

The Tenth
Acolyte Reader



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Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel
First Edition published October, 1994

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Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf suggested by the story *Serrana Bay* in this book.

The Acolyte Press
P. O. Box 12731
1100 AS Amsterdam
The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Acolyte

The Tenth Acolyte Reader / [ed. Frank Torey]. -
Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press
ISBN 90-6971-054-4
Trefw.: homoseksualiteit; mannen / verhalen ;
oorspronkelijk - Engels.

Runaway

by **B. J. Freedman**

For a while I was drumming in a rock band. We practiced down the ridge at Big Otto's because his house had electricity, an empty room, and no neighbors within disturbing distance. My drums had been stashed under the deck of my cabin for almost two years when I dragged them out, scraped off the fungus, polished the chrome and cymbals, cleaned the skins, and hauled them in a wheelbarrow down the dirt road to Otto's. We were a pretty ragged crew. I hadn't played for two years – since leaving college – which meant I couldn't do much more than keep the beat for the first few weeks of practice. Otto, who'd been playing sea chanteys on guitar in town hoping to net some women, was pretty tentative on the bass, and unused to singing with a loud group. Jim, the lead guitarist, a shaggy drug-prone refugee from an Oregon arts college, chafed at our no-drugs, one-beer-a-night rule for practices, but we all knew that everything would disintegrate unless we stayed sober, for a while.

After a month of practicing three or four times a week for as long as we could stand it, we decided we were good enough to play, mostly for friends, at a local community hall. The gig went smoothly, with only one amplifier turnover and two or three songs begun in different keys. The folks, sweaty in jeans and tie-dyed tank tops, cheered us on and danced, too wasted to care if we were really good or not. Jim got wired for the second set, which had us all racing, but no one noticed. We all sweated, unlike practice. Streams of sweat rolled down Otto's bald dome. Daniel, our Paul McCartney heartthrob on rhythm guitar, unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. I gave up entirely and took off my shirt and shoes, and had I been wearing underwear might have chucked my jeans as well.

We did another couple of free dances, one in town, and then began a regular, barely-paying gig every Saturday and Sunday at a bar in town. We were happy, rocking twice a week, having our friends dance and sing along and give us drugs. For the bar it was a mixed blessing, since our friends preferred to smoke a joint for free outside on the headlands rather

than pay for a second beer. But the bar manager liked the music, and there weren't many alternatives – certainly none as inexpensive. It was a hassle pulling down the set-up every Saturday night and re-doing it on Sundays, and even though we left the instruments stashed in the bar, we had to drive fifteen miles back to the Ridge at two or three in the morning, and then come back the next day. I couldn't get any sleep; I'd usually end up at Cedar's place, where she'd massage me and we'd have lazy sex for a while and then all too soon it would be morning. After getting up at dawn for nearly three years, switching for one day a week to a New York nightlife schedule was impossible. So I decided to try staying in town.

I hitched in on a Friday before our gig. I didn't know anyone in town well enough to ask for a place to crash, especially beginning at three in the morning. And if they rose at a normal hour, I still wouldn't get any more sleep than usual. I'd have to camp out. After a few hours, I found an ideal site, just across the river from town, on a small wooded spit of land. It was private; I could walk there across the bridge from town, and probably no one would bother me. The next day I brought tarps, rope, a foam pad, two old polyfilled sleeping bags (one up, one down), a flashlight, candles, a roll of toilet paper, a few joints and matches. I set up the camp halfway into a burned-out virgin redwood stump, tying one tarp above to ward off rain or dew and laying the other one underneath the sleeping bags. It was the ideal retreat for a penniless rock star. After setting up I sat for a while in the cool woods, listening to the surf whacking the rocks, searching the trees for birds, thinking how bizarre it was that a few hours after this elemental, Druid interlude I would be banging away behind amplified guitars in a crowded, smoky room.

I walked across the highway bridge back to town, had a forbidden hamburger at the local cafe (we were vegetarians back at the Farm), and went down to the headlands. It was, as usual for a summer afternoon, cool and foggy and eerily still. The flatness of the light gave little perspective; the distant horizon was a barely discernible difference between gray sky and gray ocean. Looking back from the headlands the town appeared, as always, like an abandoned movie set. A few gulls swung low over the headlands. I walked out to the edge of the cliffs overlooking the ocean, feeling happily alone, away from the complications of communal life at the Farm, Cedar's relationship games, my cabin's leaking roof and the split porch step that I had avoided repairing for almost three months.

There was a bench in the cliffs, out of sight of the town; to get to it,

you had to walk down a narrow path cut into the cliffs, to a sort of hollow where years ago an industrious crafts person had fashioned a sturdy bench about three yards long from redwood planks that had been washed down the river. From the bench you could see not only the mouth of the river, with its rocky beach and piles of white, ragged driftwood, but also the highway bridge and the wooded hill where my camp was hidden, and the green and gray coastline to the south. On a chilly afternoon I expected to be alone, but as I descended the path I saw that there was someone on the bench, slumped forward, and a small backpack beside the bench. As I came closer, I saw that it was a child, or young teenager. The posture told me it was a boy, but the pageboy haircut might have been a girl's. He or she didn't turn around until I sat down on the bench. It was a boy, but with a prettiness that, properly dressed, could have passed for the opposite. His face was smooth, with reddened cheeks and wide-set almond eyes. The pageboy cut, straight out of Herman's Hermits and grown out too long, was light brown. He was slim, it seemed, underneath the green flannel shirt and baggy jeans. His tennis shoes looked too new. He nodded when I sat down, but then stared straight out at the gray horizon, resting his chin on his fists and his elbows on his knees.

"Want a smoke? It's something I grew," I said. I reached into my shirt pocket for the joint and a strike-anywhere match.

"I don't care. Sure." His unsteady voice was still a child's. He turned to me, just long enough for me to notice that his eyes were red, I guessed from crying. I struck the match against my jeans zipper and lit the joint. I took a long drag and then held it out for the boy to take. He took it, looking at me as if he were about to start crying again. Obviously a runaway, and not enjoying his freedom.

"What's your name?"

"Damian." Hippie parents – the worst.

"I'm Brian. Where'd you come from today?"

"Marin. I live there. I mean, I used to live there – you know."

"I know. So did I, a few years ago. Whereabouts? San Rafael?"

"Fairfax. Near Fairfax, up a road. With my Mom."

"Why'd you leave?"

He turned to me, his reddened eyes starting to tear.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Oh, yeah? You look a lot younger."

"Well, sorry, I guess I'm just *underdeveloped*."

I took the joint from him – the ash fell off and I had to relight it, using my crotch again. "Bite my head off, why don't you? I'm not your Mom."

"Yeah, okay. I'm sorry. Can I have another hit?" I handed him the joint. He took a long hit and began to cry, softly but steadily. He put the joint down on the bench and rubbed his cheeks.

"What's to cry about?" I guess I could have cried, too, just in general: the gray sky, the salty air, life on earth. I could have cried from sadness or happiness and maybe not have known which one – sitting at the ocean will do that, sometimes.

"Everything. I fucked everything up. I *always* fuck everything up."

"Your haircut, for starters." The wrong thing to say, but I guess it was a good line I couldn't resist. The boy stood up and glared at me through his tears. "Take it easy," I said. "I don't know you well enough to get you so angry. Jesus. Sit down and tell me the story."

"Don't make any fucking *jokes*, will you?"

"I promise. Give me the joint, though. It's out again." I struck my last match on my fly. "You ever try that?" I asked him.

"No. I mean, I probably could, but my jeans have buttons." That started a smile. Then he looked out at the gray horizon again. "It wasn't my mother's fault, it was *his*."

"Who?"

"A guy. Some guy." I practiced Farm-style listening: I shut up and stared right into his eyes. He looked out at the ocean and continued, "This guy moved in maybe a year ago. Nice guy, I thought, kind of longhaired but okay."

"Where's your father?"

"Who knows? I haven't seen him since I was like two or three."

"So what about this guy that moved in? Is that why you left?" I turned towards him, sitting sideways on the bench. He turned to me, too, and without thinking I took both his hands in mine, the way we did on the Farm during these confessional conversations. I rubbed my thumbs slowly into his palms. We stared at each other and listened to the waves crashing against rocks below us. He tightened his grip on my hands and started crying again. I was trying to be sympathetic, understanding, a good *listener* – but touching him, I felt something more than sympathy pass between us. I wondered, for a minute, who was sending it and who was receiving it.

He stopped crying. "See, I guess Mom knew, but I didn't, that when he moved in, he was dealing. I mean, that was his income, his work. He got dope from somewhere and sold it. It didn't matter, he wasn't really using the stuff himself very much. But then his friends started coming around, our

house turned into a scene, always people, more people. More dope. It was kinda fun at first, but then it got weird. One night one of his friends, a guy, we were playing chess, I think, waiting for a phone call or something, and then when I went to bed, I had my own room, he followed me in, you know, and he wanted to, you know, mess around. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah." The kid was so tender, and so beautiful. I had to be honest about it. "I guess I can understand why he'd do it"

"What do you mean?" That wasn't the response he was expecting.

"Well," – did I really want to say this? – "you're really attractive. Your face and everything, the way you talk."

Tears again. "No, but I'm *not*. I'm just *regular*."

I tightened my grip on his hands. "Sorry, Damian – you're special." I wondered if he could sense how I felt. I wondered if anything was happening to *him*. "You just..I don't know. Look how we started talking, it's like we've known each other for five years instead of a half an hour, there's something about you...anyway, what happened with this guy?"

"I sorta let him do it, I mean to me. I wouldn't touch *him*."

"And?"

"And what?"

"How did you feel about it?"

"I don't know. Weird. But I guess the guy was *mad* at me. I didn't see him the next day. But I was *scared*, really, I didn't know what to *do*. It's not fair for him to just *split* like that, I mean..." Tears time again. He rambled on for a while longer, but I didn't listen very carefully. I just nodded my head and held his hands and concentrated on not trying to kiss his tear-soaked cheeks. He looked up at me and tried to smile. "Where do you live, anyway?"

I told him about the Farm, our communal set-up, my Dogpatch homemade cabin.

"Sounds cool. How old are you, anyway? You look about eighteen."

"No, I'm twenty-three."

"You have an old lady – a girlfriend?" His expression was strangely hopeful.

"Yeah, I guess I do. You could call her that."

We walked up the path, then over the headlands to town.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" I asked him.

"I don't know. I thought on the beach."

"Why don't you come watch me play? I'm in this band, we're playing at The Inn."

"I don't know. I don't have any money. I kind of – I haven't had a shower in a couple of days."

"Neither have half the people coming. You don't need money. I'll get you in. There'll be other kids there. You could, you know, hang out. I'll feed you if you want."

"You don't have to."

"Why not? I told you there's plenty. This isn't Marin, we *share* around here, everything's very *communal*." I took his hand as we walked. "Speaking of which, I'm not going back to the Ridge tonight – I'm staying over there, across the river."

"Where?"

"I'm just camping in the trees over there. I'm not finished playing until maybe three or so, it's too late to go back to my place, it's down the road and then up the Ridge and I have to play again tomorrow. Come on – it's nice over there. I could use some company."

"Didn't you say you had a girl friend?"

"Yeah, but I can take a break for one night."

"Well, okay. I guess I don't have anywhere else to stay." He dropped my hand as we reached the wooden sidewalk that led up to the main street.

My drums were already piled on the bandstand along with amplifiers, guitar cases, cables, microphone stands, and a couple of old beer kegs used for stools. Otto was at the bar, having a Coke and a cigarette. Jim was in the far corner, beyond the dance floor and the tables, playing a noisy game of pinball. Daniel and his two kids had taken the chairs from the top of one of the tables and sat eating a baguette and cheese from the town deli. They all looked up as I came in with Damian at my side. I took his hand as we walked to the bar.

"Hey, Otto," I said.

"Hey, wingnut," Otto said. "You ready?"

"I'm hot, boss." Otto looked at Damian. "This is Damian, from Marin. From the headlands, actually."

"Welcome to the planet," Otto said.

"I'll go set up." Damian followed me, obediently, to the bandstand. He watched as I put together the parts of the drum kit, threw a fifty-pound sack of rice in the bass drum to keep it from moving when I whacked it, and sat down to loosen up. He smiled at me, beaming, as I ran through a quick drum solo. I was practicing louder than usual, and I knew it was because he was watching. I stopped and unbuttoned my

shirt. Damian took a handkerchief from his jeans pocket and handed it to me; for a minute I thought he was going to come over and wipe the sweat off my chest for me.

Otto came up and set up the bass; Daniel wiped his fingers and set up the guitar and the microphones. We had to send Daniel's kids to tear Jim away from the pinball machine. Damian sat with the kids and watched as we tuned up and ran through a few songs. The sky outside was growing dark; the bartender and a couple of waitresses showed up; a Mexican boy set up the tables. Daniel's wife took up her usual spot at the door, behind a card table, to take the cover charge: two dollars, or, if you have no money – we'll take dope.

An hour later, the place was filling up with tourists and locals. Otto was mixing with some overdressed "ladies" from New Jersey; Daniel was sitting at the door; Jim had returned to the pinball machine where he was having a contest with some local dykes. I sat at the bar with Damian and had a coffee. "Let's go outside and have a hit," I suggested. I imagined taking an impulsive kiss in the alley beside The Inn.

"Maybe later," Damian said. "When your girl friend gets here."

She showed up about three minutes before I had to go on, along with ten people from the Farm and another six or seven from a commune farther up the Ridge. Everyone was decked out in native costume: jeans and tie-dyes, long skirts and tight tank tops showing off bouncing breasts; baggy white Indian pants with an orange T-shirt and a Rajneesh necklace; flannel shirts and coveralls and red bandannas tied around the neck. The tourists stared and pointed as Farmers and friends piled into the bar, laughing, singing, and ready to dance. Cedar found us at the bar.

"Hey, chicken," she said, smiling, leaning into me for a kiss.

"Smells good," I told her, which she did: a ripe mixture of marijuana, garlic, patchouli oil, and sweat, a breath of earthy reality. She looked at Damian.

"Who's your friend?"

"Damian. From Marin – I found him out on the headlands, about to jump off."

"Good choice not to," Cedar said. Her red hair was frizzed out around her face; she shook her head and her earrings tinkled. She gave me a bright smile. "He's so *cute*," she whispered, loud enough for Damian to hear, and she got a smile from him in return for the compliment.

"Sit," I said, getting off the bar stool. "I have to go play."

"I'll sit until you start playing," Cedar said, running her hand through my hair as I pulled away. She turned to Damian as I walked

away. "We'll dance together," she told him.

And they did. To my surprise, Damian wasn't shy about dancing. He joined the regulars on the dance floor and flew around with his eyes closed and his hands raised in the air. He laughed with Cedar and picked up Daniel's little girl and danced with her. I couldn't help looking at him while I played. More than once I noticed Cedar watching me watching him. In the second set, I took off my shirt and at once Damian did the same, throwing his on the bandstand near the bar and grinning at me. He was thin, but well-proportioned, and watching him I had to concentrate on not speeding up the tempos. We played a third set, mostly for our friends who'd stayed late; it was nearly two o'clock in the morning when we finished. Cedar, still flushed from dancing all night, called to me from across the room as I was breaking down the drums. "I'll catch the truck back," she said. "See you later." "I'm staying in town," I said, but she was halfway out the door.

Damian and I walked across the highway bridge through a dense, cool fog. The dampness came right through my sweat-soaked shirt. We could hear the ocean, the waves and a bouy, but we couldn't see them. Halfway across the bridge we lost sight of the town, too; all we could make out was a cottony mass off in the distance. We had entered another, secret world: quiet, slow, green, incredibly peaceful. I took Damian's hand. The path to my little camp was dark – I'd forgotten to bring the flashlight – and we had to walk slowly. It took us five minutes to wind our way from the highway down the hill and through the trees. Damian held my hand as I led him along the dark trail. The leaves dripped fog on us. Strange rustling noises came from behind trees.

The camp was as I had left it. "I gotta pee," I said, letting go of Damian's hand. I went behind a tree; Damian went behind another. When I came back to the camp he was standing over the sleeping bags, buttoning his pants.

"I'm totally wasted," I said, unbuttoning my shirt. I hung it on a branch. I sat down to take off my shoes. I took off my jeans while Damian watched me.

"You'll freeze."

"Actually it's warmer without clothes. Especially with two of us. Besides, everything's so funky." Damian was watching me, waiting for me to take off my T-shirt. I was starting to get hard, but it was now or never. I lifted off my T-shirt. Damian stared at my cock. I slipped under the sleeping bag. "Let's go," I told him. "I gotta sleep." He sat and

untied his tennis shoes. "There's a candle in the bag there, you could light it. Matches in the same pocket." Damian lit one and steadied it on the ground. The flame was tall in the windless night. Suddenly our camp had become a room, bounded by the limits of the light. The warm glow spread over the tree trunks that surrounded us like sentries. Damian sat staring at the light dancing against the trees, echoing against the darkness. He looked at me with watery eyes. Not again, I thought. "Okay," I said. I turned away and heard him pulling off his jeans. I felt him climb in next to me and to my surprise he cuddled up against me, curling close against my back. I offered a massage; I didn't think I'd be able to sleep until I'd touched him.

"My Mom used to give me massages sometimes." He turned over on his stomach. I worked my fingers down his spine; I could feel him changing, shivering, getting warmer, along his spine a veneer of warm sweat formed. He sighed loudly and shivered. "Do some more." I pressed a few points along his back, then reached farther down. My hands were starting to shake. He wasn't wearing any underwear. "Hey," he said.

"You've got points down here, too." I pressed points in his buttocks, then tickled him along the crack.

"Hey, that's not a *point*."

"I know. Sorry." I could barely speak. "That place always gets me, you know –" When Cedar tickles me.

"Me, too, I guess."

I pushed against him, hoping to turn him over. He resisted.

"Hey," I said. "You've got two sides." He gave in and turned over, but when I reached for him he blocked me with his hand. Then he started to cry. "Please don't," he said. He pushed the sleeping bag back. "Here, you can look, but..." His cock was pink and clean and jutting straight up, reflecting the candlelight. He was small, and still hairless – no wonder he said he was underdeveloped. "You should have looked when I got undressed. Didn't you want to look at me?"

"I thought – never mind," I said. I blew out the candle. The darkness, mellowed by starlight and fog, enveloped us.

He pressed himself against me. I tried to kiss him but he turned away. "Oh, please. Not now. Isn't like this enough? Like we're friends?"

"It'll be a hard night, if you know what I mean." I ran my hand along his side. "There's no one around. No one to know except us."

He turned around and curled up.

"Let's just sleep," he said. "Can't we just sleep?"

"You can, maybe," I said. "But I'll be awake all night, looking at you. You have the most beautiful face, even in the darkness."

"Don't say stuff like that."

"I can't help it. It's hue. Sleeping outside always make me say what's true. I don't care. I spent three hours fucking my girl friend last night but you're – I don't know, it's the way you smell, or something."

"Don't say that."

"But it's true. You can't help it, either. Right?" I tried to find out, but he pushed my hand away.

"Let's go to sleep."

"Come stay with me in my house for a while. I won't tell anyone, I'll tell them you sleep down below the loft."

"I can't."

"Say maybe so I can sleep."

"Maybe."

"I want to touch you a little. Can I, just a little?"

"Okay." He lay flat on his back with his hands behind his head and his eyes closed. "But I don't want to come." Maybe he didn't *want* to, but fifteen seconds after I took him in my hand, he stiffened and then exploded, spewing cream through my fingers. "I *asked* you," he said, whispering.

"I know you did. Don't cry, okay? It's normal, you know, coming when you're hard."

He started crying.

I held him, burying my face into his neck. Then his hand found my cock and started stroking it. "All *right*," I whispered. He hugged me. I kissed his neck, about to pop.

"Don't," he said, but I had to.

"We shouldn't," he said, lying back and wiping his hand on the edge of the sleeping bag.

"Why not?" I tried to kiss his ear but he turned away.

"Don't you care what people think?"

"Sure, I guess so. But *people* aren't here, it's just you and me.

"I mean, you know, Cedar."

"Well, she's not here either...anyway, now we can sleep," I said. I was suddenly so tired I could barely speak. I rolled closer to Damian and laid my hand across his chest. The fog and the stars created a soft glow that I mistook, for a second, for dawn.

"Okay, so let's *sleep* then. You already made me come." And smile, I noticed.

"Tell me you'll stay with me for a while." I wanted to kiss him but I settled for running my hand along his cheek.

"I'll *think* about it." He stretched his hands above his head and faked a yawn, then let me kiss his smile.

We slept.

I woke up to strong sunlight streaming from above the trees – it must have been nearly noon. Damian was gone, but his bag was still hung from a knot in the tree stump. I got up to pee and found him on the other side of the stump, still dressed only in his underwear, writing furiously in a spiral notebook. He was so engrossed in writing that he didn't notice me until he heard the noise from my stream of piss hitting the ground. "Good morning, or afternoon," I said.

He looked up at me and smiled, then put his notebook down.

"We could go into town and eat." I sat beside him and rubbed his thigh. I started to get hard again, but I didn't care. In fact, I was hoping he'd notice. "I'm rich, I made fourteen dollars and three joints last night."

He put the notebook down, suddenly reached for me, and wrestled me to the ground. I wasn't sure, at first, if it was fighting or a hug – but then he kissed me, full on the lips. He held me down and stroked me. We rolled together on the soft, wet ground, getting ourselves spotted with mud and damp leaves. He kissed me again and I managed to get his underwear down to his ankles. We rolled and wrestled until he was sitting on my chest; I sat up as far as I could, trying to lick him, but settled for stroking until he spurted, a high white arc that shot over my head. My cock was squished underneath his ass; he moved down until it was freed and then he held me as I came. He fell on me and we lay together on the damp ground, exhausted.

"Let's go into town," I said as he rolled off me.

"I don't want to."

"Then let's stay here." I reached for him, but he turned away.

"Don't," he said.

I stood, brushed off leaves and mud, and started to get dressed. Damian watched me, then got up and dressed and helped me fold the sleeping bags and put everything else in my backpack. I wondered what he wanted to do but I was afraid to ask. I sat on a downed log, laced my boots, and lit a joint. He stood above me and we smoked in silence. Then he picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Don't tell *anyone* about us," he said.

I watched as he turned and walked down the trail, not looking back.

Two months later I got a letter, postmarked Seattle:

Dear Brian,

Sorry to leave you so fast like that but I'm sure you know why, it was because I wanted to stay but it was still too close to Marin and besides your girlfriend I think would get angry. I got as far as Ukiah that day and then after going to Humboldt for a week or so I went to Eugene. I met some more guys there – you know. One of them was moving to Seattle so I came with him. He's a graphic artist and a waiter sometimes when he has to. I usually just go to the library. I cut my hair real short and no one bothers me anymore. Well, no one else. I guess there's not much more to say, I just wanted to let you know I'm not dead or angry or anything, and to thank you for helping me. I promise I'll come see you one of these days. I liked your band, are you still playing? Say hello to Cedar, too, she's nice. And those Farm boys, I forgot all their names. If you want to write to me, you can use the address on the envelope.

Your friend,
Damian