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Prelude to a Kiss

by Louis Colantuono

Louis Colantuono is one of the most popular American writers on affectionate relations between men and boys. The first half of his autobiographical account of his seven years of freedom between two imprisonments, "The Trucker and the Teen", was for years a best-seller and was praised for its honesty and vividness by, among others, Hakim Bey of "Crowstone" fame. Professionally, Colantuono is an independent trucker and a carpenter, although for the last few years he has been locked up in San Luis Obispo prison after having been convicted for having sexual contacts with boys. One of the most remarkable things about this writer is that he is severely dyslexic and remained until recently all but illiterate. With time to spare in prison he taught himself to type and then started setting down an impassioned account of both his highly colorful dreams and his no less colorful life in a gigantic outpouring of manuscripts, as though he was making up for years of being unable to communicate by writing. As with much of Colantuono's fiction, "Prelude" is based upon an actual incident and relationship Colantuono observed during his years of freedom.

Biff is fifteen. He is short, a little on the stocky side but well built. He wears his hair collar length. His eyes remind one sometimes of two

pools of dark green water that's deeper than most people's imaginations. Biff's biggest problem is that he is both a little too rough and a little too mean at times—the wrong times—and that's why the other kids call him “beef”, but only when his back is turned.

Biff's best friend is Tony Curtis Andrews, who gets called Tony, or Curtis, or Andrews—or just T.C. for short. As you might have guessed, Tony Curtis Andrews was named after his mother's favorite movie star. It's been said that dogs tend to look and act like their masters after a while; I guess this can also happen when boys get named after glamorous men.

T.C. has an absolutely clear complexion that has never been pimpled or scarred, and dark curly hair. All of the girls in school say T.C. is a really handsome boy, even though he is only thirteen. He is slim and wiry and taller than his friend Biff by at least half an inch, and he has one of those open, honest faces that always seems ready with a friendly smile for everyone. His smile can turn heads, and not just girls' heads—you can ask his math teacher, the gym teacher and the coach: they have all been deeply affected at one time or another by that smile.

Now it's getting to the end of the summer, with only a few weeks left of vacation. It's burn-out time: most of the people who were off doing things have pretty much gotten them done, while the others who never have anything to do are still out looking for something to do. At least that's the way it is now, and will be until next week when everything and everybody will shift into high gear: parents will rush their children around from store to store trying to find bargains for new school clothes, notebooks and all the other have-to-haves for the fall term.

This morning T.C. glides his skate-board smoothly around the corner, bending his knees like a skier. Once on the straight-a-way he

walks the board around end over end with delighted dexterity. He is young and good and he knows it.

His big smile is noticed by a lady watering her strawberry plants. They wave to each other, then T.C. coasts on.

Suddenly he moves to the extreme outside of the sidewalk. With the push of one strong leg he has the momentum he needs. He makes his turn up into Biff's walkway, coasts to a well-timed stop just before the porch, where he does a fast spin on his back wheels and kicks up the board, which jumps life-like off the ground and lodges itself neatly under his arm. Now, like a cat, he springs over the steps and lands silently on the porch and rings the door bell. He's done this many time before.

Biff's mother, Mrs. Pratt, hates skate-boards, hates bicycles, scooters, everything boys like best. She doesn't approve of T.C.'s cut-offs which expose his bare knees to injury. She doesn't like the idea of T.C. skate-boarding shirtless and barefooted, even though it is almost a hundred degrees today in the shade.

"Hello, Mrs. Pratt. Is Biff home?"

"You just missed him, Tony. He left here, angry as usual."

"Thanks." T.C. always tries to give Mrs. Pratt one of his best smiles. He knows if he has to spend much time with her he will start to feel nervous or defensive or angry himself. "I'll try to look for him."

"I wish my Biff could be as pleasant as you are," she says.

"Biff's cool," T.C. tells her. "He just has his moods."

Mrs. Pratt likes T.C. because he always seems to have something nice to say about her difficult son. T.C. swings off the porch and onto his skate-board, waves good-by, flashes his smile again. As he lets his board slowly roll down the walkway incline Mrs. Pratt says, "Tony, try the park."

If Tony Curtis Andrews was her son she would never let him leave the house dressed the way he is.

T.C. coasts neatly around the entire perimeter of the park before he finally spots Biff sitting under a tree by the pool, as usual mouthing off at the swimmers. T.C. greets his friend, sits down on his skateboard beside him.

“You weren’t at home when I telephoned,” Biff says sullenly, then, after a little boy flubs an attempted cannonball dive, he shouts, “You’re supposed to start your dive head first, then tuck your legs under you, stupid! You’re not supposed to land butt-first like that!” If Biff only wasn’t so bossy and mad all the time he would make a great Junior Life-Guard: the Park guard told him so.

“Biff, quit trying to direct the swimmers for a minute and listen to me. I found out about something really neat.”

“Oh, yeah? Tell me about what’s really neat.”

“I just came from the Community Center. They’re having an end-of-the-summer beach party for members.”

“Well, I ain’t no member.” Biff spits, then starts yelling at one of the swimmers again until T.C. stops him.

“That don’t matter. Everyone’s allowed to bring one person with them—their dates, so you can be my date.” He sits back on his heels in front of Biff, then smiles boldly at him. “Well, what do you think of my idea?”

“Your ideas always sound corny to me. Two boys on a date?”

“Good, then you’ll come with me.”

“Well, there’s nothin’ else to do,” Biff says with resignation. “What would I have to take along?”

“Here’s a copy of the list.”

Time passes swiftly and lightly for young people when they are making important plans. “So what am I supposed to say, T.C., when

someone asks why I'm there?" There's a big lopsided grin, now, on Biff's face.

"You tell them the truth." And he shows Biff the parental permission slip which reads, *Only members with dates can attend.*

"That's pretty funny, Tony. Are there going to be other boys who've invited boys to go with them?"

"I doubt it," T.C. says "but a lot of girls at the Community Center bring their girl friends, so I don't see any reason why I can't bring you."

"That's different, because girls are different because they can get away with taking other girls places with them without anyone saying bad things about them." Biff swallows hard. "When guys take guys places they call guys fags."

"Who has the nerve to call you anything?" T.C. says seriously. "Or me, for that matter?"

"No one I know."

"Good, it's settled. Come on, we'll share my skateboard."

Later, at the beach, they discover this isn't just an outing for teenagers. There are groups of young-acting geriatrics who are just as jubilant as the kids. Biff and T.C. find themselves standing around a fire-pit with several couples who are well over the half-century mark but not too old to enjoy holding hands and giving one another sedate and delighted kisses.

"Well, what do we do now, T.C.?" Biff asks, setting his school backpack down on the sand. Biff has bought sodas but decides not to drink them yet.

"You can put your pop in our ice chest to keep them cold," one of the older ladies offers. "Then you can wade, swim, build sand castles or walk on the beach with the rest of us old fogies"

"Thanks," T.C. says, "that's just what we're gonna do."

“What are we gonna do, T.C.? Are we gonna stay with these old people?”

“Of course not, Biffie baby,” T.C. teases gently, keeping his voice down. “We’re big enough to wade, swim or walk by ourselves.”

The boys open their back-packs, stake out their square of beach with their beach towels, strip down to their swim trunks, then run to the water’s edge, looking for a reasonable gap in the human wall dividing the upper beach from the Pacific. They are eager to cool off. Biff helps T.C. into the water by getting a half-nelson on him and then pushing him before him out toward the line of breakers.

They are hit in the face, at last, by the same wave. Not many people have ventured this far out. For a few minutes they jump the waves together. Now, grinning, they both get the same idea and, slipping down their trunks a bit, add their brine to the ocean’s. Then they body-surf in to where the girls are standing around only knee-deep in the water afraid that swimming will make them less attractive for later on.

“Biff, I think I’ll enter you in the wet bathing suit contest, since it seems like you’re the only date around here that’s actually got your bathing suit all the way wet.”

“Aren’t you carrying this date bit a little far?” Biff says, and turns away.

In all the time the boys have known each other they’ve had many arguments but only one fight, and that was at the beginning. Then they’d fought to a draw, really hurting each other, but as their black eyes, bruised cheeks, sore ribs and cut hands healed they gradually became good friends, despite or perhaps because of, their very different personalities.

Now T.C. recognizes the signs. He slaps Biff on the back and says, “Race you over to the games.”

There is jumping, tumbling and other competitions for the young, with the old folks cheering them on. Biff is a stalwart anchor man for his team during the tug-of-war.

Finally the sun dips down into the Pacific and it grows dark. The two boys sit sipping their sodas by the fire pit and roasting hot-dogs on straightened clothes hangers. Soon on all of the beach the only light is from the scattered fires which illuminate the figures and small areas of sand around them. Every so often people slip off into the dark; it is what goes on *between* the fire-pits that makes these parties famous.

“What’s wrong, Biff?” T.C. asks. For the last few minutes his friend has been silently staring into the fire with a frown on his face. T.C. feels his voice is too loud.

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” Biff says angrily. He suddenly gets up and stalks off into the darkness.

A half hour later when Biff hasn’t returned, T.C. is worried. He wonders if it’s something he said or did that’s turned Biff moody. T.C. was making eyes at the girls roasting hot-dogs on the other side of the fire pit, but so, for a while, was Biff. He wonders if that’s the reason. Girls do not like Biff and Biff knows in their school they all call him “Beef” behind his back.

T.C. goes to the water’s edge which is totally black except for some gently moving white-bearded foam. He turns and starts north, hoping that was Biff’s direction, too. He keeps to the hard sand beneath the licking, tickling fringes of the swash. After a while he suspects he’s been going in the wrong direction, but just as he is about to turn around his toes brush lightly over someone else’s cold wet feet half-buried under the water and sand.

“Watch where you’re walking, stupid,” says Biff in the darkness.

“Man, you scared me,” T. C. says. “I can’t see nothin’ out here. Besides, if I didn’t step on you, you’d never of said anything and I’d of never of found you.”

“So who said I wanted to be found?”

Biff has been sitting there for a long time. His eyes have completely adjusted to the night light, so he recognized T.C. well before he got stepped on. But he is still angry, and, as usual, he doesn’t know why.

“Well,” Biff says, “now that you’re here you can stay if you want to,” and he takes T.C.’s hand and pulls him around to where his friend can sit next to him.

“What’s wrong?” T. C. asks. “Can I do anything?” With his own eyes adjusting better to the night he sees what looks like furrows of moisture standing out on Biff’s cheeks.

“No, you can’t do nothing. It’s times like this I wish I was younger, like a little boy still, so someone could . . .” Biff cannot finish his sentence.

But he doesn’t need to. T.C. knows how hard it is to be brave and tough all the time, especially when you don’t want to be brave or tough, and how hard it is to act independent when you don’t want to be independent because you’re feeling babyish, as Biff is feeling now.

T.C. shifts around to sit on his knees in front of Biff. He leans back on his heels to see his friend more clearly, but, being younger, he doesn’t really know what to do for Biff or how to help him, or how Biff would react if he did try to help him.

“I’m really sorry, Biff, I teased you about being my date and all,” he tries.

“That’s Okay. I don’t mind being your date.”

“You don’t?” T.C. says, then, getting an inspiration, “That’s good, because you won’t mind if I do this.” And he rocks forward and takes Biff in a strong hug. Next, he tries to kiss Biff on the cheek, but Biff

has turned in to him in the hug so T.C.'s kiss goes squarely onto Biff's mouth.

"Hey," T.C. says, amazed and delighted and embarrassed all at once. He relaxes his hug to where he can look into Biff's face again. "That should make you feel better."

"A little better," Biff murmurs. T.C. thinks he can see a slight smile pouting his friend's lips. "So try it again, Tony."

"Sure, why not?" T.C. says, trying to take control of the situation. "After all, you're still my date."

He kisses and hugs Biff again, then stands and pulls Biff to his feet.

Suddenly it's wonderful for both of them to be out here alone together on the dark beach, with the sea foam tickling their feet.

Slowly they walk hand-in-hand back toward the distant fire-pits and the people from their home town gathered around them. They walk in silence for a while, until T.C. suddenly says, "So how do you like our date so far?"

"It's all right, I guess," Biff says slowly. "But if you ever want me to be your date again you're going to have to learn how to kiss better."

They both laugh, a bit self-consciously, and stop, facing each other in the ankle-deep swash.

Then Biff says quietly, coming closer, "You're supposed to kiss like this. . . ."