bruce could say nothing. In the shock, his orgasm came.

Then he felt the smash of a fist against his head. Another. And another. Everything went blank. -

When he came to consciousness again, the apartment was still dark . . . and empty.

He turned on the light and pushed himself out of bed, his head throbbing, and made a tour of the apartment. As far as he could figure out, all that was missing was the fifteen dollars from his pocket and, from the side table in the living room, the glass paperweight.

But he vowed that he was never going back to Riverfront Road again.

# FOURTEEN

Kevin was getting used to beer. He hadn't liked it much at first, but he found out that, combined with sniffing spray paint, beer created a wonderfully happy and drowsy effect. The influences made it much easier for him to deal with the johns he picked up (he seemed to be swimming around with them under water), but he had to watch himself so that he wouldn't fall out in some john's bed and not come to for hours.

He had an arrangement with one of the bartenders on Riverfront Road who liked to blow him in the basement among the cases and kegs. In payment he got all the six-packs he could carry at the end of an evening's work. He'd sneak them into the house if Millie was passed out, or stash them in Gino's basement.

Then sometimes Amie and Max would come around, and they'd have a party in the graveyard, and everybody would fuck Kenny. Even Kevin. He grew to like it almost as much as he liked drinking beer. But one time Amie tried to fuck him while he was fucking Kenny. He didn't like that. He fell off Kenny and pulled up his pants. Amie's face was hard. "I'll get yuh sometime, kid." Kevin was too stoned to think about what Amie said at the time. All he could remember the next morning was a crawling fear.

Lenny, Kevin's gay friend down on Houghton street, did not approve of Kevin's newfound taste for beer. "Isn't plain old sex good enough for you? Whatcha need that other shit for?" Kevin did not have a ready answer for that one. "Listen, keep on this way and you're gonna be a drunk before you're eighteen and where is that gonna get yuh?"

Kevin stared at the floor in Lenny's bedroom. "Nowhere, I guess."

"An' lose your looks with a pot belly before you're twenty!"

Lenny flicked the flesh of his bare torso. "You're gettin' there."

"Cut it out, will yuh?" Kevin pleaded.

But Lenny wasn't letting up. "You've seen 'em, haven't you, down on Riverfront Road? Over the hill. Standin' there, waitin' and waitin' for some john to pick 'em up. They hang around in bars, too, tryin' to make like they're chicken. Jesus, they really think they're chicken! Seedy types, ready to give a five-dollar hand-job if they can find a cock to play with. Yuh wanna be like that, huh?"

Kevin shook his head. "I'm not gonna be like that."

"Well, you're right on the yellow brick road, and I'd hate to see what's gonna happen to you."

Kevin had been shaken by Lenny. Lenny had been around, and knew things he didn't know. It wasn't like it was coming from a teacher or a parent or somebody older. It was coming from Lenny.

For nearly a week, Kevin didn't touch beer or sniff paint. But early one evening Dennis came in and said that Max and Amie were going to have a party at the graveyard and they had some heavy pills.

Kevin heard himself ask. "Is Kenny coming?"

"Sure, I guess so."

Pills. That wasn't beer. That wasn't paint. Kevin went along. Half way to the graveyard, he had a sudden urge to turn back or walk on to Lenny's house, but then he knew Dennis would think he was scared and he wasn't going to give him that satisfaction. Besides, Kenny would be there.

But Kenny wasn't there. Max and Amie were there, sitting on the vault between the small mausoleum and the headstone with the angel on top. Joe and Rico were hovering around, watching the older youths opening a six-pack of beer. But no Kenny. Again Kevin had the urge to get out, but by that time, he and Dennis had been seen. No way to turn back.

Max and Amie were welcoming. "Hey, c'mon over, fellows." said Max.

Rico chimed in, excited. "They really copped some shit this time!"

Joe: "We're gonna have a party."

Amie popped his can of beer. "An extra-special party."

Kevin and Dennis joined the circle around the vault. "Whatcha got?" Dennis asked.

"Downs and acid," said Max. "The best."

"Outer space ..." said Joe. "Comin' up!"

Amie wiped his mouth after a slug of beer. "It's gonna be Kevin's birthday party. It is your birthday, ain't it?"

Kevin shook his head. "Not for a couple of months yet."

"Well..." said Max. "This is an advance birthday party, just for Kevin."

"How come?"

"Cause you're such a sweet kid." Amie's voice was caressing. "And we all like yuh."

Kevin felt alone. Even Dennis seemed to have moved away from him. And Amie and Max were looking at him in the dimness.

"Have a beer." Max held out a can to Kevin.

Shaking his head, Kevin said, "I'm off that stuff."

"How 'bout that?" said Amie. "A good little boy, too."

Kevin looked around the circle. "What's going on here, anyway?" Joe standing close, put his arm around Kevin's shoulder. "We're gonna have a party." He let his arm fall till his hand rested on Kevin's rump.

"Where's Kenny?" Kevin asked.

Max sighed. "He's tired. Can't blame him. Taking it from everyone."

Kevin was aware that everyone was looking at him.

"Okay. Here's the pills." Amie was businesslike. "Come and get

55

em.

Kevin didn't see what the others got, but Amie gave him two dark pills and one light one. Kevin figured if everyone else was taking something, it was okay for him, and besides, right then, he needed something to steady his nerves.

But fifteen minutes later, Kevin wasn't sure that he had any nerves at all. He was sitting on the ground, his back against the side of the vault, in such an exquisite lassitude that he felt he might melt into the earth. Then the colors started, colors like nothing he had ever seen the times he had sniffed paint. They came glowing out of the darkness: circles, shafts, and sunbursts in purple and blue, orange and green, quivering and swirling in a ghostly dance. They came from the ground, from the trees. They chased around tombstones, and hovered over bushes, their radiance vibrant with spectral life.

Kevin barely heard the sounds of talk around him, was only dimly aware of the presences close to him. He was transported into a realm of color and light, his consciousness filled with somnolent wonder.

He felt hands under his arms raising him to his feet. He stood swaying, following a burst of violet light that slowly faded, while other hands undid his belt buckle. The sound of his fly being unzipped came from miles away as a flash of orange seemed to envelop him. The orange swirled around him, deepening to red, as he felt the cool of the night breeze on his naked hips.

Hands guided him until he was lying face down on the chill flat stone of the vault. Surges of blue washed over the sprawl of his body, serene and still as the stone beneath him.

The brute pressure on his anus sent fires of pain through his body. With a cry he struggled to break out of the lassitude that seemed to chain him to the stone. But hands held him too, his shoulders, his legs, as the pain blazed. All colors blanched to searing white.

With a desperate explosion of energy, Kevin reared up breaking the grip of the hands that held him, yanked up his pants, and plunged into the darkness. -

He was lurching among the headstones when he heard the voices calling him, first from one side, then

another. “Hey, Kevin, whatcha running for?”

“C’mon back, we’re waitin’ for yuh.” Kevin, where yuh gone?”

They were hunting him ... all over the graveyard. He had to get to the gate, the only place to climb over and get out. But he couldn’t find it. All he could see were the colors gone crazy in the gloom. The pounding reds. The gibbering yellows. The insidious greens that seemed to creep along the ground like slime.

He sank down behind a headstone, trying to shield himself against the shuddering color and the predators around him. His body shook with fear of the looming trees above him and the press of a showering sky that would drown him in blood. He filled his lungs with the night air and held it to bursting against the flood.

The face reared above him, a mask of pink and purple, grimacing like a skull. The voice was a crow-caw. “Hey, Kevin!” The slur of Millie’s voice. He reared to his feet, and threw himself against the mask, his hand slamming against the cavern-mouth. Hatred boiled inside him as in the shaft of street light he saw those ferret eyes, now glowing green. Dennis. “You were gonna fuck me, weren’t yuh?”

The mask twisted away. “Yaaah, bitch!”

All the sky went screaming red, fusing itself to Kevin’s rage. He smashed his hand against the mask, exalted as the body fell and lay there, twisted by the headstone, spewing a chant of “Cunt . . . cunt . . . cunt.”

Kevin kicked the body, and staggered off into a forest of light. Suddenly his hands grasped the bars of the gate. With every energy he had left, he climbed the iron fretwork and swung himself down onto the freedom of Houghton Street. His hand clung to the bar while he steadied himself. Then he pushed himself away and started reeling down the street. All he could think of was “Gallatin Place . . . Gallatin Place . . . Gallatin Place. ...”

## FIFTEEN

Bruce sat in his living room in his favorite chair, with the light pitched just right over his shoulder, a snifter of brandy on the side table, and read about the Black Death.

It seemed appropriate to his mood.

He had kept his vow. He had not been back to Riverfront Road in weeks. He had, it was true, cruised Jefferson Square a few times, knowing it was risky, but found no one. He had seen several movies, taken Charlotte to the symphony, gone to dinner with Amory, and had two evenings of bridge at the Merchant's Club. But he slept alone, and he did not enjoy it.

Still, he concluded, he better get used to it. He would be thirty-five in September. Over the hill. A stone's throw from forty and dotage. Yes, he had his figure, his hair, and most of his teeth. But he also had mysterious aches, occasional cramps, and there were some mornings when he was disinclined to get up at all.

There had been a time, of course, when he had had to fight them off, when he had regularly devastated the old Continental Baths on trips to New York, and returned home with an ego-flush that lasted for weeks. He had known even then that the time would pass, but not that it would pass so quickly. The years had gone by so casually, slipping one by one into the void.

The thump was muffled but unmistakable, and it seemed to come from the outer front door. Bruce sat for a moment listening, and then decided to investigate. He walked out into the hallway and opened the front door. The body fell in and slumped at his feet, moaning.

Kevin.

His face was blanched. Sweat stood out on his forehead. His eyes roved unfocused. But then they found Bruce's face. Just the trace of a smile crossed his lips. He mumbled, "I got here." His eyes closed. His body seemed almost lifeless. All Bruce could think of was to get him to safety inside, but clearly Kevin had given up the idea of walking anywhere. Bruce gripped his slim body under the arms, dragged him down the hall and into his apartment.

Kevin was limp and unprotesting as Bruce got him onto the bed. But once there, that faint smile crossed his lips again. Turning on his side, he buried his head in the pillow, and sighed. He had quite obviously decided to stay where he was.

Bruce was not naive. He knew dope when he saw it. But after an initial flash of fear, he concluded that if Kevin had managed to walk to Gallatin Place from God-knows-where, the effects of the dope would begin to wear off sometime soon. Looking at Kevin's languishing body, he suspected just a touch of dramatization. He didn't mind. Such dramatization was a statement of desire, and he felt an answering desire.

He checked the respiration, which was even. He checked the pulse, which was strong. The skin was a little clammy and pallid. But Kevin would survive. As he got him undressed, he wondered what storm or crisis had led him to come—barely able to walk—to Gallatin place. Why here? There must be dozens of other Johns he knew. And presumably he had some kind of a home. Were the cops looking for him? Would they be pounding on his door, ready to book him for harboring a teenaged fugitive?

Covering Kevin's body with a blanket, he began to suspect himself of dramatization. Could Kevin be here, in some minor desperation, simply because he wanted to be here? The serenity of his face in the night light seemed to say so.

Sitting on the bed beside Kevin, Bruce had a premonition that the fantasy he had cherished was mutual, that something had happened that evening they had met which would have to work itself out, and he wasn't sure it was going to be easy.

Wasn't that the whole point about hustlers? For cash on the barrelhead, you could get rid of them. Pay them for coming, yes, but pay them as well for going without any residue of responsibility. The contract was so simple. But the fact of the boy in his bed was not simple. He felt he needed a brandy.

But as he started to rise from the bed, Kevin's eyes opened wide and his hand grasped Bruce's forearm. "Where yuh goin'?"

"Into the living room for a moment."

The hand tightened. "Don't leave me, Sam."

"I'll be right back."

"Stay with me, Sam." A big sigh. "I got here."

"I know. I'll be here."

Bruce gently removed Kevin's hand, went into the living room and came back with a stiff slug of brandy. What was this 'Sam' thing, anyway. Was Kevin so zonked, he didn't know where he was? Then he remembered he had used the name as an evening's anonymity when he had first met Kevin.

"What's that you got?" Kevin's voice was slurred.

"Brandy."

Kevin raised himself on one elbow. "Gimme some."

"Dangerous. You're on downs, aren't you?"

"Speed, I figure. Acid, too. Gotta knock myself out. The colors. They're makin' me crazy."

"Colors?"

"From the acid." His eyes moved fretfully. "The whole fuckin' room's green!" -

Bruce looked around at the sedate beiges and umbers. "Green?"

"Yeah . . . green."

Bruce relented, held out the glass to Kevin. "A sip. Just a sip." Kevin drank the brandy in a gulp, gasped, coughed, and spilled some on the bed. Bruce retrieved the snifter glass, while Kevin gasped somemore. "That's . . . powerful . . . stuff."

"You're supposed to sip it."

Kevin's watery eyes glistened in the night light. "I'm sorry I spilled on the bed."

Bruce smiled. "It's okay. You can get drunk on the smell."

Kevin collapsed on the pillow, his hand on Bruce's forearm again. "Man, that's some smell." His eyes were heavy-lidded but seductive. Bruce leaned down and kissed him. His lips were greedy and an arm wrapped around Bruce's neck. "I got here." he whispered. "I didn't think I was gonna make it."

"What happened?"

Kevin turned his head away from Bruce, his eyes even more glistening. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Sounds bad."

"Yeah."

With a sudden lurching, Kevin put his arm around Bruce's neck and pulled him down. "Hold me."

Fully clothed, Bruce kicked off his shoes and stretched out beside him, his arms enfolding him. The odor of brandy was heavy, but Kevin's body was still damp and chill to his touch.

Lying on his back, Kevin stared upward. "It's getting lighter."

"What?"

"The ceiling."

Bruce glanced up, just to reassure himself. "The ceiling is white."

"It's green, with orange spots, but it's getting white."

"That must have been strong acid!"

"It was."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Some guys ..."

Bruce waited.

". . . They wanted to fuck me. That's why they got me stoned."

"Where did this all happen?"

“In a graveyard.”

Bruce was beginning to feel a little chilled himself.

“I got away, but the colors kept chasing me. There was this sick orangey thing that kept following me down the street, and I saw this man who was all purple with yellow things coming out of his face. A car tried to grab me. It had teeth. I tried to hide, but this garbage can turned into a bomb and it was gonna explode. I found Jefferson Square. The statue was pissing into the fountain, except it was pissing blood. I ran. I knew I was near your place. I don’t know how I found it, though. Must have blacked out.” His voice grew distant. He turned and looked Bruce directly in the eye. “You think I’m sorta crazy, huh?”

“No.”

“Then . .

“It’s just ...” Bruce hesitated over the words, and then let them come. “It’s just . . . I’ve been waiting for you.”

“It’s been a month. Maybe more. And it was just one time.”

“I know.”

Kevin stared back at the ceiling. “I guess that’s all it needs sometimes. Just once.”

His eyes closed. Kevin went to sleep.

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Bruce woke the next morning with the sound of breathing close to his ear. His eyes still closed, he moved toward the sound and touched a slim shoulder. He opened his eyes and peered at the face. Kevin. The whole evening before came back to him along with a flooding sense of rightness. Kevin belonged beside him. He belonged beside Kevin. He did not know how he knew this or why it was so, but he was sure.

But who was Kevin? He didn’t know his last name. He didn’t know where he lived or went to school, who his parents were or even whether he had any. Nothing. Nothing except the body next to him and a story of drug-induced terror.

It was Saturday. Bruce was grateful for that. No truancy for Kevin that morning. But what would his parents think of his staying out all night? Or would they know? Or would they care? A hustler’s life might have inured them.

Bruce’s thought turned back on itself. The youth next to him was no hustler in the sense that Jerry, his late and unlamented visitor from Riverfront Road, had been a hustler, corroded and soured by the mysteries of his own identity.

Bruce had known enough to see that this was a gay kid on the search. The problem was not the gayness but the search, and the graveyard trauma seemed only to enhance the intensity of that search, had driven him, reeling, all across town to find some fantasy that must have been as vivid as his own.

The thought was not entirely comforting to Bruce. He liked the privacy of his own fantasies. He was not sure he wanted them shared . . . and suddenly embodied. Fantasies by their very nature should be shielded from disenchantment. But what destructive reality could the slender body next to him thrust into his fantasy world?

Was that what he feared . . . the invasion of his privacy? Was he going to keep himself inside a bell jar for the rest of his life? He could hear what Amory would have to say about that! The impeccable bachelor, encrusted in glass and finally dessicated to a moistureless wisp, translucent as an aging Anglican vicar.

Damn Amory! What business was it of his? What right did he have to go prattling on about how Bruce “needed someone”? Let him go to Greystone Park, trying to find someone and getting himself beaten up in the process. Bruce would run his own life, and if he needed a hustler now and then, he’d take his own risks. A sore jaw and a missing paperweight were only the losses of a hedged bet, affordable and forgotten.



But. . . could he afford what lay beside him? What were the rules of the betting in this new game? What were the odds? And how could he hedge his bet?

His mind recoiled. What was he getting in such a stew for? The boy had barely known where he was the night before and probably would be gone by noon. And here he was, like a Vegas croupier calculating some hypothetical string of circumstances that were highly unlikely to occur. He remembered de Montherlant's dictum: *Les gargons, changeant comme la mer*. How could he possibly assume a day's steadfastness? Better to just enjoy the momentary calm of a summer sea.

The grandfather clock in the living room chimed eight. Kevin stirred. Bruce rose out of bed quietly and went into the bathroom. Often his morning ablutions were a cleansing ritual to wash away the guilts and stains of the night before and restore his daytime respectability. But that morning he felt virginally clean. No debauch had soiled him. No passion had left its residue of sweat. He sensed only a remembered warmth.

When he came back into the bedroom, Kevin was lying in bed, wide awake, his hands crossed behind his head. His eyes were watchful, even, perhaps, a little scared. But the curtained daylight seemed to sheath his head and shoulders in a tawny glow. To Bruce he was more beautiful than ever.

"Where did you go?" Kevin asked.

"Just to the john."

"I thought you'd gone out or something. I thought you'd left me."

"Not likely."

"You don't mind that I crashed here?"

Bruce crossed the room to the bed and sat down beside Kevin. "Glad you did. You needed to crash somewhere."

"I did." He reached out a hand and put it on Bruce's knee. "I don't remember much. Not after the graveyard. Except I had to get here. That was all."

"Why didn't you go home?"

Kevin's face clouded, and he had trouble getting the words out. "My kid brother. He was one of 'em. If I'd gone home, maybe I'd have killed him."

Bruce felt that chill again. What was this kid living through? "It was good you came here."

Kevin looked straight ahead as his hand tightened on Bruce's knee. Tears formed at the corners of his eyes and started slowly coursing down his cheeks. In a convulsive movement, Kevin flung himself onto Bruce's lap, his arms wrapped around his midriff, and the sobs came.

Bruce put his arm over the shaking figure and held Kevin close to him. The gasping sounds finally started to become muffled words, fragments of sentences, harsh as the city-streets. "Kid brother . . . shit . . . a monster . . . eyes like a rat . . . do anything . . . just to get himself on the right side of Max and Amie . . . take me down with 'im . . . peddle my ass . . . just to get dope from 'em . . . what kind of a kid brother is that?"

Kevin reared up and stared at Bruce through red, tear-streaming eyes. "But he's shit . . . nothin' but shit!" The eyes flashed. "If my ass is gonna be peddled, Vm gonna do the peddling!" His head suddenly bowed and his voice lowered. "Yeah, I peddle my ass. Yeah, I'm a hustler. You paid me, you know." He raised his head and the tears started again. "And I took the money! I took it from you! Like . . . like . . . it was everything in the world . . . just being with you . . . and I took money for it!"

He shook his head. "Well. I needed the money. That's what they all say, isn't it? They told me, when I started, like . . . 'I got a sick mother and I need the money.' Huh. I got a sick mother all right, sick on booze, but I don't need the money for her. I need the money for food."

Bruce was startled. "Food?"

"Yeah, food. We eat pretty good the first couple of days after the checks come in—welfare and Jake's pension—but then after while all that's left in the fridge is six-packs of beer and bottles of Seven Crowns.

I used to swipe apples and bananas from the fruit stand up on Houghton, but the guy who owns the place got wise to me. After that, it was McDonald's. And McDonald's takes money. So ... I go down to Riverfront Road and get money."

"Does welfare know about this?"

Kevin snorted. "Welfare? Miss Gotter? Oh, Ma puts on a big show for her! The 'natural mother' bit. She even cleans the house. And then Miss Gotter waddles in and looks around and waddles out and Millie hits the bottle again."

Kevin's voice grew flat. "Someday she's gonna die. She keeps getting thinner and thinner and she's gonna just blow away. Nothin' left . . ."

"What's going to happen to you then?"

Kevin shrugged. "I dunno. I'm not gonna stay with Jake, that's for sure."

"Who's Jake?"

"The guy my mother lives with. He's got a big belly and he used to drive a trolley car when he was young. He's crazy about trolley cars. No way. I guess Miss Gotter will waddle around and find me some new foster parents. But what do I need 'em for? I'll be sixteen. I can get a job."

"You ought to finish school ... at least high school."

With a sigh: "Yeah, I know." Bruce felt himself scrutinized. "I bet you went to college."

Bruce nodded.

"It must be somethin', going to college."

"It's a start."

"Of what?"

"Of one's education."

"You mean ... it goes on and on?"

"I'm getting an education from you right now."

"From me?"

"Sure."

"You're kidding!" He looked down at himself. "All I got's a cock and ass, and I guess you've had plenty of that."

"You've got a head . . . and," Bruce added darkly, "a past." Kevin burst out laughing. But the laughter quickly subsided. "Hey, I gotta take a leak."

"Over there." He pointed to the bathroom door. "There's a new toothbrush in the cabinet over the sink."

"Okay." Kevin swung himself out of bed. His nude body had a coltish grace. Half way to the door, he turned. "Don't go anywhere, hear?"

"I won't." Bruce stretched himself out on the bed as Kevin disappeared into the john. He could feel the warmth of the place where Kevin had been lying.

Bruce listened to the rushing of the water in the bathroom and wondered just what life held in store for him. The noises were intimate and domestic, ordinary as his own bathroom rites. There was simply another human being in the bathroom—no hooded bird of passage that would vanish in the night. The morning reality was indisputable, and the presence in the bathroom all the more alluring . . . and disturbing. Kevin stirred his every desire, but he was just not prepared to run Boy's Town.

He glanced at his own nakedness on the bed. Perhaps he should get dressed, giving Kevin the signal that while he was glad to provide refuge for some young dope fiend in his hour of need, he was not about to provide an alternative to whatever bizarre homelife had been concocted by the city's welfare department.

But inertia kept him on the bed.

Kevin emerged, radiant, from the bathroom, still drying his hair with a towel.

“Did you find the toothbrush?”

“Unhuh,” Kevin said. “But it was new, all wrapped up.”

“That’s the point.”

“Why should I use a new toothbrush? Costs money.”

“Well, what did you use?”

“Yours.”

“Oh.”

“We know the insides of our mouths pretty well. What’s the difference?”

Bruce thought about that for a moment. “Just so my dentist doesn’t know.”

Kevin threw the towel over his shoulder and grinned. “I ain’t tellin’.” He turned to the bureau, a heavy Victorian piece with ornate scrollwork. On top of the bureau were a pair of Bruce’s silver-backed military hairbrushes. Kevin picked up one of them and began to brush his tousled hair. But after a few strokes he paused and examined the silver back of the brush. Then he looked sharply at Bruce: Slowly he read the flowing script of the monogram. “B. Me I. A.” He looked at Bruce again. “What does that stand for?”

Bruce sighed. “Bruce McIntosh Andrews.”

“Your name isn’t Sam?”

“No.”

“You just use that, huh? On Riverfront Road?”

“Yes. The night I met you.”

“Cause I was just a hustler, huh?”

Bruce shrugged.

“Yeah. A quick roll-around for a night.” Another sharp glance at Bruce. “Only it wasn’t, was it?”

“No. More.”

“I know.” He looked back at the silver in his hand, tilted it to catch the sunlight. “Your name is Bruce McIntosh Andrews ...”

“... the third.”

“It doesn’t say ‘the third’ on here.”

“They were my grandfather’s brushes.”

“Your grandfather?”

“That’s right.”

Kevin put the brush back on the bureau almost reverently. “Wow ...” Then he frowned. “Is there going to be a Bruce McIntosh Andrews, the fourth?”

Bruce shook his head. “Not likely. I think I’m the last of the line.” Kevin stood motionless for a moment, still frowning. Then his

frown cleared, and he looked at Bruce straight in the eye. He walked slowly to the bed and lay down beside him.

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It was noon before they managed to get themselves out of bed. Bruce, who customarily prided himself on his endurance, was a trembling shell of himself. But Kevin was blithe. “Gotta soda?”

“Orange juice is better for you.” (What was he doing, his Father Flanagan number?)

“Okay. Orange juice,” said Kevin, standing beside him in the kitchen.

Bruce poured a brimming glass of orange juice and prepared himself a cup of coffee of demonic strength.

They proceeded to the living room to face the day . . . what was left of it. Bruce settled in his favorite chair. Kevin sat on the horsehair loveseat, primly as a maiden aunt, sipping his orange juice, and looking at Bruce from under his brows. Finally he put down his empty glass, rose, and planted himself on Bruce’s

lap. Bruce, who thought his passion had drained forever, was improbably aroused. Something, somehow, had to put a stop to this!

“Kevin?”

“Uh-huh ...”

“Don’t you think that your mother should know that you’re all right?”

Kevin considered that idea for a moment. His face clouded. “It’s happened before. I tell her I’m with Johnny.”

“Who’s Johnny?”

Kevin gave a conspiratorial grin. “Nobody. But she thinks it’s somebody.”

“Well, why don’t you call her up and tell her you’re with Johnny.”

“Okay.” But Kevin made no move, except to slide an arm around Bruce’s neck. He looked at Bruce with a childlike directness. Bruce noticed that his eyes were hazel. He said, “Bruce ...”

“I’m here.”

“Is it all right ...” He hesitated, “. . . I mean I won’t be any trouble or nothin’. ... Is it all right if I stay here this weekend?”

Now Bruce hesitated.

Kevin pressed. His big hazel eyes were luminous. “You don’t have to pay anything . . . and I don’t eat much. It’s just ...”

Bruce thought: dinner at the Merchant’s Club that night. He could send his regrets. He had mentioned to Aunt Charlotte that he might be over to see her on Sunday afternoon. Again, he could phone regrets and see her Monday evening. Amory said he might be dropping by sometime over the weekend. All right, let Amory eat his heart out. And his studies of the Black Death could wait. . . . The desolation would still be there when he got back.

“Well ...” said Bruce, judiciously, “what would you like to do this weekend?”

Kevin broke out in a big smile, wrapped both arms around Bruce and kissed him. “Take me somewhere I’ve never been before.”

# SIXTEEN

They drove through the outskirts of the city and were soon riding through a wooded countryside that was indeed someplace that Kevin had never been before. It was a warm day and the spring green of the trees was deepening.

Kevin was awed by the long stretch of road ahead of them. "Where we going to, New York?"

"Not that far. Just out to a place I know."

"Oh." Kevin moved in his seat until he was closer to Bruce. "I've never been to New York. Some guy told me down on Riverfront Road that they pay hustlers hundreds and hundreds of dollars in New York." -

"I think you were getting your leg pulled."

A touch of disappointment. "I guess so." Then, cautiously, "Did you ever pick up a hustler in New York?"

"A couple of times."

"I'll bet they were all dressed in gold and swung from the ceiling."

"Not quite."

"Same as here, huh?"

"Except they cost a little more, and do a little less."

Kevin felt reassured.

Bruce slowed the car, eased off the road into a deserted parking area set in among the trees, and cut the motor.

Kevin looked around at the woods. "Is this where we're going?"

"We have to hike a bit:"

Kevin's voice was low and tinged with excitement. "Are we going to do it in the forest?"

Bruce laughed. "No, Kevin. We're just going down to the barge canal."

Kevin wasn't quite sure that he was in a mood for a barge canal. "Oh." But then again, as he thought about it, he realized that he had never seen a barge canal. All he had was a vague remembrance of Mr. Graham having mentioned canals in history class.

Bruce locked the car and they headed down a trail through the trees. Dappled sunlight filtered down onto the dry leaves of the forest floor crackling under his feet. Bruce walked ahead of him. He wore an open white shirt and brown pants. As he walked, Kevin watched the movements of his body—the set of the shoulders, the ease of his stride, the curves of his hips, all kept and covered. And he felt a glow of possessive familiarity. He was going to have Bruce for the whole weekend!

The trail turned and, ahead, Kevin saw a small stone house with a slate roof. For a moment he recoiled. It looked like the house in the graveyard. But coming closer, he saw that it stood isolated beside a stone-banked stream of water. Beyond, through the trees, the broad expanse of the river was visible.

No one was in sight, and the very emptiness of the place filled Kevin with the foreboding excitement he had felt when he first saw the Mirabelle. Hundreds of strange people had disappeared in time, leaving only their artifacts behind. Their presences were as ghostly as any in the graveyard, and their works mysterious in their mute power. He wondered about those people, what they looked like, how they lived and spoke and worked. Were any of them gay? That, he knew, he'd never learn from Mr. Graham! But still. . . what ghosts were out there? What strangers were, in fact, not strangers but hidden kindred? Mr. Graham couldn't tell him, because Mr. Graham didn't know.

He followed Bruce to the edge of the canal, across from the stone house. The water flowed between stone walls. At the upper end, close by the stone house, was a big metal gate with massive iron gears beside it. The water lapped over the top of the gate into the lock, sending ripples across the surface

of the water. Downstream was another closed gate, and the level of the water beyond was lower still. The water was clear but tinged brown. Leaning over, he could see the leaf-strewn bottom, and he stepped back from the edge and moved closer to Bruce. The bottom looked deep, and the flow of water, almost invisible, seemed to have a sinister power within the rigid confines of the stone siding. Overhead, the boughs of the trees brooded, their greens contrasting with the gray of the stone and the earth-colors underfoot.

Bruce was talking. There was an incisive tang to his voice. "The way it worked was the barge would be coming downstream, the upper gate would be open, and the barge would slide into the lock. Then the gateman, who stayed in the stone house, would close the upper gate, working those gears over there. Then he'd open the lower gate, real easy, the water level would drop, and the barge would pass through the lower gate and keep going downstream toward town."

Kevin followed Bruce's gestures with his eyes, and could almost see the bulk of the barge moving past them. "What kept the barge moving?"

"Mules."

"Mules?"

"Mules."

"Swimming mules?"

"No. They walked along the path, right where we're standing, hauling the barge with a long rope." "

Kevin stepped back, instinctively, for fear he might be walked over by a mule.

Bruce put his arm around his shoulder. "Now, look down there. See that little footbridge?"

Kevin peered downstream, and saw the spidery iron structure crossing the canal.

"Now when the barge moved out of the locks, there'd be just enough headroom for the load of the barge and the mules under the bridge. So the bargeman would holler "Lo-o-o-ow bridge." And all the crew would duck."

Kevin ducked.

When he straightened up, he was laughing. Then, imitating Bruce who was obviously imitating somebody else, he hollered, "Lo-o-o-ow bridge."

And Bruce ducked.

Kevin tugged at Bruce's sleeve. "C'mon, I want to see the stone house."

They walked across the footbridge and up the opposite side of the stream along the strip of land between the canal and the river. They circled the stone house with its high barred windows and came to an iron door facing the canal lock. Kevin pushed against it. It did not yield.

Bruce said, "The lock man's been away for quite some years now. But when it was a warm day and there weren't any barges to put through, he used to sit out here and play his five-string banjo." Bruce sat down by the lock's edge, his feet dangling just above the surface of the water. "They say he was pretty good at it. He had enough time to practice."

Kevin sat down beside Bruce, and looked at him intently. "How do you know so much about the canal?"

Bruce stared up and down the visible length of water, gave a heavy sigh, and said, "Well ..."

Kevin waited.

Bruce looked up at the trees overhead. "Let me see ... it was my great-great-grandfather who found himself a coal mine up in the hills. He hired every Irishman he could find to help him get it out, and then he had to figure out some way to get it down to the city to sell it." "Somebody in your family owned a whole coal mine?"

"It was quite the thing to do in those days."

"When was that?"

"The 1840s."

“That’s a long time ago.”

“Downhill ever since.” Bruce sighed again. “At any rate my great-great grandfather bought himself a string of coal-hauling barges. And that’s when the family started learning about the “canawlers.” My great-great-grandfather told my great-grandfather and he told my grandfather, and my grandfather used to take me out here on Sunday afternoons—there weren’t any coal barges running then—and tell me all about it. The stories . . . they were so vivid I could practically see the mules coming down the path and the barges piled with all that black shiny coal coming along behind.”

Kevin’s voice was hushed. “I can see ’em, too.”

Bruce glanced at Kevin. “It means something to you, doesn’t it?”

“What?”

“What happened. The past.”

Kevin shrugged. “I never had much of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grandfather . . . great-grandfather . . . great-great-grandfather . . . I never had any of those. I was brought up in foster homes.” He giggled. “Mrs. Crimmins . . . she was my last foster mother . . . she said she figured I’d been found under a leaf.”

“Biologically improbable,” Bruce said.

“What happened to your father, anyway?”

“I dunno. All I know is that my mother’s married name is Stark. And my name is Kevin Stark. So I figure there must have been a guy named Stark somewhere back there. But Millie never talks about him. I asked her a couple of times and she said she didn’t know who I was talking about. She must have been sort of drunk. Hard to tell about her, sometimes. You’d think she might remember getting fucked by some guy.” He shrugged again. “Maybe not . . .”

A breeze sent a flurry of ripples across the surface of the water. Overhead, the boughs moved and the sunlight dappled the ground around them.

“Strange,” Bruce said. “You have so little past, and I have too damn much of it.”

Kevin had never heard a man say anything like that before. “Whadda yuh mean?”

Bruce hesitated. Suddenly it was desperately important to Kevin that Bruce go on talking. “Tell me.”

Bruce tousled Kevin’s hair. “You’ve got enough troubles of your own.”

“No . . . tell me. And don’t tell me I won’t understand, either.” Kevin, surprised at his own boldness, grinned sheepishly. “That’s what people keep telling me, that I won’t understand. But I’ve been around.”

“I know, Kevin.”

“Then? . . .”

“It’s just. . . I’m the last of the line. All those children. All those great doings and money-makings. All those expectations. They all

ended up with . . . me. And I have to ask myself: who am I?”

Kevin almost whispered. “You don’t own the coal mine any more?”

“My great-grandfather sold the mine. My grandfather drank up most of the money. And what he left, my father lost in the stock market.” Bruce flipped a pebble into the water. “Of course, I still have a lot of furniture. And a trust fund from my mother, so I won’t starve. But that still leaves the question . . . who am I? All those bargemen, driver boys, mules, did they do it all for me? The end of the line? All that effort and here I am, sitting by the canal, thinking about my great-great-grandfather, and knowing he’d think it was a pretty poor ending for all that work. Well, what the hell. They’ve all gone, now.”

The boy slipped his hand into Bruce’s.

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On the drive back, Kevin kept looking at Bruce as if he were seeing him for the first time. The face was still the same one he had seen on Riverfront Road. The hands, the body he had known in bed. But they were a man's face, a man's hands, a man's body. All kempt and controlled, mysterious in the powers of the adult world. But now, his vision had changed, as it had with Mr. Grover. He saw lights and shadows he had not noticed before, and they were a lot more complicated than any vision he had had of Mr. Grover.

He couldn't explain it very well to himself, but Bruce's face seemed kind of dry. Not weathered, the way Mr. Grover's had been, but parched. The skin tight over the cheekbones. The lips as set as one of those old portraits reprinted in his history book. The hands, so clean after showering, looked as if they were molded from plaster. He thought of a body slowly cooled to a time when no fluid flowed.

He knew his vision was crazy. All he had to do was think back to the morning in bed with Bruce to realize that. He knew Bruce's fluids flowed and how they had been lavished upon him. But had the parching started? Would it work its insidious way through his tissues? Thin his lips. Draw his cheeks. Sharpen his chin and take the glisten from his eyes.

"The end of the line." That is what he had said, and he had said it with a desolate finality. Kevin recognized the tone. He had felt that desolation in the graveyard the night before. But how could it come to a man with a car and money and clothes and an apartment and a job? A man who had even gone to college!

Was all that nothing just because he was gay, just because he'd never have children?

Kevin was suddenly scared. He really had nothing, and he was gay besides. If Bruce was "the end of the line," where was he?

He edged close to Bruce on the car seat until his leg touched Bruce's knee and his hand rested gently against Bruce's thigh.

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The movies they saw that evening were, as far as Kevin was concerned, very weird indeed. He'd have just as soon stayed at Bruce's apartment with a wheel of pizza and watched television. But Bruce had something else in mind.

They went out for dinner at a small Italian restaurant with a big menu. The place was dark with a single flickering candle on each table. Kevin noticed that Bruce, as he sat down, swept the dining room with his eyes and seemed reassured as he unfolded his napkin. Kevin glanced around the room, too. Mostly there were couples—men and women—seated at the small tables. But there were two men sitting at one table nearby, and on the other side of the room, two young women wrapped in conversation with each other. Did Bruce know any of them? Did anyone know him?"He felt uncomfortable, but Bruce seemed serene, so he assumed that they were all strangers. But what if someone Bruce knew came in and found him having dinner with a kid who was still all dressed up for an evening on Riverfront Road? Kevin slouched down in his chair, and kept his eyes focused on the menu as if it were a screen.

Still, he was fascinated with the place and sitting across the table from Bruce made him feel as worldly as the Late Show. Surreptitiously, he followed Bruce's every move, cutting his meat the way Bruce did, tearing off the crusty bread, spearing his salad with his fork (just enough for an easy mouthful) and sipping the strange-tasting coffee slowly. As a treat, he got striped ice-cream while Bruce smoked a cigarette. All the while, a waiter with a black vest, white shirt, and a black bow tie, who looked like Gino grown up, kept hovering about, filling the water glasses, bringing more butter, pouring wine from a bottle into Bruce's wine glass, and bringing in each course with a flourish. It sure wasn't McDonald's!

Early in the meal, Bruce asked Kevin about his school. Awash in the strange atmosphere of the restaurant, Kevin did not particularly want to talk about the harsh corridors and classrooms where he spent his time. But Bruce's eyes were both curious and receptive. Reluctantly, Kevin started to talk. It



wasn't easy.

"I go around that place trying to be so cool and all that. It's not like Laureldale—the place I was before. I knew people there. I got along." He paused, toying with a crust of bread in his hand. "I just didn't know myself, that's all. Nothing to hide. I could just ... get along. And when some of the school work got tough, I could get help from Mr. Crimmins—he was my foster father—doing my homework. He'd explain things, slow and easy, so I could understand."

Kevin shook his head. "But this school—where I am now—I haven't been there too long. Don't know many people. Gino—he's my best friend—he don't care much about studying. All he wants to do is go out and fuck girls and what am I gonna say to that?" Kevin hunched his shoulders and lowered his head. His voice deepened a range. "Sure, Gino," he mimicked, "I like to fuck girls, too."

Bruce gave a responsive grin. "I used to do that."

"Did you get anybody to believe you?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"And all the time I'm hitting Riverfront Road. And everytime I hit it, I know more about myself. Scary. What if anybody at school ever found out? What would happen in the locker room? I mean, some of those dudes at school are crazy-tough and scared of themselves. All set to take it out on somebody else. They found one kid, just a couple of weeks ago, giving a blow job in one of the john-stalls after school. Little kid. Lots of pimples. Nobody liked him much. But once they found him in the john-stall, they practically kept him locked up there for days, taking turns getting their rocks off. I guess the poor kid must have thought he was getting to be the most popular guy in school. Then they followed him home one afternoon, caught him in a vacant lot and beat the shit out of him. He ran away. Nobody knows where he went. His parents came around to the school, asking a lot of questions, but nobody told 'em nothin' . . . not the truth, anyway." Kevin toyed with the food on his plate. "Thing like that. . . make me scared." Suddenly he had a flash memory of the night that he and Dennis had gone with Max and Amie to beat up fags in Greystone Park. He wanted to tell Bruce about it, just to get the thing off his chest. But he didn't. He was too ashamed.

Kevin had never been to the city museum before. No one had ever gotten around to taking him there. He kept close to Bruce as they climbed the expanse of steps to the main entrance of the big ornate structure with huge spiked lamps guarding the doorway.

"Do they really show movies here?" Kevin asked.

"Uh-huh." Bruce grinned. "As you'd say, the oldies and the goodies."

"Like on the Late Show?"

"Older than that, usually."

Kevin shook his head in wonderment. Nothing was older than the stuff they put on the Late Show.

Kevin was about to ask just what they were going to see when, passing through the door, he entered the Museum's lobby and gasped. The place was huge with massive reddish stonework and a high vaulted ceiling of gold. All around the sides of the lobby were larger than life-sized statues of stone . . . naked people, and some of them were men. He had to admit that the men all looked as if they had just gotten out of cold showers; they didn't have much to show for their virility. But their muscles, their structure, their very presence were pulse-quickenning.

Kevin saw Bruce following his gaze with a grin. "I used to come here when I was a kid. I didn't know then that the Greeks had a word for it."

Kevin's voice was hushed. "They're beautiful."

"They knew what we've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten," said Kevin. "I'm just remembering."

"How Jungian."

"What does that mean?"

“Never mind.”

“I want to know.”

“Later.”

Kevin felt anger. When would “later” be?

Their footfalls on the stone flooring echoed as they walked through the lobby, past the darkened galleries with gates and guards, to a lighted doorway at the other end.

Bruce paid the admissions to a long-haired woman, seated at a card table, and they walked into the auditorium, a big, smooth-walled auditorium with a screen on the stage. People were scattered in the rows of seats. Bruce and Kevin took seats toward the back. While they were getting their coats off, Kevin saw a young goodlooking man turn around, recognize Bruce, and salute him. The man beside him also turned around and gave a sign of recognition. Bruce returned it with a gesture of his hand.

“Who’s that?” Kevin asked.

“George and Gerald. Friends of mine.”

Kevin sunk down in his seat, trying to look invisible.

Bruce glanced at him. “Don’t worry. We’ll tough it out. Enjoy the films.”

The auditorium darkened.

In the first place, the movies didn’t have any sound, just a piano in the background, and titles explaining what was happening. In the second place, there was no color. The pictures were all in black and white, and splotchy at that. Why was Bruce paying good money for nonsense like this? And everybody moved so fast they might have been powered by jets.

And then came the custard pies! As the first one sailed smack into the face of a fat man, Kevin let out an involuntary whoop of glee, and then looked over at Bruce in embarrassment. But Bruce grinned. Suddenly the screen was filled with a veritable blizzard of custard pies and Kevin decided right then and there that movies like that didn’t need sound or color. All they needed was plenty of pies. In fact, Kevin imagined that all those sports shows Jake liked to watch on television might be dramatically improved by the addition of some well-aimed custard pies.

Kevin was so carried away by the films that he forgot about Bruce’s friends sitting a few rows ahead of them. But when the lights went up, there they were, rising from their seats like menaces, their eyes on Bruce . . . and on him. Kevin wished they would both disappear, but they obviously weren’t going to. They timed their exit to meet Bruce and Kevin in the aisle. Bruce, matter-of-factly and without explanation, introduced Kevin, who was well aware that he was being perused from head to toe. Under other circumstances he would have thoroughly enjoyed the admiration, but now he only felt his privacy violated as surely as if one of the men had reached out and groped him. He eased himself closer to Bruce until he touched his shoulder, and with that touch felt secure enough to stare right back.

They weren’t bad looking. If either one of them had picked him up on Riverfront Road, he’d have gone with them cheerfully. They were both, he guessed, around thirty, tall, lean, and well-groomed. They had that right-out-of-the-shower look that Bruce had, and a faint odor of cologne completed the image. But there was something about their eyes that made Kevin uneasy—a quick, snappish way of blinking. Both of them had it. Kevin assumed they were lovers, but did they have to have the same mannerisms? Especially when those two pairs of eyes were directed at him.

George and Gerald wanted a drink, and nothing would do but that Bruce and Kevin join them. Bruce, genial as ever, said sure. Kevin wondered, with foreboding, just how this evening was going to end. He wanted Bruce for himself; why did he have these threatening friends?

The four of them ambled down Jefferson Street to a restaurant that looked from the outside like some dive on lower Houghton Street. But the inside was something else again. Deep-carpeted, romantically lit, with gentle music, it was . . . right out of the late show that Kevin knew on television . . . and no flying custard pies. Why weren’t he and Bruce there alone? He could think of a lot of dialogue to go with that

situation!

But there were George and Gerald, blinking.

Kevin stuck close to Bruce as a waiter ushered them to a booth, and made sure he got in beside Bruce while George and Gerald took seats on the other side of the table. But then he was confronted with those two pairs of eyes. At least he had the table for protection.

Bruce ordered a brandy and soda. But George and Gerald had very specific instructions for the waiter, including strange kinds of gin, “straight ups” and “twists” and “dashes.” The two of them sounded to Kevin like his chemistry teacher and he wondered if the drinks would emit green gas when they were brought to the table. Kevin himself wanted a bottle of beer, but he thought better of it and demurely ordered a Coke.

Then those eyes, again . . .

Gerald—he was the dark-haired one with the mustache—asked him, “Well, young man, where do you go to school?” His voice was as phony as Miss Gotter’s.

Kevin wanted to say “Riverfront Road,” but he didn’t think that would go over too well. “Houghton High.”

George—he had close-cropped blond hair and looked like a lifeguard—chimed in, a far-away look in his eyes. “I used to know a young man from Houghton High.”

“Oh?” said Kevin, wondering who else was turning ten-dollar tricks. “What was his name?”

“I’ve forgotten. He had one tooth missing . . . and the cutest buns.”

Kevin was sorry he didn’t have a beer bottle handy to give George a missing tooth. Would that be the way that Bruce would talk about him someday? He tightened the muscles of his rump. At least Bruce had remembered his name long enough to introduce him.

Gerald again, “How did you like the films?”

“Pretty funny.” Then, ominously, looking straight at Gerald’s eyes, the groomed face and the clipped mustache. “I loved the custard pies.”

Gerald’s gaze retreated and turned to Bruce. With a sigh. “I don’t mind Keaton, but my heart belongs to Lillian Gish.”

George sniffed. “Gish? Compared to early Garbo? Oh, come, Gerald!”

As the drinks came, Bruce seemed weary. “Just give me Lot in Sodom.”

“But Myra’s so much more fun! Gerald said. “Cocteau’s dreary.”

From there on in, as far as Kevin was concerned, the conversation made no sense whatever. He nursed his Coke and studied the other three faces in the booth. Would he look like Gerald ten . . . fifteen years from now? The same dark hair, skinny body, regular features? Yes, but those blinking eyes, and the purse of the lips, as if he were still tasting the last cock he’d sucked.

Who were these people? What was he getting himself into?

Then he looked at Bruce. The face so casually poised. The eyes that had devoured him. The lips that had encompassed him. The sheer authority of his assurance. Might that be his future, too? He ached with desire and the uncertainty of his hopes. It was all so evident! Bruce belonged to them. How could he talk about the things they talked about? Staring at the glass of Coke in front of him, he felt himself draining away in isolation. He hunched himself in the corner of the booth, away from Bruce, away from everyone. He thought about Burkett Street, but he knew he had no place to go. He was a prisoner in the booth, condemned to hear talk he did not understand.

With a sudden will, he determined to escape . . . and take a captive with him. With small stealthy shiftings, he moved close to Bruce, reached out a hand beneath the table until it touched his thigh. He glanced at Bruce’s face, animate in conversation. No other reaction. Encouraged, Kevin moved his hand across the fabric of his trousers until his fingers found the softness between his legs. His fingers encircled it and pressed gently. Bruce’s flesh became defined, and Kevin felt a glow of satisfaction. He sensed

Bruce glance at him, but he ignored it, keeping his eyes on the glass in front of him. But his fingers grew more active. The prisoner was now a captor. Looking at those two miserable characters across the table, Kevin gloated. There was more than talk in the world.

Shortly thereafter, Bruce finished his drink and put the glass down on the table with finality. “Well, we’ve got to be going. It’s getting late.”

George said, “Oh, Bruce, it’s just the shank of the evening.”

But Gerald said, with a caressing look at Kevin, “Run along, old boy. We understand.”

Kevin gave Gerald a baleful look as they clambered out of the booth. In a few moments, he and Bruce were alone in the night air. Kevin felt like letting out a whoop and a holler but he restrained himself. He still felt wounded, and it lasted all the way back to Bruce’s apartment. He felt more vulnerable than he had ever felt exposed to the night’s chill on Riverfront Road.

Bruce poured himself a brandy. Kevin set his jaw. “Is there some beer around?”

“Sure.” Bruce brought him a can of beer from the refrigerator. “I didn’t know you liked the stuff.”

Kevin wrapped his hand around the can. “I do.” He took a sip. “It cools my head.”

Bruce peered at him over the rim of the brandy snifter. “Your head needs cooling?”

“Yes.”

A silence.

Bruce spoke slowly. “Do you know what I lived through, tonight?” But Kevin flashed, “Do you know what / lived through, tonight?” Somehow they managed to look at each other. For Kevin, it was a look of pure anguish. Every dream he had of Bruce was slipping away. He wanted to throw himself in Bruce’s arms. He wanted to stifle Bruce’s every word. He wanted to stop time and not hear the next sentence. But the words came out. “Your friends ...”

Another silence.

Bruce: “What about ‘my friends’?”

Kevin lashed out the words. “They’d have taken me to bed. And I’ve have gone—for ten bucks—gladly.”

With deliberation, Bruce set down his snifter glass, rose from his chair, crossed to Kevin on the horsehair couch, picked him up by the front of his shirt. ‘Try that and I’ll beat you.’

Kevin looked at Bruce. “You mean it?”

There was no denying the glare in Bruce’s eyes. “You’re damn right I do.”

Kevin wilted. “Don’t let me do it, then.”

“I won’t.”

Lying in bed, Kevin held Bruce’s body close to his. Something had happened. Something big and strange had happened.

## SEVENTEEN

Bruce was appalled at the suddenness of his anger, the force of his jealousy. He lay there in the darkness, Kevin snuggled against him after love-making, and thought to himself: what is this two-bit Riverfront Road hustler doing to me?

Kevin's arm was stretched across his chest—a statement of possession even in sleep, and Bruce felt its weight as well as its warmth. He thought of shifting his body away, but then he pressed closer to Kevin, luxuriating in his captivity.

His mind drifted back to the booth at the bar—George and Gerald across the table, Kevin beside him. He had sensed George's appreciation of Kevin's looks. But he had also felt Gerald's lawyerly disapproval of jail-bait. And he was all the more conscious of that disapproval as he felt Kevin's shameless activities under the table.

He grinned to himself, but the grin quickly faded. Gerald was no fool. What Bruce held in his arms was dynamite. It had been so simple at first, a quick commerce of body for money. And the money paid not just for consent, but for leaving, without trace or tie. Sure, the rules of the commerce were sometimes broken. Jerry's sudden violence had broken the rules. But a swollen jaw could heal. Kevin's breaking of the rules—and Bruce's consent to it—was far more insidious. He could feel the ties begin to tighten as clearly as he felt Kevin's arm across his chest.

He could hear the traffic noises outside the apartment, the rumblings and stirrings of the city and the occasional distant wail of a siren. The foliage in the backyard cast restless shadows on the walls of the bedroom, as if the trees stood witness outside his windows. He felt vaguely threatened by wisps of power, as casually hostile as a lion in wait.

Kevin moved. The voice was close to his ear, and slow with drowsiness. "Whatsamatter?"

"Nothin'. Just thinking."

Kevin's hand stroked his face and settled back on his chest. "Don't think too hard. It'll hurt your head."

Bruce pulled him closer, sighed, and went to sleep.

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Early the next afternoon—Sunday—Bruce browsed through the Sunday paper while Kevin lay sprawled on the bed watching television. Bruce was musing on the casual domesticity of it all when the phone rang. He heard the prim, reedy voice of Miss Harkins, Charlotte's housekeeper. She was hesitant, but Bruce could sense her anxiety in a fluster of half-finished sentences. "It's just that she seems so depressed . . . quite unusual for her . . . been going on for several days . . . and her appetite . . . she just doesn't seem interested . . . even when I cooked her sweetbreads last night, one of her favorite dishes . . . and . . . and I was just wondering if . . . if you weren't doing anything this afternoon, if . . . if you might drop by and see her. She's always so cheerful after she's been with you . . ." "Of course, Miss Harkins . . . er . . . this afternoon?"

"If you could . . ." Her voice was almost pleading. "She'd appreciate it so much. I know."

Bruce glanced at Kevin, sprawled on the bed. There would be only a few more hours before Kevin had to go home, and Bruce ached at the thought of cutting the time short. But he had mentioned to Charlotte that he might be over that afternoon, and now it seemed more important than ever.

Bruce straightened his shoulders. "I'll be over within the hour." "Thank you, Mr. Andrews. Thank you so much."

As he hung up the phone, Kevin looked at him intently. "Who was that?"

"My Aunt Charlotte seems to be ailing."

"You going over and see her?"

"Yes. I'd better."

Kevin's eyes were downcast. "I'll go, if you want."

Bruce hesitated. A very strange idea crossed his mind, and he gave Kevin a long appraising look. Kevin looked back, his hazel eyes grown large and liquid. "I have to go back anyway . . . sometime this evening."

"Kevin ..." Bruce forced the words out. "If I take you with me, will you be on very good behavior?"

"I can go with you?"

"Promise. Your best behavior."

Kevin sat up on the bed and he spoke with an unaccustomed dignity. "Mr. and Mrs. Crimmins ... my foster parents . . . they taught me ... all about things like that." Then, almost a whisper. "Can I come with you?"

"Okay. Let's get dressed."

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Driving over to Charlotte's apartment house, Kevin close beside him, Bruce felt momentarily panicked. How would he explain Kevin? What the hell was he doing dragging a Riverfront hustler into the quiet of Aunt Charlotte's home? The whole idea was preposterous. Yet, glancing at Kevin beside him, it didn't seem preposterous at all. Charlotte had always responded to youth, and Kevin radiated charm in his quiet way. But who would he say Kevin was?

The answer was still eluding him as they stood at Charlotte's door.

But when Bruce introduced Kevin, Charlotte greeted him as if he were some long-lost nephew, and Kevin blushed with a demure pleasure. In that moment, as she held Kevin in handshake, Bruce saw the Charlotte he remembered from that summer in Maine, the tilt of her head, the light in her eye. But then, as she released Kevin's hand, age seemed to envelop her again, and he could see a sick old woman. But he also noticed Kevin . . . how he looked at Charlotte with a kind of . . . what was it. . . reverence? He took his place on a side chair, close beside her on the couch, as Miss Harkins served tea and sandwiches.

For a few anxious moments, Bruce wondered how Kevin was going to cope with a Meissen cup and saucer. He managed, gingerly but with poise. Bruce did, however, catch him peeking to check out the interior of a watercress sandwich.

But what he most noticed about Kevin were his eyes. When he was not watching Charlotte, they roved the apartment's living room, detail by detail. He had done the same, Bruce remembered, when he had first entered Bruce's apartment. But now the inspection seemed even more intent, as if the darkened room were Alladin's cave set about with the diamond-gleams from the silver tea service, the gold luster of the heavy picture frames, the ruby-reds and sapphires in the glass lampshade.

"You know, Kevin," Charlotte was saying, "when Bruce was your age, he spent a wonderful summer with me down in Maine."

"Oh?" A faint grin crossed Kevin's face. "What was he like, then?"

"Well, he upset the canoe quite a few times and ... he liked to eat a great deal."

Kevin's grin grew broader. "Was he skinny like me?"

She looked at Bruce clinically, "He has filled out a bit since."

Bruce was not entirely pleased with the way the conversation was going. Still, the memory of that Maine lake where Charlotte had had her summer cottage was a balm to him. Looking at the expressions on Charlotte's face as she talked to Kevin, he felt that memory was cherished by her, too, and made all the more vivid by Kevin's presence.

Miss Harkins was clearly delighted with the lift in Charlotte's spirits. She plied Kevin with watercress sandwiches and quietly inquired if Bruce would like "a little fortification" in his tea. Bruce passed the offer up with a smile. Hovering on the sidelines, Miss Harkins asked Charlotte if she would like a little music.

"That would be very nice."

Bruce watched Miss Harkins carefully select a record and set it on the turntable. He wondered what

she had chosen—Bach or Artie Shaw. Charlotte's taste in music was eclectic. But what filled the hush of the apartment was folk dance music, strings, winds, and a tambourine.

The effect on Kevin was startling. He froze for a moment, then his body began to move to the rhythms. "Hey, I can dance to that!"

"Dance?" Bruce said with foreboding.

"Yes. Mr. Crimmins taught me the jigs and the flings.",

Charlotte smiled. "Well, do dance for us."

Kevin glanced at Bruce. Bruce shrugged. "All right," Kevin said. Rising to his feet, Kevin moved to the middle of the living room, looking first to Bruce, and then to Charlotte, a bashful expression on his face. "Mr. Crimmins says you should always wear kilts when you do this, but I don't have any kilts."

Charlotte laughed. "We understand. Go right ahead."

Miss Harkins put her hand over her mouth in amazement. Charlotte . . . laughing?

Kevin assumed his stance, one foot forward, toe pointed, one arm curved over his head, the other behind his back. He was motionless for a moment, listening to the beat of the music. Bruce wondered at the poise of the figure, the delicacy of its balance. He could almost see it as an abstract work of art, sheathed from any feeling, remote from the realities he knew were there, beneath the tee-shirt and jeans.

Suddenly Kevin came to life, his feet moving fast to the music, his body twirling. But his torso and head were straight, chest and chin out, and a prideful half-smile on his lips. Every so often, Bruce caught a glance coming his way and realized that for all the formality of the dance Kevin was flirting with him.

The music stopped. Charlotte applauded. Bruce and Miss Harkins joined in. Kevin, breathing hard, looked startled but, with aplomb, bowed deep before Charlotte. Bruce hoped that the moment would add months to her life.

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Driving back to the apartment, Bruce turned to Kevin. "You were great!"

"Thanks." Kevin was sitting close, his hand resting on Bruce's knee. "Aunt Charlotte's a good lady. Can we see her again?"

"I hope so."

"What do you mean?" There was anxiety in Kevin's voice.

"It's just . . . her health doesn't seem to be so good."

"Oh," Kevin sighed. "She's old. She even knew you when you were a kid."

"Well, that doesn't make her all that old. Wasn't even twenty years ago."

"You must have been some kid, upsetting canoes and all that."

Bruce grew righteous. "Now, listen, one of the things they teach you in Water Safety and Life Saving is how to right a canoe, slosh the water half out of it, and get it back to shore. And to right a canoe and slosh the water half out of it, you have to upset it, first. Right?"

"Right." Kevin sounded chastened.

"Well, Aunt Charlotte never understood that. She thought I was just upsetting the canoe for the hell of upsetting the canoe. But it was a . . . premeditated exercise in water safety."

"Getting by . . . somehow. Huh?"

"Uh-huh."

"Like ducking under a low bridge, huh?"

"As your years pass, Kevin, you will find that very frequently you have to slosh the water out of the canoe and duck under low bridges."

"I'm learning that, already."

The statement sent a pang through Bruce. He remembered his own adolescence as a time of such vivid colors, such gaudy aspirations. Despairs and exaltations alike were bold in their clarity of feeling. Nothing was impossible, not even suicide. But just struggling to survive, trying to eke out some

security and pleasure, just one effort to cope after another? . . . Bruce could see the premature age in Kevin's face, the set of the chin, the watchful eyes, the hesitancy of the smile. His adolescence seemed gone before it even started.

Bruce's thoughts took an insidious turn. Everything had been so carefree and secure that summer with Charlotte, the surface of the lake so gleaming blue, the cloister of the pines around the cottage so protective, and Charlotte so companionable. After a week or so, he began to look forward to thunderstorms. If there weren't any thunderstorms around, he'd go out and upset the canoe. Anything for a challenge, an uncertainty, a possibility of disaster however remote.

Then he had met Julian. He didn't need to swamp the canoe anymore. He had found all the challenge he needed, and in his adolescent vision, it was as awesome as the aurora borealis that sometimes lit the northern sky.

"Kevin, did you ever see the aurora borealis?"

Kevin looked startled. "What?"

"The Northern Lights. You see 'em in the sky at night when you're up toward Canada. All over, shimmering blue and green, red and orange. It's like a whole symphony in color . . . but not a sound."

"Must be something else."

"I dunno. When I first saw it up at Aunt Charlotte's, I thought the world was going to explode into all the colors of the rainbow."

Kevin was silent for a few moments. Then: "I've felt like that."

"Oh. When?"

Another silence. Kevin's voice was barely audible when he said, "When I'm coming. With you."

The night sky was dark that spring, but in Bruce's inner vision, there was a remembered radiance of spacious color vibrant in the north. On warm week-nights, he'd take strolls around the city streets, feeling pleasantly detached. He was no longer on the prowl. He could pass by Jefferson Square, see the shadowy figures silhouetted in the street lights as they moved through their stealthy mating dance and feel neither excitement or desire. He had only to wait till Friday night.

He kept up his accustomed rounds of social engagements— evenings with Aunt Charlotte, with George-and Gerald, an occasional dinner with Amory and bridge at the Merchant's Club—but he was careful to avoid appointments on weekends, and discouraged casual drop-ins. Weekends were Kevin's time.

The knock at the door would usually come around six in the evening. Kevin would throw himself into Bruce's arms like a fugitive and just hang on in moment after moment of silence. Bruce could feel the muscles of his back begin to relax and his breathing grow more regular.

On Friday evenings, the bed was the decompression chamber. But Saturdays were a celebration of spring. They roved the countryside on the outskirts of the city in Bruce's car, tramped through woods and past fresh streams, and ate in country inns. Bruce was bemused at how casually the two of them were accepted by waitresses and gas station attendants. Clearly, it seemed, Bruce was a divorced father taking his son on an outing. The assumption even allowed for modest displays of public affection. Kevin appreciated the humor and in public would sometimes address Bruce as "Pop." Bruce would recoil. But Kevin's eyes were always seductive.

The weekends would pass as isolated spaces in time, apart from any other phase of Bruce's life and, he knew, Kevin's life as well. Because the periods were so encapsulated and so emotionally consuming, Bruce could put aside any thoughts, questions, doubts about where it was all leading. Nor were any of his friends sufficiently aware of the circumstances to raise any questions. Bruce could just bask in the reflected wonder of Kevin's adolescent vision and the satiation of his own hungers.

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One warm Sunday afternoon in late May, Bruce and Kevin having just returned from a foray to the city



Zoo, the doorbell rang. Bruce glowered at the intrusion, but he answered the door anyway, assuming some door-to-door salesman could be easily disposed of.

But it was Amory, fully recovered from the beating in Greystone Park and looking more chipper than usual. "Sorry to bust in on you like this."

"Oh, it's okay," said Bruce, without enthusiasm.

"I was just in the neighborhood ..." he blushed prettily, ". . . and I developed an insatiable desire for one of your Bloody Marys."

Leon in.

He realized that Kevin and Amory had never met each other, but—what the hell—it would happen sooner or later. "Amory, this is Kevin Stark."

As Kevin shook hands with Amory, his face went white, then crimson. Bruce was puzzled. The only explanation he could think of for Kevin's acute reaction was that Amory had taken to cruising Riverfront Road, but Riverfront Road was not Amory's style. If he had had a momentary lapse, his cover was pretty good. Amory seemed very much at ease.

But when Bruce went into the kitchen to make Bloody Marys, Kevin followed him and stood very close while Bruce put various ingredients into the cocktail shaker. "I've gotta go."

"Oh? It's still early."

"I got homework to do."

Bruce looked at Kevin's face—the fear around the eyes, the strain tightening his lips—and he put the Tabasco sauce down firmly on the counter. "Listen, Kevin, it's just Amory, my ex-lover, and it's all over. Nothing to get excited about."

"I gotta go." Kevin's voice quavered. "You two have things to talk about and . . . and I got homework."

Something told Bruce not to push it. "Okay."

At the front door Bruce kissed Kevin and tried to press a ten dollar bill into his hand for pocket money. But Kevin kept his hand closed and shook his head. "I don't need it. You keep it." He wrapped his arms around Bruce's neck with a sudden strength, held on for a moment. "I'll call you." Then he was gone.

When Bruce walked back into the living room, feeling glum and puzzled, Amory was nursing his Bloody Mary. "Beautiful boy." "Uh-huh."

"Why did he leave in such a hurry?"

"Homework, he says."

"Do you believe him?"

Bruce shook his head. "He seems to have a thing about my friends."

"I could have dropped over some other time. I hate to spoil a leisurely Sunday afternoon of debauchery with something like that." "Don't worry." Bruce hesitated, as if to reassure himself. "He'll be back."

"Oh. Serious, eh?"

Bruce ruminated, poking his finger at the ice-cubes in his drink. "I guess so."

"I know. Just looking at you, I know."

"What do you know?"

"It's serious." He glanced at Bruce over the rim of his glass. "Expensive, too, I dare say."

Bruce snorted. "He won't take my money."

"Well, what, pray tell, is he after? Your soul?"

"The thought has occurred to me. Worse yet, I think he's making progress."

"I think you're getting yourself into a rather bizarre situation. I mean a ten-dollar roll in the hay is one thing, but this ..." Amory looked at Bruce intently. "How long has he been here?"

“The weekend.”

“Don’t his parents care where he is?”

“Apparently when they are sober . . . which is not very often.”

“Oh, God, somebody ought to do something about the breeders!”

“Are we so much better?”

“What do you mean?”

“At least they breed.”

“They fuck . . . mindlessly. And from such odious events, children are born, thereby further depleting the limited resources of the planet.”

“So we’re the ecological angels?”

“We don’t pollute the earth with squalling infants. At least we don’t do that.”

“But once the terrible deed is done? ...”

“That’s their problem.”

“Even if the kid is gay?”

“So let the kid find his own way. We had to.” Amory started to prowl the living room. “I think this young man has you mired down in some pretty gross sentimentality, and I fear for your immortal soul.” Bruce felt weary. “Come off it, Amory.”

“I mean it.”

“I know what you mean. The beauty of gay life is its detachment. Let the breeders clean up their own mess.”

“So? Fair’s fair.”

“But ten percent of what the breeders produce—year after year— is us, not them.”

Amory sat down and put his head in his hands. “I should have known you’d figure out some way to make some comely cock-and-ass into a moral crusade.”

“I am not . . . moralizing. I’m simply concerned about one gay youngster named Kevin Stark. At the moment, that’s quite enough.” When Amory left an hour or so later, he paused at the front door, kissed Bruce. “Be careful, huh?”

“I’ll try,” said Bruce.

# EIGHTEEN

Kevin didn't stop running until he was four blocks from Bruce's apartment. Even as he slowed to a walk, he kept glancing over his shoulder to see if any police cars were coming.

As the panic gradually passed, Kevin began to wonder if Amory had even recognized him. He thought back to that moment in Greystone Park. He had been crouched over Amory's body as it lay on the ground. The streetlight was above him, shining on Amory's face, but shadowing his own. Maybe he hadn't seen him clearly in the shadow. Maybe the shock of the mugging had fogged his memory. Maybe . . .

But maybe not. Maybe even now, Amory was telling Bruce the story, and the police were being called. They'd be on the lookout for him all over town. And what would Bruce think when he found out? Kevin ... his Kevin . . . beating up fags in Greystone Park? Some macho punk out to waste his ex-lover? No way would he ever want to see Kevin again.

Images flooded through his mind of love-making with Bruce. The times he lay back, passive and yielding to any pleasure Bruce wanted to take with him. And times when he surged over Bruce's body like an invading army, taking everything Bruce had to give. He thought about Kenny, still as a corpse on the flat gravestone, being plundered by Max, by Amie, by Joe and Rico, even by Dennis. And he had gone along with them to beat up fags. Amory.

He trudged the darkening city streets, heading toward Houghton. The blocks he walked were mostly lined by apartment houses with foreboding entrances of heavy stonework decorated not just with beetle-browed overhangs and scroll work, but with medallions of lions, eagles and unicorns, ferociously at guard. The street itself seemed narrowed by the bulk of the buildings, and he felt himself puny against their massiveness.

He knew people lived in those apartment houses, people like Aunt Charlotte, like Mr. Grover, like the figures he passed on the street. Maybe some of them, Mr. Grover and others, paid quiet nighttime visits to Riverfront Road and brought back their tricks to pass under those lions and eagles and disappear behind that brick and stonework. Who was to know then, or care, as long as the brick and stone kept its frowning face to the street, like those stone soldiers in Greystone Park?

Kevin felt a growing anger as he plodded down the street. He wanted to kick at the stone, tear the brick, throw a cherry bomb into one of those fancy entrances and yell fire in the hallways. The anger was all the more bitter because it curled back on himself. What had he done in Greystone Park? His fists had landed on the man that Bruce must have loved.

Kevin sat down on the stone railing around one of the apartment houses, and the tears came.

"What's the matter, young man?"

Kevin looked up from his seat on the railing. Through bleary eyes, he saw an older woman. Not as old as Aunt Charlotte, but with well-groomed gray hair and settled lines on her face. She was walking a dog that looked like a floor-mop.

"Nothin'," Kevin sniffed. "Everything."

The woman gave a light laugh. "That's the way it usually is."

"Only this time, it's worse."

"And then it gets better."

Kevin shook his head. "Not this time."

The woman sat down beside him and patted his shoulder, while the dog sniffed his feet suspiciously. "You know, after my husband died,

I felt like that. Everything just turned gray. No color left in the world.. Then, after a while, I knew something had to change. So I went out and bought a bouquet of flowers, bright colored flowers, and I put them in a vase beside my husband's picture. And that's when I began to see the world again."

Kevin wiped his eyes with his sleeve. The woman poked around in her purse and handed him a Kleenex tissue. "Here, this will help." "Thanks." Kevin blew his nose loudly and stuffed the Kleenex in his pocket.

"Feel better, now?"

"A little."

"You aren't hurt, are you? I mean . . . physically?"

"No." That was all he said. He wanted desperately to talk, but ... to a woman? Still, her voice was soft and gentle in the evening air, and he thought of Aunt Charlotte's voice in the darkened apartment, so casually receptive. But what could he tell her?

"Did you lose a friend?" she asked.

Kevin nodded.

"Sometimes we think we've lost someone when we really haven't."

"But I have, for sure!" he said, and felt the tears cloud his eyes again.

The woman's silence was an invitation. He gulped and tried to steady himself. "I did something awful."

"We all do, sometimes." Then, gently: "Does your friend know what you did?"

"Yeah, I think so. I think he knows now."

"But you're not sure?"

"No. I'm not sure."

"It might be a good idea for you to tell him before he hears it from someone else. That is, if he doesn't know already."

"Tell him?" He shook his head violently. "I can't do that! I ... I . . . I couldn't get the words out."

"I know. But ... as you think about it, perhaps you'll want to try."

Kevin felt a jittering anxiety. "I gotta go." He rose to his feet. "But thanks . . . thanks for the Kleenex . . . thanks for talking to me." "Good luck," she said, and walked slowly down the street with her dog.

It didn't seem to Kevin that Millie and Jake were aware that he had

been out of the house for the weekend. The evening drifted by with Jake nursing his beer, Millie her seven-and-seven, and nobody, except the television set, saying much of anything. Kevin felt as isolated as if he were on another planet, and mostly what he thought about, his stomach churning, was the woman with the dog . . . the impossible thing she had suggested and the sliver of hope.

By the eleven o'clock news, Jake had fallen asleep in his chair and Millie was passed out on the couch. But Dennis kept his eyes on the set. Feeling bleak, Kevin went up to the attic to go to bed. The room was still hot from the day's sun, but a slight cool breeze came in through the windows. He turned on the lamp, sat on the bed, and leafed through his history textbook, but the pictures seemed remote and the text opaque. What history book could describe what he was living through? History books didn't seem to know that people like him existed.

He dropped the text on the floor beside his bed, and slowly got undressed. Naked, he ran his hands over his body and thought about Bruce. What was he doing here, when Bruce was there?

As he turned off the light and lay down, he had a heavy thought. He had left Amory with Bruce. Was Amory still there? Were the exlovers having a reunion? Bruce had been casual about it being "all over," but if Amory had told him who had beaten him up in Greystone Park? ... His mind suddenly filled with graphic fantasies of Bruce and Amory making it in the big^ double bed, doing all the things that he and Bruce had done together ... in the same bed. And Bruce sympathizing with Amory about that crazy punk kid trying to be macho.

He heard footsteps on the stairs and saw Dennis's figure moving across the dim light from the back window. Dennis's bedside light went on, and their eyes met . . . and held for a long moment.

"Listen. Max and Amie ..." Dennis's voice sounded strange, almost a whine with a trace of fear. "They

still want your ass.”

“Let ’em have your ass.”

The words tumbled out, high-pitched but just above a whisper. “Naw, don’t yuh unnerstand? They’re tired of Kenny. He’s stretched so wide, it’s just like a cunt, for God’s sake. And you . . . acting so straight and all . . . you must be tight. They’re gonna get you, and they’re gonna have you, and then they’re gonna sell you to a gang of homy Puerto Ricans down on the south side to do anything they want with you for a week, and then kill you. They got ways, and nobody’ll know. That’s what they say. Anything they want for a week, and then they snuff you.”

Kevin’s pulse was racing, but he kept his voice steady. “Big talk.”

Dennis turned off his light and lay down on his cot. “I believe ’em.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s just . . . when they figure it’s time.”

“Yeah, and you’re gonna help ’em?”

Dennis sounded on the verge of tears. “I can’t stand up to Max and Amie. They want me to do somethin’, they’re gonna make me do it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, or maybe they sell me to the Puerto Ricans.”

Kevin said nothing. He felt chilled.

Dennis’s voice seemed to come from a great distance. “You better split. If you got a place to go, go. Like I say, it’s just time. Max and Amie don’t give up.”

Kevin stared at the ceiling. “I have no place to go.”

# NINETEEN

Bruce did not sleep well that Sunday night. Puzzled about Kevin, his mind kept drifting back to Julian. He had been Kevin's age the summer he had met Julian at Aunt Charlotte's. Julian, going into his senior year at college, must have been about twenty but, in Bruce's eyes, he was resplendent in maturity. He imagined that Kevin saw him, the way he had seen Julian then.

They both had canoes that summer and used to race each other, paddle stroke to paddle stroke, to a deserted island in the middle of the lake. They'd land in a small sandy cove sheltered by pines and there, one warm afternoon, they had made love.

Bruce had let the scene play through his memory hundreds of times since and each time warmed himself in its golden aura, the slant of the sun's rays and the light on the tawny sand. He had never felt quite the same way again. No expertise could recapture that experience with Julian, until he had met Kevin and seen that golden aura reflected in his eyes. He remembered how gently Julian had nurtured and guided him that summer. Could he now do the same for a youngster he barely knew and whose life, as far as Bruce was concerned, was lived not just on the other side of the city, but the other side of the moon? He had explored Kevin's body, but he had only a glimmering of what was hidden beneath.

He had an image of Kevin as they sat beside each other at the edge of the canal. His eyes had scanned the visible length of the waterway with a curiosity and receptivity as open as his arms would later be. He listened as Bruce rambled on about the degeneration of his family and pressed him with intuitive questions. Whatever Kevin had, he wanted something more. Bruce wondered what he himself had to give.

That Monday, Bruce had lunch at the Merchant's club, consuming two martinis and a generous helping of sauerbraten. He returned to his office, repentant, to confront the sluggish sales of an inner-city school bond issue. In the course of making several phone calls to see if he could stir up a little investor interest, he got a call from his friend, Chuck Ryerson, who worked for a small but energetic investment house in New York City. It was one of Chuck's "stroking" calls about the great things going on in The Big Apple, how their plans for the bond department were "really shaping up," and how did he feel about a big move to New York? Bruce was flattered but noncommittal. "Keep me posted" and all that. The money seemed promising, but how was he going to move all those family heirlooms? Outside their natural environment, they might turn to dust. Bruce, the last of the family line, would have failed his curatorship.

The afternoon dragged on. Every so often, Bruce caught himself staring out the window and thinking—in fact, downright mooning—about Kevin. Everytime it happened, he'd pull himself together and make another phone call. But by four in the afternoon he concluded that investor indifference was impenetrable and that he might as well leave for the day.

He was putting his papers away and tidying up his desk when the phone rang. It was Miss Harkins. She sounded distressed. Charlotte had been rushed to the hospital with a cardiac seizure and could Bruce meet her at the hospital as soon as possible?

"I'll be right over," said Bruce.

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When he reached the hospital, Miss Harkins was waiting in the lobby. Aunt Charlotte had already been pronounced dead. He sat down beside the tearful woman, prim in her pill box hat (she never left the house without her hat), and lit a cigarette.

"She didn't suffer," Miss Harkins murmured.

"I'd better call the church."

"She'd want that."

"What's the name of the sexton?"

"Mr. Cobum."

For the next few days Bruce felt entrapped in some arcane brotherhood of lawyers, doctors, ministers and morticians, all of whom went through their mysterious rites of signs and symbols and code words with solemn pomposity. At the center of all this ritual was Bruce, feeling empty.

At the funeral services, Bruce sat in the front pew of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church with his cousin Malcolm whom he had not seen in over a year, and Malcolm's wife Esther, whom he detested. Aunt Charlotte's mahogany coffin stood in the chancel little more than an arm's length away. By her wishes, the casket was sealed. Aunt Charlotte did not want her privacy disturbed.

Music flowed softly, and the words of the priest were soothing. The candles on the altar gleamed against the dark polished wood of the sanctuary's interior. Every arch, molding, and carving of that vault was familiar to Bruce since childhood when he had explored the ceiling with his eyes during long dull sermons. His mother, sitting on one side of him, would disapprove of his preoccupation with the ceiling, but he would be reassured that his father, sitting on the other side, would be doing the same thing. He suspected that his mother found the rector's sermons just as dull as they did, but that attentive behavior was called for in the family tabernacle where God cast a benevolent eye on the passing of the generations.

Even now, sitting beside his cousins, Bruce felt the weight of family, whose presences seemed to prowl the recesses of the church, just as he had sensed their presence at the canal with Kevin. But here they moved with an ease of proprietorship only a little lower than the angels. To his left, the memorial window to his great-grandfather glowed in the reds and blues of St. John at Patmos. The organ that provided meditative inspiration for the mourners with themes from Faure's Requiem was a gift from his great-aunt Maude. Just visible to his right was the entry to the Sterling Chapel, designed for the intimacy of baptisms or solitary worship, funded by a shadowy ancestor of his named John Sterling, an eccentric bachelor of great wealth who, after providing for his Episcopal God, disappointed his potential heirs by willing the bulk of his fortune to endow a shelter for impoverished newsboys. Bruce had always wondered about John Sterling. Even in Aunt Charlotte's family album, there was no picture of him. Nor, in Charlotte's memory, were there any stories except for the strange provisions of his will. But Bruce felt his kinship perhaps more strongly than any other, except for the confined presence of Aunt Charlotte.

Both his mother and father had lain confined there in the chancel within six months of each other when he was thirty. His father had died first, frustrations pumping his blood to bursting and the hemorrhage flooding his skull. He died of other's expectations, clawing at him from beyond the grave—and left Bruce's mother to waste away in loneliness, letting a variety of vaguely-defined womanly ills waft her gently to him. Even as his mother lay dying, Bruce felt like an intruder in the realms of their life. He had always been more at home during his sojourns with Charlotte.

He walked away from the grave site, Esther beside him, talking. Esther always talked. About the care of their lawn. About church work. About her children and Malcolm's prostate. Bruce did not listen. The beauty of the foliage made him feel bleaker. In the grayness of his mind, only one color emerged . . . the color of Kevin's skin in the flush of its excitement.

Suddenly his wanting of Kevin was almost overpowering. Image after image, in lewd specificity, coursed through his mind as he walked toward the waiting limousine, Esther beside him, still talking, past the grave stones and flowering shrubs. He was beyond elegy, now—Charlotte interred beside his mother and father. His inner vision narrowed to one lingam of life—Kevin.

That evening, casting off a gaggle of remote relatives, he took Miss Harkins to dinner. It was a quiet meal. Miss Harkins was still in shock and she spoke haltingly. "I'm so glad you visited your aunt and brought that fine young man with you. Kevin . . . was that his name?"

"Yes. Kevin Stark."

"He cheered her up delightfully."

"I'm glad. He cheers me up, too." But Bruce hastened to change the subject. He asked if she had

relatives she might go and stay with; Charlotte's house would be lonely. But Miss Harkins shook her head.

Only a brother in Denver. After dinner, Bruce drove Miss Harkins back to Charlotte's house, waited until she climbed the stoop and let herself in. Then he drove back to his own apartment. It was nine in the evening. The night was warm and clear.

Bruce prowled his apartment. Kevin's presence was palpable, pervasive. Even his odors seemed to linger in the mahogany gloom and the folds of the draperies, pungent with raw animality. He saw the boy stretched out on the loveseat in the living room, strewn across the bed, emerging from the bathroom, bending over to take a soda from the refrigerator, peering through the window-curtains—above all, standing exultant, his feet planted apart, his arms upraised, a smile on his face and his eyes glistening.

But the apartment was empty. Bruce poured himself a brandy. He wanted to call Kevin, but he knew the family had drunk up the phone bill and the line was disconnected. He thought of calling Amory, but the thought seemed stale. He sipped his brandy, and let Kevin's body roam seductively through his imagination.

The urge came through the alcoholic fogs of his consciousness. He had to go for a walk, get out of the house, find people, warmth, the sound of voices, break out of the torpor of loneliness.

None too steadily, he put on a light jacket, locked the apartment door behind him, and headed out into the night. He told himself he was simply out for the air, but he walked, slow-footedly, toward Jefferson Square. Under ordinary circumstances Bruce would not have been caught dead cruising Jefferson Square, but these were not ordinary circumstances. His mind had retreated into the misbegotten habits of his late adolescence when encounters in Jefferson Square had been exquisitely sinister adventures that kept him aroused for days afterward. He knew no better then. Now he did. But he felt propelled there, just the same.

He remembered a special tree in the shadows behind the statue, a pine with shaggy overhanging boughs. Entering the Square, Bruce headed for that tree, wondering if it was still there, wondering how much it had grown. He passed the silent figures, wrapped in their watchful solitude, as he moved toward the lighted fountain and the massive statue of Jefferson behind it. All his impressions were slightly blurred, but still he felt a tremor of adolescent excitement, anticipating what he might find by that tree.

It was still there, smaller than he remembered. He leaned against the trunk to steady himself, lit a cigarette, and waited. The glow of the cigarette would announce his presence and availability—but not his face. When he was young, he would light a match, and hold it to advertise, however fleetingly, his looks. Now he liked the protective darkness; mature handsomeness did not always stimulate a quick attraction. Yet he yearned for sudden anonymous warmth that could be substitute—a sorry substitute to be sure—for Kevin.

He wished now he had not gone so heavy on the brandy. Even if he found someone in the darkness, he wasn't sure he could perform. He felt himself flaccid and could only trust to some skilled stimulation. Years ago it had been easy to find; now he was not all that confident. His eyes followed the moving solitary figures with a fretful intensity. Did they notice him? Were they repelled? Or after other quarry? He took a deep drag on his cigarette, to make the tip bum brighter, and then sneered at himself for trying to act like a courting glowworm. For an instant, he saw the whole exercise as monstrously silly. Then, as quickly, he was caught up again in his insistent need.

The need became a visceral pain as he saw two figures meet close to a nearby tree, pause before each other, then, their hands reaching, couple with motions as quick and desperate as two fighters. He knew that discovery, the miraculous blending of assent, and he felt more lonely than ever, mired in the miseries of adolescent yearning and detesting the retrogression. But he kept his back pressed against the tree and took another drag on his cigarette.

This time the glowworm was noticed. He saw a wandering form hesitate some yards away, then move slowly in his direction. He thought of Kevin, to arouse his body, as the figure approached. He felt an



inquiring hand on his crotch. Bruce reached out his own hand and felt the stiffness beneath his touch.

Assent.

Bruce was coming to a climax, tense and gasping, when a blinding flash of light hit his eyes. He heard guttural commands and was suddenly aware of commotion. People running through the trees, others chasing. Lights probed the darkness obscenely.

In the paroxysm of fear, Bruce climaxed. His partner leapt to his feet and started running away. Sirens sounded. Cries and curses peppered the darkness. As Bruce tried to get his pants adjusted, he felt a hand clamp his shoulder, the voice as bruising as the hand. "Into the wagon, faggot!"

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Bruce took a taxi home from the police station at four in the morning. He had been among the last of the men to be released. He felt numb. The very streets he passed—streets he had known all his life—were now alien, nightmarish in their hostility.

It was only when he got back to the apartment that the enormity of what had happened grew clear in his mind. He was at the mercy of some police reporter. If "B. M. Andrews"—the name on the police blotter—appeared in print, he would be wiped out in the city. Staring at the solidity of all the mahogany that surrounded him in the apartment, he wondered at the fragility of his life.

The cocoon of gay friendship was so deceptive, the support system so evanescent. Straights ran the world, and straights were carnivorous. How sweet it would be for some frustrated underpaid newsman to ferret out a scion of the city's more ancient lineage caught with his pants down in a public park! Even George and Gerald would have their snickers over Bruce McIntosh Andrews . . . caught. "My dear, wasn't he even satisfied with that gorgeous boy?"

Bruce cursed his drunken stupidity. He imagined himself wasting away in some banana republic . . . the last of the line, wallowing in his sterility, his ancestors sneering. He could only defend himself with tearful, drink-stained self-pity.

Bruce sat stone-still in his apartment and loathed himself.

What could he offer Kevin? What strength? What substance? What reality?

Bruce flung himself back onto the memories of the bed. Kevin demanding. Himself ridiculous in that cultivated sophistication that only asks . . . just. . . so . . . much. He knew he wanted the totality of Kevin, but could he ask?

But Kevin had given, without being asked. At the same time, he had doubted Kevin's gift. He could give it to anyone.

The streets. Those hostile streets. They were home to Kevin. If he was destroyed by the streets—and the Squares—Kevin could profit from them. He would go on—gamering his money from them—while Bruce was exiled by the tap of a newsman's typewriter.

He hated Kevin, arrogant in his youth, secure in his attraction. What had Bruce known of the old man who had blown him in Jefferson Square? He had met him—eye-to-eye—at the police station, stoop-shouldered, weary in his guilt, looking mostly at Bruce's crotch. He had watery eyes and thinning, wispy gray hair. Bruce had shuddered as he looked at this image of his future self, wandering the streets of the hostile city, searching like a scavenger for scraps of human contact.

Sleep was impossible. He lay on his bed and watched the curtains lighten with the dawn. In his mind, he heard, like a banshee wail, the screech of highspeed presses printing copy after copy of the morning's news for the city to read. The early city edition, he knew, would be at the corner newsstand around seven. He watched the hands of the bedside clock pass six. Six-thirty. At twenty to seven, he pushed himself out of bed, still fully clothed except for his shoes, poured himself a cup of instant coffee and sipped it, feeling lightheaded.

At five minutes to seven, still feeling light-headed, he walked down to the corner newsstand in the fresh morning air. Bob, the newsman, was still unwrapping the stacks of morning papers. He gave Bruce a

friendly smile of long acquaintance. "Up early this morning, eh, Mr. Andrews?"

"Yes, Bob." Bruce handed him a quarter. "Hard to sleep last night." He tried to keep his hand from shaking as he took the paper and tucked it under his arm as he always did. He tried to keep to his normal pace of walking as he left the newsstand, wondering if Bob read the papers he sold. He hoped not.

He headed for a nearby coffee shop and sat down at the far end of the counter to have room to spread out the paper. Cindy, the waitress, was cheerful. "Good morning, Mr. Andrews. Nice day today, huh?"

"Very nice," said Bruce.

"The usual?"

Bruce didn't know whether he could cope with two eggs, but he wasn't about to break the routine with any suspicious behavior. "That's right. Over easy."

As Cindy brought him a steaming cup of coffee, Bruce examined the front page. No story there. He opened the paper and scanned page after page.

He almost missed the story, buried at the bottom of the obituary page.

### **POLICE VOW CLEAN-UP OF JEFFERSON SQUARE**

**Acting on the complaints of near-by residents, Police Captain Edward L. Roche of the city's Fourth Precinct announced that twenty-three loiterers and undesirables had been picked up in the sweep through Jefferson Square last night at 10:00 P.M.**

**Jefferson Square is increasingly frequented by known homosexuals, Captain Roche said, with the intent to commit lewd acts on public property. "We intend to discourage this practice with unannounced clean-up actions."**

**Though withholding the names of those who had been picked up, Captain Roche said that the roster included "apparently substantial citizens of the city." He warned that in later raids, however, names and addresses would be released to the press.**

Bruce sat at the counter holding his head in his hands. Cindy came up with his eggs. "What's the matter, Mr. Andrews, are you sick?" Bruce shook his head. "Just a hangover."

Cindy stood back, looking at him clinically. "How about some tomato juice with Tabasco sauce?"

"No thanks. Just the eggs. They'll be fine," said an apparently substantial citizen of the city.

# TWENTY

The days since Kevin had fled Bruce's house seemed long and dreary to Kevin. It took effort to push through each waking hour, and by Thursday night Kevin felt that time had stopped altogether and that he would be suspended forever in a dim futility.

That evening, lying in bed, trying to sleep, he could hear Jake and Millie arguing in the bedroom downstairs from the attic. He tried to shut their voices out of his mind and lose himself in the remembrance of Bruce that was even now growing distant and mythical.

He hadn't had an orgasm since he had left Bruce and the dull lonely ache in his groin was getting worse. He ran his hand down under the covers and began to fondle his penis, thinking it was Bruce's hand, Bruce's lips. His penis stiffened.

But he could still hear the voices downstairs—Millie's growing shrill with querulousness—while all he could hear of Jake was short grunts, angry as an animal. They were at it again, and Kevin was weary of even hearing it.

He tried to focus his whole awareness on the slow-moving pressure of his hand on his penis, but as he did so, the bed creaked. He glanced across the attic room to Dennis's bed. He could detect no sound or motion. Dennis, he figured, was asleep. And good riddance. They hadn't been speaking much. Whatever relationship might have grown between the brothers Kevin now knew wasn't going to happen. The best he could do for Dennis was not to take a swing at him, and Dennis had done his best to keep out of Kevin's way.

Kevin felt utterly alone in the house.

The pressure of his hand on his penis moved faster, and he felt the involuntary surge through his pelvis.

Downstairs, Millie's voice rose to a shriek, followed by a loud thudding on the stairs to the ground floor.

Silence.

Kevin, still gasping from his climax, reared out of bed and went to the top of the attic stairs. "What's goin' on?"

A grunt from Jake. Then a slow distant moaning.

Kevin raced down the stairs, passed Jake standing swaying on the second floor landing, and went down to the ground floor where he found Millie crumpled at the bottom, her feet still incongruously on the lower steps, her head and torso on the floor. Her mouth was agape, and she was bleeding from a cut on her forehead.

Kevin glanced up the stairs at Jake. "What happened?"

"She fell."

"Well, c'mon down and help me get her up."

As Jake came, heavy-footed, down the stairs, Kevin turned back to Millie. "Hey, Ma, you all right?"

One eye opened, its pupil unfocused. She mumbled. "Goddamn cocksuckers." She spat into the air and the spittle fell back on her cheek, coursing down with the blood into her strewn hair.

Jake stood beside Kevin's kneeling figure. "We better get her upstairs to bed."

Kevin looked up at Jake. "Did you push her?"

Jake shook his head. "She fell." His eyes dampened. "You've seen her like that."

Kevin believed him. "Think we better get her to the hospital?"

Jake shrugged. "She's drunk. Nothin' happens to people when they're drunk."

They tried to get Millie up the stairs, but she kept slipping out of their grasp and sliding to the floor, limp as a cloth doll. They finally hauled her into the living room and laid her on the couch.

They stood beside each other, looking down at Millie. Jake said, "Give her a couple hours. She'll be okay." And he tromped upstairs to bed, shoulders sagging.

Kevin went into the kitchen and came back with some paper napkins. He wiped the spittle and blood off the side of her face,

straightened her dress, and put a coverlet over her. In the low light of the living room, her face looked gaunter than ever. Her hand, resting on the coverlet, seemed to Kevin little more than a bony claw. She was breathing through her mouth and her breathing was labored.

Kevin sat down on the chair next to the couch, to keep watch. If she had to go to the hospital that evening, he'd see that the ambulance was called. But he didn't want to call the ambulance if he could help it. He had a premonition that if she went to the hospital, she'd never get out alive. And what would that leave? Dennis, Jake, and Kevin? He shuddered at the possibility.

Millie survived the night. Kevin came down from the attic the next morning to find her creeping around the kitchen, complaining about her back. She apparently had no remembrance of what had happened the night before. Kevin ate his cereal and toast in silence, as if he were in mourning, and left for school.

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In history class, Mr. Graham was off on some cowboys-and-Indians thing about the settlement of the American West. For the first fifteen minutes, Kevin paid little attention. His mind was wrapped up, thinking about Millie and thinking about Bruce. He didn't give a damn about the Central Pacific Railroad or how many Chinese coolies died tunneling through the High Sierra with hammers and chisels. And as far as Kevin was concerned, Custer got what was coming to him. The Indians and the buffalo were the good guys.

But then Mr. Graham started talking about Conestoga wagons. Families pulling up stakes and moving West. Whole families. People. Single men. Pulling up stakes in their hometowns and heading for the spacious wilderness. No yammering hometown people any more. Just space and freedom to be one's self under the wide sky.

Suddenly Kevin was listening as intently as he had listened to Bruce talk about the canal. Those Conestoga wagons—he'd seen them on TV—began to have a very personal meaning to him. He imagined a long train of them, following the courses of broad rivers, heading out across open grass lands, lone men riding beside the wagons on horseback.

Who were these people? Why did they pull up stakes and get out?

What did they want? Mr. Graham had answers. They were going to California for gold or land, or to stretches of virgin mountain timber, or to find big ranges of grazing land, or to make a fortune in mining. Mr. Graham had lots of ideas about what those pioneers were headed for, but he didn't have much to say about why they left their homes and families.

"Some of the Western migration was made up of families of considerable means who sold their farms back east and headed west for better agricultural opportunity." Mr. Graham said, then added, "Others, especially single men, were ne'er-do-wells, malcontents, and misfits who could not adjust to the demands of an essentially puritan society." That is how Mr. Graham put it in that dry, even voice of his. Kevin glanced around at his classmates and sensed that those who were paying any attention were greatly relieved that their families had stayed in the East and didn't have "ne'er-do-wells, malcontents, and misfits" for ancestors.

But all Kevin could imagine was himself and Bruce, riding side by side on horseback, their horses' asses facing east as if to tell 'an essentially puritan society' to fuck off. He found the image sweet. In a flash of insight he felt a kinship with the shadowy history of those "ne'er-do-wells, malcontents, and misfits" who rode the plains into the setting sun. He felt he knew a secret meaning of the history of the West, and sitting there among his classmates, he treasured it. But he wondered where his "West"

would be. From what he had seen on TV, it sure wasn't California! All that seemed to happen out there was that cops raced around in cars, beating everybody up. Maybe that's what Mr. Graham meant by "an essentially puritan society." If so, it covered the whole damn country!

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Getting out of school that afternoon, Kevin started down Houghton toward Burkett, but after a block or so, he slowed his steps. The thought of going back to the wreckage of his mother was, right then, too much for him. For a moment, he hoped that they had taken her to the hospital, and then felt ashamed of himself. But he didn't want to go home . . . not yet.

He turned around and headed for Lenny's house to talk about wagon trains . . . desert islands . . . space colonies . . . anything. Maybe, if his mother was out, they could have sex, too. But he wasn't sure he wanted that. After sex with Bruce, Lenny didn't seem all that exciting. There were mysteries about Bruce that Lenny did not have. Still, Lenny was his friend. If Lenny wanted it. . . okay. He wanted to keep Lenny as a friend.

Walking up the stoop, he rang the buzzer to Lenny's apartment. In a few moments, he heard an answering buzz and climbed the stairs to Lenny's door. A woman answered the door. She was short and stout with a tight-clamped chin and fierce-looking blue eyes.

"Is Lenny here?"

The eyes grew fiercer. "You one of Lenny's friends?"

"Yes."

"Come in here, young man," her voice rasped. "I want to talk to you."

Kevin hesitated. He sensed a low bridge ahead. But if Lenny was in trouble, maybe he could help. He walked into the living room. The picture of Jesus on the wall blinked at him.

"Sit down," she commanded.

Kevin sat down on the chintz-covered couch. "Are you Lenny's mother?"

"That's right, young man. I'm Mrs. Jenkins."

Kevin wondered how a gentle flaky kid like Lenny could have such a mother. She moved like a truck. A small truck. Now she stood over him, her hands on her hips. He noticed she wore a cross on a chain around her neck.

That voice again: "Are you one of them kids that's been corrupting my Lenny?"

Kevin blinked, just like Jesus. "Corrupting?"

"You know what I mean! All that dirty stuff in the bedroom." Kevin tried to look puzzled. "Laundry?"

Mrs. Jenkins face reddened with rage. "Not laundry! That dirty stuff you do with your clothes off!"

"Sleeping?"

"YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN! Should I filth my mouth to say it?" Kevin looked around. "Where is Lenny now?"

"Oh-ho, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?" She prowled the room.

"So you could lay another hand on him. Drag him down into the pit of sin, lure him to damnation, yes, the fires of hell!" She pointed a shaking finger. "And it was happening right in there. Right in the bedroom of this holy house. I caught them. Naked as the day they were born, and what they were doing . . . Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! When I told Father Mooney—oh, you may be sure I told him everything—I thought the poor man would pass to the grave that such a thing would happen to my poor little Lenny, corrupted by some dirty boy!"

Kevin could barely believe what he heard. Was her "poor little Lenny" the guy he knew who had been at it like a rabbit since he was twelve? Didn't she know? Well, she knew now, and there was no stopping the woman.

"Oh, he was a rock for me, that Father Mooney. Him, praying over Lenny's immortal soul, and then calling up the Family Court judge to have him sent away from all those evil . . . dirty boys."

“Sent away?”

“Yes, sent away!” She dug a handkerchief out of the pocket of her housedress and wiped her eyes. “I’ve lost my Lenny. But God’s making him safe out there in the country with clean living and the good Dominican fathers to guide him in righteousness.”

“He’s been sent away to a training school?”

“Yes.”

“A boy’s training school?” -

“Yes. The blessed Father Mooney arranged it to get him away from this wicked city!”

Kevin tried to look solemn. But he knew that Lenny had at last been sent away to heaven, and that not another boy in the school—or a good Dominican father, for that matter—would be safe once Lenny hit his stride.

But Kevin had lost a friend.

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That afternoon, when Kevin got back from Lenny’s house, he found Millie back on the couch in the living room again, moaning. Jake was sitting beside her, watching television, his face stoic.

“Don’t you think we should get her to a doctor or something?”

Jake looked at Kevin, and Kevin suddenly understood that Jake was having the same thoughts he was; once Millie went, she’d be gone for good. He felt a certain welling sympathy for the old man. He wouldn’t have much left except all those memories of trolley cars.

But then there would be Miss Gotter, waddling into the situation, and talking about new foster homes for him and Dennis. Kevin felt panic. He was not ready for Miss Gotter, and never would be again! And with that resolve, he felt a new power in himself. He could live without Miss Gotter . . . the city government. . . the welfare system. Out there, in the city, was another system, and Bruce was part of it.

Kevin trudged down Houghton Street toward Gallatin Place through the evening rush-hour traffic, muttering to himself the words of the woman with the dog. “Tell him before he hears it from someone else.”

“Tell him.”

*“Tell him”*

And then an answering wail inside his head. “But he’ll call the cops! They’ll send me to prison!”

But Kevin kept walking, taking stiff-legged steps, his hands clenched at his side. He made one resolve to himself. He would not enter the house. Inside the house he’d be trapped. Outside, he could run.

He climbed the stoop of Bruce’s house, reached out, hesitated for a moment, and then pushed the buzzer. Waiting for an answering buzz, he felt light-headed and leaned against the door. He thought for a moment that he was going to pass out, but the vertigo passed. He waited, but there was no answering buzz. Bruce apparently hadn’t gotten home from work.

Kevin sat down on the stoop and scanned the street for a sight of Bruce’s car or Bruce’s figure walking down the street. No sign. He wondered what would happen when Bruce showed up. This was going to be a low bridge! But he had to tell him . . . had to . . . it was the only way.

He tried to calm himself down by examining the street. Gallatin Place reminded him of the picture he had seen in the waiting room of the welfare office. Gallatin Place looked like Houghton Street in 1880, the same even rows of brownstones with graceful stoops, the same overhanging trees. Nothing had changed here since the carriages had left, and the wealth seemed as solid as the buildings.

Gallatin Place was sure no place for the “ne’er-do-wells, malcontents and misfits” Mr. Graham had been talking about. The people who lived here stayed here and let the oddballs tame the West. Then what was Bruce doing here, he wondered, and what was he doing, waiting for him? They should both be out riding the range!

Kevin caught sight of Bruce walking toward the house, a newspaper tucked under his arm. But

something was different. He had no spring to his step. He walked warily as if he expected to be mugged, and his shoulders were hunched as if to ward off a blow.

As Bruce grew closer, he recognized Kevin and smiled. Kevin tried to smile back. But the grimace quickly faded and he felt lightheaded again. All he wanted to do was throw his arms around Bruce, but he knew that wouldn't do in the middle of Gallatin Place. Not with Bruce. Not now.

Bruce walked up the front steps. "Hi. Been waiting long?"

"Just a while."

"I've been looking forward to the weekend." Bruce took out his keys. "You can stay for the weekend, right?"

Kevin rose to his feet and stood rigid. "I don't know. That depends ..."

"Oh?"

". . . on you."

Bruce shot Kevin a quizzical glance. "On me? Well, c'mon in and let's talk about it."

Kevin shook his head. "No. Let's take a walk, instead. You may not want me to come inside . . . once you hear."

Bruce put his keys slowly back in his pocket. "What's the matter, young one? Do you have the clap?"

"No. Not that. It's just ... I want to talk."

"All right."

"Why don't we go over and sit in Jefferson Square?"

Bruce recoiled. "Any place but Jefferson Square. I'll tell you what. Why don't we drive up to Greystone Park and take a walk there?" "No. No . . . not Greystone Park."

Their eyes met and for a moment they were wordless in a shared discomfort. They descended the stoop together and started down the city streets, side by side, but there was a distance between them.

Kevin didn't know how to begin. Max and Amie . . . Dennis . . . Kenny . . . what could Bruce understand about kids like that? All he wanted to say was—yeah, I beat up Amory, and I'm sorry—and then run. Run? And never see Bruce again?

He gulped, and the words began to come. "You see . . . there's this graveyard over on Houghton Street . . . real old. They got head stones . . . and stone boxes . . . and little stone houses with ivy growing up the sides. It's all dead people and nobody ever goes there, not even the cops."

"I know. St. Luke's churchyard."

"I guess they call it that." Kevin kept looking straight ahead, his eyes on the pavement. "Anyway, that's where the kids in our neighborhood go to smoke dope, sniff paint, things like that ..."

"Sniff paint?"

"Yeah, spray paint. In a bag. It's a high." He glanced at Bruce who was shaking his head.

"Okay," Bruce said. "Go on."

"So anyway, a couple of months ago, a bunch of us were in the graveyard. I guess we were getting pretty high. And Max and Amie—they're older, eighteen, maybe nineteen—and they got this kid named Kenny that they fuck all the time—and they got a car, yuh know, with big tires on the back and twin pipes ..." Kevin gulped again. His mouth was dry. "Anyway, Max and Amie, when they get finished fucking Kenny, they say we're gonna go over to Greystone Park and beat up on some fags."

"WHAT?"

"Yeah, well, kids around our neighborhood, they're always doin' things like that. Yuh know, their folks tell 'em there's nothin' worse than a fag. So . . . why not?"

Bruce cleared his throat. "Now let me get this straight. Is Kenny a boy or a girl?"

"A boy. A kid. Maybe twelve or thirteen. He hangs around."

"And they were fucking him?"

"Sure."

“Go on.”

“So we all get into the car and go over to Greystone Park. And right by one of the entrances, yuh know, with the statue of the soldiers, there’s this place.”

Bruce’s voice was icy. “I know the place.”

“That’s where Max and Amie found ’em. We all closed in. Joe and Rico got one of ’em to the ground and . . . and ... I smacked him, hard, right in the face.” Kevin gasped, choking back a sob. “It was Amory.”

Bruce stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and glared at him. His voice cracked like a whip. “You lousy, no-good punk!”

Kevin looked down.

“You hurt Amory!”

“I did. And I told you.”

“A hell of a thing to tell me!”

“Do you want me to go?”

“Yes.”

The sob burst as he turned and started to walk down the street. But he had only gone a few steps before he felt a hand on his shoulder. He stopped, steadying himself against the hand, and looked up at Bruce through watery eyes.

Slowly they started walking back toward Gallatin Place. Neither of them said anything for a few blocks. Then Bruce started talking, his voice even, but weary. “It’s been a hard week. Aunt Charlotte died on Monday.” -

“You mean . . . the lady we saw that Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“Aw, that’s bad. I wanted to see her again.”

“At least you saw her once,” Bruce sighed. “After that, it was the funeral arrangements, the relatives, all that. I held myself together till the funeral yesterday, but I guess it hit me harder than I realized. At any rate, last night I had too much brandy ...”

Kevin, not knowing why, began to feel very uneasy.

“. . . and I went out. I shouldn’t have gone out. But I was lonely. I walked over to Jefferson Square.”

“Why did you do that?”

“To find a trick.”

Kevin felt his anger begin to boil. “After last weekend . . . you had to go out and find yourself a trick?”

“Yes.”

Kevin clenched his teeth and his fists. He thought about smacking Bruce. Then he thought about running. But he just kept walking.

And Bruce talked. “The cops raided the square. They took me in.

I spent most of last night at the station house. But they let us go. No publicity. A close call. I’m tired.”

Bruce and Kevin sat on the front stoop of the house on Gallatin Place for a long time without saying anything.

Finally Bruce said, “Shall we go in?”

“All right.”

Lying in bed in the darkness, close together, Bruce said to Kevin, “I think it’s time we got the hell out of this town.”

“I think so, too.”

“A friend of mine has been after me to take a job in New York. I think I’m going to take it. Would you like to come with me?”

“Yes,” said Kevin. “Yes . . . yes . . . yes.”



As they went to sleep in each other's arms, Kevin thought about all those "ne'er-do-wells, malcontents, and misfits." They weren't riding the range any more. They were riding the New York subways.

Kevin's sleep was fitful. Images of fantastical skylines kept going through his mind. He thought of Greenwich Village as some Disneyland of faggotry and conjured up awesome dockside debauches. New York, he was sure, was where it all happened. Some of the other hustlers on Riverfront Road had been there and they'd told him stories about it. Now he was going there with Bruce. To live. Maybe.

Or maybe Bruce would wake up in the morning and decide it wasn't such a good idea after all, and he'd end up having Max and Amie selling him to a bunch of Puerto Ricans. Mostly he thought the threat was bullshit, but there was just a chance that Max and Amie could do it. Bruce . . . New York . . . was refuge.

He propped himself up on one elbow and looked at Bruce's figure beside him in the dim light from the windows. Some very heavy thoughts stirred in his mind. It couldn't be just refuge, as the

Crimmins had been refuge, as Millie and Jake were supposed to be refuge. Nobody would be paying Bruce to keep him with him as the Crimmins had been paid as foster parents. Nobody would be giving the blessing of the Welfare Department to his staying with a natural parent. He had no blood ties with Bruce. Then what was he to Bruce? And what was Bruce to him?

Even if they got to New York and were settled in, what was to stop Bruce from getting tired of the arrangement one fine day, breaking the whole thing up, and giving Kevin a ticket home? What incentive did Bruce have to keep him, house him, feed him, clothe him, and school him? Sure, Bruce had money, but there was a lot more than money involved and furthermore he might have other ways to spend his money.

Kevin thought about that a long time in the darkness. Whatever Bruce and he were to each other ... it was different from the Crimmins, different from Jake and Millie. To them, to the Welfare Department, he was just a kid to be cared for, somehow. But to Bruce, he was another person and he'd have responsibilities he had never had before. He had to make Bruce want to keep him. And that was a very heavy thought, indeed.

Kevin ran his hand over his body. He knew the power of that body and he had every intention of using it to its fullest. He needed Bruce just as much as Bruce needed him, and he would keep Bruce well-reminded of that fact. But sex could be a sometime thing. What else did he have? Hustling gave him no clue; the men were gone before he knew their names. Mr. and Mrs. Crimmins were so settled in their placid aging that their signals of relationship were barely perceptible. And, as far as Kevin was concerned, all Jake and Millie did was scream at each other. What did any of them have to tell him about Bruce? All he had was his own insights. But they came to him, if only in scattered images and tenuous hints.

He thought of sitting on the loveseat, the lightness of his skin contrasting with the dark brown of the woodwork and the blackness of the horsehair upholstery. He remembered the sadness in Bruce's eyes as he looked at the empty canal and talked about being the last of the line. His lips seemed parched till Kevin kissed him, and his voice brittle as he talked to waiters—even to Gerald and George.

Even to Amory. But the voice softened as he talked to Kevin.

He almost never heard Bruce laugh. A dry chuckle at times, and a frosty smile. But at the otter pen at the Zoo, Bruce had laughed. Not even the custard pies had made him laugh, but the otters did. Kevin had observed the otters carefully.

Mostly he thought about lights, that blaze of color in the graveyard and the rockets that went off in his head as he climaxed. Bruce had seen those colors all over the northern sky.

# TWENTY-ONE

At four that Monday afternoon Bruce entered the offices of Simpson, Caldwell and Wiggs, attorneys on State Street. The offices were familiar to him, sedate and hushed, every provincial's image of the sacred chambers of Sullivan and Cromwell. He had picked up Gerald at his office often and always admired how well he blended into the environment.

George and Gerald's apartment was a vivid contrast, an arrangement of Art Deco that reminded Bruce of the foyer of a men's room at Radio City Music Hall. But at his law office, Gerald kept his cover. Despite all the sleek consoles and copying machines around, Bruce suspected that the real business of the firm was done with quill pens.

The young lady at the reception desk smiled at him. "Hello, Mr. Andrews. Mr. Sanderson is on the phone, but I think he'll be off in a few minutes. Have a seat."

"Thanks." Bruce settled himself and lit a cigarette. He tried to act appropriately casual, but he felt a roiling tension. What had been private, intimate, even playful was now about to become public. He was about to commit an official act. Sitting in the law offices, he realized that he was only vaguely aware of the consequences of that act. For the first time in his life, he was going to take responsibility for another human being.

Heterosexuals seemed, on the surface at least, so easygoing about it. Investors would sit across the desk from Bruce while he set up complex bond portfolios "to take care of the kids," even at the expense of small luxuries in their retirement. Bruce had always felt faintly condescending about the self-denial—the price of "normality." But he knew that once he committed this official act, he could be condescending no longer. He'd have his own kid to take care of.

He combed through the memories of his own adolescence, remembering how he assumed his parent's responsibility for him as blithely as the air he breathed and how he had staged his little rebellions to test the strength of it. Would Kevin start testing him? And would he, suddenly confronted with another adolescent, have the strength to survive the test? Kevin was a very smart young man and quite capable of playing games.

But he had taken his parents for granted. Kevin had few such assumptions, and his growing awareness of his own gayness (so much more mature than Bruce remembered in himself) was going to cut him off from what little he had. Kevin was alone as he had never been alone and seemed to hunger for a bonding, asserting his need to Bruce in a hundred youthful ways. Would Kevin's deprivation make the difference?

There was no way he could know. And for the gayness in the relationship, he knew of no rules, custom, or tradition. All he could think of was Emperor Hadrian and young Antinous, and that comparison didn't quite seem to fit the situation. He knew of no precedent for his official act.

He knew that the move to New York was no panacea. A fresh start, yes, in a broader spectrum of gay life. But queer-bashers plied their trade in Central Park with as much viciousness as they did in Greystone Park and with as much parental approval. Kevin would still have trouble with his peers, and Bruce would still have to maintain his cover on his job. Both Bruce and Kevin would be the same people in the same society, even if the polyglot population allowed for a little more breathing room. The majority of New York was its minorities and they had to live together, somehow. Chuck Ryerson, making his stroking pitch to Bruce about the job in New York, had said, "Hell, man, up here, we're all Puerto Ricans." And Bruce McIntosh Andrews, III, rather liked the idea.

Still, Bruce was moving into the unknown. But he'd be damned if he'd share his private anxieties with Gerald.

"Mr. Sanderson will see you now," the receptionist said. Bruce walked down the corridor to Gerald's office.

Gerald greeted him at the door with a manly handshake and a hail-fellow voice, gestured him to a chair, and shut the office door behind them. The heavy rug and the curtains shrouded the room in a sepulchral quiet, a place for whispered conspiracies.

But Gerald's voice was at normal level, with only a little extra lilt to it. "You'd think that our boy scout police commissioner would have something better to do with his troops than chasing people out of bushes in Jefferson Square."

"You knew about that?"

"I read the papers. It must have been very trying for you."

"My name wasn't in the papers."

"Oh, I know. But a friend of George's—Jack Welton—was caught up in the same raid. He recognized you down at the precinct house." Bruce and Gerald's eyes met. Bruce felt as if he stood before a judge. "I was crooked. Charlotte's death shook me up considerably." "Yes, I was sorry to hear about Charlotte. I wanted to make it to the funeral but I felt ..." Gerald shrugged just ever so slightly, ". . . that it was your family time."

Bruce shook his head. "You and George are family. My family. Damn sight more so than those cousins of mine."

Gerald's voice softened. "But family of a different sort."

"I know." -

Gerald ran his hand across his forehead. "But why, Bruce? After that gorgeous young thing we saw you with at the Museum, why the pits of Jefferson Square? Isn't he laying back for you?"

"Beautifully." Bruce fought for control. "I missed him after the funeral. I needed him. And there was no way I could get in touch with him."

A silence. Bruce felt Gerald looking at him, but he didn't look back. He was not about to make a fool out of himself in Gerald's office.

Gerald spoke slowly. "He means a great deal to you, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"And it was obvious, when I saw you two together, that you mean a great deal to him."

"I hope so."

"Oh, come, Bruce. The child is voraciously possessive and if you'd let him, he'd tie you up at the baths and eat you alive . . . just for love. Amazing, these young gays. No sense of proportion. Now, George, on the other hand ..."

Bruce held up a hand. "Spare me the latest."

Gerald laughed and put his hands flat on the desk as if he were concluding the interview. "Well, Bruce, as far as the raid is concerned, I understand the charges have been dropped. I think we've heard the last of it. Just stay out of Jefferson Square, and enjoy that beautiful chicken of yours. Just remember, though, you are messing with jail bait. Avoid lover's quarrels."

A pause. Clearly, Gerald expected Bruce to rise. But Bruce stayed in his chair. "I didn't come to see you about the raid."

"Oh? Charlotte's estate? Carrington's handling that, isn't he? You could be quite well off."

Bruce shook his head. "I'm here to see you about Kevin."

"Kevin?"

"Yes." He hesitated and then plunged in. "The raid. It seemed to bring everything to a head. The whole city suddenly seems hostile like the face of the cop who pulled me in. Strange, I've lived here, off and on, all my life. And then Charlotte's death, and the raid ..." He snapped his fingers. "Everything's changed. Inside my head. The city ... I don't belong here anymore."

"An emotional reaction."

"A change of vision. It was there all along. Suddenly I saw it."

“Saw what?”

“Everything. The past. It’s pulling me under.”

“Bruce, old boy, you’re not making sense.”

“It makes sense to me.”

Gerald sighed. “What’s this got to do with the young man . . . Kevin?”

The whole conversation was getting painful for Bruce. It had all seemed so clear when he walked into Gerald’s office. Now, under Gerald’s cool, lawyerly eyes, his determination seemed bizarre, the rightness of the weekends just past preposterous. Gerald was not just a lawyer, but a member of the family “of another sort.”

“I’m pulling up stakes. I’m going to New York.”

“Well, this is news!”

“Chuck Ryerson’s a classmate of mine from college. It took us a long time after we graduated to find out that each of us was gay . . . both of us being in the investment business and all that. But one evening . . . I was visiting New York . . . we found out about each other. After laughing our heads off, we got gloriously drunk. I’ll never forget it. We must have hit every gay bar south of fourteenth. And in our business suits, too, with vests . . .”

Gerald was tapping his fingers on the top of his desk. “Bruce. You are digressing.”

Bruce felt guilty. He didn’t want to go on, but he did. “At any rate, Chuck’s been wanting me to come up and join his outfit to set up a municipal bond operation because he is under the impression that I’m the greatest thing in municipal bonds since John Mitchell.”

“Not very flattering.”

“Chuck is morally eclectic.”

“Well? . . .”

“Today, I called him up and told him I was ready to move.” He looked at Gerald straight in the eye. “I want to take Kevin with me.” Gerald ran his hand through his thinning, neatly-combed hair. “Oh, my God, I was afraid that was coming!”

The two men sat across the desk and looked at each other. When Gerald spoke, it sounded as if he were reciting the Code of Justinian. ‘Transporting a minor across state lines for obviously immoral purposes without leave or knowledge of his responsible guardians. Kidnapping. Statutory rape. Violation of the Mann Act. Corrupting the morals of a minor. Do you want me to go on? An eager prosecutor could probably work a charge of arson in there somewhere, along with an infamous crime against nature, breaking and entering the child’s beautiful little buns. As your attorney, friend, and an officer of the Court, do you expect me to countenance this madness?’

Bruce arched one eyebrow. “The law, sir, is a ninny.”

Gerald’s voice grew sonorous. “The law, damn it, is the law!”

“Compounded in ignorance of social realities in our subculture, as both you and I know perfectly well.”

“The law does not recognize the realities of ‘our subculture’—as

you call it—as both you and I know perfectly well.” He glared at Bruce. “Nor do our jails.”

“It’s about time it did!”

Gerald held his head in his hands. “All right, tell me the story.”

“I told you. I’m going to New York.”

“Tell me the story about Kevin.”

For the next ten minutes, Bruce told Gerald everything he knew about Kevin, what his impressions of the boy were, what Kevin had told him, what details had inadvertently slipped out in conversation, and what he had implied. And he summed it up. “What I suggested to Kevin was the only reasonable solution to an untenable situation. And I want to go through with it.”

Gerald was doodling on a legal pad. "How do you know what Kevin is telling you is the truth? Adolescents have fantasies, and they dramatize."

"I know he is either going to run away if his mother goes to the hospital, which is the end of his education, or he is going to do away with himself, which will be the end of him."

"Are you sure?"

Bruce thought about the past weekends. "Yes, I am sure."

"Are you prepared to consider what this will mean to you, personally? Trying to make your way in a new job, in a new city, and having to cope with some changeable teenager who, after spending his childhood banging around from one foster home to another, has obviously been damaged, and may take that damage out on you? I mean, picking up an occasional chicken on Riverfront Road doesn't qualify you to take responsibility for the day-to-day guidance of a maturing human being. Faggot life-style is not very tolerant of intrusions on its egocentricity, and you, my dear Bruce, have been involved in such a life-style since you graduated from college. Charity precludes me from mentioning how long ago that was. Just how many dirty socks are you prepared to put up with?"

Bruce tried to suppress a feeble grin. "As many as it takes to get him to put them in the laundry bag."

"You know what I mean."

"I know that my egocentricity is becoming a crashing bore, if that's what you mean. I'm the last of the line. What have I got to look

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forward to? A portrait of the aging faggot with cats? No. I have my own 'line' to care for, and it is about time that I got my act together and did it."

It was Gerald's turn to hesitate. The doodles on his legal pad grew harsh.

But Gerald's voice was as incisive as ever. "Do you really think that there is the slightest possibility that the child's mother is going to sign over her son's welfare to a man she has never even met?"

"I don't know."

"Unlikely."

"That is up to Kevin's . . . persuasiveness. What I want from you is the custody papers that she can sign if Kevin is able to persuade her."

"And then you would move out of state?"

"Yes."

Gerald tapped his pencil on the legal pad, frowning.

"I can prepare a document giving you permission to take care of the child. I doubt if it would hold up in court if she wanted him back before he's sixteen, but he'll be sixteen soon, won't he?"

"Yes. But I think I'll need some kind of a paper to get him into school."

Gerald nodded. "Expensive, in New York City, if you are sending him to private school."

"I have savings. I'll have a job. And I know some of the details of Aunt Charlotte's will." Bruce stared off into space. "I don't think Aunt Charlotte would mind if she knew where some of her money was going."

# TWENTY-TWO

Kevin walked down Houghton Street toward Burkett, carrying in his hand the large, light blue, official-looking envelope that Bruce had given him. He had made a special trip over to Gallatin Place to get it after school, and he clutched it in his hand as if it were his last possession on earth.

It was up to him, now. Inside the envelope—in three copies—was the life he might have, or might not have. And the choice depended on the whim of a sick, distracted alcoholic woman . . . but a woman who loved him.

He walked down Houghton Street as if he were a stranger. Whatever way the choice went, he would not be there much longer. If he couldn't get to New York with Bruce, he'd split for Washington alone and to hell with Miss Gotten Other hustlers had told him how to make out on DuPont Circle or New York Avenue, around the bus station. "Always pick the johns driving around in government plates," one worldly hustler had advised him. "They pay better and you don't have no trouble with 'em." And he had heard dazzling figures—twenty, forty, even fifty dollars a throw. He knew he could live on money like that, even in Washington. Other kids did it.

But he'd be alone. He'd be at the mercy of older kids like Max and Amie, and he knew what they'd do to him. There wouldn't be any Bruce.

He stood for a moment in front of the house on Burkett Street, and all he could think of was Bruce saying "Lo-o-o-ow Bridge!" Then he thought "But I'm comin' through!" He squared his shoulders and walked into the house.

When he got into the house, his shoulders drooped. Millie was on a rampage, her hair streaming, her voice a strangled croak. Jake and Dennis were just standing there, close beside each other. "I ain't goin'! I don't care what no goddamn doctor says. I ain't goin'! Yuh unnerstan?" She took a defiant swig from the glass in her hand. "An' when they come, I'm tellin' 'em to get the hell outa here! Yuh unnerstan'?"

She collapsed on the couch, her breathing coming in heavy gasps. But her eyes were as watchful as a cornered animal.

Dennis drew still closer to Jake. "Ma ..."

"Shuddup!"

"It's just . . ."

"Don't back-talk your mother! I'm tellin' yuh!" She swept the room with flashing eyes. "You're all gangin' up on me! Trying to get rid of me!" She focused on Kevin for the first time. "Even little Kevie. Your own mother! Yuh wanna put away your . . . natural . . . mother!"

Kevin felt the stab and flinched.

Jake's voice sounded tired. "You're sick, Millie. They can help you at the hospital."

"I ain't goin' to no hospital! I been at the hospital. I got out of the hospital. I ain't . . . goin' back!" The room was silent for a moment. All that was audible was Millie's labored breathing.

Kevin clutched the envelope in his hand and wondered in panic when the ambulance was coming.

Millie's breathing grew tremulous, and her body, seated on the couch, seemed to shrivel. Her bony arms were crossed over her chest. She began to rock back and forth. "I didn't do nothin'. Just tried to get well, so I could give my babies a decent home. Month after month, in that goddamn hospital! Then the doctor said I could go. Yeah, I was well. I could get out. Oh, what thoughts I had then! What wonderful things were going to happen!" She glared around the room, her eyes passing from Dennis to Jake to Kevin. "This!" Her laughter crackled with bitterness. "'Least in the hospital somebody's around. Yeah, somebody's always around. Maybe in the next bed it's some crazy old crock, but she's there—yuh unnerstan'—she's there.

She ain't goin' nowhere. Not gallivantin' all over town or stuck there in front of the television set. No.

She's there, an' yuh can say 'hello' to her, an' she answers back. How 'bout that? She answers back." Her voice was reedy, now, and her eyes had a distant look.

Kevin had a crawling feeling that part of her wanted to go back to the hospital, wanted to curl up in a bed, wanted to drift into death. That part of her would sign the papers. He crossed the room and sat down on the couch beside her, putting the envelope on the coffee table in front of them, along with his school pen.

"Ma . . ."

She looked at him, her eyes in uncertain focus. "Yeah . . .?"

"I want to talk to you."

She nodded. "Yeah, talk to your mother."

Jake and Dennis, he noticed, grew alert, and curious, which made Kevin more nervous than ever. He wished they weren't around, but there seemed to be no way to get them out of the house. He turned his full attention to Millie.

"Ma . . . Ma, listen to me . . ."

Her eyes focused on him. "I'm listening."

Kevin was panicked into silence. He toyed with the envelope in front of him and Millie's eyes shifted from his face to his hand. "Whatcha got there?"

"Papers."

"What kind of papers?"

Kevin felt everything slipping away from him. Bruce. New York. Everything. He gulped and braced himself. "Ma ... I want to talk to you."

Her voice was petulant and angry. "Well . . . say whatcha gotta say!"

Jake and Dennis just stood there, watching. Kevin hated them for it.

Then he thought of Lenny. Smooth-talking, street-wise, Lenny. The kid from underground. His underground, too. Survival. No matter what else . . . survival. He felt its wrongness, and its rightness. He tried to talk like Lenny. The veiled way Lenny could talk. Even to his mother—now—he could talk like that.

"Ma, the hospital will do you good. They'll take care of you like you should be taken care of. And you'll get well. And you'll get out again, feelin' fine. And we'll all be together again ..."

That distant look came back into her eyes. Kevin kept on talking, her voice low and gentle. "No need to worry about us. Jake can take care of Dennis, and I've got a place to stay."

Everyone was looking at him, now. All he could think was 'Keep talking, Kevin, keep talking . . .'

"I've got a friend. He lives on Gallatin Place, and he'll take care of me good till you get out of the hospital."

Millie looked at him sharply. She had a puzzled frown. "You got a friend ... on Gallatin Place?"

Kevin nodded. "Yeah, Ma."

"How come you met somebody who lives in a fancy part of town like that?"

"I met him. And he's got money. He can take care of me good."

"Money?"

"Yeah, Ma. He's got a big job downtown and a real nice apartment and a car and all that, and he can take care of me while you're in the hospital."

Jake spoke up. "That sounds like a good idea."

Millie looked around the room, the frown still on her face, and then turned back to Kevin. "What makes yuh think he'll take care o' yuh? You're just a kid."

Kevin opened the envelope. His hands shook just a little as he pulled out the crisp, immaculately typed papers, and unfolded them in front of Millie. "My friend, Bruce, had these papers drawn up for you to sign."

She picked up one of the papers and looked at it with bleary eyes. "A lawyer done this. Never can figure out what they're talking about."

Kevin kept talking. "It's just a transfer of custody, Ma, till you get well."

Millie handed the paper to Jake. "What's this all about?"

Jake put on his glasses and looked at the document, Dennis peering over his shoulder. Jake nodded his head as he read, and Kevin suddenly realized that Jake was on his side. Jake must be as ready to get rid of the responsibility as Kevin was to leave. He wondered just what Jake and Dennis had going between them, and then he quickly decided he didn't want to know. He just wanted to get out. But there was Millie . . .

Kevin went on talking. "It'll work out just fine. I won't be trouble to Jake or anybody. I'll come and visit you at the hospital ..."

Millie was suddenly galvanized and she spat out the words. "But I ain't going to no hospital! Yuh hear? You're all just sweet-talkin' me, trying to get rid of me!" She swept the copies of the paper off the coffee table onto the floor. "No need to sign anything, 'cause I ain't leavin'!"

Jake looked up from the paper. "You're sick, Millie. If you stay around here, you'll only get sicker."

"I ain't sick!" said Millie with a gasp. "And I ain't gonna be locked up!"

She glared at Kevin, and then a fit of coughing wracked her body. The veins stood out on her neck and her eyes glazed as spasm after spasm shook her. Finally she was still. The only sound in the room was the rasp of her breathing. Her hand moved like a blind person's until she found the glass of Seven 'n Seven on the coffee table and brought it to her lips with both hands.

"Ma ..." Kevin said. "Don't ..."

She glared at him again. "I'm gonna have a drink when I wanna drink!" And she took a gulp.

She barely got the glass back to the table before the coughing started once more. Kevin put his arm around her, clutching her bony shoulder as he tried to quiet her and fighting back the tears that seemed about to flood his eyes. He was lying to her. Telling her she was going to get well when the death-odor seemed to hang in the room. Telling her he was coming to see her in the hospital when he'd be in New York with Bruce. Sweet-talking her. His natural mother.

But . . . she had to sign those papers! Now.

As the coughing subsided, she put her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Kevie . . . Kevie ..." she murmured. "It's hard, livin'."

Jake finished reading the document and put it back on the table. Millie straightened up, and looked at Jake. "What does it say?"

"What Kevin says it says. You transfer custody to some fella named Andrews who lives on Gallatin Place. Clear enough. No money either way."

Kevin picked up the copies from the floor. "Ma, it's just in case . . ." He put the pen right beside the papers.

Slowly, Millie's hand reached down and picked up the pen. She held it poised while Kevin showed her where to sign. But then the hand was motionless. "I want to meet this Andrews man."

"Sure, Ma. Sure." He guided her hand down to the paper.

"He hired a lawyer, just to write all this stuff? Just for you?"

"Yes, Ma."

A pause. Kevin held his breath.

Millie nodded her head slowly. "He must be a nice man."

She signed the three copies of the document, and Jake signed as witness.

Fifteen minutes later, the ambulance came. As Jake let the two attendants in the door, Millie screamed, "I ain't goin'!" She threw herself into Jake's arms. "Don't let 'em do it, Jake!" Jake held her shaking body. Then, softly. "I'll be comin' with you, Millie. Nothin' to worry about. I'll be with you."



Silence.

Millie's shoulders slumped.

She kissed Dennis. Then she kissed Kevin. "You'll come and see your mother, won't you?" -

"Sure, Ma."

She walked out the door on Jake's arm, the two attendants following.

Clutching the papers in his hand, Kevin ran up the stairs to the attic room, flung himself down on his bed, and cried.

# TWENTY-THREE

Six months later, Amory Borden and Gerald Sanderson lunched together at a small table in a quiet corner of the dining room of the Merchant's Club.

Sipping his sherry on the rocks, Gerald said, "I still think the whole arrangement is grotesque."

Amory shrugged. "But you have to admit, so far it's been durable."

"How do we know? Bruce may be just throwing himself away on that child. Destroying himself. Tragic."

"I haven't gotten that impression."

"Have you seen him? Have you been up there for a visit?"

"No. But I'm planning on going to New York next week."

"But how do you know, now?"

"We talk on the phone once in a while. He seems in good spirits." Gerald snorted. "Putting up a front. He's good at that."

Amory toyed with his shrimp cocktail. "He and Kevin were down here a few months ago."

"Oh?"

"Briefly."

"What for?"

"Kevin's mother died. They came down for the funeral."

"I didn't know that."

"I had a drink with them before they left. But it wasn't a very communicative meeting."

"Understandable."

"Still . . ."

"Still . . . what?"

"They were together. It's been six months now."

"Bizarre."

Amory stared across the table at that impeccable man and he felt a kind of rage. He had known Bruce's desolation. But Amory was a polished man and this was, after all, the dining room of the Merchant's Club. Offensive behavior would be frowned upon.

Amory's tone was sweetness itself. "Has it crossed your mind, Gerald, that we might not know one goddamn thing about it?"

Gerald's tone was sweetness returned. "For an ex-lover you are being very tolerant."

The waiter brought the fish. Scrod. Very good that day.

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New York City, to Amory, was freedom. No need to watch his step. No need to hunch his shoulders as he went into a gay bar, or wonder who he might meet turning a corner at the baths. New York was the place he could be himself and he relished every trip, from the tingle of anticipation he would feel as he stepped off the train at Penn Station to the sated fatigue as he would settle in the train seat for the trip home.

Yes, he had been the soul of tolerance in his conversation with Gerald about Bruce, but in the privacy of his thoughts, he was damned jealous of Bruce for having had the courage to pull up stakes and head for New York. Manhattan was liberated territory.

Now as the train pulled into Penn Station, Amory collected his hat, overcoat, and overnight bag and, stepping off the train, he gave a happy sigh. A light snow was falling as he hailed a cab. By the time he

checked into his hotel on lower Fifth Avenue, it was nearly six. He was due at Bruce's apartment on the Upper West Side at six-thirty.

He walked briskly past the shoe stores, bookstores, and Greek restaurants on Eighth Street, the snow prickling his face with chill. He crossed Sixth Avenue and headed down Christopher Street to the Seventh Avenue subway. West of sixth was another land. He felt like a citizen returned from exile, and walked with the same studied ease he noticed in other men who passed him by—alone or in couples in varieties of native uniform, denim or leather. He felt disguised in his business suit, and considered the possibility that passport verification might be needed on Christopher Street.

He got off the subway at 86th and Broadway, and braced himself against a gusty wind as he headed west toward the Hudson. He had not visited Bruce in New York and he wondered what he would find at that Riverside Drive address. Dirty socks and the detritus of youth littering all that Victorian furniture? Ear-shattering records on the stereo? Posters of the pel vises of male rock stars? He had resisted Gerald's presumptions of grotesquery, but now, as he turned the corner through swirling eddies of snow, he was not so sure that Gerald might not be right, and that Bruce might be being consumed by carnivorous youth. So easy for gays, having little day-to-day contact with the obstreperous processes of growth, to be romantic about such a liaison. But Bruce had now had six months of reality. Had he survived? And if so, what were the modes of survival, the equations of relationship, the balance of dependencies that made survival possible?

As Amory confronted the entrance of the large apartment building, he felt almost like an anthropologist stepping out on a riverbank in New Guinea to find out how the natives coped and what strange customs had evolved in their jungle culture. But as the wind whipped by him, he felt it more likely that he was investigating Eskimos on the Canadian tundra.

The doorman announced him and, as he took the elevator up to the tenth floor, he gave a whispered wail of anxiety. "Bruce, my beloved ex, just what the hell have you gotten yourself into?" Even in the broad spectrum of gay relationships this was—he had to agree with Gerald—"bizarre."

Shortly after he rang the buzzer at apartment 10 B, he heard Kevin's voice. "Lo-o-o-ow bridge!" And Bruce opened the door.

After the gloom of the winter evening, Amory felt suddenly bathed in light. The walls of the living room were a spacious white, and there wasn't a piece of Victorian furniture visible. The furniture was muted modern with upholstery in bright solid colors. If Bruce wasn't standing before him, he'd have thought he had wandered into the wrong apartment.

But Bruce was there, and behind him, Kevin.

"Welcome!" said Bruce.

"Thanks." Amory rubbed his hands together. "It's cold outside."

Kevin came forward. "Here, let me take your coat."

Amory shed his snowflecked raincoat and, with a shake, handed it to Kevin. As Kevin hung it in the closet, Bruce led Amory into the living room, his arm around his shoulder. "Have a seat. What can I get you to drink? The usual scotch and water?"

Amory grinned. "I haven't changed much." He looked around the room. "But this! ..."

"Like it?"

"Great. The new Bruce."

As Bruce disappeared into the kitchen, Amory stared out the window. Below him, visible in the street lights, was the whitened landscape of Riverside Park. In the distance, the towers on the Jersey shore could be seen through the snow flurries.

Amory was aware that Kevin was standing beside him. "Nice view, huh?"

"It sure is."

"When the sun comes in in the afternoon, the whole place just. . . shines."

“I can imagine.” He glanced at Kevin. His chin was growing firmer, more defined. He suspected that he now had to shave two or three times a week. But there was a boyish glow in his eyes as he looked out the window.

Amory fought a desire to pepper the young man with questions that might befit an anthropologist; he knew good anthropologists rarely asked direct questions. They looked and listened.

Bruce came out of the kitchen with mixed drinks for Amory and himself, a bottle of beer for Kevin. They settled on the couch with Kevin on a sidechair. Amory noted that Bruce was as understatedly casual as ever—cashmere sweater, gray slacks and loafers. But Kevin wore heavy workshoes, Levis, and a flannel shirt. No sartorial concessions in either direction. Kevin’s auburn hair was not as long as he remembered it, neither was it as short as Bruce’s.

The living room was not as large as he had first thought. The white walls along with the sparse furnishings had created a generous illusion. He estimated it was smaller than the cluttered apartment on Gallatin Place, but it looked a good deal larger. Seated on the couch, Amory could see through the open door to the bedroom. A low double bed was covered with a bright red spread.

The new Bruce. Neat, simple, and sweet.

But Kevin was evident, too. Against the wall by the window was a leanly-designed wooden desk. On the desk, a typewriter and papers. Above the desk, two shelves of formidable looking school-books. But the most startling evidence of Kevin was right before him beneath the glass of the coffee table. Amory was fascinated by this compendium of American history in miniature—Kevin’s toy collection. It was like no other toy collection he had ever seen. A locomotive with flaring smokestack. Toy soldiers in Revolutionary dress. A pig penny bank painted red, white, and blue. A Conestoga wagon. A canal barge with a load of coal. A buckboard with a horse in front.

They were iron toys. They were old. But the colors were still bright with circuslike variety. Yet each object seemed to be centered in a universe of its own, evoking images around it. The wagon seemed to move through grassland. The locomotive huffed through rocky gaps in the Appalachians. A ghostlike banjo player rode the buckboard. He imagined the Revolutionary soldiers on the shores of Lake Champlain.

Amory noticed that both Bruce and Kevin were watching him as he scanned the pieces. Bruce said, “Kevin found the canal barge somewhere and after that there was no stopping him.”

“It’s a great collection,” Amory said.

Kevin smiled, and opened a casement door on the side of the coffee table. “Would you like to see some of the pieces?”

“Sure.”

Kevin reached his hand in under the glass. It seemed disembodied and, for all of Kevin’s youth, surprisingly virile. “Which one?”

Amory hesitated a moment. “The canal barge.”

Kevin brought out the piece of heavy iron and handed it to him. As Amory examined it, Kevin told what its payload was, how it was loaded and unloaded, how it was propelled and manned, where and when it was used. For all the wealth of information, he did not seem to be reciting but, uncannily, talking out of his own experience.

Bruce sat on the couch, sipping his drink, and saying nothing. Once Amory and Kevin had finished coffee-table history, Amory turned to Bruce and indulged himself in a direct question. “What happened to the furniture you had?” He half expected Bruce to say he’d stored it; it had been so much a part of his heritage, himself, his whole environment.

“I sold the stuff.” A pause. “I was saving polished wood for my coffin.” Another pause. “I don’t need a coffin, now.”

Amory saw an electric look pass between Bruce and Kevin. Kevin straightened in his chair. But Bruce

seemed more at ease than ever. Amory sensed a glow about Bruce. He had known it before when he and Bruce had been lovers, but then he imagined it to have a cast of gentle pale blue. Now, he emanated a vitality, in voice and gesture, that Amory had never seen before. Perhaps it was the change of job, the change of city, the sloughing off of the furniture, or maybe it was Kevin. Whatever the cause, Amory felt bemused by the transformation. And envious as well. He himself was mired in his job, in his apartment, in his circle of friends, in the whole routine of his life. Still ... to do what Bruce had done ... he recoiled. He could only be resigned to his own pale emanations.

Amory was beginning to feel the warmth of the liquor. "It must be wonderful to live up here. New York's so free."

A pause. That exchange of looks between Bruce and Kevin, intimate as a caress. Then Kevin looked at Amory. "Well ... if you have four hours homework a night to do, it doesn't seem so free." Bruce grinned. "And if you are living with a possessive sixteen-year-old, it doesn't seem free at all!"

Kevin tried to look demure—rather successfully, Amory thought. "I am not possessive." But then there was a gleam in his eye. "Well . . . not very."

Both Bruce and Amory burst out laughing. Amory turned avuncular. "I'll give you a dried leaf from my memory book. If he has to work late at the office, call up every bath in town."

"I have a better way," said Kevin. A half-grin flickered on his lips, but his eyes were steady and serious. "I keep him exhausted. Thoroughly exhausted."

Amory nodded. "Yes, I'U concede. That is a better way." And he glanced at Bruce. Bruce looked exhausted. Amory thought: wait till Gerald hears this!

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The three of them had dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Broadway that looked like an opium den to Amory when they first entered. But the waiter was Puerto Rican, and the booths and formica-topped tables had the general ambiance of a Jewish deli. Only in New York!

Dish after dish came to the table. But when Bruce and Amory had been sated, Kevin ate up everything left. Even the Puerto Rican was impressed.

In the theatrical lighting of the restaurant, Amory kept glancing at Kevin. He wondered: hadn't he seen that youngster somewhere before? Not with Bruce, but somewhere else? But he decided he hadn't, and he put the thought out of his mind.

They said their good-byes at the corner of 86th and Broadway. As Amory headed for the subway entrance, he glimpsed Bruce and Kevin walking shoulder to shoulder through the snow flurries down to Riverside Drive.

Amory caught the southbound IRT and headed down to Christopher Street . . . and his kind of freedom.