

*The Eleventh
Acolyte Reader*



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Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel
First Edition published July, 1995

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Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf

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

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Acolyte

The Eleventh Acolyte Reader / [ed. Frank Torey]. -
Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press
ISBN 90-6971-057-9
Trefw.: homoseksualiteit; mannen / verhalen ;
oorspronkelijk – Engels.

Rocky

by Jotham Lotting

The nice thing about a cactus garden was that you didn't have to water it or mow it, just rake around the sand occasionally and pick up whatever trash the desert wind had blown in. Patrick Dean *liked* cacti, from the cathedral-like Saguaros that ranged along the flanks of the Catalina Mountains, to the willowy ocotillo, to the squat barrel, the aggressive cholla, even the tiny pin-cushion, the sight of which sometimes brought tears to his eyes if he was in a philosophical mood. Cacti were a little like himself: undemanding, survivors in drought, their inner life protected by row upon row of defensive needles.

Now his garden was in its glory. Spring rains had burst upon the valley, quickening all its buried roots. Little red flames waved from the top of his ocotillo, yellow waxy cups ranged around the top of his barrels and he hoped soon the night-blooming cereus beneath his bedroom window would open its pale petals and once again scent the evening air.

He heard voices. An hour ago the street had been aswarm with children; now it was the high school students who were making their way home. Patrick stepped to his gate and peered into the lowering sun. And, yes, He was there, the new kid on the block, walking slightly behind two other boys as befitted his newcomer status. His companions were talking about music and a concert some group called Lethal Revulsion was going to give down in Tucson. They passed his gate, absorbed, but the new boy caught Patrick's eye and nodded, rather formally. "Good afternoon, Mr. Dean."

"Hello, Rocky."

He wanted to say so much more: How are you feeling? Are you happy? Do you like it here? Are you making friends? Can *I* be your friend? But of course he couldn't. The boy passed on, trailing the other two.

Rocky's room was still something of a mess. He'd put his favorite posters up, got his stereo working, but his computer remained in pieces under the bed, and boxes of *The Archive*, which Mother and Dad were forbidden to

even *look* at, lay about on the floor begging for a proper place to be put.

He shrugged off his book bag, went into the bathroom to piss, then stood in front of the full-length mirror examining himself.

There was nothing wrong with his clothes: the gym-shoes were cool, likewise the Levi-501s. His T-shirt was okay, too. The problem was his face. Here he was fifteen already, and his face showed every year of... thirteen. His cheeks were as smooth as a baby's butt. There wasn't even a trace of peripubescent fuzz on his upper lip, and his nose was what the girls back in Fullerton had called "so cute!" – not only did it belong to the face of a 10-year-old, but it was crossed by freckles, as though it had got hit by a sprinkler and the drops had somehow darkened and stuck. And then there were his eyelashes, dark and long, so that, against his fair skin and blue eyes, it looked as though he was wearing make-up – "Oh, double, double, *seriously* cute!"

He went to his room, lay down on his bed, turned on and up the stereo, which was something he couldn't do when his parents got home in about an hour. Then, thinking what the hell, he loosened his belt, unbuttoned his fly, pushed down his 501s and undershorts and released an erection he was confident nobody would mistake for a 13-year-old's. He wrapped his fingers around it and thought about friends and girlfriends back in Fullerton. His hand started moving back and forth, up and down.

Patrick retired to his kitchen to prepare dinner for one. Would Rocky like the quiche he was re-heating? Probably not – maybe a steak grilled out on the back patio, provided it was smothered in a pile of french fries and could be washed down with cases of Coke.

The microwave dinged. Patrick took out the steaming quiche, set it beside a glass of wine and salad on a tray and carried it all into his living room.

Another lonely night in front of the TV. There had been a time, many years ago now, when, as dormitory master, his evenings had been filled with boys – reading to them in their pajamas from Jules Verne or Issac Azimov, sorting out arguments, putting them to bed, slaving over their homework. He'd been a good teacher, a popular teacher, but then age had caught up with him. Now, at 67, he was just a skinny, sun-wrinkled survivor whose remaining active thrust at life was long walks in the mountains with camera and notebook and contributing desert photo studies to "Arizona Leisure".

On the news a "child molester" who had "preyed on teenage boys" had been caught in Carson City. A well-known New York psychiatrist commented in that connection that all known pedophiles should be rounded up

and "warehoused" for the good of society. Well, it was fortunate Patrick had always restricted himself to dreams and solitary acts.

Tonight as he lay in bed with the desert stars shining down on him he would dream of Rocky. That psychiatrist in New York could never know his thoughts.

"Good day in school today?" his father asked.

"Uh huh."

"Making friends, are you?" His mother was all worry and sympathetic support.

"Some."

"That nice boy down the street, Philip..."

"Sucks."

"Rocky!" His father put down his knife and fork.

"Okay, sorry, sorry..."

"You should be. What you need is to get involved. You move to a new territory, you make it your own."

"Yeah, well, sure, how? Elbow my way into some crowd of kids and, like, 'Hi, guys, here I am, the great me!'"

"Just be yourself," his mother advised.

"What's so special about me?"

"Oh, lots of things."

"Name three – and I can tell you from personal observation all other boys have them, too."

"Now, that's enough of such talk."

His mother came to his rescue. "It is hard breaking in a new town and a new school. Rocky's just lonely."

"And broke," Rocky said. "And I have no money to go to that concert."

"Well, earn some," his father said, "like you did back in Fullerton."

"I didn't know there *was* a concert." His mother was confused. "I didn't know you liked that kind of music."

"Mom!" Rocky gave her his best disgusted look. "Rock groups give concerts, too."

"You're talking about the Revolting Corpses or whatever it is."

"Lethal Revulsion, Dad."

"Oh, dear!" Now his mother was really worried. "Knives and drugs and lots of *older* boys and girls."

"I don't carry a switch-blade, Mom, I don't do drugs, and I'm already an *older* boy."

"You don't act like it sometimes..."

"Okay, Dad, no concert, you won. Now can we drop it?" He sat back and glowered.

After a moment his father said, "I'll make a deal with you, Rocky. You earn the money for the ticket to that lethal thing and your mother and I will let you go."

"Dearie, do you think that's wise...?"

"Thanks, Dad..."

"Probably isn't. I get less wise every year, and I wasn't very wise when I was Rocky's age."

"Yes, you were," his mother protested.

His father winked at him. "What your mother didn't know back then in Tecumseh high...!"

The cereus didn't bloom that night, but the stars blazed down on the valley, sharp as ever. Patrick lay in bed thinking of Rocky, and Rocky lay in bed a few hundred yards away wondering how he could raise money for the Revulsion concert. *Everybody* was going, and this would be a good way to get to know some of them. There was one girl, Lindy, who had actually started talking to him. Back in Fullerton he had mowed people's lawns, but he didn't understand the kind of tangly matted grass they used out here in the desert, and you certainly couldn't mow a cactus garden. Besides, he didn't know any of the neighbors yet, except for old man Dean.

Every afternoon when he got off the school bus old man Dean was there, in front of his house, watching him, leaning on his rake. That cactus garden must be the best-raked piece of sand in the whole Sonora Desert. At first he wondered if he was unbuttoned, or a piece of snot was hanging out of his nose, or a scratched zit had burst and was bleeding down his cheek, but it wasn't that, he realized pretty soon. Mr. Dean was homo – no big deal about being homo: half the male teachers, and all the unmarried ones, were queer. But Mr. Dean was queer specifically for him.

Back in Fullerton, Dusty Sayles had sometimes worked queers for pocket money. "It's easy," Dusty had said. "You just lie back and think about whatever you want to think about. It's less work than mowing grass. You should try it. You'd be big time."

"Now you're going to tell me about my Face."

"You got it – use it."

He never had. It was all right for Dusty to do those things. Dusty was a big brawling sort of kid nobody was likely to challenge, Rocky a less impressive hanger-on.

But he was in a new town, now, and he was broke, and for the first time in his life he had an admirer. Did he dare do the Dusty thing to raise a little cash? Did he want to, really?

What would Dad think of the machinations going through the mind of his only child?

He'd consider it more seriously in the morning, cogitate over it at recess and during History. Visions, snatches of conversation, faces of lost friends started to drift through his head, and then he was out, lying peacefully on his back, his hand, as always when he dropped off to sleep, wrapped snugly around his cock.

Teenagers were once again straggling back from school: clusters of girls giggling and screaming and hoping to be noticed, small groups of more taciturn boys. This time Rocky was walking alone, book bag slung over one shoulder and a T-shirt knotted above his navel. His navel, Patrick observed, was button-like, a modest punctuation on the vellum of his spare belly.

Rocky stopped and leaned on the garden gate and, to Patrick's amazement, asked, "Um, Mr. Dean, you wouldn't have any odd jobs I could earn a little money doing for you?"

Up close the boy was more beautiful than Patrick had ever imagined. He caught his breath and held it for a moment, staring into those dark-lashed, deep blue eyes. Was there, perhaps, a glint of amusement there?

"Well, yes," Patrick said at last, "I suppose so."

"Maybe I can come in and we can talk about it?"

"Oh, of course. Sorry, Rocky."

Inside, he gave the boy a Coke. Rocky sat on the sofa, in the middle. Patrick went to his reading chair.

"What exactly did you have in mind?" Rocky asked.

"Well..." Patrick thought fast. "The paint on the south-facing window frames is starting to peel off. It needs, first, scraping..."

"Okay. I can start now."

"Fine..."

"I got a couple of hours. I always have a couple of hours after school and before I gotta get cleaned up for dinner."

A few minutes later Rocky was on a stepladder behind the house, stripped to his undershorts and reaching up, rasping a paint-scraper along the top frame of Patrick's bedroom window. Sweat beaded the boy's brow and trickled down his chest and between his shoulder blades where multiple streams coalesced along the indented spinal column.

"You're a well-built boy," Patrick breathed.

"Huh?" Rocky looked at him under his upraised arm. Beneath it a sweat-bejeweled tuft of light brown hair glinted in the sun.

"I said you've got a good build."

"You haven't seen all of it yet."

"I..." Patrick swallowed. What on earth did the boy mean by that? The only part of him not on magnificent display was...

Rocky had gone back to his scraping. Flakes of old paint floated down, covering his arm, flecking his hair. Patrick pushed down the rise in his trousers before the boy could see. "I'm going to leave you alone now," he said. "Come on in when you're finished... or you get tired... or it's time to go home."

"Guess I'd have to, unless you want me walking up the street in my skivvies."

That Thursday the stripping of the window frames was complete. Rocky didn't want to paint them. "I tried that once on my grandmother's house and got fired after an hour when she saw the mess I was making. Me and paint don't get along."

He was stretched out on the couch, pungent in his undershorts, Coke in hand.

"Is that a zit coming out on my forehead?" Rocky felt his temple gingerly.

"I don't know, Rocky..."

"Come here and look for me."

Patrick sat down on the edge of the couch and inspected the suspected patch of skin. There was nothing wrong with it that he could see, except that, like the rest of the boy, it was almost too smooth, too pure, too beautiful to be real. "Looks fine to me," he said.

"You mean you like what you see?"

Patrick swallowed. "I've always liked it, Rocky."

"But you haven't seen it all." This was the moment of truth.

"No, not quite all."

Rocky wondered if he should ask to take a shower first, but then he remembered something Dusty had said: "It's okay to stink a little; that way the queer gets more of you for his money." He took Patrick's hand and placed it on the humid front of his skivvies. "Go ahead, Mr. Dean. I'm cool. Besides, we're running out of things I can do around here to earn money."

That night Patrick didn't sleep. He found himself riding on huge waves

of dazzling lust which he masturbated off, only to be caught in the consequent troughs of despond and trembling fear. Every time a car passed outside, or he heard a police siren off in the distance, he imagined the vice squad, or the social workers, or a team from the mental hospital coming to pick him up. Then lust would start creeping back into his loins and he would remember the sight, the blood warmth, the feel, *the smell* of Rocky's magnificent hard-on, as the boy rubbed its soft tip over his nose and lips and then set it worming its way into his mouth, sliding over the top of his tongue, murmuring, "That's okay, Sir... Take your time, we got no rush." The salty taste of sweaty penile skin. The scratchiness of Rocky's pubic bush as his nose descended into it. The final tensing of adolescent stomach muscles, the culminating spasms. The scent and taste and somewhat oily feel of the boy's young vitality pouring out onto the back of his tongue.

Then, after the inevitable voiding of a few more exhausted drops of semen, the depression would return, the sense that he was trapped and any moment would be carted off to the horrors of police inquisition.

But none of that happened, and (was it an omen?) the night-blooming cereus opened its petals and scented the desert air, unseen but appreciated, and later the sun came up as always, and still later he saw Rocky trudging off to the school bus, normal as apple pie.

"Are you still going to that lethal thing?"

"Yup."

"Got the money?"

"Yup."

"So you've been earning it?"

"Sure have."

"Scraping paint."

"Among other things."

His father looked at him keenly, opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, then closed it.

"He's okay, Dad. Besides, he tries anything I don't want, I guess I can handle it." He'd sure handled it yesterday afternoon. He'd surprised even himself at how cool he'd been. No, Mr. Dean wouldn't be a problem. He was just a nice old queer who'd never had it off with anyone in his whole long life – too scared, which when you came to think of it was more sad than wimpy. Then along had come yesterday.

"He's hired me to go with him in the desert Sunday on some sort of photo expedition."

"Taking photos of what?"

"How should I know? Cactus, probably, or horny toads. His stuff gets published in nature magazines, so it's bound to be legit."

Patrick had explained that the desert track they'd been bumping along since early morning had once been an Indian trail that led through the Gran' Seco from one water hole to another. It hadn't been much improved over the last hundred years. The low hills were mineral poor, the land between them too dry to range cattle, and only the occasional surveyor or nature freak came that way now.

They'd grown a lot more relaxed with each other. Rocky had started to pester Patrick, like any teenage boy. "Come on, let me drive, I'm a good driver, I really am, Dad lets me do it all the time, there's no cops out here, *please?*"

Patrick had given in. Now the boy sat high and proud, battling the wheel, bare-chested, chewing on a stalk of six-weeks grass.

With Rocky driving, Patrick could keep a better eye out for potential photos. They stopped several times, set up the camera and reflectors, photographed lizards, clumps of desert mistletoe in flower, cacti, birds. Once, when Rocky was kneeling beside a flowering barrel while Patrick made the final adjustments, he asked, "What you want *me* in the picture for?"

"For scale."

"Can't you use a hat?"

"Not as interesting."

"*I'm* interesting?"

"You bet. You know you are. Now look nice – don't squint."

"I can't help squinting. It's bright out here."

"Then look down. I'll move in closer."

Patrick had to talk Rocky into putting on his shirt every time he used him in a shot. "Arizona Leisure" didn't like photos with a lot of exposed teenage skin.

About noon, with Rocky at the wheel, they bounced over a little knuckle of ridge and there was a hard thunk.

"What was that?" Rocky froze, huddled over the wheel, and stalled the jeep.

"It might be the steering."

"You better take over."

Patrick slipped onto the driver's seat, re-started the engine and crept down the trail a bit. "It's okay."

"I just didn't see it, Mr. Dean."

"Don't you think you can start calling me by my first name?"

"I don't know what it is."

A half hour later Patrick brought the jeep to a stop. "I think it's up here," he said. "I've got a surprise for you."

They hiked up the sandy bottom of a wash that issued from a low range of hills bristling with saguaros. Brown rock cliffs closed around them, and then the wash began to rise in smooth rocky steps with sandy stretches between. They crawled over a last step and came out into to a basin hollowed from the solid granite by a million flash floods. In the center of the basin was a pool of fresh water left over from the recent rains.

"Aw, cool!" Rocky said. "I'm gonna swim. Can I swim? You gotta come in, too."

When they lay flat out in the middle of the pool, the water just covered their stomachs, cool but not cold and gloriously refreshing after the hot climb. Rocky lay back and closed his eyes. He imagined a small group of Indians clustered around the precious water. Off there under the cliffs the old squaws would be cooking pancakes made from barrel cactus pulp. A young brave comes into camp with a slain deer slung across his shoulders, and a young girl steps toward the waters with an earthen pot... no, she is modestly casting off her clothing to bathe, coming towards him naked, kneeling now, splashing water upon her shoulders, smiling...

Rocky left the pool and stretched out beside it on his back. There was no disguising his arousal, and no need to: Patrick had noticed and was crawling out of the water, too.

This time, when it was over, Rocky felt the most wonderful contentment. It was nothing like the aftermath of jerking off, which calmed jangled nerves but left him always somehow empty, or even the satisfaction he'd felt after Patrick had given him his first B-J. He was simply cradled in a kind of unearthly peace, chug-like but completely natural. He touched their mixed semen on his stomach with the tips of his fingers and moved it around. And then he yawned.

Patrick noticed the yawn. How hard-hearted youth was, he thought. Not for Rocky had the heavens opened up, the earth shook, the sun dazzled, the Milky Way reeled and welcomed them into the only paradise man would ever know. He could never do for Rocky what Rocky had done for him.

The boy yawned again. Then – and it came to Patrick like a miracle – Rocky rolled toward him, snuggled against his side and, mumbling, "This is super nice," dropped his head on Patrick's shoulder and quickly fell asleep, with Patrick's jaw resting against the boy's temple and Rocky's gentle breath coursing over Patrick's breast.

Looking up towards a gaggle of great saguaros on the canyon-side

raising their blunt arms to the heavens, Patrick blinked away tears. This was almost too beautiful for an old man to bear.

When they got back to the jeep they saw beneath it a patch of wet, purplish sand. Rocky crawled under the motor and found that the rock he'd hit had put a small hole in the bottom of the radiator. All the coolant had gradually leaked away. He came out wide-eyed with guilt. "I wrecked your jeep!"

"I doubt it's a death sentence." Patrick inspected the damage. It was minor but he didn't see any way of making field repairs or carrying enough water to get them back to the main road that afternoon. "Looks like we'll have to spend the night."

"Will somebody come for us?"

"I expect so, in the morning. But don't worry. I always carry freeze-dried food and we know where water is."

"What about sleeping? It gets cold at night."

"I always carry a bed-roll, too."

"*One* bed-roll?" A smile was beginning to chase away the worry on Rocky's face.

"I'm afraid so. We'll have to share it."

The smile widened to a broad grin. "Okay. Just don't keep me awake all night doing... you know."

By sundown his mother started to worry; by ten o'clock his father was worried, too.

"I'm going to call the police," she said.

"No, you're not."

"But he's my baby! He's out there in the desert without food, without water, with rattlesnakes and scorpions. We must call the police!"

"I'll tell you what will happen if you do that. They will be very polite and very bored and take down all the information and tell you to wait until morning when the boy will probably walk home all smiles and with beer on his breath."

"Rocky doesn't like beer."

"And then they'll start asking you questions about Patrick Dean, and when you tell them he's a retired schoolteacher who lives alone, they'll suddenly get very interested. Computer memory banks will be queried in Phoenix and Washington, D.C. and all the electronic files on Patrick Dean will be opened..."

"Mr. Dean's no criminal!"

"Irrelevant, because you know what? There'll be a report buried in there somewhere that some mother once *suspected* Patrick Dean of being too interested in her son – and maybe a lot more, who knows? – and all of a sudden a dozen helicopters will be dispatched in the middle of the night to sweep that old Indian trail with search-lights powerful enough to light up a football field, and when the two of them are found your son will be taken to the police station and grilled, good cop, bad cop routine, and told he can't go home until he tells them the truth."

"What *is* the truth?"

"Does it really matter? Do you want Rocky going through all that? Plus the publicity, because that's what this is all about, not rescuing people in the desert. I'll tell you what. If Rocky's not here by dawn, I'll be out there looking for them in my partner's super-cub, and I'll find them, I promise."

An hour after sunrise they saw the little plane – high wing, four not two wheels hanging underneath, fuselage painted gray with a red stripe along the side. It circled a few times above them, and then something streamed out of the half-opened door and fluttered down. Rocky ran after it. It was a scribbled note on a large piece of wrapping paper:

LANDING ON A SMALL PLAYA A HALF MILE DUE SOUTH
OF YOU. WAVE IF YOU'RE OK AND CAN MEET US THERE
– DAD.

They waved and started walking.

*

After they had eaten, after his mother had gone to bed "exhausted with worry and nerves", his father said, "Come on, let's take a drive."

They made their way out of the city and stopped in the middle of a creosote flat. His father shut down the engine, pushed a button and opened all four windows to the big-sky night.

Rocky thought it best to get in his own word first. "I know what you're going to say."

"No you don't." His father put a hand on his arm. "What I'm not going to do is ask about Mr. Dean or what he does or doesn't mean to you. If you want to tell me, fine, otherwise a guy's got to have a few privacies."

"Dad, I'm normal."

"I thought so. I only want to tell you what almost happened last night

and I prevented."

He listened to his father, with growing gratitude and admiration.

Lecture over, his father grasped his knee. "So, tomorrow's your rock thing."

"Right."

"Go, and enjoy. I remember the Rolling Stones..."

"Oh, *them!*" They were back to their old casual, teasing ways. His dad was right. It was good to keep a few 'privacies' to himself.

After the drama of their rescue Patrick stopped standing in the garden when the high school students straggled back in the afternoon. Rocky had to come to his door now and ring the bell.

As always, he plied the boy with ice-cream and Coke, but Rocky seemed anxious to get down to the real purpose of his visits, collect his 'odd-jobs' pocket money and depart. Patrick found himself, despite all, falling more and more in love.

It was late night, later than Rocky had almost ever stayed up before. What had happened after the concert was so incredible he could hardly get his mind around it. He'd been in the back seat with Lindy and another couple. They had driven to a well-known make-out spot, parked, and under the stars made love. Well, at least she'd opened his trousers and made love to him *there*, and she'd allowed his hands and lips to roam all over her body.

Afterwards they had let him off at the comer and now, walking home, Rocky felt light as a helium balloon. The night air was soft, smelling of ozone and, as he passed the familiar cactus garden, perhaps a bit of old man Dean's nocturnal flower.

Everything in his life these days seemed to be happening enormously fast. A couple of years ago jerking off had been an intense new pleasure. Then came old Mr. Dean and his blow-jobs, which had cranked up that intensity to a much higher level. And now this! After he'd messed up his pants and spattered Lindy's hand they'd walked alone in the desert for a while and made some important decisions about themselves.

Asleep that night in his old bed in his new bedroom, he dreamed of making love again, only at the last moment it was Patrick Dean's lips which brought him off. He came awake voiding into the sheets, curious and a bit annoyed with himself. It was time to move on from *that*.

The next afternoon Rocky informed Patrick that he would be away for the summer visiting his uncle's family in Missoula. That was the first blow,

but the second, more serious blow came hard on its heels: "Another thing. My girl Lindy and I have sort of an agreement..."

"Does that mean...?" Patrick began.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. And you know Mom's not too enthusiastic about me spending a lot of time over here any more."

"I see."

"But I'll come by once in a while anyhow, don't worry."

Of course Rocky hadn't, although twice Patrick had been invited to his parents' home for a barbecue and got fleeting glimpses of the boy among the other guests. Now he spent more and more time in the desert mountains, or hid in the darkened, air-conditioned living room, working on his nature articles and reviewing his color transparencies. After the initial anguish of losing Rocky, age started working for him. He thanked the Fates that at long last they had given him those wonderful weeks with the boy. Now he had his memories and wouldn't have to go out of life without knowing the cutting edge of lust in satisfaction.

That is where he was, hunched over his light table one blistering mid-June morning, when his doorbell rang. It *couldn't* be Rocky. Rocky would be in Montana by now, yet Patrick felt his heart speed up as he walked toward the door.

It was a Mexican boy maybe a year, perhaps two years younger than Rocky, and quite a bit smaller. "Are you Mister Dean?" the boy asked.

"Yes."

"Miguel Alvarez – but everybody calls me Mike." He put out a hand and they shook, rather formally. "A kid I know in school told me you could use a boy to do odd jobs around here."

Miguel had straight black hair, raggedly cut and dusty in the morning sun, and eyes that were almost as black. A sensitive face narrowed down to a smallish mouth and delicate chin. He spoke with only a trace of mestizo accent and cadence.

"What do you do?" Patrick asked.

The boy flashed an almost professional smile. "What do you want me to do?" Then, realizing he had thrown Patrick into some confusion, he added, "That kid, the one I know, said you were very proud of your cactus garden, but look at all the junk that's blown in. Give me a rake and I'll clean it up. And he said he'd scraped down your window frames but didn't dare paint them, but I'll do that for you. I'm an expert with paint – and a lot of other things, too. Will you give me a chance to show you?"