

Reel One

Welcome to the Hotel California

1

In the end he could not deny his human heart. Always he had known, long before he came that drizzling California night, with the gun in his hand, to the gymnasium, that his life, scaled down, of course, would be forever like the newsreel of the Widow standing, alone and in black, with her tiny son, his hand saluting as muffled drums rolled across a dazed and weeping landscape. In the movies one image dissolves into another. The dissolve itself is metaphor of change. He, now looking thirty-seven years old, managed a drive-in movie against the screen behind his high forehead. He had Movietone newsreels from his black-and-white childhood of a plane crashing into the Empire State Building, of VE Day and Hiroshima, of Korea, the Papal Holy Year, and the wedding of Elizabeth and Philip. He knew by heart the first campaign footage of Camelot and the final Super-8mm Zapruder strip shot in grainy Technicolor in Dallas. He had images of draft cards burning up in defiant flames; inserts of dogs lunging at black bodies on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, oh yeah, hungry dogs of Alabama; of American cities burning in protest; of the Summer of Love; and of terrified Vietnamese fleeing their American saviors on the evening news.

Chronology was not his style. Feeling was. Sometimes he forgot to breathe. Sometimes he remembered he would have to pay for the good times. Once on fortune's wheel, everything is fixed. Sometimes he had that high-flying feeling of a person who goes starved to bed. Sometimes nothing mattered. Sometimes everything mattered too much.

He was smaller, more real in size, than the huge Widow, who, like him, would forever mourn her love, ended abruptly like his, but who, unlike him, was not approaching the gymnasium stage where his victorious blond bodybuilder lover was posing, handsome, muscular, golden, brilliant, shimmering with sweat, triumphant in the final moments of the Mr. California Physique Contest.

Waves of applause washed him closer and closer to the bank of the

stage. He felt himself moving in slow motion through air as thick as celluloid.

The gun was in his hand.

His hand was pulling the gun from the holster of his pocket.

The man he loved more than life itself was turning, nearly naked, smiling with intensity in the cone of hot overhead spotlight, into a double-biceps shot...

2

Rewind. Back up. Whiz. Whirr. Click. Bang.

“I want to belong,” Ryan Steven O’Hara wrote in his *Journal*. “I want to belong to that tiny, terrible elite: men who live their lives beyond the limits and never die in their beds.”

His life was a pursuit of manhood. Ryan O’Hara fancied himself Orion, the star-hunter stalking the Constellation of the Bear. Sometimes reality slapped him up against the side of his head.

“You’re one kind of man,” Julie Andrews said to James Garner in *Victor/Victoria*. “I’m another.”

“What kind is that?” the virile Garner asked.

“The kind,” Julie Andrews said, “that doesn’t have to prove it.”

Ryan tried not to protest too much. He knew he was as much a man as Julie Andrews. He adored her ideal purity.

Ryan’s masculinity, and in some quarters I run the up-front risk of immediately losing empathy for him, ran exclusively homosexual. He never apologized for it; nor will I for him. You may stereotype him, or dismiss him, or chalk up what happened to him during what the media called gay liberation as the just desserts of a faggot who immigrated to San Francisco, tried everything, risked everything, and maybe lost everything.

But don’t. Don’t put his story down.

Sometimes outlaw men and defiant women, who dare to stand outside our normal pale, reflect back a bit more of our straightlaced selves than we first imagine. When all’s well ends well, we call that comedy. The rest is tragedy. But, sports fans, that’s all entertainment. There are more questions here than the simple one: how gay liberation, so happy, outrageous, and political, wound up critically wounded in an intensive care unit. Mainly, what I want to know is, how men and women lose their balance in the high-wire act of love.

This all began, once upon a time, back in the madcap days before real estate boomed in San Francisco; in the days when the first Irish and

Italian merchants in the Castro sold out to Tommy's Plants and the Castro Cafe; in the days when gays bought dumps and everybody on Castro was a carpenter; in the days when gays were more hippies than clones, long before New York faggots arrived to Manhattanize the Castro; long before fisting and coprophagy, when crystal was still something collectible on the sideboard; long before murders, assassinations, disease, and Death, when sex three times a day was still the great adventure. It dissolved. It changed. What first seemed like Mecca shifted on the fault line to someplace east of Eden. They were innocents. For all they did right, for all they did wrong, for all their pursuit of sexual adventure, what they searched for in the bars and baths and cruised on the streets was, heart and soul, for them all, no more and no less than human love.

3

There may be only one sin in life: the ultimate violation of human rights is not the taking of a human life; it is the breaking of a human heart.

4

Music up. Vamp. Step. Step. Step. "Castro! That's where I'm goin'." Bump. Bump. "Castro! That's where I'll play." Slow grind. "Castro." Hula Hands. "Where hot lips're blowin'." Bump. Grind. "Castro! Where nights are..." Left bump. Right bump. Heavy grind. "...gay!" Shake Midler tits. Bump. Grind. Bump. "Castro!" Go down on mike. Play Carmen. Flutter. Whisper. "Where all those handsome gay boys..." Stop. Breathly Mae West double-entendre intonation. "...wind their playboys' windup toys!" Belt. "Castro!" Dirty bump. Dirty grind. Then NYNY-Liza strut, strut, strut. Shout. "Divine decadence, darlings!" Big Minnelli finish. "I'll see youuuu.. in C-A-S-T-R-O!"

Ryan's baby sister was appearing at the Castro Palms. Margaret Mary O'Hara was the Queen of the Castro. She billed herself as Kweenasheba and lived with a bevy of six gay boys above the Bakery Cafe three doors from where 18th Street collides with Castro Street. The intersection was the heart of Gay Mecca. It was the place where, when Gray Line tours took them there, Midwestern tourists felt they needed a passport. It was there Ryan kicked up his motorcycle one afternoon when he called unannounced on his little sister. He rang the bell. No one answered. The music was loud Tina Turner and the door was open. Halfway up the stairs he met a young gay boy. "You live here?" Ryan asked.

The stoned chicken looked deep into Ryan's eyes. "Mister Man," he said, "I don't know who lives here." He moved his hand to grope Ryan's jeans. "But I'll go back upstairs with you."

"Thanks." Ryan pushed the boy's hand away and pointed the kid down the stairs. "Later," he said.

Ryan found his sister lounging in a white Queen Anne ball-and-claw bathtub. Boys tumbled up and down the hallway. "Hi, Ry," she said, and she raised her legs straight up in the air, something like the 1940s' pop art of the bathing beauty with her fanny in a champagne glass and her feet in high heels thrust up higher than the rim.

"Hi, yourself," he said. "How high are you?"

"High enough." She sat up in the tub. Ryan was astonished at the full-blown size of his eighteen-year-old sister's breasts. "Ain't they a pair?" she said. She put her finger coyly to her mouth. "But dare I forget," she said. "You don't have a taste for milk shakes."

"Don't be a bitch. It hardly becomes you."

"Don't be a prig. It's unbelievable in you."

Margaret Mary morphed into Kweenie, rising from the tub elegantly as Venus on the half shell. Rivulets of water streamed down her leggy frame. Ryan reached for her grape-colored chenille robe. "You look good," he said. He was proud of her dancer's body.

"But not good enough for you to do it with me, huh?" When she was four, and he was twenty, she had asked him to kiss her the way he kissed his girlfriends. She hadn't known then what she knew now. "If you ever change your mind," she said. She folded her arms across her breasts and placed her delicate hands on her shoulders. "Who am I?" she asked. Years before, Ryan had taught her how to pose. The game endured between them. Somehow Margaret Mary's talent for becoming Kweenasheba who could become Bette Midler or Mae West or anyone on stage had started way back home in Kansas with this charade.

"Too easy," Ryan said. "Vanessa Redgrave. *Blow-Up*."

Two naked gay boys, both blond, chased each other down the hall. "You like them, Ry?" she asked. "I know your thing for blonds."

"No," he said. "Too young. You live in a chicken coop."

The phone in the hallway rang. Kweenie hopped naked and dripping from the tub and raced for the phone, bumping past Ryan holding her robe. She slid in and snatched the receiver right out from under the grasp of one of her roommates.

"Cunt," the twinkie blond said.

Kweenie held the phone between her wet breasts. "A star," she said

to the boy, “is a star especially in her own home. Now bug off, Evan-Eddie!” Then in her sweetest virginal voice she said, “Hello. Backstage. Blue Moon.” She paused. Her voice hardened. “I should have hoped it was you. When the fuck are you going to get me something?”

“It’s not her agent,” Evan-Eddie said to Ryan. “It’s her dealer.” He scrutinized Ryan. “You are her sister, aren’t you?”

“Put in your contacts, dude. I’m her brother.” Ryan loathed the gender-fuck mother tongue of Sodom-Oz where *brother* switched with *sister* and *he* came out *she*. “And keep your pronouns straight.”

“I have such a hard time keeping anything straight. I’m a poor little fag.” He tentatively touched Ryan’s leather jacket. “I’m not a heavy-duty Mister Man like you. I mean I prefer to do my mother’s act.”

“Call your shrink,” Ryan said.

“Who do you imitate? Your big, butch dad I’ve heard so much about?”

“The only one performing an act in our family,” Ryan said, “is Margaret Mary.”

“Honey,” Evan-Eddie said, “we’re all acting.”

“Except,” Ryan said, “when we’re reacting.”

“I love your act,” Evan-Eddie said. “You, a leather queen from Folsom Street. Your sister, the Acid Queen of the Castro. Ain’t you a pair of parodies? You write leather filth. She sings dirty on stage. You must come from quite a family.”

“Actually,” Ryan said, “we’re cannibals.”

“Margaret Mary said you were Catholic.”

“Catholic cannibals.” Ryan moved in on the boy, half threatening, half teasing. “We go to mass and communion and eat the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Then we eat little boys like you.”

“Oh, stop it, Mister Man. Pinch my tits. Make me cum.” Evan-Eddie pushed both hands together in his crotch and oooched over, pursing his lips, shaking his luxurious blond hair, making little squealing sounds.

Margaret Mary caught sight of the pose. She held her hand over the receiver. “Who is he, Ry? Who’s he doing?”

“Fuck,” Ryan said, but he couldn’t resist their little game. He looked at the undulating boy. “Marilyn Monroe. *Seven Year Itch*. Holding down her skirt.”

Margaret Mary signed him thumbs-up.

Evan-Eddie blew him a kiss. “Be my daddy?” he said. “You’re *tres fun*. You’d love to spank me.”

“Don’t be perverse.”

“You sound exactly like my father. He hasn’t spoken to me since I was

twelve and bleached my hair blond for my coming-out party in the toilet at the local park.”

“Bleached?”

“Mister Man, one thing you better learn before you get any older is there is no such animal as a real, honest-to-God, true blond. Well, there’s a few natural blonds, but most of us are fakes, frauds, phonies. Disguising the goods. Like you big bad men cinching in your guts with leather corsets—excuse me, belts.”

“Look again, dirtbag,” Ryan pulled up his tee shirt, revealing his flat belly.

Evan-Eddie cooed. “Meet me tonight. Ten-ish. Backroom. Jaguar Bookstore.”

Ryan straightened his fuck-finger. “Wanna play *Chinatown*.” He threatened to stick his finger nail-deep up Evan-Eddie’s left nostril. “You’d be easy to recognize, sissy boy, with no nose.” He pushed the boy away.

Margaret Mary squealed with delight into the phone. “Thanks. *Ciao*. Good-bye.” She dropped the receiver into its cradle and paraded her dripping, naked body as imperious as Isadora Duncan toward her brother. “Kelsey got the Palms to extend my run. She’s such a good agent.”

“Congratulations,” Ryan said.

“Kisses on your opening...again,” Evan-Eddie said. He kissed his fingers, looking hard at Ryan, and planted them in Margaret Mary’s crotch.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ryan said.

“But I’m having,” the twinkie blond moved in on Ryan, “such a good time.”

“Not you, shit-for-brains. Her!”

“I didn’t want to go out with you anyway. You’re so tall, dark, and balding.”

“Evan-Eddie,” Margaret Mary said, commanding as Kweenasheba, “go sit on something long and thick. Leave this man alone.”

“Oh, so now he’s a man and I’m not?”

“I love you, Evan-Eddie. Don’t push me.”

“Yes, my sweet dominant mistress.”

“Really, E-E. Don’t be such an ass.” She pecked him on the cheek. “Will you be a dear and clean up the bathroom for me? My big brother’s taking me out.”

“Dear heart,” Eddie said, “what movie will people think you are? But, of course! *Ryan’s Daughter*.”

“E-E?” she said. “Eat shit and die. Come on, Ry. Let’s go.”

5

Something there is in love that rules out amnesty. For everyone. For every word and act. For every promise and betrayal. For every reason and passion. For all sins of omission and commission.

Love interests me. Intrigues me. As well it should. If love were easy, everyone would be in-love.

Ryan in his romantic fantasies wanted to be a sexual soldier of fortune. He marched from the Midwest to California in quest of other men, preferably jocks, and precisely in conquest of blond bodybuilders. Ryan, I think, started his search for the perfect body the day he discovered he didn't have one. "I'm no movie star, but I know how to get what I want."

Ryan's face and aerobic build were attractive enough. As a child, he had suffered the embarrassment common to many cherubic curly-haired boys. Women in their 1940s' clothes stopped his mother to say, "He's too pretty to be a boy. He should be a girl." Something in Ryan's baby gut tumbled. He hardly knew what, but he knew he did not ever want to be a little girl. Little girls grew up to have female trouble. Those two words, perhaps because the women ordered him to run out and play when they said them, locked together in his head: *female* and *trouble*. So he endured the women's dismissal gladly and ran out to build his forts in the woods behind the house. Ryan somehow was always building fortifications. I think his passion for real estate took root at the same time the women in his mother's kitchen shooed him to the porch, and he went in search of other boys to share his forts. He liked hunting boys. Something outdoors in the treble heads-up shouts of older boys at play drew him irresistibly. He liked entering into a group of strange boys and picking out the best one for his best friend.

Ryan's curly dark hair slipped slowly up his forehead which he minded at first in his mid-twenties, growing the compensatory beard, and then after thirty not so much at all. Some young gay men, balding themselves, ran from his bravado. Some men read his aggressive balding-bearded Look as style.

"I think of myself," he once told me, "as a sports car with the top down."

He made humor with words. He seduced with his voice. He was *Pillow Talk*. When he tied men up at the baths, he discovered dirty talk enhanced the sex scene. His words could cause a hard-on. Out of the sack, on Castro for brunch, he was smart enough to dish himself harder than anyone could needle him. It was the best defense. It kept tongues sharper

than serpents' teeth from calling Ryan O'Hara "Miss Scarlett" to his face. He was not self-deprecating. He was self-accepting, or so he thought, his baldness having forced him to be realistic and stoic about what he could not change.

I think if a gay man can accept his own receding hair as a naturally evolving male Look, he achieves a kind of triumph of acceptance unknown to those who try to imitate twenty-one forever. Long hair was the fashion when Ryan first moved to San Francisco. He loved the Castro Rocks Baths and the muscular hippies with long blond braids who found an opposite attraction in his short black crewcut. He was one of the first balding and bearded gay men on Castro in the days when Castro was young, long before the crewcut and beard turned into the signature of the Castro clone. He felt sorry for men like the massive bodybuilder, Casey Viator, who wore toupees because they couldn't accept certain male truths about themselves. His sex talk in bed led to freelancing erotic writing.

"Baldness," he wrote in a gay magazine where models are always twenty-one and hung, and no hero is bald unless he is shaved, "is a natural secondary male sex characteristic. A totally male Look. Attractive to men. It keeps grown-up men from looking androgynous. It forces self-actualization. Never fight nature in yourself. What's hotter than a young balding blond college jock? Look in the mirror and never look back. Tell anyone who asks that you got bald making U-turns under the sheets."

When he inaugurated his own magazine, *Maneuvers*, he took an editorial policy of glorifying men over thirty. The movie, *In Praise of Older Women*, had sparked the idea. He wrote the word *daddy* and it entered the gay lexicon. *Maneuvers* became a hit.

Suppers at Ryan's Victorian, over the hill from Castro in Noe Valley, revolved around talk of sex and gyms and drugs and real estate and foreign films. Ryan's Irish tenor voice, trained to sing high mass in the seminary, was like Paul Simon's. Not that he was a singer. But he could match Simon note for note on "Bridge over Troubled Water" without any strain. From four years of university teaching during Vietnam, he had learned to project a certain presence with his voice. He was a talker. From the soup to the nuts, Ryan was up. Intense. On. Active. Purposely seductive after the fashion of men who realize if anything good is going to happen to them, they'll have to play their hand with whatever strong suit they have been dealt. Ryan's wild card was a Joker full of sarcastic, punning, maddening, needling, blasphemous wit honed first among his adolescent classmates in a Catholic seminary, then perfected over brunch in restaurants on Castro, and finally merchandised in the pages of *Maneuvers*.

magazine, whose trademarked cover line each issue was, “What You’re Looking for Is Looking for You.” His tongue was incisive. He never took a broad ax if a rapier would kill. He could murder with his tongue. He was not a man to leave a scene agonizing over things he wished he had said. He was, with all the pop import of California astrology, a Gemini in a City founded in Gemini. He was elusive, mercurial, always thinking a thousand recombinant thoughts a minute.

“He was a liar,” his first lover Teddy said.

Teddy.

Poor sweet Teddy. With a shelf life from 6/9/69 to 1977.

Teddy had dragged his feet when Ryan told him they were moving from Chicago to California. “No!” Teddy freaked. “San Francisco’s where you go to lose a lover.” But Ryan assured Teddy he wanted no more than to open up their relationship. “Trust me,” he said, and Teddy had trusted him. Teddy entertained a strange belief that he had a special sexual hold on Ryan as long as they stayed in the Midwest. He never realized, through all their eight years together, that nobody could ever quite capture Ryan who was Orion, one of those men who is the hunter not the hunted. He was the one who had hit on Teddy during one July Fourth weekend at Chuck Renslow’s original Gold Coast bar in Chicago. Ryan had been out less than a year and he wanted to be in-love. Teddy, freckled and red haired, seemed a fair choice. He was the boy next door. He was sexy and Ryan was certain that sex could turn to love. That is perhaps the most romantic of fatal notions. Only fools fall in-love, pledging their infinite love forever in a finite world where all is change and nothing lasts, and still you buy furniture and silverware together. So they made love and a life together, too innocent then to know that love’s inevitable failure is the main reason why a person finishes life with a sense of panic at being torn away from the tangled bedclothes of sexuality and self-deception.

For four years Ryan had taught at Loyola University in Chicago and Teddy joked about his status as faculty wife. Ryan had corrected him. “You’re no wife. You’re a man. You’re my partner.” Teddy had said, “I was only joking.” Ryan was not laughing. California was on his mind. They packed their household into a U-Haul truck and drove westward across the mountains, sleeping naked outdoors at night, servicing truckers at rest stops along Interstate 80. Ryan bought the Noe Valley Victorian at 25th and Douglass the day they arrived in San Francisco. Real estate was rolling like *Monopoly*. Life was a cabaret. During the first three years in the City, Ryan and Teddy clung together, fought, reconciled, entertained the troops, and fought. Loud words gave way to long silences, and Teddy

threatening suicide.

Late one night Ryan told the crying Teddy who saw the end coming, "I love you, Teddy. I do no kidding love you." Ryan talked 7-Eleven convenience talk, the kind of bull you know a hungry old lover will swallow like junk food. He said it exactly the way Tony Perkins had said to Tuesday Weld in *Pretty Poison*. "I do no kidding love you."

In San Francisco, Teddy had gotten in the way. He couldn't keep a job for fear of not keeping a constant eye on Ryan. He seethed if Ryan said hello on Castro. Without changing his boyish smile, Teddy could conjure instant Evil Teddy. Men asked Ryan, "Teddy's hot but what's with his vibe?"

"You need," Ryan said, "to live on your own for a few months. You need to have some friends who aren't my friends."

"I don't want anyone else," Teddy said. "I'll never let you go."

"Your meal ticket's punched out. So's your free ride. Get a job."

Suffocating captivity drove Ryan-Orion mad. I think more than anything in his heart of hearts he wanted nothing more than to be captured; but unless it was precisely the right man, it was a bondage he would never allow. Not in a million years. Not until he found the Ideal Man of his dreams.

Not until Kick.

Not until Kick captured Ryan completely.

"Kick? Kick." Ryan was talking long distance to El Lay. "Is that his stage name?" He grilled Dan Dufort who told Ryan he had a friend Ryan must meet. "I'm suspicious of blind dates." But that first night, when Ryan first saw Kick, he dropped the suspicion. Something clicked in his very soul. Ryan stared in awe. At Misericordia Seminary he had learned the words of transubstantiation. *Hoc est enim corpus meum. This is my body.* Muscular blond flesh and blood walked into the Platonic Ideal he had tucked away in the back of his head about the way a man is supposed to be. The sweet treble call of boys' voices at far-off games deepened down into the slow southern drawl of Kick's first Alabama "Hullo."

Kick. With a shelf life from here to eternity.

Kick was a man's man, to hear Ryan tell it, an angel's angel, a god's god. His was the perfect body, the classic face, the supernal blondness that was the object of Ryan's search that something in life could be ideal.

I myself thought Kick a bit slick, but I recognized the type. Everybody can recognize the type: the man who since he was a little boy is popular on the playground, always a captain in sports, the jock who dates the prettiest girls, the muscular guy in the showers who makes boys with high IQs and

swimmer's bodies jealous as shit. There is something about handsome, husky, blond jocks that has filled everybody from Hitler to Madison Avenue with lust. Especially if, like Kick, their genes take to bodybuilding, and they groom themselves like impeccable Highway Patrolmen parading their stun-gun good looks with all the Command Presence of a man carrying himself with absolute self-confidence.

Kick could get away with murder.

One night, when Ryan sat with Kick at the Castro Palms, Kweenasheba took a handheld mike, sat down on the edge of the stage, and sang soft country-blues, with a twinge of lust for Kick in her own voice: "His pickup grin's flashin' across the juke joint floor. Redneck an' handsome. Blue-jean eyes lit from above. Chancin' with dancin', flirtin' with love." Ryan and Kick were hardly listening. They were staring into each other's eyes. At least, Ryan was staring into Kick's.

"God," Kweenie told me after she first saw Kick, "He's so drop-dead gorgeous he should carry drool buckets for innocent bystanders."

Kweenie and Ryan were psychic twins born sixteen years apart.

I must warn you. I am a professor of American popular culture at San Francisco State. I am not inexperienced in my observations. I am not gay, but I am a scholar—no, a student—of the gay subculture so important to San Francisco. I like gay men and lesbian women. Gays have always been a wonderful affront to received taste in America. That makes them interesting. They know how to make us react. You do not have bearded men in nuns' habits on network television without offending someone; and in the stylish offense of a man like Sister Boom Boom, quite often, comes the shock of awakening society needs. Gay men and lesbian women have been avant garde gadflies to straight American society. They exist to teach us irony. We are better off because of them. Our interiors are better designed. But that is academic. What is personal to me is that, once, while jogging Venice Beach, I met a woman friend who had run into a Golden Man. The look in her startled eyes was the same wondrous look I saw in Ryan's face when first he told me about Kick.

Recently, lecturer Quentin Crisp, that brilliant British pioneer of world-class queers, warned the yearning world of homosexual lovers that there is no tall, dark man of their dreams. But Ryan, the night that Crisp held my campus lecture hall in queenly thrall, would not have it so. Crisp gayly fielded questions after his lecture. Ryan challenged Crisp's velvet-glove rhetoric with a boxing glove. What a show! Both men respected the other but neither budged an inch. They locked horns at the political heart of the gaystyle matter. Ryan, plucky as Quentin was plucked, was playing

Patrick Henry in some movie or another, exposing publicly for the first time his theory about emerging, evolving, masculine homosexuals. Ryan virtually said, "Give me homomasculinism or give me Death!" Quentin, ever the showman, turned an aside to his fans, wryly arched his brow, and brought down the house.

Ryan himself laughed, but his shot, like another shot heard round the world, had been fired. That night the Revolutionary War was not about tea and taxes, but about Sissy-Brit tea and sympathy versus American-Butch coffee and sex. Ryan, still radical from the Sixties, could not help rebutting. He wrote later in his *Journal*: "The internationally received popular stereotype of effeminacy was Crisp enough, and terribly British, but is not hard enough to play ball in America." Ryan's appetites flew directly in the face of Crisp's philosophy the way that passion always will. As much as Crisp denied the dashing, tall, dark man, Ryan truly believed in the existence of the Golden Man. He believed that bodybuilders are half-man and half-god the way centaurs are half-man and half-horse. He also believed in Tinker Bell, the fight for love and glory, and the sweet, sweet promise of blond muscle. Everything for Ryan was metaphor.

Many people feel me ambiguous, and somewhat of a sore thumb; but understanding of my role and my voice, be assured, is part of the mystery here. As a pop scholar, I feel bound to investigate a love affair, especially a love affair of this popular sort that ran for three years at the corner of 18th and Castro, an intersection suitable for the painter Hogarth. The street was their medium as the street has always been for gay men. The street is for cruising. The street is for parading. When gay people liberated themselves at the Stonewall riot, they shouted, "Out of the bars and into the streets." The street is a confirmation of the public side of gay life and politics. Walt Whitman was the good gay poet of the streets. The street is the place where, when you go there, you know you're out of your closet.

Maneuvers magazine made Ryan visible. Kick's body was more than just another streetside attraction. Together they became an instantly Famous Couple on Castro Street. On the big screen over its glitzy bar, the Midnight Sun showed candid telephoto closeup videos of them holding court on Castro in the afternoons, leaning against the window of Donuts & Things, drinking coffee from yellow plastic cups. The camera loved Kick; and Ryan, more famous for his words than his face, was always at his side. More than one queen wished Miss Scarlett dead, because they saw him as all that stood between them and Kick.

"What's that balding faggot have that I don't have?"

"Kick Sorensen," was the answer.

They stood on their tongues trying to figure what the Famous Couple had in common. Kick's contribution was obvious. He had Universal Appeal. Ryan was the ringer.

"I hear they have sixteen inches between them."

"Yeah. Twelve-to-four in favor of Kick."

To me the bigger curiosity concerned more mysterious workings than sex appeal. I wanted to know, in the game of love, how a one-night stand turned unexpectedly for them both into an off-ramp to Alpha Centauri.

Mysterious forces propelled both men toward one another. Ryan, on an enchanted El Lay evening, had indeed met a stranger across a crowded room. So had Kick. But while their blind date that first night seemed the very essence of gay lust, the kind Ryan sold by the column inch in *Maneuvers*, somehow, very quickly, sometime between midnight and the next dawn, this match of writer and body artist, something like a same-sex Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe, became much more than trick rock 'n' roll.

Somehow, I think, Ryan and Kick accidentally tapped into a Force Field so basic and so human that it thrilled them narcotically, before it terrified them totally.

That first August night in El Lay something clicked. Kick posed and Ryan talked his sex-rap. Recreational sex became unitive sex became transcendental sex. They pushed out the bounds of the finite, conjuring sexually, riding into dangerous psychic territory where neither was himself, and each passed through the other, until they triangulated a third Entity: a Power, a Force, a supranatural Being neither at first fully recognized, and, once conjured, neither could ever live without again. Something more than love muscled in on them.

Crisp may be right. There may be no tall, dark man; but Ryan had seen at their first meeting, and this I reveal as plainly and without prejudice as I can, the face of the Golden Man. Knowing Ryan's Catholic metaphysics, of one thing I am absolutely certain; and don't misunderstand what I, a confirmed atheist say, when I say it with qualification, not on Ryan's part, but on mine, that Ryan had glimpsed the very face of God.

6

On the title page of his dog-eared *Billy Budd*, Ryan wrote, in the most legible scribble of all his random notes, what must have come to him, suddenly, as a single, illuminating, uninterrupted, crystalline vision of sexual elegance.

That first night when I first saw Kick, I recognized one of life's long shots at the Perfect Affirmation.

He was a man.

He had a man's strength and fragility, a man's grace and intensity, a man's joy, and a man's passion. He seemed my chance to celebrate the changes in me as growth. He was so fully a man, he was an Angel of Light.

To him I could say nothing but *Yes*.

One thing, you see, I know for sure: Nature very rarely puts it all together: looks, bearing, voice, appeal, smile, intelligence, artfulness, accomplishment, strength, kindness. That's what I looked for all my life: the chance to say *Yes* to a man like that.

I look in men for nothing more than that affirmative something that grabs you and won't let you look away. Maintaining my full self, to have some plenty to offer back in balance, I've looked for some man who fills in the appropriate existential blanks, for some man to be the way a man is supposed to be, for some man to keep on keeping on with, in all the evolving variations of friendship and fraternity, beyond the first night's encounter.

I've looked for that to happen: to be able to say *Yes* inside myself when a good, clean glow of absolute trust settles over the world.

Honest manliness is never half-revealed. When it's there, it's all right there in front of you. The hardest thing to be in the world today is a man.

Start from the beginning. Start from before that innocent prehistory in those Druidic eons when men consorted with the gods. Consider those ancient fables celebrated by the classical Greeks. Consider the Vatican's magnificently oversized marble Hercules. Consider the naked bruising statue of Vulcan, Forger of Steel, standing astride a hill overlooking Birmingham where Kick was born in Alabama. Then you can better understand Ryan's passion for men's heroically muscular bodies.

When Ryan first saw Kick, I dare say, his fantasy spanned a million years.

"You're a strange new mutant," Ryan said to me. "A scholar of American popular culture. You're a vulture feeding on your contemporaries. It

used to be, when things were what they used to be, that scholars would wait a decent fifty years at least before daring to dissect people and their behavior. But you? No! You pounce right on us. You formulate us like butterflies on the heads of pins. You dissect us. You poach us. You're a culture vulture. Do you know the difference between a vulture and a pop culture scholar? Of course, you don't. A vulture waits till you're dead to pick on you."

"Fuck you," I said, "and your high horse."

Ryan grinned.

This was my first meeting with him and he was spiling me. "Asshole," I said. I had called to do an interview with the editor of *Maneuvers*. It was a leather and S&M magazine, but I hadn't expected to be abused. "Don't waste my time attacking me. You don't know who I am." I could tell he was testing me. "I'm here to find out who you are."

Ryan unbuttoned his fly and flipped out his penis. "That's who I am," he said. A sizeable chunk of meat, as Ryan would have written in his fiction, lay on the chair between his leather thighs.

"That's of small interest to me," I said. "I know how to play 'Dueling Banjos.'" I bluffed him by patting my own Levi's crotch.

"I'm gay," Ryan said.

"I'm straight," I said.

He broke up. We hit it off. I think I was the first person ever, and probably the last, to tell the flamboyant Mr. Ryan Steven O'Hara to shut up.

I make no apology for my vocation. I make my living as a dispassionate observer. I believe one must study culture quickly before it melts. Memory and memoirs only make the past glow. I love the firsthand immediacy of another of my interviews, Sam Steward, the Father of Gay Erotic Writing. He was a joy telling his merry tales of Gertrude and Alice and Thornton and the rest of the Charmed Circle. Who but the living, breathing Sam, the last survivor, could tell the intimacies of Bilignin, how he, one night, stumbling into the bathroom, caught sight of Gertrude, one hand trying to cover her mastectomy that only Alice had ever seen. No one had even known that Gertrude had cancer. But Sam knew. That's the kind of firsthand reportage that is the essence of pop culture: get it while the source is alive and kicking; poke at it while it's fading; perform an autopsy while it's still warm; keep to the immediate evanescent facts and feelings that will evaporate before they can be recorded; leave the eulogies to historians studying the world through the rearview mirror. I prefer watching the world through the windshield: not where we've been, but where we are and where we're going. An odd approach for an ivory-tower professor, but

one that involves a person deeply. Sometimes dangerously. Something like covering El Salvador, or San Francisco, under fire. Writing history is dead and distinctly different from the vicarious adventure of witnessing a whole people being carried away by history.

I admit I'm a fame-and-failure junkie. Not mine. Others. I entertain an almost perverse curiosity about the ironies of American culture. I want to know why the postmodern craze for derivative pastiche, quotation, and appropriation succeeds seamlessly in Spielberg and Lucas and fails in the lurid flash films of De Palma and the post-*Apocalypse* Coppola. I am more interested in the delayed-stress syndrome of Vietnam that affected Ryan's brother, Thomas a'Beckett O'Hara, than I am in that curiously flawed war itself. I am more interested in the generic emotional effects of MTV than I am in any Number One song ever. Beatlemania interests me far more than the Death of Lennon. I am more interested in the American males' sports obsession with muscle and size than I am in knowing which bodybuilder is contractually owned by which publisher of which glossy physique magazine. I want to know how men achieve a certain Look, a certain Attitude, a certain way of Being. I want to know why star-crossed lovers, such as that woman created by John Fowles, wait for the French Lieutenant who, like Godot, never shows. I want to know why Ryan cruised in the fast lane, certain that what he was looking for was looking for him, praying for the first time ever he'd see the like of Kick's face. Kick, you see, was not the French Lieutenant, nor was he Godot. Unlike them, Kick showed up. Saint Theresa, beloved by Saint Truman Capote, was proven right again: "There are more tears shed over answered prayers than unanswered."

On a more mundane level, Ryan's friend, the streetwise porn-video mogul Solly Blue, had warned him: "In California you've got to be careful what you wish for. You might get it." I want to understand sexual politics. I want to understand how Dan White revised gay history one November morning when he crawled through the basement window of San Francisco City Hall, high on junk food, and shot the liberal Italian Mayor, George Moscone, and the gay Jewish Supervisor, Harvey Milk. I want to understand how White brought an outrageously playful community, with little more than sexual freedom on their minds, together in a way that he neither wanted and they could never have foreseen. Especially, I want to know in all their infinite variety about all American women and American men. America, I tell my students, is a wonderful country that has yet to be discovered.

My name is Charles Bishop. I am only peripheral to these events of passion and illusion. I was a bystander taking notes. I thought I was not

part of any of this. Yet, I must confess, what happened to them all touched my heart one way or another, a fact that for a very long time my cynical, atheist critic's head hardly believed. Now I am working my way back. This is my only deep, dark secret. I must work my way back. Back from what once was called a nervous breakdown. Not a real nervous breakdown, mind you. I wasn't myself touched that much. But from a tenth-rate nervous break-through. The kind you don't see a psychiatrist for. The kind you work out for yourself. By examining all the pieces that push you to the limit. By examining all the bad things that happen to good people. By trying to figure how golden fliers become star-crossed jumpers.

Like Ryan, I left the Midwest to start a new life teaching in California. I like the academic life. It's sheltered. It gives a man time to himself, even with endless papers to grade. My time made me accessible to Ryan. Ah, yes. In some ways we were very much alike: me with the analytical need to listen, and him with the emotional, Catholic need to confess.

My masculinity, and rein in any ambiguous cynicism about *closets*, runs exclusively, when it runs at all, straight toward older women. I am more asexual than consciously celibate. I remain perhaps coolly interested in—forgive my slight pedantry—the existential ramifications of human love. Somehow, Ryan Steven O'Hara seemed to me, if anything, at first proponent then victim of the new romantic, liberated sensuality trying to fit itself into the inexorable mainstream of twentieth-century existential constraints. Translated, that means he was trying to find love in the face of Death, but not the same way *The Advocate* proclaimed the safe sex of the New Homosexuality in the face of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Ryan and Kick were, long before AIDS, when San Francisco was still Eden, something like Adam and Eve, a couple with something special. In his heart, Ryan carried a priestly purity; in his body, Kick carried a manly nobility. This mutual recognition, achieved through the transcendence of hard-balling sex and drugs bonded them together. Actually, both of them were something like Adam before the Fall. And nothing like Eve.

What I must tell you makes me feel like a film editor whose footage has all run off the reel and lies in tangled snarls on the dusty floor. I must make sense of it. Stories in the movies all make sense. Maybe movies—something all these film fans never understood—are a crock. Maybe movies lie. Maybe in assembling the footage of what happened what I too want to know is what the tall dark writer and the short blond bodybuilder had in common. I think I know.

It was body and blood and soul and divinity.

The writer took up bodybuilding and the bodybuilder began writing. Falling through the looking glass, mirrorfucking, each becoming the other, they fathered that third mysterious Entity that lifted them out of space and time and made their world stand still, in a space out of time, for almost three years when for both of them there was no one else.

Ryan, by the way, nicknamed me “Magnus,” because, he said, I reminded him of the stern rector of Misericordia Seminary, the Very Reverend Monsignor Magnus Linotti. “Magnus,” he said. “Magnus Bishop. A perfectly ironic name for a cynical, atheist critic.” Kweenasheba picked up on the name game because of her counterculture taste for changing given names. Solly Blue endorsed it because all his hustlers had street names. Kick and the others simply followed suit. So I, Charles Bishop, from Peoria, Illinois, nicknamed by Ryan O’Hara from Peoria, Illinois, became, in San Francisco, California, Magnus Bishop.

Kick’s was a nickname too. “Without a nickname,” they say in Chinatown, “a man has no chance to become rich.” Kick was born rich, the only child of an athletic, horsey, handsome couple whose roots went back three generations in the American South, and before that, to the icy blond, arctic midnight sun of Norway, and before that, if Ryan was to be believed, to the Planet Krypton.

How the real Billy Ray Sorensen, southern-born and Alabama-bred in Birmingham, became the bodybuilder titled Mr. National Physique, Mr. Golden Bear, and Mr. California, is part and parcel of my pop culture theory that people tend to be like their names, given or assumed.

“Kick” was short for “kickstand,” a name dropped on Billy Ray in his high school shower room by a coach who joked in front of the other lathering players: “Hung like that, boy, you ain’t got a dick. You got yourself a kickstand.” The nickname stuck in the positive upbeat way things always stick to good-looking, well-built, blond athletes. For those on whom the gods smile, they positively grin.

I’d like to say none of this happened to anybody. Yet, with all Ryan’s *Journals* and videotapes, Kick’s muscle trophies, the pile of their mutually passionate letters, and the hyper-male fetish-clothing belonging to both of them spread around me here in my study, I have good reason to believe, sitting alone here at Rancho Bar Nada, facing westward over the Pacific, that something enormous happened. Something beyond their control. Something one or both of them, and I say this metaphorically, sold their souls for. I want to find the name of that Entity they conjured between them. I want to know where are they now, and why am I alone with my feet and my head tangled in their footage? Remember that. And remember

this. If any other mystery hides here, it's who is Magnus Bishop. Pay attention, I tell my students. There's a quiz at the end.

Somehow backtracking the facts of Ryan and Kick as a Famous Couple is irresistible. I often tell my film students that it never offends me that a particular lifestyle is presented on screen as long as it makes dramatic sense and the lighting is good. Despite what Ryan's starstruck mother taught him, life is not always as pat as the movies. So let me continue, hopefully with a compassion for people who once were my friends, the job of the editor. That's all that remains, you see, when you're not as much of an urbane traveler as you think you are, and they leave you behind to pick up after them.

All I know for sure is that no matter what they once were, they'll never ever be the same. That's why, after all, everyone comes to San Francisco.

This is how love, or what passes for love on this planet, goes haywire.

8

Movies are made or betrayed by editors sitting alone at their Movieolas viewing and reviewing hours of footage. A sequence is picked here. A close shot inserted there. The editor punctuates the director's hours of linear footage with sometimes no more than the subliminal flash of a single frame. The cinematographer's angles are cut to intensify the perspective on a scene. Actors' timing is re-paced. Character becomes dramatic, comic, romantic, elusive, mysterious, more vulnerable, more vicious. Plot tightens, or jump-cuts to the surreal. Emotions are led, guided, seduced, betrayed. Beauty and terror collide. Scenes juxtapose, repeat, invert. Villains ride unrepentant into the sunset. Beauty takes a fall on a banana peel. Editors, usually women in the film industry, give American movies their final glossy vision. Under a scissors, decisive as the Three Fates, places and people appear and disappear. Faces end up on the cutting room floor.

These days, everyone in America is writing a screenplay. Ryan's was titled *Half of Noah's Ark*, "Because," Ryan said, "San Francisco, especially the Castro, has one of every kind." All of us play the lead in the movie we're living. If that conceit of our times has any truth, Warhol made it quite clear that our movies are at best short subjects. "Everyone," Warhol playing Mephistopheles, had whispered into a hanky over a microphone, "will be famous for fifteen minutes."

Ryan had the good sense to avoid moving to Hollywood when he left the Midwest for California. Instead of El Lay, he took his life on location to San Francisco. "I'd never move to Hollywood," he said. "You can get

lost in Hollywood. You end up like Marilyn in a tangle of sheets with the phone on the floor. Besides, as the Castro's greatest party producer, Michael Maletta, always said, 'In San Francisco, everyone is a star.'

Maletta's was no idle observation. San Francisco, unlike Los Angeles, is small and familiar: hardly more than a simple fishing village with an opera. And a tolerance for colorful characters. In three fast generations, the Beats of North Beach begot the Hippies of the Haight-Ashbury who begot the Gays of the Castro. Because San Francisco is the easiest place in California to do parole, eighty percent of the convicts released in the state go directly from jail to the City's Tenderloin. It's a sleazy, dangerous neighborhood of small hotels, of mattresses burning in gutters, of pub-crawling drag queens and whores and hustlers, of old people waiting to die and new boat people scrounging aluminum cans to live.

The Tenderloin is a war zone.

The Tenderloin was Solly Blue's totally urban place of funky preference. It was his life. Its delinquent tough boys were his business. Their bodies were zoned commercial. He hired them in, and shot artful porn videotapes of them solo on screen as if they were specimens trapped in solitary confinement. They flexed and posed, showing off their tattoos and big dicks and buttocks. They talked dirty to the camera, asking Solly's mail-order customers if they wanted to "slob on bob," stroking their dicks, masturbating to full spasm, spitting cum and saliva at the camera. Personally they were straight. Commercially they were anything a patron wanted them to be. They were the throwaways and the runaways of America, kids born, back in the deep South or the Midwest, to some strange calling to the streets of El Lay and San Francisco.

"And they're all twenty-something," Solly said. "Like us."

He taped them, had hustler sex with them, gave them more money than they earned or asked for, had them sign a model release, and sent them back to the streets. In the Tenderloin, where he lived, Solly Blue was a star the way movie directors are stars. He was as much an *auteur* as Truffaut, but the young men who brought him other young men didn't know that. His money made him famous with the boys and the boys, particularly quite some few of them, had no idea how famous Solly had made them on the home-video porn circuit. Solly Blue was a marketing genius.

Ryan often disguised himself to walk the streets of the Tenderloin. The neighborhood was a perfect match for his frequent bouts of depression.

"Convicts, alcoholics, immigrants," Solly Blue said. "Judy Garland exposed the truth. San Francisco's Golden Gate lets no stranger wait outside its door."

Ryan always ended up at Solly's penthouse. Teddy, ever jealous Teddy, accused him of having a hot affair on the side. Not with Solly, for god-sakes, but with somebody! A terrible fight ensued.

"I'll never let you go," Teddy said.

"Alright, already. Okay. I get the message. It's okay. Stop worrying," Ryan said. "I've never balled Solly."

"You have sex with his hustlers," Teddy said.

"I've always liked hustlers."

"What's that mean?" Teddy was pissed. Ryan was expert at saying one thing and meaning another. "I'm not a hustler."

"And Castro isn't paved with yellow bricks."

"I need you," Teddy said.

"Ryan wanted to be needed, but not by the likes of dear sweet Teddy," Solly Blue said. "Teddy was life-size. Ryan wanted someone larger than CinemaScope. He was ripe for Kick's picking."

"If I'm not needed," Ryan said, "I don't know how to relate to the world."

Monsignor Magnus Linotti, the rector of Misericordia, had encouraged Ryan, telling him the essence of a vocation was the world's need for handsome, manly, young priests. His father, sick and dying those twelve long years, had cornered Ryan's ear and whispered how much the family needed him. Teddy had needed him. The priests' pinched souls, his father's illness, and Teddy's whining, exhausted him. He was depressed. He thought not so much of actual suicide as about the idea of suicide. He read Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*. His curiosity overrode his emotions. He was down, but he wasn't ready to kill himself; he was merely sniffing around the edges, the way a porn writer sniffs around an asshole for a story, to imagine what suicide might be like. He never wrote a *Maneuvers* story ending with the cliché of gay suicide. He was, if anything, intellectually curious only, because he was in his mortal soul afraid of Death.

If Ryan thought of suicide, he was in the right City. He drove regularly across the Golden Gate Bridge to spend weekends near the Russian River in Sonoma County at his small ranch that he called Bar Nada. He felt the Bridge's strange attraction.

"Some nights when I drive back to the City, and the fog is sweeping in over the railings, all orange from the Bridge lights, I see ghosts. The Golden Gate Bridge is the most haunted place in San Francisco," he said.

I was hardly afraid that Ryan would do himself in. At least, not from the Bridge. Ryan was a flier not a jumper. I might explain that the City's notoriously high suicide rate is misleading. Native San Franciscans rarely

jump off the Bridge. It is mostly outlanders, anonymous immigrants from the dark interior of the American continent, with only a few months in the City, who are jumpers. No one, no one who is anyone, ever jumps off the industrial-strength Bay Bridge coming in from Oakland. It is the Golden Gate, and only the gracious Golden Gate, that has the singular siren mystique.

You can't really understand San Francisco without understanding the Golden Gate Bridge.

I think California draws high-fliers from all across the country. New beginnings in America have always beckoned westward. California is as far west as you can go. When even that last hope of California's promise becomes, like everything else, betrayal, the Golden Gate's siren height, spanning land's end to land's end, gives those would-be upwardly mobile aspirants who wanted to fly so high, one last ironic chance to dramatize the talent for daring they couldn't even give away: one soaring flight, out and over and down into a deep Pacific sea of surcease.

"Gravity sucks," Ryan wrote. "Gravity holds us bondage on this prison of a planet. Gravity is the bottom line for angels flying too close to the ground."

Ryan had seen enough of love in San Francisco to have learned the country-western wisdom of Aristotle who said, "Love makes a man a romantic; the loss of a lover makes him a philosopher." When you can't beat something, you join it. When you can't find love, you settle for sex. The Bridge is, perhaps, the last chance of the existentially betrayed to flaunt gravity's unbeatable revenge on all the world's high-fliers.

When, I wonder, and how, does a flier become a jumper?

One of my university students, a glowing young freshman girl, asked me why so many books and films are always so depressing. "Why aren't artists content to show happy people having good times?"

I handed her that morning's *Chronicle*. Page two featured a shot of a young man sitting on the rail of the Golden Gate Bridge. He faced the City. Jumpers always face the City; everybody's movie requires a blockbuster audience, especially for the final reel. The athletically built boy was naked. His head was shaved to a Mohawk. He had padlocked his ankles tight together with a heavy chain. He had handcuffed his wrists together behind his back. A blond California Highway Patrolman was leaning, black-gloved hand outstretched, to the bound boy. The patrolman's mirrored sunglasses doubled the image of the perching figure. The photo was an esthetically perfect shot. Seconds later, the boy arched his buttocks and dropped, cutting like a rock through the wind, naked and shaved and

bound, into the cold currents below. Tourists on a Bay excursion cruise, the article reported, cheered and applauded.

“Why?” my student asked.

“Because they got what they wanted.”

“That’s why?”

“Why not?” I said.

She looked stymied.

Explaining the *why* of anything has never been my strong suit. That’s one of the reasons I find wrestling through the effects of Ryan’s life an exhausting exercise. *Why*, after all, isn’t really a whole question. *Why* is only the yin of the yang, *why not*?

The Bridge fascinated Ryan. He once joked about entrepreneuring a small business, printing engraved invitations. Something in quiet good taste for a suicide: “Golden Gate Bridge. 9 PM. Midspan. Cityside. RSVP regrets only.” He proposed starting a service to throw off the Golden Gate Bridge the ashes of cowards who had always wanted to jump, but were too chicken, and lived out the natural length of their unnatural lives. He should never have joked about Death.

Solly Blue’s first lover had jumped off the Bridge one New Year’s Eve. “He was very clever,” Solly said. “If he had jumped any other day, I probably would have eventually forgotten the date. He wanted me to remember him every New Year’s. And I do. I can’t help it. He made me hate New Year’s.”

The tourists on the excursion cruise got what they wanted: the shocking beauty of the naked boy’s fall, the horror of his splattering, splashing Death, and the moral superiority of flying back to Kansas telling tales of lurid California, and how good it feels to be back home.

“Everyone should get what they want,” Ryan said. “At least some version of it.” Ironical that ultimately Ryan got it, and got it good. “Oh, how you do me when you do me like you do,” he wrote to Kick.

9

It happened one night. It started with their first meeting. Ryan had flown PSA from San Francisco to Hollywood/Burbank. Teddy was still living with him, because, Ryan said, “Teddy can’t afford to move out. He needs first and last months’ rent plus a security deposit.” Teddy worked minimum-wage jobs in fits and starts that drove Ryan mad. “Every six months, Teddy has some medical problem.” Ryan was beside himself. “In the eight years we’ve lived together, I had to get his teeth fixed. I’m talking

every molar and bicuspid. Guess who paid good Doctor Percodan? I mean tooth decay in this day and age? Not tonguing around in my mouth, thank you. I read somewhere tooth decay is contagious.” Ryan was a hypochondriac who would go berserk with the onset of AIDS. “After his teeth, Teddy had surgery to repair a torn cartilage in his knee. He claimed I tore it when I tied him up. I told him he shouldn’t have struggled so much. Then he had a kidney stone, which was right before his hepatitis. Then came the series of allergy shots. He’d endure anything rather than work.”

The downward spiral of gay men, I’ve found, goes with the territory. A man, straight or gay, can’t follow his dick around and not expect to lose ground in the real world.

“And during his allergy shots, he had a tonsillectomy.” Ryan rubbed his thumb to his fingertips. “Guess who paid for it all? Teddy was an attractive twenty-four-year-old strawberry blond when I met him. He never got over being a hustler. He’d work New York for awhile. Then Chicago. He said I rescued him from being an alcoholic.” Ryan was resolute. “Believe me when I say my Finishing School for Gay boys is closed. From now on, I want full-grown adult men only.” His madness those days was the kind of madness one sees in men saddled with bitter loyalties to old lovers they can’t seem to dispose of in a gentlemanly fashion.

In those last days, Teddy kept to himself in the Victorian flat that had always been more Ryan’s than theirs together. His room was a pile of old clothes, magazines, and boxes of Styrofoam peanuts from the packing cartons of photographic equipment Ryan had bought for him.

“You spoiled him,” I said.

“I loved him,” Ryan said. “I still love him. But I can’t stand him.” When finally Ryan ordered Teddy to move out, he refused. It took several of us, including a gay San Francisco cop, to coax him from the house. He did not go gently. There was a fight. Physical blows. He held onto Ryan tighter than I have ever seen anyone cling to anyone else. He was hysterical.

“You made me move with you to California,” Teddy said. “Now you’re abandoning me.” He was terrified of going out into the world alone.

“That’s precisely why he has to go,” Ryan said. “He’s hiding out in me. He has no friends of his own. His only friends are my friends.”

When we dragged Teddy screaming from Ryan’s apartment, his fingernails tore into the carpet like a cat being pulled on its belly out the door to the vet.

Teddy’s forced exit had been shaped sometime before. The last straw had been the Friday evening Ryan flew to Hollywood/Burbank. Teddy

had been supposed to drive him to San Francisco International.

"I can't find the car keys," Ryan said.

"You can never find your keys."

Ryan grew frantic about missing his flight. Teddy searched all Ryan's pockets hanging in his clothes closet. Teddy had always taken care of keeping track of things Ryan couldn't be bothered with. The search for the keys escalated into name-calling. "If you don't find them, I'll have to call a taxi," Ryan said. "You asshole!"

"They're your keys, asshole," Teddy said. I admired nothing so much in the boy as his ability to put up with Ryan's stormy temperament. Anything Ryan gave him or paid for, believe me, Teddy had earned.

The taxi arrived. Ryan was in a movie. "The airport. And step on it!" The gay driver, thrilled by the classic line, careened past everything on 101 South. He roared into the airport, wheels squealing around curved ramps. Ryan jumped out at the PSA stop and threw the driver a wad of bills. "Keep the change, pal!" Ryan said.

Everything in his life somehow seemed to depend on making this flight. Six months before, Dan Dufort, a man Ryan had taken into his bed from the CMC Carnival, had promised to fix him up with a good-looking blond bodybuilder he knew in El Lay. Ryan had watched professional musclemen posing in nonsexual commercial videotapes nightly in his bedroom. All the straight, big-muscled names displayed themselves in slow motion on his screen: the brothers, Mike and Ray Mentzer; the blond Mr. America, 1965, Dave Draper; the ultimate manimal, Pete Grymkowski; the moustached blond Scott Wilson; Rod Koontz with his "*Thee Animal*" tattoo; Big Daddy Bill Pearl, and a dozen more, always excluding Schwarzenegger whom Ryan found big but not erotic. "He looks like something Hitler shit." Ryan had grown tired of muscle fantasy. He wanted reality. Quite the opposite of Miss DuBois.

"There are no real bodybuilders in San Francisco," Ryan said. "El Lay. That's where. Venice Beach. That's their Mecca. Like Castro is ours. Maybe I should have moved to El Lay. I moved to California because this is where the bodybuilders come from all across the country. But I couldn't move to La-La Land. It scares me too much. I get set down in the middle of it and I can't comprehend it. In San Francisco, I go stand at the top of any hill, and I know exactly where I am."

At the Hollywood/Burbank airport, Ryan picked Dan Dufort out of the crowd at the arrival gate. Dan was an intermediate bodybuilder. He wore a tight white tee shirt and faded Levi's. His biceps were pumped and tanned against the white cotton. His white teeth smiled. His face

was sunburned and oiled with a down of fresh sweat from the humid Los Angeles night. In a couple of years, he was going to win the Gay Games physique contest.

“You look great,” Ryan said.

“We’ve had a change of plans.” Dan reached for Ryan’s camera case. Ryan’s heart sank. The fight with Teddy and the big tip for the taxi driver had been for nothing. Dan read his face. “Kick’s not coming over tomorrow night.” Ryan suddenly felt his car keys in his jacket pocket. “He called an hour ago, and asked if it was okay if he posed tonight instead of tomorrow night.” All Ryan cared about at this moment was the news that would satisfy his lust for flesh-and-blood musclemen. “So I told him to come on ahead.” Ryan was relieved. He’d have to apologize to Teddy. “I couldn’t wait for you to see him. Everything I’ve told you is true.”

“Including,” Ryan said, “that you’re a master of understatement?”

“You’ll see for yourself.” Dan smiled like a man with a big surprise. He drove Ryan back to his house off Santa Monica in West Hollywood. The hot August night smelled of jasmine. Dan’s apartment was austere, perfect, poised, calculated to the display of extraordinary muscle. A spotlight can on a black track hung in the center of the bedroom ceiling, angled for perfect

posing display opposite a floor-to-ceiling mirror.

Ryan wrote in his *Journal*:

We smoked a joint and waited. The radio sounded the way radios sound in a new town: different commercials, different weather forecasts. I was nervous. All my life I had idealized men in a classic sense. I’d fantasized about the thickness, the bigness of bodybuilders. *Bodybuilders*. The word itself. *Bodybuilder*. A builder of bodies, taking meat and sculpting flesh by deliberate sweating design. The building of a body. A man’s body. The architectonics of muscle. The taking of flesh to make a man into a muscleman. Another incarnational word: *muscle*. *Muscleman*. A complete investigation, no, celebration of the complete male. Could he be as good as I hoped, as good as Dan said? He was, I had been told, extremely handsome. Had he truly the perfect body and the perfect face for dramatizing whatever athletic clothes or uniforms he carefully chose to wear? Was he really coming to make me cum? Could he really let me worship his muscle the way I have so long wanted?

Ryan had waited his whole life for this night. In long ago summers in the Midwest, riding in the backseat of his family's car, he had watched men not even knowing why he watched how they moved, looked, groomed, and carried themselves. His whole boyhood had been an indescribable ache for what he had not then known, other than the sight of some man made him say to himself: "I want to be like him when I grow up." The thought of touching such men never crossed his mind; the thought of making love to such men never entered his head; the possibility of handling an athletes' body, stroking his rock-hard muscles, breathing in the sweet sweat scent of his hair lay in the vague unseen distance for him like a far rainbow's end.

He ached for the roar of the crowd and the smell of the Coppertone.

Flying back from El Lay, Ryan tried to capture something beyond words. He wrote on the only paper available. I transcribe these essential words here from the back, no kidding, of unused PSA airsick bags. I found them stuffed in the back of his *Journal*. There's an innocence here like *Love: Round 1*.

10

Pacific Southwest Airline. Seat 5A. Window
8 PM Sunday, August 21, 1977
PSA Fit 101: HOLLYWOOD/BURBANK TO SFO

Kick's red Corvette pulled into Dan's drive. Dan met him at the door. Kick entered. He was better than any man I had ever seen. And I've seen stunners. His face alone, his body yet unseen, was perfect. Desire filled me. Everything I ever wanted to do with a man, to a man, or have a man do with or to me, flushed through my body. My eyes, and I'm not lying to exaggerate, came, looking at him. Never have I ever seen anyone who looked so noble, handsome, classic. The light in his blue eyes showed something more sensitive than I could ever have hoped for in a man of such physical beauty. He had no vanity. No Attitude. He was what he was. He simply walked into the room and controlled the furniture, the radio, the breeze from the windows, everything, with his Command Presence.

I shook his hand and sat down, knocked out by his beauty, afraid I might turn him off by being taller. He and Dan stood in the center of the room and talked. I sat silent. Speechless. He

turned and smiled down at me. He said nothing but he communicated everything. His eyes looked deep into me. Reassuring me. As if I already heard his heart say: "Here I am. Look at me. Look at what I was born with. Look at what I have worked at improving. I like it. You like it. It's all here. A gift to us. Let's share it. Let's enjoy it. Let's let go with no reserve. Let's get off on it together."

I wanted to hump his leg.

He had dressed himself in fantasy gear he thought would please me. He had tucked his blond body into an impeccably tailored California Highway Patrol motorcycle uniform: high-polished, calf-hugging black boots; the tan wool-serge breeches bulging tight around his muscular thighs; the black-leather police jacket, accessory belt with handcuffs, nightstick, and gun in the holster. His gold-framed cop glasses accented his tanned blond face. His hair was cut, groomed, and the kind of translucent blond that runs from black-blond to platinum. His bristle of moustache was authoritatively clipped military style. He was a bulk of a man. No fag in cop drag. He understood perfect police dressage. He presented himself to me uniformed like a sculpture for an unveiling. I could tell he had an immense capacity for man-to-man fantasy play. He was, in fact, teasing me and I was loving the foreplay. Dan had promised me a bodybuilder. Kick himself intensified the promise one step higher. He offered me my first reading of his physique as an ideal man in authority. He was perfect. He walked, flesh and blood and muscle, right into my abstract ideal of what a man should look like. He filled in all the blanks. He was my every fantasy. He was the kind of man I looked up at when I was a boy and thought, "That man. That man. That's the kind of man I want to look like when I grow up."

Kick terrified me. Never in this life did I expect the fulfillment of ultimate fantasy. But, my God, if this sexual wish to dive straight to the heart of pure masculinity can be filled, what other wishes in life can I hope to come true? Most bodybuilders give no indication that their muscle can be used for anything but flexing. Kick, in his CHP uniform, went beyond decorative muscle-for-muscle's sake. He was an enforcer. He was a more real cop than most credentialed cops ever dream of being. He was a CHP recruiting poster.

Kick was the way a man should be.

He finally sat down opposite me. Dan fired up a joint. We

talked about the heat and the smog. He said he had never been to San Francisco. He asked me what the city was like. Dan sat back and grinned, listening to us making our way through the small talk with steady gains toward discoveries of everything we had in common.

Kick and I were not strangers.

We almost instantly recognized we were Old Souls.

I masked what I was sensing, afraid he might not recognize what I already knew. I asked him about bodybuilding.

"The summer I was twelve," Kick's voice was an easy Alabama drawl, "I spent three months with my uncle and aunt. They ran a filling station with a diner outside of Muscle Shoals." He grinned. "I didn't quite know then how much I'd learn to love that name. About the second week, I started noticing this young trucker came in every day. He talked to me the way a grown man, who's not much more than a big kid himself, jokes around with a kid. I remember he had cut the sleeves off his flannel shirt. He asked me if I wanted to feel his arm. I reached up. Way up, I remember."

Kick raised his arm, smoothing his moves through the gestures of his story.

"I was such a little guy then, and he was so big. I wrapped both my hands around his bicep. For the first time, I felt how strong and hard and big a man's body could be. I hung on to his arm and he lifted me up. Swung me right up off my bare feet, up out of the dust. Face to face. After that, I guess I pestered the shit out of him. Every day for the rest of the summer, without my asking, he let me swing from his arms, betting me he was strong enough to hold his flexed double-arm pose while I hung, my face to his chest, with both my hands on both his biceps. I could hear his heart-beat and I wanted arms strong as his. He bet me I could chin myself from that position." Kick grinned. "So I pulled myself up, the first time half-climbing his tall body. By the time summer was over, I was hanging from his arms and chinning myself up to his face. All that next winter, back in Birmingham in my own bedroom, I stood in my white cotton underwear and started flexing my arms. Sort of posing the way boys do when they're home alone with a mirror. I studied my arms. I imagined them growing big and hard. Like his. You should have seen me. Squinting my eyes. Concentrating on them to make them grow.

Moving to an angle in the old mirror that, when I caught the distortion just right, made my arms look bigger than they were. It gave me an image to grow into. I really worked at it.”

He lowered to a manly modesty.

“I guess I have lucky genes. My mom and dad have good bodies. They said I was eating them out of house and home. The next summer I went back to Muscle Shoals. I was about four inches taller and a few pounds heavier. But the trucker wasn’t stopping by anymore.” He leaned forward, rested his forearms on his thighs, raised his face, and looked me straight in the eye. “So that’s how muscle turned me around. Especially on arms. They’re Big Guns. That’s where a man shines. Ask any guy to show you some muscle and ten-to-one he’ll flash you a biceps shot. It’s natural. If I ever compete, I don’t care if I win or not, as long as I can take home the trophy for the Best Arms. So,” he said, “that’s it. That’s how I got hooked on muscle.”

Kick relaxed back into Dan’s chair. He was smooth, slow, easy. Natural. The El Lay night was hot. I could smell his body heating up the leather of his police jacket. Sweet sweat was building up in him. His blond face glistened. He was in no rush to wham-bam. His discipline of slow southern savoring kept him in cool control of his courting foreplay. He was intent on pleasing me. He smiled at me the way a man smiles when he’s giving a new friend a gift. “I think I better take this jacket off,” he said. He stood up. He reached for the zipper. Everything slipped into slow motion. His blue eyes squinted, sizing me up. Slowly, deliberately, he grazed the back of his hairy blond hand across his strong All-American jaw. His holster and gun and night stick shifted. His shoulders and chest bulked huge under the jacket.

One part of me thought, omigod this is Hollywood! Another part of me thought, Oh, God, this is Heaven! The best gay sex scenes are half of both.

I was hooked to the tits. I couldn’t resist him and didn’t want to. I picked up his scene. I jumped on in. Words came tumbling from my mouth. Sextalk. Muscletalk. Mantalk. The scene had begun. I wasn’t acting; nor was he. We were doing a number on each other, a real number. His hand slowly pulled the zipper down every tooth of the leather jacket.

“When you take it off,” I said, “this will be my first look at you.”

He smiled and pulled off the CHP jacket. Slowly. So slowly. That was his style to move southern-slow in the El Lay fast lane. First one muscled arm. Then the other. All his moves like the slow-motion muscle movies I watched every night in my bedroom. He wore a tan CHP short-sleeve wool shirt. It bulged like armor over his chest. His gold seven-point star stood out on his left pec. His eighteen-inch upper arms filled the precisely tailored sleeves to bursting.

He was arms. Heroic arms. His thick forearms were downed with soft golden hair. His wrists were squared off in the classic way wrists are presented in men's watchband ads. His hands were perfect, defined, and powerful from gripping iron weights. His fingers and the backs of his hands were downed with sunblond hair. His nails were clipped short. His arms, hands to shoulders, were arms to worship. This was no false god I had before me. In sex, I have few inhibitions. With him, I had none.

"You are," I said, "perfect."

He smiled, and something in the way he smiled assured me there was no vanity in him. Only an honest pride. He was a man who realized the body perfect for himself. He was a body artist, a muscle artist. Bodybuilding is a subjective sport, but he was as objective as any sculptor unveiling his work.

He kept his look straight on me. His fingers reached for the buttons on his police shirt. Again, slowly, deliberately, he opened the shirt: at his neck, down across his hairy blond chest, down the length of his washboard belly. He pulled the shirt tails from under his belt. He dropped his arms down to his sides. He rotated his shoulders. The tan wool shirt pulled open over his chest and tight gut. He smiled at me, and slowly raised his left hand to palm inside the open shirt. I watched his hand run up the ripple of his belly and then smooth and cup his pectoral muscles. Already he had shown me more than I ever expected. He might have stopped and I could have flown back home happy. I've always loved seduction.

He peeled his uniform shirt deliberately off first one shoulder and then the other, revealing how wide side-to-side were his shoulders, how thick front-to-back was his chest, how wide were his lats under his shoulders and alongside his chest until they narrowed down to the tight V of his waist. He handed Dan the shirt, and stood before me, stripped to the waist, with his high-booted

legs apart. The tailored lines of his motorcop breeches clung to his thighs, swelled over his butt, and bulged at his zippered fly.

God! Was I getting material for *Maneuvers*? He was the incarnation of every mighty sexual hero I had ever conjured up in my erotic fiction. He was a vision stroked out of my one-handed study of hundreds of videotapes of bodybuilders. He was theology, literature, myth. He was Adam before the Fall, Billy Budd in full bloom, a male god rising tanned from a blue sea with the vine leaves of a satyr wet in his hair. He was what I had always wanted. "You are," I repeated, showing the proper ritual respect owed to an artist generous in sharing his creation, "perfect."

"You told me," he said to Dan, "that your friend liked muscles." Then he shined right on me. "Your friend," he said, "loves muscles."

"Your muscles. I love your muscles," I said. I had been lost and now I was found. "I love your proportion, your bulk, your definition. I love your symmetry. I love your Look." I could not bring myself to say to these men, that suddenly in my always terrified heart I was a little less afraid of dying which I had been born afraid of. Looking at Kick, I knew that if a Being were to meet me on the other side of the squeeze of Death, that if there were a sweet Jesus, then what must eternal heaven be like, if Jesus only looks this good, and this good feeling infusing my body lasts forever?

The night heated up. Kick stripped in the spotlight. His chest and abs glowed with thick blond hair. Long golden fur fleeced his thighs and calves and feet. He sported the body of a bear. His dick was more than most nylon posing trunks could pouch. We played musclesex until the hour before dawn. Kick posed and flexed under my oiled hands. Something more than sex, something like an understanding, was bonded between us. Dan knelt off in the corner stroke-watching the match he had made. He said later that Kick and I both were like beggars at an ecstatic feast, that we were perfect yin-yang, that gods need worshipers as much as worshipers need gods. I only know that I knelt before Kick for hours, rising up, stroking and sniffing and licking his body, eyeing his face close up, breathing his sweet breath, and for hours he posed, tireless, flexing arms and chest and belly and legs. He encouraged my sexual muscle-rap, following my words with his moves, as if I was scripting a scenario he had waited all his life to hear. We

were smiles of a summer night, rising together up to that moment before climax, falling back, savoring the pleasure, rising up again, until our final mutual salute to triumphant masculinity.

Honest manliness is never half-revealed. When it's there, it's total. Roman emperors could have tortured me to Death, and with my eyes upon him, and his gladiatorial smile upon me, I could have been, even at his hands, the most joyous of martyrs.

I knelt in front of him, between him and the mirror, sizing up the perspective of his muscle in the posing light. I had never before been ambidextrous; but I found my right hand reserved for myself. My left, as if for all my life I had been saving a virgin hand for stroking his hard-pumped muscle, palmed the contours of his body. I ran my left hand up his magnificent calves and thighs, not daring to touch his long hard rod for fear the muscle-worship would revert to purely genital sex. His dick was veined as thick and heavy as his arms. I ran my hand up his washboard abs and stopped, flat-palmed, where his belly met his hard rounded pecs. We both dripped sweat. He looked down upon me, and for the first time our eyes locked into an affirmative understanding. He raised his magnificent arms wide, never taking his eyes from mine, and rolled his broad shoulders. My hand on his upper belly felt his pecs harden and his abs tighten. He took a deep breath, and with all his might, flushing red, muscles pumped and veins roped around them, he intensified his look deep into my eyes, and pumped down tight and hard into the Most Muscular pose. His body quivered. Veins corded his massive neck. His jaw line set hard. Heavy streams of sweat poured from his blond hair, down his forehead, around his eyes, along his lantern jawline, and dripped, I want to say like sanctifying grace, down on me. I looked deep into his resolute face. We hung in perfect balance: the adoring worshipping the adored. I knelt in high fealty to his presentation of ideal manhood.

Our eyes locked tighter in an unspoken Energy of understanding. Hours before, we had left Dan behind, watching in amazement from the corner. Then we rose from the room, the mirror, the light, the clock. We moved to another dimension. We rose in that frozen moment to where the only clock was the one heart ticking between us. He held his body in the full locked-down power of his muscle armor. He was as graced with spiritual energy as he was with physical muscle. We were beyond words.

My eyes looked hungrily into his, feeding back what he was giving out, circulating his energy back to increase his muscularity, to heighten our intensity, look to look, face to face, soul to soul. If there is a Jesus who meets me at Death, and if His face is to reassure me, then let Him look at least this good, and let that good feeling of that frozen moment be the beautiful vision that lasts forever. Inside the moment of our intense look that held no secret from each other, I knew this was no false idol I had before me. At this moment, more than any spent kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, I experienced true adoration.

“I worship you,” my voice said, and my voice was not my voice. Something that belonged to both of us was speaking. “I worship your muscles, your bodybuilder face, your muscleman soul, I worship all men in you. I honor all men in you.” I fell into a litany of worship, stroking myself, rising slowly up toward his glorious face, shooting my seed over his veined thighs, and without pause continued on pleasing his insatiable satyr hunger. My pleasure in him pleased him even more. My energy toward him caused him to pump out more male intensity. I hardened again. He displayed his double-arm shot bringing his Big Guns to full flex. My hand ran up his body and held firmly onto his biceps. I began to pull myself up to his chin. His eyes stared straight ahead into the mirror behind me, and, without touching himself, he shot hot rivers of seed and sweat down my face and chest.

Later, he said, “I felt I was taking all your energy. I usually pose alone. No one’s ever followed along so well. I don’t want to take anything from you.”

I held my palms toward him. “Does a man holding his hand out to a fire ever feel he’s giving rather than receiving heat and light?”

I wanted Kick. I wanted him soul and body. Through incarnated muscle, he opened his soul to me, for longer than an instant, and I, through my worshiping words, opened mine to him. We knew nothing about each other; we knew all there was to know. I wanted his spirit. My journey at long last ended. We had both shot in salute to what passed between us. It was not private parts, not crotches, not mere ejaculation, not sexual spasm. It was total whole-body orgasm. I wanted his Being. My homosexual searching had been no more than a physical trek across the geography of men’s bodies to find this man’s homomasculine essence through

the medium of his muscle. With Teddy, at the beginning, when he was so young and tender, I thought I had surrendered, in sweet, sweet surrender to love; but Teddy is a petulant manchild. He maneuvered me into fathering him. Teddy is not grown up enough, not adult enough, not man enough to fuck my soul.

I push on my sweet tooth of Death. Sitting on this plane, flying home, I know I will never see Kick again. He will become one of those nights that on my Deathbed I will remember. Sometimes perfect acts are better not repeated.

We lay in each other's arms with the El Lay dawn already coming in the windows. "Sleep well, my fellow worshiper," he said. He kissed me. "I know," he whispered, "that you know what we know." I buried my face in his neck. He closed his eyes and drifted off. His breath, his slow even breath, in sleep was sweet. I can never thank Dan enough. Nor ever forgive him. Lying last night folded in Kick's huge arms, the thick hair of his chest warm under my left palm, I memorized the moment I know will never come again, and ached with the truth of Teddy still to be dealt with on my return: our life together is an escalating craziness like the speeding wild taxi drive to the plane. If I had missed the flight, last night would never have happened. I know I have to stop Teddy from keeping me from meeting other men. Last night was proof of that. I'll never forget lying in the tousled sheets with Kick, him sleeping, me knowing, with my head on his shoulder and my nose in his blond hair, the fact, the god awful fucking fact that in a finite changing world, no ticket is a round-trip fare. Life is a one-way ride through distraction to oblivion. This man with these muscles in whose arms I felt so shielded was a handsome, distracting way station on a journey I know we all must make alone. I slept and tried to dream that I might die before waking.

11

All I, Magnus Bishop, can say about that is: we all remember what we need to remember. I picked Ryan up at SFO. Teddy stayed home with a petulant headache. Just as well. Nothing steps on an ejected lover's last line like the galloping hoofbeats of his fast-approaching replacement.

"So how was Superman?" I asked.

12

“I know I’ll never see him again,” Ryan said.

13

One springtime a helicopter high in the Austrian Alps swooped down to find a pretty girl singing about the hills being alive with the sound of music. Thus began one of the most popular musical love stories, told like *Cabaret* against a background of fascism. In another season, a late summer, a helicopter, high above the coastal California hills north of San Francisco, buzzed low along the winding banks of the Russian River, turned and traveled three air-minutes south, hovering over a small Sonoma County ranch. The children in the yard at Bar Nada called their uncle Ryan from the house. He looked up in amazement. “Stay where you are,” he told the triplets. He headed out to the rolling pasture. The sun behind the blades of the hovering helicopter blinded him. The noise was deafening. The down-draft whipped the tall field grass into a frenzy around his legs. He stood his ground, shielding his eyes, as the chopper slowly descended from the sky, touching down in a whirl of shimmering grass seed. The door popped open and out jumped the golden man of bodybuilding.

“Your ranch is beautiful from the air.” Kick shouted over the roar. “I love you!”

I was visiting Bar Nada that weekend, watching the antics of Ryan’s brother and his family. Kweenie was with us and so was Teddy. The full catastrophe. We all gathered on the back deck. The rotors stopped. The pilot stayed in his cab. We watched the two men talk in a far-off pantomime in the middle of the sun-swept field.

“What the hell’s that chopper doing here,” Thom demanded. He was Ryan’s and Kweenie’s brother, born between them, but he was nothing like them. “Choppers. I hate choppers. I hate anything that reminds me of Nam.”

“Maybe they’ll give us a ride,” Abe said. He was the single boy in Thom’s set of triplets. Ryan’s brother was a man of untender mercies. He thought it clever to name the boy and two girls, Abraham, Beatrice, and Siena. Beautiful names on their own, but not if you nickname your triplets, Abe, Bea, and Sie.

“You’re not riding in that damn thing,” Thom said. He ordered his children like a drill sergeant.

“Thom,” Kweenie said to no one in particular, “did two tours in

Vietnam. Anything to get away from this family. But two tours, my dears, count them, two! I think that exposed him to twice as much Agent Orange.”

Ryan and Kweenie, and even Teddy, ran snide commentary on the family’s battering ways, as if they were a TV sitcom, hoping they’d respond to the barbed humor. They poured water on ducks’ backs. They insulted Sandy and the triplets to their faces, and mother and kids laughed perversely whether they got the joke or not. They thrived on any attention. Nothing really bothered them because, no matter what was said, their critics were all gay or at least bisexual like Kweenie, and the family’s self-inflated trump card was that no matter what the fags and lesbos said, they’d always be queers and dykes, and the family was absolutely, triumphantly straight. “And that,” Thom once pronounced, “is where it’s at!” What style they had was loud, vulgar, and destructive. I knew Ryan must be dying with mixed emotions out in the pasture. The last thing he would want the perfect Kick to see would be his brother’s raucous family, especially Thom’s wife Sandy who slouched out to the deck in her housecoat and pink scuffles.

“She’s the only woman I know,” Kweenie said, “who can violate the dress code at the Kmart.”

For almost fifteen minutes, Ryan and Kick talked. Ryan’s posture told me all I needed to know. He was dumbfounded. Always he had been the pursuer not the pursued, the lover not the beloved. Well, if God, as Ryan once thought, had called him at the age of fourteen to be a priest, then why couldn’t this outrageous blond muscle god descending out of the sky on a golden whirlwind, call him to be his lover?

Teddy, awakened from a nap by the noise, stumbled out to the deck.

“I don’t think,” Kweenie put her arm around Teddy, “that you’re going to like this high-tech pastoral scene.”

Sleepily Teddy surveyed the situation. “Oh, shit! He can fly!”

“With no visible means of support,” Kweenie said.

“Ry says he’s independently well off,” I said.

“From what? His home-wrecking business?” Teddy said. “What else has he got that I don’t have?” From all Ryan had told him about that night in El Lay, he figured the broad-shouldered blond meant trouble. “What kind of high-wire stunt is this helicopter bit?”

Actually, Kick was more comfortable than well off. His father had given him a stake and he had earned a bundle building spec houses back in Birmingham. He told Ryan he had a degree in architecture. He himself had built most of what he had designed. He preferred to be known as a

carpenter by trade.

Solly Blue had laughed under an arched eyebrow. "All that and a face and body too? I want to check out his bank account, his diploma, and his references," he said. "Something everybody should do before they take a lover."

"I think it's fabulous," Sandy lit a Lark. "Only Ry would have such exciting friends. It's like *General Hospital*."

"Shut the fuck up, you dumb bitch." Thom turned on his hapless wife. "I want that chopper off my property."

Teddy, always protective of Ryan, said, "Your property? It's Ry's ranch."

"It's all family," Thom said. "Ry said so when we moved in."

"Ha!" Teddy said. "That's what he tells you. That's not what he tells me. He defers to you. God knows why."

"What's *defer* mean?" Sandy asked no one in particular.

"Because we're family."

"The Snopes were a family," Teddy said. "So were the Jukes and the Kallikaks."

"I knew some Jukes," Sandy said.

"Relatives, no doubt," Teddy said.

"Zip it or I'll clip it," Thom said. "You're not even family."

"I'm his lover."

"You're his whore!"

"Either way," Teddy said, "a man can pick his lovers and his whores, but only God can make a family tree."

"Don't talk X-rated in front of the kids," Sandy said.

"Why not?" Bea said. "You talk worse yourself."

"You little bitch," Sandy said. "Go to your room."

"Bea's not a bitch," Sie said to her mother. "You're the bitch."

"Don't you fucking talk to your mother that way," Thom said.

"You're all three bitches," Abe said.

His two sisters and his mother glared at him like the three hags at the opening of *MacBeth*.

"Thommy, stop them. I won't be abused by my children."

"Want to bet?" Thom said. He thrived on helter-skelter.

"Thommy, you bastard," Sandy said. "Make all three of the little son-sabitches go to their rooms."

"You heard your mother." Thom moved threateningly toward the triplets.

"Where's Diane Arbus when you need her?" Teddy whispered to me.

“Maybe I should run on out into the field and invite Mr. Muscles in for a free show. You know, *Genetics on Parade*. The war hero and his adoring All-American family. If I have to fight fire with fire, I might as well get serious. Next to these people, the Borgias were a nice Catholic family. Ry coached me for four years so I could stomach them for more than five minutes. Now I’m supposed to find them amusing. When,” he huffed, “have I ever done what I’m supposed to?”

Ryan had adroitly moved Kick around so his broad back was to the deck. He had bought this place in the country for quiet romantic weekends. Don’t ask how Sgt. and Mrs. Thomas a’Beckett O’Hara and family moved in one foggy night and took up residence. Ryan was always a soft touch. He was the oldest, and his father, as he lay dying had asked him, exactly like the movies, to take care of his younger brother and sister.

“Obviously, we are not,” Kweenie said, “the family Von Trapp.” She poked me in the ribs. “You’re such a silent observer, Magnus. A Quaalude for your thoughts.”

“If Ry’s as good a talker as I know he is, that helicopter will be taking off very soon,” I said.

“But will my sweet brother get what he wants?” Kweenie said. “I don’t normally dig muscle types, but that face! Leave it to Ry. Whatever Ryan wants, Ryan usually gets. I only hope he’s careful. I’m the voice of experience. All extremely gorgeous people hustle in their own way.” She pulled me into her warm bosom. “Including *moil*”

I held her, looking through her hair, that was henna red that weekend, at the longshot of the two men in the pasture. Kick put his arm around Ryan’s shoulder and together they walked to the waiting copter. The pilot revved up the engine. They hugged the way straight men hug: they embraced and their chests touched briefly, but their hips stayed almost shyly apart. Kick stood for a moment on the step. He was the very picture of the noble savage sprung from the dusty backwoods of Alabama, the golden athlete raised on shit-kickin’ southern music, coming of age listening to the Allman Brothers while he humped Miss Alabama in the backseat of his red Mustang convertible.

As the copter rose into the bright sky, I watched Ryan stand solitary, looking up, at the glorious, noisy, straight-up ascension that defied the bounds of gravity. In my arms, Kweenie turned to watch the grand exit. “What do you think?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Play it as it lays. I think Ry wants to be swept away. He doesn’t even know this is already too good to be true. And neither of us, Magnus, will spoil it for him. Let him enjoy it. For

now, what is, is. When I did *Carousel*, there's this song at the beginning: 'What's the Use of Wondrin?' You know, like wondering if your last reel will be sad, wondering if you should quickly break it off and run away now, before the ending, but you know you can't, because he's your own true love, and that's that."

The helicopter swooped off south toward the City and connected Kick back to LAX. Ryan stood for a long time in the field watching the sun-raked distance into which the man who said he loved him had disappeared.

14

Ryan was captive of a secret promise.

He had fled his family in the Midwest, but first Margaret Mary and then Thom had followed him to California. For twelve years, their father had struggled through a death-defying illness. His agonized lingering terrified Ryan. He recognized his father's decaying body as his own Death threat sent from someone, sent from somewhere. In the tenth year of his sickness, and after his twenty-first major surgery, Ryan's father held onto his eldest son's hand and said, "Take care of them all for me." Charley-Pop meant his wife, Annie Laurie, and he meant his young daughter Margaret Mary. "But especially," and he was very clear, "take care of Thom. No one knows like I do how much help your brother needs." He squeezed Ryan's hand. "A father knows," he said. "Promise me, Ry." He looked directly into Ryan's eyes.

This was it, Ryan knew: his father after this long fight was admitting Death, was letting Death waft like a small breeze in through a door he was slowly opening. If his father died, there would be no male generation left between him and his own Death.

"Ry?" Charley-Pop said, and he held his son's hand tenderly, "you don't have to say anything. I know what you'll do. You're the man in the family now."

Ryan wanted to say, "I'm the faggot in the family, dad." But he knew, whether his father knew or not, that for all that he was no less a man. For ten years, he had taken care of his sister and his mother, and, in a warmly affectionate way, his father. Thom, with his mercenary heart, was always gone, killing time in one military installation after the other. Thom fought the war in Nam. Ryan fought against the war in the streets, always coming back to his father's bedside, sometimes at home, more often in the intensive care unit of Saint Francis Hospital.

Every visit back introduced Ryan to some new horror of modern medicine. This time, the time of the promise, his father lay motionless, gaunt, in the crisp white bed. His blood circulated through clear dialysis tubes. The pleasant nun in attendance walked Ryan out to the hall explaining that dialysis was really like a giant washing machine. "It's my father's blood, not his laundry," Ryan said. "I'm sorry." He apologized quickly, thanked the sister, and walked down to the end of the long terrazzo corridor. He had in this hospital his fill not of the nuns, but of the priest, their chaplain, who one bloody night, when Ryan discovered his father unconscious and hemorrhaging alone in his room, told Ryan, that God must want another Saint Charles in heaven. Ryan had grabbed the startled priest by the lapels of his black suit: "My father is going to live!" It was probably the first time the priest had ever been told to fuck himself. After that the chaplain confined his ministrations to Annie Laurie. Ryan could not mind that. For his mother, priests provided her only consolation. Ryan wondered what she really thought about his leaving Misericordia Seminary the year before his own ordination to the Catholic priesthood.

The hospital was in a continual state of remodeling and reconstruction. The old wing where Thom and Margaret Mary had both been born was, in the last days of that Illinois June, nearly leveled by the wrecker's ball. "For ten years," Annie Laurie said, making conversation in waiting rooms, "they've been rebuilding the hospital around us." Ryan paced the length of a corridor that ended abruptly where the wrecking crew had stopped for the day. The gutted hall glowed with the dark luster that happens before a Midwestern twilight. At its western end, huge swaths of opaque plastic sheets billowed inward from the updraft. The broken lip of the hall floor stopped abruptly six stories from the hard ground. The hospital was suffocating him. He could feel the barometer falling. He knew if he climbed over the lath and plaster debris, and through the plastic, he could stand on the ledge of a hall that had once led to obstetrics. No one was around to stop him. A construction worker's sandwich sat abandoned on an improvised two-by-four of a table. No nurses or nuns hovered around this drafty end of deserted corridor. Far down the hall, behind him, he watched them, kind women, starchy and white, sailing silent through the pools of light at their main station.

He climbed through the dust and plaster shards. He needed to be anywhere no one could find him. A hospital has no privacy. He needed air. He needed to remember to breathe. He needed great gulps of air. The ragged concrete ledge ended with snagged rebar twisted by the powerful wrecking ball. He stood on the narrow ledge, six stories above the rubble

below. He leaned back against the plastic. The rising wind flapped its edges around his legs. From the high ledge in the hospital on the high hill, he could see for miles across the rolling prairies. A heavy June thunderstorm was moving in over the flat skyline of Peoria. The air was violet. Lightning flashed. He knew how to read Midwestern summer storms. He counted the seconds from the lightning until the thick roll of thunder rumbled from the western farmlands and across the city. Every second between lightning and thunder told how far he was from the center of the storm.

At first flash, he counted to nine. Minutes later, between flash and thunder, he counted to six. His breath grew shorter. The rain was moving in a curtain toward him from the west. He counted to three. Lightning and thunder were almost one. The first rush of rain blew up under the overhang of the corridor above him. Mist sprayed his face. The plastic beaded up with moisture. His hands and back pressed flat against the wall. The storm swept up in a rising vortex in front of him. The falling pressure took his breath away. He was crying, for the first time in a long time, really crying. The downpour was soaking his corduroys and madras shirt, and no one was around anymore to tell him to please come in from the rain. For the duration of the storm's passing front, he stood facing whatever wild energy of lightning and thunder the twilight could conjure. "I'll invoke any god," he pleaded.

For the first time with any real clarity, he saw through the rain into the past, into his dying father's past, into the past whose history until this moment had been lifeless as the three paragraphs in the *Jackson County Register* of 1904: the wife of Michael Fitzpatrick O'Hara had been killed in a Minnesota cyclone. But the statistic was far less than the jolting vision he had of his grandfather's first wife standing at the top of the storm-cellar stairs, holding their ten-month-old Aurelia in her arms, her long golden hair fallen loose and flying in the wind, shouting for her two young sons to run to her in the shelter. His grandfather started up the thick wooden stairs. He was knocked flat by the gust of wind that sliced a piece of flying sheet metal clean through his young wife's neck. Her face, shrouded by her flying hair, showed no surprise. Only her arms reacted, pulling her baby in close to her breast, then straightening out rigid. The baby fell and was killed in the bloody tumble with her mother's head down the storm-cellar stairs. The confined shelter roared with the blast of the cyclone. His grandfather, then a young man, struggled up against the wind. The suffocating dust turned to mud as rain blew into the cellar across his wife's headless body at the top of the stairs.

Michael O'Hara had not known where to turn. Near his knees, full

within his terrified sight, his wife's head rocked back and forth, her hair alive in the vortex. A thin trickle of blood ran from the baby's mouth. His wife's eyes bulged open and unblinking. The cellar door crashed closed. He was in darkness. He felt for the wooden stairs with his hands. They were wet with rain and blood. His two sons in those few seconds that lasted forever had not yet made the cover of the cellar. Then the cyclone lifted the door open and up off its hinges. The pressure sucked him part way up the bloody steps. As fast as it hit, the storm roared off and away. He pulled himself up through the debris. He found his two sons clinging to the branches of the one tree left standing in the devastated farmyard. He had immigrated all the way from Ireland for this, he thought, and pulled his crying sons to himself.

The young widow from the next farm over, her own husband dead two years from typhoid, helped with the burial of his wife and baby. Within the year, in the grand brick Catholic church in the little town of Fulda, Minnesota, they were married quietly by a German priest in a ceremony attended by her three young children and by his two sons. In another year, they had their own child, a son, Ryan's father.

"Promise me," his father had said. He was a child of storms. He was born out of sudden violence that came from the sky, and he was dying by slow degrees. He frightened Ryan the way a person alone in a house is frightened by his own image caught sudden and distorted in a mirror. Like father, like son. What if he himself should become so ill at so early an age? Fear of illness, fear of Death took up nest in his heart. Death depressed him. Maybe the promise, made and kept, could keep sadness and sickness and Death at far away bay. "I promise, Charley-Pop," he said. "I promise I'll take care of them all."

15

"I love you," Ryan wrote in an affectionate note to Kick. "I love us. I've gone beyond being infatuated in-love with you. Funny, I have to get around the way you look so I can love you despite your looks. I'm the man most wished dead on Castro. Guys think I'm all that stands between them and you in their beds. I don't care who either of us plays with on the side. As long as we remember you and I are the home team. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone." And he meant more than family, lovers, friends, life itself.

"I'd die for you," Ryan said.

"Don't die for me." Kick's smile lightened the heat of Ryan's dark

passion. "Live for me."

Ryan loved Kick's powerfully positive suggestions, because they came from strength. Ryan had been born depressed. He had been drilled in the *Baltimore Catechism* of negative guilt, that very Catholic spin on things Annie Laurie had used to raise him the way she wanted. "Kenny Baker," so sweetly she said the boy's name, "stayed out past midnight last night." The tone in his mother's voice inferred that Ryan must never stay out past midnight. Neither she nor his father ever ordered his obedience directly. Ryan often bragged about the way his parents had raised him. "They never told me to do anything," he said. "My parents always arranged things so I'd know what I was supposed to do. I was the best little boy in the whole wide world."

When he announced at the age of fourteen that the next school year he wanted to leave home for Misericordia Seminary, his parents, who wanted nothing more in life than to be the greatest thing a Catholic mom and dad can be, the parents of a priest, sat him down for a talk.

"You're not going to become a priest to please us," Annie Laurie said.

In fact, they had raised him from birth to be nothing but a priest. Girls, at worst, were occasions of sin; at best, untouchable. Especially Ryan's classmate, the daughter of his parents' best friends, the apple-cheeked Madonna Hanratty. If ever a schoolgirl in her plaid-skirt uniform were perfect for Ryan, it was Donna whose budding Roman Catholic breasts, cradled in her white linen summer halter, made him think his curiosity about her was mortally sinful. He placed Donna on a pedestal, with a reverence born of terror. She loved him like a brother, but she teased him, experimenting with her own sexual wiles, virginally vamping him, despite Sister Mary Agnes's warnings to her that she not tempt a young man away from his vocation to the priesthood. Ryan had heard about that sinful breed of Catholic woman whose idea of big game is bagging the parish priest. The more Donna teased him, the more frightened Ryan grew about sex and sin and Death; and the more resolute he became in his priestly vocation which was his safe refuge from the mortal sins the nuns and priests warned him were to be found in the eager flesh of young girls.

Ryan, to save his soul, knew he must sacrifice everything worldly. To save his life, which he long sensed was somehow different, to keep his life from dying in a Midwest cow town, he had no choice but to run away from home, the way fourteen-year-old boys ran away from home in the polite fifties. All the way to Misericordia Seminary.

"It's your life," his father said.

"Whatever you want to do," his mother said, "is alright with us, if

you're sure."

"But if you're not sure..." Charley-Pop was playing devil's advocate. "We think maybe you should wait until after high school."

"High school?" Ryan said. The word embodied everything they had suggested to him was worldly and tempting and bad. They had themselves, high school sweethearts, talked of high school as the place that had stopped their progress dead.

"If Charley-Pop could have gone on to college after high school," Annie Laurie said, "he would never have worked at the dairy. He wouldn't have driven that awful truck for Mid-American."

"I wouldn't be selling washers and driers now," Charley-Pop said. He was proud of the living he made. He was the department store appliance salesman with the distinctive bow tie, in fashion or out. Customers might forget his name, but they always came back asking for the man with the bow tie. He wanted more for Ryan and Thom.

It was in high school Kenny Baker learned his first year to smoke and drink. "Kenny's gotten too wild for his own good," Annie Laurie said, and she meant for Ryan's own good. He knew she wanted him to drop his friend. It was in high school that Donna Hanratty had gotten pregnant. Ryan was sorrier than his mother when Donna, his Madonna, proved them all right about sin in the flesh of young girls. It was in high school that Kenny Baker's older brother, a short muscular varsity wrestler, was killed during his senior year. He was drunk and speeding and drove his car at three in the morning over the embankment of the new concrete expressway, rolling end over end, thrown finally from the disintegrating car, impaled through his guts on the steel post of the cyclone-mesh retaining fence. Dying, most likely, in a state of mortal sin, while his screaming girlfriend tried to pull him off the post with both of her broken arms.

High school was pagan sex and Death.

"I might lose my vocation if I go to high school here," Ryan said.

His father took him for a ride the Sunday before he was to leave for Misericordia Seminary. "Ry, I want to tell you something," Charley-Pop said. He stopped the '57 Plymouth Belvedere in a turnaround glade on the dusty country road. They sat parked deep in the forest, shaded from the hot September sky. Leaves waved in the soft breeze and made dappling spears of sun motes come and go on the dusty hood of the dark blue car. "When it first happened to me, I thought I was hurt." His father stared straight over the steering wheel and through the windshield. Ryan had no idea what *it* was exactly, but he sensed Charley-Pop leading him into dangerous territory. "I thought something was wrong with me. When it

happens to you, I want you to know it's nothing to worry about."

Ryan felt a first peculiar turn of real sexual panic in his stomach. This was worse than all the spiritual fear Madonna had caused. Why was his father, this man whom he loved so much, talking dirty to him? He wanted to escape from the car, but in the stifling heat he could not lift his hand to the door handle. Besides, where would he run? They were miles from home. His father would think he was crazy.

Ryan had to stop him. He had to stop the feeling in his stomach. He had to stop the stirring he felt swelling in his loose Bermuda shorts. His cock was uncoiling and it hurt. He did not want the vague pleasure he knew must be the sin of impurity they all feared so much. "I know all about it," he lied. "You don't have to tell me."

Charley-Pop, relieved, put his hand on Ryan's bare knee. Ryan wanted to pull away, but he did not. His young balls ached. Something in him was betraying the long schooling of his purity. The nameless thing he feared late nights in his bed and in the dark of the confessional was here. It filled him with want. It was scary, this thing. It smelled of hell and felt sweet between his thighs. He wanted his father to hold him, tenderly hold him, closer than he ever had before.

Ryan sat stock still. The shadowy thing he wanted with this man, who had been a three-sports star in high school, was not in his father, but was in him only. Whatever it was, Ryan was smart enough to know that. This one-sided ache was more than wanting to be like-his-father when he grew up. This was the first time in his life that Ryan consciously experienced one thing meaning two things. His father's hand on his knee was his father's hand, but it was something else, something Ryan felt in the pit of his stomach, something vague he had no name for, something he did not know even existed, something he would later call passion.

"You don't have to tell me." He lied to his father for the first and last time in his life. "Sister Mary Agnes instructed us boys about what we need to know."

Later that afternoon, Ryan rode out to the Bar-H Stables with Kenny Baker. They squandered four dollars for two hours on two horses to celebrate Ryan's last weekend before leaving for Misericordia.

That final Sunday afternoon, in the early evening, Ryan's rental horse, at the last bend of the return trail, sensing the comfort of the stables, broke into a startling gallop. Ryan was terrified. The horse's pace was too fast for him. He dropped the tied reins to the horse's neck and hung onto the saddle horn with both hands. The horse, taking its head, rounded the curves of the trails, cutting tight under the sticker branches of the

low-hanging trees, trying to knock Ryan off its back.

Ryan had been carried at full gallop, scared and weirdly thrilled, holding on for dear life. He had cum involuntarily in his pants.

Five days later, Ryan left home, afraid his accidental ejaculation might have cut him from the state of grace. Fear made his train ride a blur. He arrived in Ohio at Misericordia Seminary, dragging his army-green foot-locker. The cuts and scratches on his arms and face were nearly healed. He went to confession immediately, trying, not too successfully, to explain what had happened. The priest seemed understanding. Ryan was relieved. He was thrilled those first days by the majestic Catholicism of the seminary. The architecture was inspirational gothic, something Ryan later called Misery's reign-of-terror decor. He was fascinated by the forty-foot-tall, nearly naked, bearded, muscular Jesus hanging crucified over the main altar. He liked the side chapel of Saint Sebastian, tied, suffering, stuck with arrows, "stuck with eros," he later said. But it was the huge, handsome Jesus that immediately caught his interest and for ten years held his attention. This Jesus, though Ryan hardly knew it then, was his first lover, and a hard act to follow, unless you were Kick Sorensen.

At Misericordia, Ryan was one of the prettiest of the new class of minor seminarians. Some of the older boys showered him with attentions he refused to understand. He prayed to the huge Jesus to shut impure thoughts from his mind. Fear of hell and love of God combined to keep him steadfastly free from masturbation. He was the epitome of the perfect Catholic altar boy. Thom, I think, was himself always attracted to that in Ryan. Their parents, the nuns, the priests always prodded Thom to follow the good example of his older brother. Ryan hardly noticed that his younger brother, finding Ryan the favored son, began reacting like the prodigal. To Ryan, Thom was a tagalong whom he resented the way the firstborn son often resents the second born, the potential usurper of their parents' affection. Ryan refused to be Thom's hero; Ryan was himself looking for heroes. At Misericordia, he found them in the older seminarians. His friends were always the best of the seminary jocks.

"The better athlete you are on the playing field," Monsignor Linotti said, "the better the priest you'll be." It was the old jock equation men have always made. It sounded good to Ryan who knew, of course, that Monsignor Linotti was right. If Ryan wasn't really a jock himself, he could make up for it by accepting the older boys', the best of the older boys', invitations to go off to the woods to wrestle. Ryan spent every semester tumbling body over body, hugged and held and fighting back, pulling punches and rolling down the ravines to Misery creek that ran into the

Olentangy River.

Ryan was a good sport. He wrestled like Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!*

He could rarely best the older seminarians physically, so he topped them with his imagination and his words. He invented a new game: fighting slow-motion the way brawlers sometimes wrestled in the movies. In slow motion, he figured, with his long, lean build, he had a better shot at giving even the huskies a run for their money.

Not until Ryan was eighteen, four years into the seminary, did he begin to realize fully that the rough-and-tumble brawls seemed more like some kind of sex than sport. He wasn't dense. He was pure. He wrestled with their bodies and with his feelings. He was confused. He liked these muscular, older boys. Besides, sin, they had drilled into him, was in the flesh of young girls.

No one had ever said anything about older boys.

Yet a nameless warning hummed in Ryan's vigilant soul. He had a way with words in English and Latin classes, but he had never heard the word *homosexuality*; or, if he had heard it, the word meant nothing he could fathom exactly. Monsignor Linotti tended to speak in abstraction, except for the time before Christmas vacation when he told them all if anyone asked them what time it was in a bus station toilet to kick them in the crotch and run. It hardly seemed charitable to Ryan, but he was nothing if not obedient.

What worried him most was the return of the nameless feeling he had first felt with Charley-Pop. The boy he had it for was David Fahnhorst.

I remember he said it was on an October afternoon of his senior year in Misericordia Seminary high school. He sat with his best friend, the strapping Dave Fahnhorst, who was the captain of that and the president of this, down on a bench overlooking Misery Lake. The feeling he had for Dave Fahnhorst was lodged in Ryan's heart, not yet in his crotch. He was in-love for the first time in his life and in his confusion he did not know it.

"I can't wrestle with you anymore," Ryan said.

Fahnhorst, a big German farm boy from Ottawa, Ohio, looked puzzled. He palmed his hand through his blond crewcut.

"You..." Ryan hesitated. He ached for the full hug of Fahnhorst's husky arms.

"I what, Ry?" Fahnhorst's blue eyes pierced Ryan's resolve. Ryan felt suddenly deferential to the big blond jock. Maybe he should forget it. It was nothing. At least it was nothing he had a name for. Except maybe a vague sense of sin. "This," Ryan later said, "was how I got so twisted." His deference gave way, in his young Gemini heart, to resolve to protect his

innocence.

“You press against me too much.”

“What do you mean too much?”

“I don’t know. I mean too hard.” He meant Dave Fahnhorst’s big German schlong, stiffening in his black chinos, pressed too hard against his belly. But he could not say that then.

“I can’t help it.” Fahnhorst was mystified. He knew where he was heading and he had thought Ryan hadn’t minded. They were planning on being priests together. “We’re buddies. I like you.”

“I like you too.” Ryan thought of Monsignor Linotti’s warning against special friendships.

“You’re fun.” Fahnhorst interlaced the fingers of his big hands together and dropped his clenched hands like one big fist between his spread knees. He bowed his head down and forward. He was himself in-love with Ryan and Ryan, for no reason, was hurting him. “I mean you’re so...goddam...pretty.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Ryan was too unsophisticated to know that long before young boys know they’re gay, they read some lines like Blanche DuBois.

“You’re so pretty,” Fahnhorst conjugated Ryan’s name like an erotic litany he used as a nightly jerk off mantra. “Ry, Ryan, Ryan Stephen, Ryan Stephen O’Hara, you should be a girl.”

There was that dreaded line again. Ryan fled from the bench at the lake. He thought something was wrong with him if he caused those feelings in another boy. When Ryan told me this, years later, he said, “In those days, I didn’t want to be an occasion of sin for anyone. Now I write pornography for men to jerk off to. Can you believe I was once that pure?” I could believe it. Ryan of God had a will of iron. When he refused to recognize the first bud of homosexuality in himself, he was honest in his ignorance. He was not feigning like *Agnes of God*: “What baby?” When he was committed to something or someone, he went all or nothing. He became what they wanted. I think that’s what made Ryan give himself up completely to Kick. Ryan was a chameleon. Most gay boys are. It’s survival. He was eager to please. He became whatever people wanted. An astrologer told him that adaptability was characteristic of Gemini: to find what somebody else’s trip is and give it to them in spades. That’s what he did, if not for Dave Fahnhorst, then for Kick Sorensen. He was fully what he was when he was dedicated to what he was doing. When he was a Catholic seminarian, no boy was more holy.

“Dave Fahnhorst loved me,” Ryan said, “and I was too pigheaded

pure to let him. I denied myself everything. I never even masturbated until I left Misericordia when I was twenty-four. Stop laughing! I didn't want to go to hell. I really believed all that stuff. Priests never tell you that masturbation is the main way to maintain your center."

When later he began his promiscuous search for the perfect man, the man selected for audition in his bed became for that night the only man in the world. Hoping each next man would be the right one, Ryan gave every man he met the benefit of the doubt.

It was a gift Kick would enjoy to full advantage.

Perhaps, and this is Magnus Bishop talking, the only curse on liberated homosexuality is the all-too-easy access openhearted men give one another to their homes, their bodies, their hearts, and their souls. It's an innocent trust, this belief in the homofraternity among men whose preference is each other. It's an incurable irony, more terminally dangerous than disease, that this gay innocence continues to exist, so frequent and so many are its betrayals.

"Men should make love at the baths," Solly Blue said. "Never take anyone to your lovely home."

16

Kick was clever. On his visits to San Francisco, he purposely moved a heartbeat slower than all of madcap Castro. He drawled when he talked. He moseyed when he walked. His style was an appealing mix of down-home redneck and southern gentleman. His gray Crimson Tide tee shirt with ALABAMA screened in red across his broad chest said it all. He was Bama-Alabama. He was an original: more archetype than stereotype and certainly no cliché. He was no Castronaut. He brought Ryan, who was speeding on fire in the fast lane, to a grinding halt. Kick was virtue on the prowl. The boys on the Castro sidewalks parted like Kick was Charlton Heston and they were the Red Sea. He had no eyes for them. He had come to the City for Ryan. Slowly, deliberately, he began to coach Ryan onward toward a pristine manliness that Ryan feared he had betrayed in himself with too many cheap tricks and cheaper thrills. Before Kick, Ryan had been the Wife of Bath. With Kick, he became Caesar's wife. Or at least the emperor's new, uh, lover.

"Castro's the place where," Kick said, "you can see men do to themselves things you hoped you'd never see men do to themselves."

Kick set off an alarm in Ryan. He pierced the veil of the Castro. He saw things and said things. Ryan thought him a seer and a sayer.

He marveled that the bodybuilder and he thought so much the same. "Sometimes I think," Ryan said, "you can read my mind." Kick had an edge. He had known of Ryan O'Hara long before Ryan had ever heard of Kick Sorensen. Kick had read Ryan's writing in *Maneuvers*. He read the lines and he read between the lines. He figured he knew Ryan. Kick had something to say. He wanted Ryan to say it. He was too reserved to blow his own horn. He wanted Ryan to articulate the meaning of his muscular body.

He was more than meat.

He was a sculptor.

He needed an agent.

His plan seemed simple. Until that first El Lay night when the *click* between them turned Kick around to something, well, more personal. He suddenly felt silly as a starlet pursuing a press agent. He suddenly felt like Arnold Schwarzenegger falling for Woody Allen. Never wanting to do the right thing for the wrong reason, Kick had descended by helicopter on Ryan. He had planned to confess, "I set out to use you, but instead, I love you." When he opened his mouth, he said simply, "I love you." If he had said, "I wanted to use you," Ryan would have said, "You can use me till you use me up." But he hadn't and the fast bloom of their relationship surprised them both.

"Nobody," Kick said, "has ever treated me better than you. You surprise me. You understand me. I've never allowed anyone in so close to me."

The ongoing suspense of Kick gradually revealing his magnificent self excited Ryan. One evening before sex, one of the few times in their three years together when they went somewhere other than to bed, they attended *Evita*. Ryan placed his hand on Kick's muscular arm when Patti LuPone, playing the thrill-seeking Eva Peron, sang about the Argentine peasants to her Magnus Bishop, Mandy Patinkin's Che: "They must have excitement, and so must I!" Kick was the hero of a hundred tricks, a thousand faces, a million revelations to hear Ryan tell it.

"Almost every night," Ryan wrote to Kick, "we conjure this thing, this power, the Entity between us, and we never lose ourselves."

Kick wrote back on stationery with the letterhead of *The Daily Planet*. "You're the most fun I've ever had."

Ryan glowed.

Appearing nightly in his bed was the man all of San Francisco wanted in the sack.

Kick equaled Ryan in his twists on musclesex. Kick liked bondage, not so much the constraint as the drama. He liked the mythological feel

of his muscle against ropes and chains and leather. He could have been a muscle-bondage centerfold for *Maneuvers*, but Ryan advised him against sex modeling if he wanted to compete without compromise in physique contests.

They played nights of heroic bondage sculpture, starring Kick as Prometheus Bound and Hercules Chained. "I'm bound in muscle," he confessed to Ryan. "You of all people can understand what bodybuilders really say when they talk muscle. *The ropes of muscle coiling around my body. The veins corded around the muscle.* Nothing turns me on more. I like exhibition of muscle sweating and straining against chains and rope and leather straps." Kick peeled back another layer of himself. "But when you look the way I do, there's a curse on the gift. Everybody always wants me to tie them up and treat them like shit. I'm not into degradation sex. I'm into heroic celebration sex."

Ryan understood. Kick needed a man to tie him up. Bondage was one of Ryan's favorite sexsports. A fetish Kick knew from the pages of *Maneuvers*. For their first Christmas, Ryan ordered an industrial-weight latex rubber bodysuit with hood tailor-made for Kick. Complete with hands and feet, the one-piece black suit covered Kick's body and helmeted his head inside the full hood with mouth and nose and eye holes. A heavy zipper ran up Kick's back from the base of his spine to the top of his blond head. Skin-tight layers of black latex encased his sculpted body. His long, thick blond dick pointed erect and hard through the black-rubber cockring in the crotch. His balls hung big and low. Completely encased in rubber, Kick posed intensely: thick black latex pecs, abdominals treaded like tires, biceps big as baseballs, thighs and calves hard as pilings. His bulk was so defined each muscle flexed distinctly. Abstracted by the beautiful sheen of black latex, he was a massive, beautiful chunk of rippling black-rubber sculpture, a blond man transmorphed to a dark angel, posing and flexing his wide-winged lats, sculpted to life by the rubbing, stroking, warming of Ryan's adoring hands.

Watching Ryan's Latex Videotapes, I sense a kind of necrophilia, as if Ryan were courting a muscular, black, inexorable Death. He was almost Bergmanesque finding love and Death and the whole damn thing in the sweating black-sheathed body of a blond Scandinavian.

Solly Blue, who was always a sage, was closer to Ryan. "Of course," he said. "Ryan's always been half in love with easeful Death. It's a writer's romanticism. Writers need to be depressed to write. At least good writers. That's why they all kill themselves one way or another. At least American writers."

When Ryan's friend, Hank Diethelm, the owner of the Brig, the most popular leather bar South of Market on Folsom, was tied spread eagle in his own basement, strangled, bludgeoned, and set afire by a casual trick, I accompanied Ryan to the memorial service at the Neptune Society's classic Columbarium on Loraine Court behind the Coronet Theater on Geary Street. The once-glorious edifice, having survived the 1906 earthquake, had fallen with the ravages of time and neglect and grave robbers to a cold Wordsworthian ruin during the 1930s until restoration began in the late 1970s.

Men, accustomed to meeting at bars and baths, gathered at the massive bronze door in small groups unsure exactly what to do. Death was new to them. This was the first grand gay funeral. "At least he doesn't have to grow old," they whispered. The majority of the mourners wore full leather gear. They were Folsom Street men, good-looking and gruff, a decade or two older than the boys on Castro. Leather for them was an attractive saving grace. Leather transformed aging bodies. Leather was tighter and smoother than skin. Leather cinched and corseted and disguised bodies which rarely, if ever, darkened the iron-pumping, designer-muscle gyms on Castro. Leather was a fetish that extended a mature man's sex appeal for another dozen years.

"Can you believe it?" Ryan whispered to me during the service. "We're witnessing a whole new gay phenomenon." He pointed to a row of bearded men in full black leather wiping the dark circles under their eyes with red bandanas. Their grief was real. Ryan was not so cynical as to be blind to that. Death was bad enough, but premature Death at the hands of a murderer was almost more than he could bear.

Liberated life in San Francisco had become in too many sorry ways a serial Death sentence indeed. Murderers found gay men easy prey. Their bodies all too frequently turned up stuffed into barrels in Golden Gate Park and in dumpsters South of Market. Drugs took their toll in overdoses. The occasional suicide was inevitable. However it was Death rode into the City, nothing stopped the party. Death in the early days was considered no more than bad taste. It took Dan White's assassination of Harvey Milk to make gay Death seem real, but even Harvey's Death, when everyone was young and healthy, seemed no more than a fluke of politics.

Ryan wrote, in an unpublished manuscript dated Monday, November 27, 1978, the day of the assassination:

Castro could hardly regard Dan White objectively. They knew no more about him than the way he was the November morning

he took his gun in hand. Murder is the ultimate passionate act. I saw Dan White box his last Golden Gloves fight, three days before he turned thirty. He was tough, cocky, aggressive. Brooks Hall at the Civic Center was filled with cops and firemen. White had been a fireman before he had been a cop. Once on either force, always on both forces. The traditional rivalry between the police and fire departments jelled into a mutual cheering as their Danny Boy punched the lights out of his opponent. The referee had to pull him off the other fighter several times, sending him to a neutral corner to cool down. Always the beefy young White tore back to ring center, jabbing, punching, pounding. He was determined to win his last fight. He was determined to show his stuff to the cheering crowd of his department buddies. He was tougher than Rocky. He was meaner than an amateur fighter need be. Head bent, advancing, going for the kill, he was determined to crown his Golden Gloves career with a final victory. He had a passion for confrontation, the more public, the better. Sweat and blood flew with his last punch. He flattened his opponent and stood dancing and jabbing over his prostrate body for the count. "He murdered the guy," they all said.

I remember a Dan White no one else seems to remember, his arms raised in victory, with the crowds screaming pleasure at his win, which seemed to me more like a kill. I remember his passion as he danced around the ring, dripping sweat and blood, touching his gloves to the outstretched hands of the cops and firemen who stormed the ropes to touch their champ.

Dan White had passion.

I think Dan White had more real passion in his trigger finger than there is in most of the drug-hard cocks at the baths. Harvey was a victim of whatever White's passion was, and if this is not too simplistic, it was that, besides all his political reasons, he was murdering in Harvey Milk the very homosexuality he needed to murder in himself. Anyone who saw Danny White box could see he was a driven man.

Whatever White's real motive, Harvey Milk was dead, and in Death he became larger than life, something that did not happen to White's other victim, Mayor George Moscone. Suddenly everyone loved Harvey. Suddenly gay liberation had a martyr. Harvey's beatification as a saint drained some of the sorrow. He seemed like the first gay person ever to

die and in dying he had transcended spiritually.

Castro was never a street of sorrows. Harvey was not dead a month before a story, recounted with the kind of gay hilarity that laughs even at Death, made the rounds of the bars and bruncheries: how some of Harvey's mourners snorted coke on the sailing sloop hired to spread his ashes over the Pacific waters outside the Golden Gate. The punch line was that several stoned mourners, as the gossip escalated into a joke and the joke became an urban legend, had gone all the way and snorted carefully laid out lines of Harvey's ashes.

I think you must remember that to gay men everything is a joke.

It has to be.

Otherwise, their lives would be unbearable.

Why else would shops on Castro make small fortunes selling Generic Blues tee shirts saying, "Don't cry for me, San Francisco"?

Death, in Ryan's stories, was erotic, heroic, tempting, beautiful. As much as bodybuilders were the life force, they were angels of Death, escorts of the dying; repeatedly, like Tennessee Williams' Christopher Flanders in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, they hold out their strong arms to guide the cleansed soul directly into the muscular eternal embrace of God's Big Daddy arms.

Stuffed in a torn-out centerfold from *Blueboy Magazine*, February 1977, was a sheet of stationery from the Cabana Sands Motel in Venice Beach dated before Ryan had met Kick. On it, Ryan had written words that seemed to have sprung from the vision he saw in the centerfold pictures of the sexy young model, whose name was Roger, and whose face and body, all muscles and tousled hair, glistened with the kind of sun-sweat young men sweat only on Southern California beaches.

CABANA SANDS MOTEL. Death? I'll know Death. I'll be seated somewhere hot and bright, squinting painfully toward the beach, trying to clear my vision which movielike will have become all blurred about the edges, and I shall want to clear my sight to resume my sweating cool glass of Perrier and I'll look up.

He will be there. Suddenly. Unexpected. Waiting. Turned in upon himself. Leaning back against the white stucco wall. His body tanned, stripped to the waist, wearing those long white nylon beach trousers that will cling wet to his thighs, wet from his healthy sea-sweat, from a plunge in the sea. A white sweatband will coil his dark hair. His face will be turned down toward his white transparent crotch, the draw-string opening a V-shaped

area of winter-white skin above his cock which will be hard and held covered in his right hand. His left hand will hold out the drawstrings to slow the slide of his clinging wet pants down his strong cyclists thighs.

He is very muscular: arms, shoulders, chest, legs. He has a black moustache which, with the curl of hair over the white sweatband, obscures seductively his perfect dark face. But I know him. I know that boy, who in the village is called Roger. I know that when he looks up, finally, from his crotched hand, across the distance to my eyes, that he will be beautiful, that he will lift my heart, sweet savior, right out of me, and carry me up into the brightness and light and heat of the sun, and my eyes will pain no more.

Death is no less than the brightness and heat burning in a young man's body.

Then I'll learn the secret some of them know, those golden ones, running from a Castro bar to a waiting Mercedes or a slick Ford truck, hair styled and washed, jeans or slacks, perfect, and somehow all the same, because they know the secret, and they're not telling, not these perfect golden boys who traffic only among each other, signaling their secret to pick each other up at bars, to ball each other at the baths, to lounge together weekends on the Russian River and months on end in Laguna Beach and Palm Springs.

Solly Blue refuses to go out anymore where the boys with the secret hang out, "Because," he says, "they only make me feel bad." The way someone who thinks he's an insider feels when he discovers he's an outsider, because no matter how far in you make it, there's always a still more intimate, precious, charmed circle. Not all gay men are created equal. Cocks to karma. Maybe I'm not a nice person. Maybe I'm jealous because the boys with the secret always remain twenty-seven, lean and muscular and hairy and hot. I'm now thirty-four. Solly's thirty. Why do we think they've sold their souls for some transitory, skin-deep beauty? Are multiple Polaroids of Dorian Gray stuck aging up in the otherwise empty closets?

The new liberated species seems everywhere. They come and they go, I'm sure, like flowers for a season. They have first names but no last. They have phone numbers, best written in pencil, and no addresses. I see them on Castro Street and think of them;

but not seeing them, I do not think of them. Individual boys can move out of town or die, and I'd never know, because it's only in seeing them that they are there. Not seen, individually they do not exist. Not seen, only the general memory of them provokes in me not an aching jealousy, but an aching desire to penetrate to the heart of their secret hyper-gay fraternity.

Will Death reveal the secret? Will Roger, hoisting me to heaven by flap of his muscular wings, whisper to me the secret I know he, behind the muscle of his body armor, conceals? Will the brightness and light become so light and bright that in a flash I will see what, in spite of careful observation of everything in my life, I have somehow missed? I know I am missing something. In all that light will I finally see? Where is the handsome body-builder who will coach me, who will take my hand, and, leading me toward the only vocation I want, leading me toward perfect manhood, smile at me, shine on me, and say to me, "Follow me."

Such, in the years before Kick, with Teddy around his neck, was Ryan's idealized, aching desire. Through all his adolescence, he had studied older boys and young men, not knowing what it was he wanted with them anymore than only to be like them when he grew up. Now he was grown, newly moved to San Francisco to pursue the secret, and he felt betrayed. No man, no shaman priest, and no coach, not even his father, had ever taken him in hand and explained to him how it is that an American boy grows to American manhood. He had trusted they would and they had not. They had not confided the secret passage some boys seem to know as naturally as they pull on their virgin jockstraps at thirteen.

In his first two years in the City, Ryan had not yet written anything erotic. He had left university teaching in Chicago to work as a technical writer for a large corporation in the Financial District. He had slept his way into his job at Glass Tower Engineers. He thought it was cute at the time. He had met the man who became his boss at Dave's Baths, and for a time his boss had been a sometime lover. Then Teddy had conjured up Evil Teddy and caused a scene and the man had grown angry and made life at the office miserable for Ryan. He wanted Ryan to quit. But Ryan would not.

At night, exhausted by nine hours' writing of engineering proposals on nuclear-waste repositories, Ryan lay awake moaning in his rooms, not exactly feeling sorry for himself as much as wondering vaguely if all people crawled off alone in the darkness to anguish over reasons outside

their control, feeling some big mistake, if not some big joke, lay in his not belonging here, having never been consulted, plunked down on this planet, belonging somewhere else.

He had to defy gravity.

He had to gain altitude.

He had to fly.

He had the Golden Gate blues.

He told Solly on the phone he never meant to cry, but each night as he lay down in his bed the water table of sorrow tilted inside him, his body quaking, life having ticked off another day at the Glass Tower, another day toward his Death, making him, in those long minutes between Valium and sleep, making him a thousand years old. He plodded through the day at his desk editing engineering reports that raped the environment. "This work is unnerving. It's immoral. I'm working on Department of Defense contracts for nuclear-waste repositories on Indian reservations. Sometimes I envy window dressers. You know: faggots who get to do something pretty during the day. I mean creative. Like carpenters."

By night, he began to write pornography. "I'm overheated and under-ventilated. I've got to defuse myself somehow. I write with my dick in my hand."

"You've put in three years," Solly said. "You should get some time off for good behavior."

"My boss thinks good behavior is letting him suck me off."

"Why don't you quit?" Solly asked.

"Who would feed Teddy?"

After sundown his mind picked up speed.

Teddy holed up in another room. Ryan refused to sleep with him until he found a job. Ryan regretted his refusal, but he stuck to it. He missed the familiar cuddle of their night's sleep. "Doesn't anybody ever stay together anymore?" He tried strangers, but found nothing worse than an alien in bed. No one but Teddy knew exactly how to sleep with him, back-to-belly, turning belly-to-back in some perfectly natural horizontal choreography. His bed was empty. He needed Teddy more than he wanted him. He needed excitement. He needed the sunny balance of somebody physically athletic, an upbeat sportfucker who suffered none of the *mondo depresso* soul-searching that plagues writers inspired by anhedonia.

Teddy I thought even more sorrowful than Ryan. Neither of them could enjoy normally pleasurable experiences. How can straight parents, clueless, guide their little children who are not straight?

"Teddy's sadness," Ryan said, "is superficial. Like a cartoon of sadness."

Maybe Teddy's my real mirror. Maybe that's why we can't stand each other these days. We're exactly alike. We're both jokes."

Ryan invited Teddy back to his bed. Out of all the quarrels and venom, they still had one thing going for them, the thing that had brought them together at the Gold Coast bar in Chicago: as long as they didn't talk, they were good in bed. "That's the solution," Ryan said, "sex partners should never speak outside the sack." They were mutually convenient.

Teddy was a red-haired boy. He was not a man. "I don't love you," Ryan said to him. They were on their first scouting trip to El Lay. Ryan had insisted on staying at the Cabana Sands near Muscle Beach. They lay side-by-side on a blanket in the sand. The ocean was as blue as the sky. A low surf rolled idly toward their feet. This was the first time they had taken acid together. Teddy had tears in his eyes. "You're so goddam manipulative," Ryan said. "You can cry on cue."

"You're the only one who makes me cry."

"I'm the only one who does anything, everything, for you. Food, lodging, tuition, plane tickets. Your teeth. You've got the price of a new VW in your mouth."

"It was all your idea to make me into something."

"So become something. Anything. Be yourself. Get a job. Stop hiding out in me."

"I can't. I'd be a bum, an alcoholic. I'd be dead if it weren't for you."

"I wanted to love you more than anyone or anything in the world."

Ryan could not bear the tears streaming through the Coppertone on Teddy's freckled skin. "Don't cry," he said. There was a long silence between them; they had lived together for three years; they would continue to live together for five more. "You cry too easy." Ryan reached for Teddy's hand, and would not let him pull away. "Listen," he said. "Forget it. Okay? It's not me. It's the drug talking."

Later that afternoon they made furious love.

Many nights of their last year together, Teddy cruised out to trick. Left alone in the Victorian, Ryan could not bear to go out. "My aura's too sad." He tried making solitary love to himself, finding some semblance of God in his cuming, finding the blinding amyl-nitrite vision that God is what you jerk off to, that what you see when you're cuming is God, only God will be more so, because He will last longer, and passing over into Death will be to slip into the vortex of holy orgasm forever. Aching to have a life before dying, Ryan rehearsed his dying nightly, cuming often with tears streaming down his face for the sweet sad joy of understanding nothing at all.

“Orgasm,” Kweenie said, “is Ry’s cure for the blues. Too bad it’s not working.”

“All I live for is to cum,” Ryan said. “Everything in between is intermission.”

Insomniac, Ryan walked from room to room chasing the ghosts he had brought to his old Victorian. At Misery, he had received all the minor holy orders of the Catholic priesthood. He was an ordained exorcist. He pursued phantoms in the night. Men were his only distraction and they weren’t good enough. He entered rooms for no reason. He left rooms for no reason. He turned on both televisions to different channels. He switched on the radio, all the lights, the four burners on his small Wedgewood stove, and the oven. He ran the faucets in the kitchen and bathroom sinks. He turned on the shower, and listened for the gas water heater to kick on. He plugged in the blender and the Hoover upright vacuum cleaner and left them roaring in place. He turned on his new electric typewriter. “It’s better to light one candle than curse the darkness.” His house roared with sound and glowed with light signifying next to nothing. The gas wall-furnace burned blue and orange near an open window. His reel-to-reel tape deck pounded out heavy rhythms. He lit a candle in front of Teddy’s picture. The face of the red-haired, moustached boy flickered between a stuffed deer head and a staring fox fur Ryan had rescued from the Saint Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop. Wandering naked through his booming, blazing house, he threw himself on top of his electric blanket and lay, in the days before video, watching slow-motion Super-8 movies of bodybuilders thrown up against his wall in heroic poses, projected the way he preferred his men, three times larger than life. If the house was empty, he would give it the illusion of fullness. He was his own high-tech poltergeist. He haunted himself. His utility meter spun in expensive circles. “Everything in the house is turned on—except me.”

He had only himself to exorcize.

Teddy told me once how it had been between them in the last screaming weeks of their relationship.

I think, and this is only my casual observation, that when men go against the norm and love each other, they love each other somehow more intensely, precisely because the world is against them, and when that intense love ends, its passion becomes enormous rage, at each other, and at themselves, for making the straight world seem right and them seem wrong.

Teddy and Ryan pushed and pulled at each other until quarreling and clinging slipped past bickering and bitching into knock-down-drag-out

wrestling and fist fights, followed by cold silences and colder apologies.

"I was afraid to leave him," Teddy said. "You don't know how safe I felt with him. He can make you feel like the most wonderful guy in the world. I wish we could have been together forever. Or at least together the way we were back in the Midwest. Back before he insisted we move to San Francisco. He packed up everything. Including me. He told me I could go or stay. He told me he wanted me to go with him. I think he was afraid to move all the way to the west coast by himself. For myself, I figured that time with him was better than time without him. He used to say that to me, back there, that time with me was better than time without me. We weren't in California even a year before the opposite was true. He got along fine without me. As long as he wasn't depressed. As long as it wasn't night and dark. As long as he could get to sleep."

The stoicism of the betrayed had hardened Teddy's face.

"I was good enough for Ry until we moved out here. Then I wasn't good enough. He told me I was keeping him from meeting the people he needed to relate to. I don't know how. He was relating, if you get my meaning, to three guys a day. Like he had a quota. Like he was keeping score. Like he was auditioning guys for some part only he knew about."

I must tell you: when Ryan lived with Teddy in the Midwest, even before they moved to California, they flew the Great Gay Bermuda Triangle of SFO to LAX to NYC. "When you're gay," Ryan explained, "travel is cheap. Someone's always inviting you to stay. You find yourself admitted into circles that otherwise, without money or name, you'd never access." He laughed. "But you have to be hot and good in bed."

On the leather circuit, especially with the attractive, laggard Teddy in tow for three-ways, Ryan was in play. His new face in town, his fast repartee, and his aggressive sexual kinkiness opened doors to him I've only read about in *People*. In the sixties, Ryan had known nearly everyone worth knowing in the big-league designer and pop-art sets in Manhattan. He spent time at Warhol's Factory. He skipped teaching his university summer classes for two days one June, dismayed that Warhol had been shot, standing side-by-side with art critic Mario Amaya. Ryan himself felt wounded, reading the newspaper accounts of bullets entering flesh he knew intimately. Vivid in his mind forever after was the image of the elevator doors of the Factory opening, revealing Valerie Solanas, the proto-feminist founder of SCUM, the Society for Cutting Up Men, gun in hand, shooting down in surprise attack the man she told police had too much power over people. Poor Mario, discussing art, was caught in the fusillade.

Two days later, Sirhan Sirhan put Bobby Kennedy's anguished face on the front page: his head, cradled in his wife's arms, oozed life across the tiled kitchen floor of the Ambassador Hotel in El Lay. Warhol's headlines were bumped in fifteen minutes to a small update and quickly buried.

Both events gave Ryan his first real taste of bicoastal urban terror. Coupled with his father's saga of illness, he felt more mortal than ever.

"Anyway," Teddy continued, "Ryan had all these guys coming and going in and out of him and the house. He was very San Francisco. Tricks fed his ego. But nothing ever satisfied him. He always wanted more; and more was never enough. I figured he had over nine thousand guys during the eight years we were together. He probably came with them all. He only needed me for fill-in sex. You know what I mean, Magnus? The kind of affection old lovers have for each other when the honeymoon's over."

He meant when the passion was gone.

"He'd come home from the Barracks or the Slot wanting still more. Hardly anything satisfied him. He tried everything; whips, chains, fisting. He stuck mostly to grass. And Quaaludes. Late nights, scrubbed clean of Crisco, as if you could ever scrub clean of Crisco, he'd crawl into bed with me, and hold me, and I'd hold him back, half asleep, and silently, as if we'd never had words with each other, he'd start massaging my tits and we'd make love. Ryan was good in bed, but as soon as he climbed out of the sack and his feet hit the floor, he turned into the world's biggest asshole." Teddy shook his head. "But in public on Castro or Folsom, Ryan was always on. Especially after he quit his straight job and became Mr. Wonderful Porn Writer. He was expert at talking guys into bed. He used his writing the way he used his mouth. He knew how to talk a guy to orgasm. Sex-talk scenes were his specialty. Guys fantasized about star-fucking him. They never lived with him."

Teddy clasped his hands together. "Everything was his. His money. His property. His furniture. His decisions. His work. He treated me like scum. He said I didn't care enough about those things. His things. It wasn't enough that I cared about him. He wanted proof that I loved him. I was too naive then to say to him that the proof was that I was there asleep and waiting in his bed when he dragged himself in from a marathon night of sex at the Barracks."

Teddy's face was sad.

"He expected me to take whatever he dished out, and when I took it, he'd twist it, in that special way he could twist everything, and despise me for taking it. What could I do? He had a way with words that was too clever for me. That's why I first hit him."

Teddy shrugged.

"I admit I hit him first. Sometimes I held on to him, because I figured he needed someone to grab ahold of him, and hold him; but he'd fight me off, yelling that I was making him claustrophobic. That I was smothering him. That he couldn't breathe. That I should let go and leave. He only made me hold him tighter because I didn't want to leave him. Life with him was better than any life I had ever known. He rescued me from the streets. When we met, I was—I don't know if you know this—hustling between New York and Chicago. But I wasn't, you know, making ends meet. I was mostly hanging out in bars waiting to score with some john and I was drinking a lot. At first, he liked the idea I was a hustler. He thought that made me exciting. Then after awhile he tried to save me. He wanted to make me more like him. When I couldn't be what he wanted, he accused me of wanting him only for his money."

Teddy looked at me, expecting me to be able to sort out the truth.

"He accused me. 'Once a hustler,' he said, 'always a hustler.' Then came the salt in the wound. He'd tell me I was too old to hustle the streets and the bars anymore. He told me I was too fat to be hot. That's when I busted him in the chops."

"Because it wasn't true?"

"Because it was."

Consider Ryan considering Teddy. Teddy was an outsider like Ryan. He was a tagalong like Ryan's brother Thom. Neither Teddy nor Thom was part of the charmed circle of hot, elite men that Ryan wanted to crash.

Kick was different.

He was not only one of the boys.

He was the leader of the pack.

He was a man's man.

Anyone could see that a hundred yards off.

When Ryan met Kick, he felt if he himself was not fully one of the boys, the boys with the secret, then at least he was in the final stages of learning how to be one of the boys, a mystery whose secrets had both eluded him and turned him on from boyhood. In Ryan's heart of hearts, in his outsider's heart, he had always felt there existed tighter male fraternities within the general fraternity of men. He had foregone the fraternity of heterosexual men to enter the fraternity of celibate men who were priests. He had abandoned the fraternity of straight men to enter the more secret fraternity of homosexual men. Yet even in that narrowed fraternity, he had discovered even tighter circles of kinship. Man hunts what he likes and discriminates against the rest. Ryan cruised through the bars and baths.

He was in the parade, but not feeling part of it. The night was too gay and cold. He needed heat and light. He set his sights on that impenetrable circle of homomuscular men he adored from afar. He went from man to man trying to fuck his Ideal into existence. Drugs helped. Especially poppers that could turn Godzilla into God.

That El Lay when Kick walked into that Ideal and filled it with his aura and his muscle, Ryan found his target. What is love-at-first-sight if not that moment when someone suddenly matches in the flesh the ideal image that the seeker has always carried in his heart and head? It's tragic if the feeling isn't mutual. It's a gift of the gods if the love is requited. Ryan played it cool. Kick was too good to be true, but was no more, Ryan felt, than he wanted or deserved. He spun head over heels when Kick pursued him as much as he wanted to pursue Kick.

Under the roar of the helicopter that Sunday at Bar Nada, Kick had asked Ryan to fly to El Lay. Three weeks later the blond bodybuilder who strode out of Ryan's wet dreams drove him in the red Corvette to the top of the hill above the HOLLYWOOD sign overlooking the smog burning the topless towers of El Lay.

"If you can find it in your heart to love me," Kick said, "you won't have to leave anything behind. If you want, I'll show you everything you ever wanted to know about muscle."

Los Angeles spread out below them like all the kingdoms of the world that could be Ryan's if only he would take up this calling, this vocation, to a life as manly and noble and pure as a disciplined bodybuilder.

"You know," Kick's blue eyes looked deep into him, "you can have anything you want."

Kick was offering himself.

"Why me?"

"You are," Kick said, "the richest man I know."

Sirens shrieked through the boulevards below them. An alarm went off in Ryan: he flashed on his Victorian and the deed to his ranch, his safety deposit box, his bank account with the savings from the tidy days when he had pulled the salary of an associate professor. He was shocked, wary, that he should be told this.

After all, Teddy...

But then he rationalized, no, realized, that this man, this golden bodybuilder, knew and cared nothing about his assets. Besides he had his own: the beach condo, the Corvette, the Harley-Davidson Sportster, the extravagance of the helicopter.

Kick must have seen the flush in Ryan's face. "I've known since that

first night,” he said, “what you’ve always known about yourself. You have a rich soul.” He reached out his massive, hairy arm and touched Ryan’s beard with his hot hand.

There are people who burst into flames, incredible cases of spontaneous human combustion, people crumbled literally to ashes by searing flames that reach two thousand degrees while their clothes are not even singed. These are bizarre cases baffling to the scientific community; yet they are well documented in tabloids the world over. They are part of the folklore of our popular culture.

Kick rose like a Viking warlord up on the block alongside the nagging Teddy.

“You know in your heart,” Kick said, “what you can live with, and what you can’t live without.”

Teddy went down the toilet.

“You want excellence. I want quality. We want the same thing.”

“Yes,” Ryan said. “Yes.”

“Then it’s settled.” Kick folded Ryan-Orion into a bear hug. The arrangement began a tale of two cities. Ryan flew back to San Francisco. Kick kept his Venice Beach house. Long distance connected them nightly. Kick drove his red Corvette Stingray up I-5. His visits became more frequent and longer. He could not leave and Ryan could not let him go. They were finding the unfindable in each other. The end of one weekend began to meet midweek with the beginning of the next.

“So,” Teddy said, “why doesn’t he, like, move in? Why do I always get sent off to Bar Nada? Who do you think you are? Who does he think he is? Who do you think I am?”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Ryan said.

“I saw you first.” Teddy was crying. “Eight years....”

“To you I’m the fastest checkbook in the West. Your account’s closed, buddy. You’re overdrawn. Flat busted.”

“Disgusted. You can’t be trusted.” Teddy pulled Ryan to him and held him so tight he couldn’t fight free. “I love you, you sonuvabitch. I’m your lover.”

“You’re a tenant renting a room in my house.”

“Goddam you.” Teddy squeezed Ryan tighter. “I have some rights.”

“All you’ve got, you asshole, is kitchen privileges. Now let go of me!”

“Not until you tell me you love me.”

“I don’t love you. Let me go. You’re making me claustrophobic.”

Teddy shook Ryan as hard as he could. “Tell me you love me!”

“I don’t love you, you idiot! Let me go. You’re hurting me.”

“You’re hurting me. I want to hurt you. I want you to tell me you love me.”

“I want you to move out. I mean it this time. Let go of me, and, goddam it, move out!”

Teddy held Ryan out at arm’s length with one hand on his throat. As hard as he could, with his other hand, he slapped Ryan across the face. The blow spun Ryan free. He ran to the front door, escaping from his own house. “Move! Goddam it! Whatever was left between us you finally shattered. Nobody’s ever hit me before.”

“That’s a miracle.” Teddy was coming toward him down the long hall, slowly at first.

“I won’t be your abused lover.” Ryan was backing out the open door. “I don’t come from a family that hits each other.”

“Your family’s a laugh,” Teddy shouted. He was approaching faster.

Ryan went for Teddy’s jugular. “Your father beats your mother!”

Teddy broke into a run coming for Ryan’s throat. Ryan stooped down, and with all his might, pulled a hard yank on the long oriental runner exactly at the moment when Teddy’s feet hung in midair gallop. His next step came down on the fast-sliding rug and he sprawled screaming across the waxed hardwood of the hallway. Ryan dashed down the porch steps to the safety of his VW Rabbit. He fumbled for the door key, but Teddy was not chasing him. He had crawled to the front door and was lying across the threshold broken like Stanley calling for Stella. “Ryan! Don’t go.” He was crying. “Don’t go. Ryan! Ryan! Ryan! Don’t leave me.”

Ryan looked across the street to see if the gay-boy clone couple they rarely spoke to was looking out from behind their Levolor blinds. They weren’t. He shouted over the car roof back at Teddy. “I hate this. I hate you.”

“I love you. I love you.”

“Move out!”

“Please. Please. Please. Please.”

“Omigod.” Ryan closed his eyes, but he could not close his ears. He climbed into his pea-green Rabbit with the MANUVRS license plates and peeled out from the curb. “Omigod,” he said, and he was crying. “What have I done?”

He drove west to the beach, to the ocean. Waves of guilt washed over him. “A man’s got to do, oh, chow yuk, what a man’s got to do.” The late afternoon turned to a brilliant twilight. The sun disappeared out beyond the far horizon. In the evening mix of dying sun and rising moon, two ships, lit brilliantly, passed in the soft light, one heading safely into shore,

one heading steadfastly out into the dark ocean.

Ryan found a phone booth outside the Cliff House. He called Kick long distance. "Don't come up this weekend," he said. "Those are hard words to say to you."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing's the matter. In fact, everything's probably perfect. Teddy's moving out this weekend."

"Why don't you fly down here? There's a Mr. Western States contest Saturday."

"I want to, but I can't. I better stay here and make sure he really moves out." Ryan hesitated. "It's okay if I don't fly down? I mean this isn't a test, is it?"

"Would I test you?" Kick's voice was warm. "I love you. You're a mad-man. Whatever's going on up there, I understand. I love you."

"I love you too. I want to see you, but I can't."

"Then you should stay. I'm being selfish wanting you to come. My friends down here think I've met a miracle man. I want to show you off."

If my witness serves any purpose in all this, it is balance. Despite my protests of noninvolvement, remember, I, Magnus Bishop, became somehow the father confessor. I heard the several sides of various collisions. I think they all told me the truth. But what is truth? And who am I? *Rashomon*?

That night of the big fight, Ryan could not sleep. At 4:30 he heard Teddy come into the house. He waited long minutes in his big bed to see if Teddy would go to his own room or come climb comfortably in with him. He heard Teddy drop one boot and then the other. He heard the toilet flush. He heard the soft pad of Teddy's gray wool boot socks walk off to his own room. He heard the sound of the bed creak under Teddy's exhausted weight.

Ryan called Teddy's name. He announced in a voice too loud for the late hour that he was ill. He hated himself calling Teddy. He hated that he had to lie about his perfectly good health, but he needed attention, and if Teddy's was the only attention available, then he was shameless. Besides, Teddy owed him.

Teddy climbed wearily out of his own bed and stood at the door of Ryan's room. "Are you physically sick?" Teddy asked. He was wary. "Did you take something? Or are you just insomniac. Again?"

"I need," Ryan said. He could not find the word. "I need..."

"If you don't know what you need, I can't help you."

"Come in here. Lie down with me."

“What’s the matter with you. You said you wanted me to leave you alone. You told me to move out. I don’t like it here anymore. I won’t be able to sleep in here. This used to be my bedroom too, you know. Why can’t you say what’s the matter?”

Ryan, the writer, grasped for a word to explain. Over Teddy’s shoulder, the digital clock read 4:40. Dawn was already gray outside the windows.

“If you can’t say what it is, it can’t be too important,” Teddy said. “You always have a word for everything.”

“For some things, words fail,” Ryan said. “Some things cannot be spoken.” What he meant was, some things cannot be asked. Some things, if they have to be spelled out to someone who should know, are not worth saying. If Teddy could not see what Ryan needed, or would not give it to him, then asking for what was not given betrayed the integrity of the sharing.

All Ryan needed was to be held. Just held. Just for a moment. To fold his body into the warmth of another man’s body. To imagine how warm his father’s body might have felt that hot afternoon in the car in the woods. To warm himself with the familiar shared warmth of Teddy’s body against the cold dawn. “This is your chance,” he wanted to say to Teddy, “to regain your ground. Love me because you love me, not because you’re desperate.” But he said nothing. If he had to ask to be held, then the holding could never be the same as an embrace freely given. He could not ask Teddy for it. This was the test, the supreme test, for them both: the one could not ask, and the other could not figure out what was to be given. They stared at each other impassed, like two men trying to go opposite directions through the same door at the same time: neither one moving to the right or left, both waiting for the other to step aside, or step forward, to solve the squeeze.

Hindsight tempts me to think that if one or the other or both had reached out, they might have changed the course of their personal history. They might have salvaged what had been a genuinely innocent, boyish love between them. They might have averted slammed doors and loud voices. But at that moment, when their future history could have been born or aborted by a simple embrace of human love, neither man reached out, and events began to collide the way people on foggy freeways crash into each other. No matter now. What’s done is done. The truth is that Ryan alone could have stopped all of this if he had wanted; but not knowing what he wanted more than adventure, he knew he at least did not want to stop the madness around him, because deep down Ryan liked hysteria. It distracted him from his anxiety blues. The crazier the world the less

crazy he felt. The faster the track the less time to be depressed. Ryan was my friend, but I won't fail to admit that if Ryan wasn't exactly the cause of all this, at least he was to the maelstrom what the eye is to the hurricane.

Ryan was the center. None of these people would ever have crossed purposes if somehow or other they had not wanted something that Ryan had. That cutting edge, that way he had of pushing reality with words, of course, is the point of my working through this wreckage of fools who spoke the word *love* more than any word they knew.

Ryan, lying in his bed, with Teddy sitting on the edge, ready to bolt for refuge in his own room, could not say the words. He was slightly amused. Teddy proved his suspicion correct that if people knew what he was really like they would flee for their lives. He planned to be very careful with Kick.

Teddy knew, but Teddy was more scared of the world than he was of Ryan. Teddy knew men existed who would gladly do to him the unspeakable acts he wanted and feared they would do. In the gay world, where there are no limits, Ryan was his protector.

"If you're what having a lover is all about," Ryan said. "You're my first, last, and only lover. I'll never speak the word again!"

Ryan was always in a rage about love. He thought love could change people. He knew he would be changed by Kick's love. He was planning on it. He had wanted to change Teddy, but Teddy had not changed. Ryan burned a slow smoulder because Teddy had somehow failed. He could not forgive him. He went into a rage that someone he had chosen, someone he had trusted, poor Teddy, had failed to understand, by design or defect, what intensity and depth of feeling Ryan had attempted to share with him.

"I understood him," Teddy said.

But I knew he hadn't, not always, especially not that crucial night when Ryan had called him to his bed, and he would not lie down. Teddy hadn't understood at all that cold gray hour before dawn. If he had chosen to climb between the bed covers and hold Ryan that night, he could have held him forever. Kick or no Kick, he could have salvaged everything between them. Ryan was offering him a truce. He was offering peace terms. If Teddy had climbed into Ryan's bed that night, he would have so enmeshed himself in Ryan's heart that Kick would have been no more than a long-distance affair. But Teddy was too gun-shy to stand his ground. Ryan never pulled punches with him. He could not figure what snare Ryan was laying to capture him. He grew nervous sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I have to go to my own room," Teddy said. "Don't involve me in

whatever it is you're trying to talk about. I'm tired. Don't give me your insomnia."

"It's not contagious," Ryan said.

"With you, everything is a plague. I've got to get some sleep. I'm sorry I'm not up to your late late show. I didn't know I was going to have a few beers and some grass and meet a big, bearded Canadian with an uncut dick and a hairy chest and belly."

"I'm glad you did. I'm glad you enjoyed it." Ryan meant it. But he needed the accustomed comfort of Teddy's body sleeping next to him. It was as close to proof as he could come that he was not in solitary confinement inside his own skin. But if he had to ask for it, the proof would not be there. Teddy had to give it, someone had to give it, without being asked.

"So one last time. What's eating you?" Teddy asked.

"I can't say it."

"Coming from a big mouth like you that's something. I thought you had a spiel for everything." Teddy stood up from the edge of Ryan's bed. "If you can't say it, Ry, it doesn't exist." He turned his back on Ryan and walked toward the door.

"If there is one sin in life," Ryan sat up shouting in the bedcovers, "you just committed it."

Teddy retreated through the door, turned and said, "I'm sorry, Ry."

"Here! Tonight! Committed here in this bed tonight!"

Teddy pushed the door to Ryan's bedroom closed and padded softly down the hall. Behind him, he heard one of the last things Ryan ever said to him.

"You Judas!"

17

Within two months, Kick was living in Ryan's Victorian. "I haven't moved here," Kick had an indirect way of taking to Ryan, "because you're here; but I wouldn't have moved here if you weren't."

Kick knew how to hold Ryan. His big arms made Ryan feel safe. Ryan's house made Kick comfortable. They were a pair.

The Entity took up residence with them.

Kick was an exhibitionist pleasantly surprised that Ryan could equal him in exhibition. On Castro, Ryan delivered a gentle Attitude that declared to the hunks who gravitated around Kick that Kick was as built in his head as he was in his body. Kick, in his soft spoken way, matched Ryan subtlety for subtlety, handling adroitly every queen and musclehead

who doubted they could really be a couple.

"Most bodybuilders," Kick said, "are more competitive than communicative." He winked at Ryan. "For me, men have to be more than competitive."

"What do they have to be?" Ryan asked.

"Like you," Kick said.

"Whatever that is," Ryan said.

Both were performance artists. Kick knew how to handle men beguiled by his handsome Look. Ryan knew how to manipulate men with his words.

"Even if you have become a Famous Couple overnight," Solly Blue told Ryan, "you're still somewhat of an odd couple."

"This isn't the first time," Ryan said, "that I've been laid because of my mouth."

"Spoken like a true cocksucker."

"Like seeks like except when opposites attract."

Ryan was purposely vague. Solly knew about the musclesex. He didn't know about the bondage. He would never have approved. He hated bondage. He had to. He could not have sex with hustlers who might tie him up. That would be a Death sentence. He had canceled bondage trips out for everyone.

"So, beyond his looks, what do you have in common?" Solly asked.

"I never kiss and tell."

"That's all you do. Your magazine is all kiss and tell."

Very late one night, tumbling in the covers, Kick sat up and straddled Ryan's chest. They were laughing at their offbeat affair. "We could be dangerous," Kick said. "We could take on the whole world." He stretched his huge arms up, flexed, and slowly lowered his hands flat down on Ryan's turned-on tits. "You and me, man. We're on a roll." Kick lowered his muscle-packed body, grinding the full heft of his power slowly and sensually into Ryan. Their hard cocks rolled sweaty between them. Ryan pushed up hard and confident into the dream man whose shoulders and arms held him in tight embrace. Their tongues intertwined, and pumping and hugging, they came to the good old bellybucking Princeton Rub.

Kick had Universal Appeal. He was everybody's type. On Castro, guys rubbernecked. Cars rear-ended each other. Queens fell up the stairs at Paperback Traffic. The Norse Cove Deli grew silent when they entered. Even Nureyev, out touring the Castro for an afternoon, snipped off a fast double take. "I guess," Ryan said, "Rudy knows a body when he sees one."

Kick grinned. Straight men, and gay, pumping iron at Gold's Gym on

Valencia Street broke their silent Attitude to say hello to Kick who trained only with Ryan.

“You’re my coach, Ry,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to compete. I can’t do it alone. We’ll win together.”

Kick promised Ryan they would always go for the best in life. *Quality* was Kick’s code word. His expectations of life, and he had the gifts that proved his expectations were correct, meant nothing less than the best of everything. He had built his body more with visualizations than he had with weights. Ryan saw it happen the nights of their musclesex before the mirror. Kick was living proof of the power of positive thinking.

“Ry,” Kick said, “I really meant what I said. You can have anything you want, you know.”

“I want a body like yours.” Ryan teased him.

“I want a head like yours.” Kick played back.

“I’ll settle for your body.”

“I’ll settle for your head.”

“You don’t care if I’m not a bodybuilder.”

“You don’t care if I’m not as smart as you.”

“I’m not smart. I’m only clever.”

“Whatever you say, coach. But I wouldn’t have chased you if you weren’t the damndest package I ever did see.”

“I’d never have been caught if you weren’t on top of all those goddam muscles. Nothing’s worse than beef with more pump than soul.”

“God!” Kick laughed. “How’d we get so perfect!”

“Funny, how in a way,” Ryan said, “we both had to get around each other’s bodies in order to get inside our heads.”

“Funny, isn’t it,” Kick said. “Funny and fine.”

Their first New Year’s Eve together was private. They skipped the big disco party at Trocadero Transfer and bowed out of the private party tossed by the best of the A-gay muscle crowd. Instead, they had driven, three blocks from the corner of Market and Castro, halfway up the mountain path of Corona Heights. Kick parked the Vette and they hiked the steep trail to the craggy top. The City was alive below them. They stood holding each other, watching the fireworks flash and boom through the soft gauze of fog hanging motionless over the City.

“You’re the best man I ever met,” Kick said.

Ryan was held tight by the man he was sure had fallen to Earth. If ever Ryan were to be rescued from the thick air of this strange planet, if ever they were to be beamed back up to wherever Kick had come from, Ryan knew that the rocky outcropping of Corona Heights was the pickup

place. The red lights of Sutro Tower blinked like terrestrial signals west against the moon. Kick's arms embraced him. His warm breath through his blond moustache touched Ryan's mouth making one breath between them. The moment was so right, so pagan, on the rock-slab steps of the raw mountain only three circuitous blocks from the hyper-civilization of Castro, that Ryan's old Catholic heart pounded with superstitious fear. "We'll have to pay for all this." He recovered with a small laugh. He remembered the line from *The Boys in the Band* about every one of them willing to trade their immortal souls for a half hour of skin-deep beauty. But Kick's beauty was more than skin deep and Ryan hardly cared if for all this mortal joy he should burn forever in hell. He was head over heels.

The intensity between them that first New Year's Eve was the same as the night they had won Kick's first physique contest. They had driven back to the motel with four trophies. Kick never said, "I won." He always said, "We won. You and I, coach. We won." Kick took the Most Muscular trophy to a jewelers and had it engraved with both their names, "From the Champ to the Coach." He gave the golden trophy topped with a victorious bodybuilder to Ryan for his own.

Ryan certainly had helped Kick with his posing. Their muscle movies and videotapes exhibit the talent of both men: one before the lens, one behind. Ryan once said when he visited my apartment that he watched his tapes of Kick when Kick had to return to El Lay on whatever business he had there.

"I think," he said, "that the ultimate ritual act of worship in the twentieth century is a grown man, stripped, naked, stoned on grass, with poppers by his side and clamps on his tits, greasing up his dick, kneeling on the floor with his face four inches from the video screen, masturbating to glorious closeups of bodybuilders flexing and posing."

He gazed somewhat idly into one of those designer mirrors that looks like a chrome hubcap surrounded by seashells. "My face will probably fall off from terminal video burn." He palmed his hand up his high forehead. "Maybe that's why I'm balding." He turned to me. "Do I look hot?" He didn't wait for an answer. "For my type, and I am a type, I look hot."

Life and lust, as much as Death, led Ryan to the discipline of bodybuilding. And to the worship of bodybuilders. He was little different from straight males turning rowdy when they see athletes they adore exhibiting their flesh and muscle in arenas and rings, on stages and playing fields; but he, more than they, understood how homomuscularity was different from homosexuality. The attraction men, even straight men, have for other men who are athletes proves that men can love and admire other men as long

as the other man is more ruggedly handsome, more muscular, more a cocks-man, with more earning power. American men idolize other males who are top dog. American women go for men who are the underdog. American homosexuals love top dogs with big dicks. Ah, yes, I know, all generalizations limp.

Ryan, having quit his technical writing job at the Glass Tower, began to write even more torrid fiction of man-to-man musclesex.

In his *Journal*, he reasoned that a man's body, ideally developed and then tensed into the graceful flow of a posing presentation, skin bronzed, sweat running, and veins popping, was the ultimate existential act of physical defiance shouting I AM HERE into the cadaverous face of Death. Ryan needed, really needed, Kick's body, the cuming strength of his good seed, his good genes, to hold back his fear of his own body that he felt too closely linked to the body of his father who had died so young so slowly.

Ryan was so concerned about Charley-Pop that he once said, "My one outside hope, as much as I love that man, is that my mother will finally confess to me that I'm her love child, her little bastard. Fat chance. She was a true Catholic bride. She was always totally in-love with him, and he with her. Besides, God help me, I look exactly like he used to look before his pancreas exploded inside him and started eating his guts like lunch meat."

The weight of the world was in Ryan's face.

"The poor man's suffering was a disaster. It destroyed our family. Everybody in Peoria thinks we held together so bravely. Matter of fact, we've all become mad as hatters in a textbook example of a dysfunctional family. At least, Thom and Kweenie and I have. My mother grows more translucently saintlike every day. She lived to make her man fight to live. I don't think she understands that all three of her children, unlike her, are terrified that what happened to him might be passed along to us. She only married him. She's not descended from him."

He found the antidote.

Muscles were all.

Sport.

Art.

Ritual.

Sex.

Bodybuilding pulled an adult man together. Whether a muscleman was displayed in full glorious competition pose in a double-biceps shot, lats spread, legs thrust forward, or was standing in noble repose, the body-builder was simply the way a man should look in his full body armor, if he was to protect himself from the onslaught of everything that adds up

to Death. Bodies, healthy, well-developed bodies, spit, if ever so briefly, in the face of Death.

Kick and Ryan agreed that the death of El Lay's most famous professional bodybuilder, this side of Arnold Schwarzenegger, had been an avoidable disaster. The former Mr. America was the talk of the gyms. He had taken so many steroids to beef up his mass over the course of his professional career that his liver had grown terminally hepatic, his hair fell out, his muscle collapsed, and he died less than six months after diagnosis of cancer of the bone marrow.

"Steroids kill," Kick said. "It's a shame. Bodybuilding is supposed to be a health sport."

"It's as far," Ryan said, "as a man can get from Death."

"We'll stick with coke and MDA," Kick said.

"And poppers," Ryan said.

"Definitely poppers."

You needn't be a student in my American pop culture class to see that Ryan and the general public had some differences of opinion about bodybuilders. Straight folklore knocks bodybuilders as the dumbest of big dumb jocks. Gay folklore insists that bodybuilders are hung like stud mice. Kick suffered neither debility. Ryan's sex videos of Kick, in competition condition, jerking off in front of a mirror visualizing the Look he was perfecting, show both a Zen master sculptor at work and a male animal "with," as Ryan wrote in his *Journal*, "probably the largest piece of dirty-blond meat in captivity." Kick outstripped even the legendary blond muscleman, Frank Vickers, in the Colt Studio classic, *Pumping Oil*.

Living with Kick, Ryan learned to read the person living inside Kick's muscles. If gay boys on Castro recognized Kick's appearance, Ryan went them one farther, penetrating the difference between Kick's appearance and Kick's reality. Kick was an itinerant apostle of manhood. He was not a clown cruising Castro like an orangutang in a spray-painted tee shirt.

Most massively big bodybuilders, gay or not gay, up from El Lay for a visit, hunkered down Castro, to see and be seen, all their muscles competitively flexed, parading in pose-downs of two or three, each outcrunching the other, exaggerating every movement, pulling at their crotches, walking shoulder to shoulder, clearing the sidewalk. In front of them like offensive linemen, *Muscle Fucks from Outer Space*, shoulders and lats and arms spread wide like a squadron of vampire bats.

Kick was a champ not a chump.

"You develop muscle," he said, "to show it. But you want the Look to read right. You want Command Presence, but you don't want gay bar

Attitude.”

He stood relaxed next to Ryan in the sun in the tiny garden park in front of the Hibernia Bank, which the Castronauts dubbed Hibernia Beach. Kick, in cutoffs among the gay boys, slowly stripped off his gray ALABAMA tee shirt. His fetish for his own golden body hair was erotic contradiction to the strip-shaved Look bodybuilders affect for competition. Upholstered under a thick layer of his perfectly patterned blond hair, Kick’s pecs and belly and legs dazzled in the afternoon sun. He was unusual. He was a natural man, a natural bodybuilder. He was a ripe candidate for the Mr. Golden Bear contest at the California State Fair.

If any physique competition should have been open to unshaven, hairy bodybuilders, with body hair counting for extra points, it should have been the Golden Bear. When Kick began competing, Ryan spent hours shaving his grand body smooth. Kick watched the revelation of his bare muscle as Ryan razored off the inch-long blond hair from his shoulders, back, chest, belly, arms, hands, butt, legs, and feet.

“There are some sacrifices,” Kick said, “a man has to make.”

His relaxed Look, off the contest stage, because of his symmetry and polish and finish, was more a casual muscular All-American jock Look rather than a bulked, beefed, steroid bodybuilder. People could relate to him. He had the gift of Universal Appeal, something more than mere muscle can give, and something muscle alone can often destroy. He was Ryan’s BMOC on Castro. He was the embodiment of every sex hero Ryan had ever written about in all his erotic stories.

Kick had a body.

He had a face.

He had a soul.

“Sometimes,” Ryan said to Kweenie, “I think he sprang from my head, through my dick to my fingertips, into the keyboard of my computer, and appeared fully developed on my monitor. I only had to tap the screen and take his hand and pull him out of the video screen into reality. Like Michelangelo striking the statue of his Moses and commanding him to speak. How’s that for conceit?” He pulled at her arm. “What movie are we?” he asked.

“*Butch and Sundance?*” Kweenie said halfheartedly.

“Try *West Side Story*.” Ryan said. “I love him.”

“You’re his!” Kweenie hissed. “And every little thing he is...”

“I am too,” Ryan said.

“Don’t you just wish,” Kweenie said. But she knew what her brother meant. Kweenie herself in her young life had seen a dream or two walking.

And Kick was one of them.

Only a fool lacks desire to become, really become, his fantasy.

Kick projected a manly balance that was his main appeal. He never betrayed the gift: on the street he was good example; in the bedroom he was heroic lover; even on the physique contest posing platform where animal aggression is expected, he charmed audiences and judges and Ryan's heart all over again with the virile intensity of his muscular, handsome, blond charisma.

18

Indulge the pop culture professor if you please. As I said, there will be a question to solve the puzzle—theirs, mine, and ours—at the end.

American sports tend to be objective and subjective. In objective sports, the basketball drops or does not drop through the hoop. The tight end either catches the football or he doesn't. The tennis pro makes his serve or he misses. Objective sports may have referees and umpires, but they are mostly yes-or-no athletics. Everyone basically sees the same results.

Subjective sports like gymnastics, skating, fencing, and bodybuilding determine winners or losers not by definitive touchdowns, but by judges' opinions. Of all sports, bodybuilding is the least understood because it is the most subjective. If gymnastics has a right way to move on the flying rings, bodybuilding has several right ways to execute the mandatory poses that display the bodybuilder's various muscle groups separately and together.

Who wins a physique contest is often as much a trick question as which is the best art form: literature, painting, or music. The results depend on subjective values and enthusiasms. Most Americans like their sports cut and dried. For that reason, bodybuilding has been slow in coming to national acceptance as more than a cult sport. Someday it will, when Calvinism dies, and when it does, bodybuilding will finally become an Olympic event.

Physique presentation is a sporting objectification of self that is art and science, logic and feeling. A bodybuilder needs to know his body. He is dancer, actor, salesman. He is a contradiction in terms: a romantic existentialist. He strides barefooted across the stage with a dozen other bodybuilders. He takes his place in the lineup. He stands pumped and oiled and nearly naked, his two hundred and thirty pounds tucked into his tiny four-ounce posing briefs. He poses without movement. A perfectly sculpted statue. He radiates victory. He asserts his Command Presence

under the hot lights. He calls the eyes of judges and audience to the quality edge of his muscle. Size. Symmetry. Power. Proportion. Bulk. Definition. Striation. Vascularity. Grooming. Look. His superior Command Attitude reduces the other highly competitive muscle to beefcake. His posture states HERE I AM.

Winners know how to peak for the contest day. Three weeks before competition they cut carbohydrates from their high-protein diet to remove the last micro-pinch of body fat that might obscure muscle display. Work-outs intensify to carve out the lean definition of each separate muscle in the bulked muscle groups. A week before, the entire body is strip-shaved for the first time to allow any cuts or shaving rash to heal. In the last forty-eight hours, diuretics drain the minute layer of water between the muscle and the skin. The skin, paper thin, form fits the striae of each muscle, showing the minutest furrow like tiny grooves on granite. The vascularity of the veins snakes around the muscle almost on top of nearly invisible skin. The tan, by contest day, must be perfect and the body smoothed to a final shave before it is oiled backstage.

Contests are grueling twelve-hour affairs. The Pre-Judging, where the contest is actually won or lost, begins at ten in the morning, and, depending on the classes, Teenage, Men, and Weight and Age Divisions, can last until the early afternoon. By the evening show at eight, the judges, of whom there must be at least five, have tallied their votes. The Pre-Judging audience, smaller and hard core, can only have guessed at the winner. The audience for the evening show is larger, fans and friends and family, hot to party and cheer the parade of muscle bodies and wait eagerly for the names of the four finalists and the winner.

In the morning, the contestants arrive early. They saunter into the green room. They check in disguised under thick jogging suits and bulky nylon athletic jackets. They carry enormous gym bags. Some arrive alone. Some have the company of their training partners or their coaches.

The room is silent. Brows furrow with concentration. They psych each other out. One by one they begin the slow strip of their jackets and gym shoes and sweatshirts and tee shirts and sweatpants. Each reveals his stuff slowly. The offstage competition posing has begun.

Arms, big guns, appear. Broad shoulders. Huge pecs. Washboard abs. Thunder thighs. Big, naked bubble butts. In unshaven groins, penises sprout tight with tension or hang long and thick with languorous confidence.

Attentive buddies fold the contestants' clothes into the gym bags. They wet their hands with baby oil and begin the even slather of the

huge muscle bodies. The bodybuilders slide into their nylon posing briefs. Most pull their penises straight up toward their navels and let their balls hang low in the pouch. They pin the small white paper with their contest number over the front left hip of their briefs.

This is ritual.

Some play tug-of-war with their partners, pulling white towels back and forth to bring up the day's glossy pump on their years of hard muscle building. Others move to the ton of iron delivered to the theater for the day to polish their muscle, most often their arms, one last time before marching out on stage for the real competition of group comparison, flexing in unison mandatory poses, then individually, each one mounting the dais alone to pose for sixty seconds to music of his own selection.

Ryan, driving the Corvette to San Diego, could only guess what lay in store. That first morning of their first contest, when he and Kick entered the greenroom, Ryan thought he had died and gone to heaven. He was surrounded by more than twenty naked bodybuilders. He tried to keep custody of his eyes. He folded Kick's clothes and knelt at his feet, oiling up his legs to his shoulders. Ryan, during a scene of musclesex, had convinced Kick to replace baby oil with olive oil, because its sheen was more lustrous and its essence more classic.

"Whatever you say, coach."

Kick was up. He thought it was a good omen that his assigned contest number was *One*.

The morning Pre-Judging ran nearly three hours. Ryan was beaming. Kick glowed. They met during a break backstage.

"You look great out there," Ryan said.

"I feel great out there," Kick said. He motioned for Ryan to move in closer. "Spread some more oil on my chest." He pointed toward the watch pocket in Ryan's Levi's. "Give me a hit," he said. He reached into Ryan's pocket for a small snifter of coke. He blew two lines. "Now you," he said.

"I'm already wired," Ryan said.

"Come on." Kick put his arm on Ryan's shoulder. The heady smell of contest sweat and olive oil made Ryan's tits ache. "We're here to have a good time."

Ryan swacked off the snifter.

"Again," Kick said.

Ryan snorted another line.

"It's good for the vascularity," Kick said. He thrust his arms, fists down, alongside his thighs, flexed, and popped his veins. "Nice, huh?"

"Sexy."

“I want you to know,” Kick said, “how much fun it is to be inside this body.” He chuckled Ryan under the chin.

“Every man on that stage would like to be in your body. They might as well go home. You’re going to win.”

“I know.”

After the Pre-Judging, Ryan drove Kick in the Corvette to a coffee shop. Kick ordered an orange juice with four raw eggs. Ryan ordered, but was too hyped to eat.

“Keep your strength up,” Kick said. “You want to shoot a terrific video tonight.” He stroked his high-top gym shoe up and down Ryan’s leg. “Muscle TV.”

Kick was triumphant in his evening posing routine. Through his video monitor, Ryan caught every graceful nuance. He knew the choreography he had coached by heart. He had even selected Kick’s music. He was bored with uninspired muscleheads posing one after the other to the clichéd themes from *Exodus*, *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *Superman*. Ryan chose Tchaikovsky’s “Marche Slav.” Its thunderous power matched Kick’s smooth and commanding posing routine.

He flexed. He shined. He was pure, hard, blond muscle. His hair and face and jaw accentuated the blond brush of his moustache, groomed trooper sharp. His physique flowed from his head. He hit each pose hard. He had appeal. There was no quiver from the muscle exertion or the coke. He displayed every body part alternating always with the dozen ways he powered out his arms.

The crowd called out for more.

He hit the Most Muscular pose three times and threw his arms up over his head in victorious salute. The muscle crowd rose cheering to their feet.

Here was a man.

“Alright, gentlemen,” the head judge said over the loudspeaker. “We’re calling the five finalists out on stage for a pose down. This is the final comparison, man for man, to determine the winner. Ladies and gentlemen, these are our five finalists. Number One, Kick Sorensen....”

Ryan heard no other names.

The five finalists strolled out on stage. Each picked a spot and hit a pose, playing the cheering audience. Kick owned stage center. He threw a double-biceps shot and then crunched down into the popular Most Muscular. The crowd went wild.

“Give yourselves some room, fellas. Spread out. Make sure you’re in the light.”

The finalists sought their places. Kick held center stage with two musclemen moving to each side. They all stood heels close together, toes pointed out, elbows extended, arms hanging down.

“Alright. Let’s do a double-biceps pose on three. I want you all to hit exactly the same pose at the same time. On three. One-two-three. Hit your pose.”

Kick raised both arms. His biceps peaked under the hot light. He was arms and more than arms. He worked his pecs. He tightened his abs. Always he was working his legs. Contests are won or lost on legs.

“Okay. A lat spread from the front. On three. One-two-three.”

Kick positioned his thumbs behind his waist with his fingers front pointing down his hips. He swung his elbows out, lifted his chest, spread his shoulders, and opened wide his lats, holding the pose, then twisting slightly from the waist, left to right, catching the best play of the light.

“Now a side-chest pose. Your favorite side. Take your positions. Quiet, please. We want a side-chest shot. Rotate the sides. One-two-three.”

Kick stood on his left foot and the ball of his right with his right knee bent to display his right calf development. He turned his head to face the judges straight on. He clasped his hands above his right hip and pulled his left shoulder toward the audience. His arms read like an awesome frame around his massive pecs.

“Now a side-tricep. Your favorite side. Take your positions. On three. One-two-three. Hit it.”

Again, standing sideways, yet facing the judges, Kick rested on his left foot. He placed the ball of his right foot behind him, flexing his calf. He shot his right arm down his outside thigh, displaying the horseshoe definition of his triceps. Then reaching his left hand behind his butt, he shifted the pose, taking hold of the hand facing the crowd to pop his tricep even more. He instinctively knew the extra flourish needed to show off the fine detail of each muscle to its best advantage.

“And relax. Turn toward the curtain, please. Give yourselves room, fellas. Spread out. Okay. Double-bicep from the rear. On three. One-two-three. Hit it.”

Kick was born to show arms. From the backside, his biceps mounded like twin baseballs on the girth of his huge arms. He powered into the biceps shot, spread his shoulders, and kicked in a rearview of his left calf.

“Gentlemen, let’s have a back lat spread. On three. One-two-three. Hit it.”

Kick thrust his butt out. His perfect glutes caught the light. A woman behind Ryan screamed. Kick tucked his thumbs behind his waist and

opened his elbows, wide, spread his back, slightly at first, and then opening the left side to its full plane, and then the right, both wings from his waist to his shoulders in perfect symmetry. The back of his blond head glowed atop the column of his thick neck.

“Relax. Face front, please.”

The crowd had settled on a favorite. Someone set up a chant of “Number One! Number One!” The number Ryan had pinned on Kick’s brown nylon briefs.

“May we have some quiet, please. Face front, please. May I remind you, Number Three, that these are mandatory poses. If you’re not sure which way to turn, look at the men next to you.”

The crowd cheered and hooted.

“Alright now, fellas. Flexing the legs, display the thighs. One-two-three.”

Kick locked his hands behind his head, elbows wide, armpits rampant. He flashed his washboard abs and thrust one leg and then the other out for judgment. The thickness of his thighs broke up into distinctly displayed muscle groups. The contestant on his right moved his own leg toward Kick’s, daring closer comparison. The crowd went wild. Kick lowered his hands to his waist, thrust his leg toward his competitor, flexed it, looked at the other bodybuilder, then pointed, grinning, to his own thigh, bulked, carved, cut, vascular, and tanned. He looked up from his leg and threw the crowd a devastating so-what-do-you-think grin.

“And relax. Fellas, we’re going for your favorite ab shot on three. One-two-three. Hit it.”

Again Kick locked his hands behind his head. The crowd was with him. He kicked out his right leg, resting his foot on the heel, working his leg length, giving more than required, locking his abs into the sculpted ridges Ryan’s tongue knew by heart. He carved his abs tight, then sharpened them tighter. The crowd chanted “Number One!” Kick’s whole posture, arms up, leg extended, belly displayed, seemed to focus the light on the full pouch of his posing briefs. Ryan, at the last minute in the greenroom, had slipped Kick’s balls and cock through a brass cock ring to accentuate the big package. “I want them to see everything you’ve got,” he had said. He wondered how much a big cock and balls registered with the judges, many of whom were older, closeted gay men. On stage, Kick radiated pure sex. Women in the crowd were shouting, “We want Number One!”

Ryan shouted into the din. “Dream on!”

“And relax. Catch your breath, fellas. We’re going to do the Most Muscular now. Your favorite Most Muscular. On three. One-two-three. Hit it.”

Kick raised his arms wide, elbows above his shoulders, then slowly, hunched, leaned over, and powered down into the Most Muscular crab pose. His right leg led his left. His arms were Most Muscular. His chest pumped like a barrel. His head was up. His face back. His chin out. The cords in his neck spoke power. The crowd loved him. He broke the pose and hit it again. Then again. This last time in full lockdown, revolving his fists one around the other to play the brute force of his upper body and massive arms.

“And relax. Now there will be sixty seconds of free posing. Remember, fellas, this is a pose down. This is your final chance to show why you should be Mr. Western Pacific Coast. Take your sixty seconds. Use it, please.”

The disco music came up over the cheers of the crowd. Each contestant tried to outpose the other. They moved, freestyle, pose against pose, topping each other: arms, chests, backs, abs, and legs. They moved sideways. They turned front and back. Kick stayed confidently in place in the melee. He had found the best light. He was center to the group. They were good. But he was power. They were competitors, but he was brooking no competition. He ignored them jockeying into him, following his poses, trying to lure him into following their competitive moves. Instead, he grinned, thrust out his chin. His blond hair and his moustache glowed. He played straight to the audience, straight to the judges, straight to Ryan behind his video camera in the first row. Kick was surrounded by bodybuilders, but he was more than a bodybuilder. He was a Lord of Light.

The crowd turned to near riot. Fans with cameras rushed the lip of the stage. Applause. Whistles. “Number One!”

The minute of blasting music stopped. The crowd rose cheering louder. The head judge called for quiet. The auditorium soothed down expectantly. Finally, he named the fifth and fourth and third runners-up. The three men took their trophies, kissed the girl who presented them, and moved off to the side. Kick flexed his pecs and ran his hand down his rippled belly. The hall grew tense. Expectant. Kick stood next to Number Nine. He reached out to shake Nine’s hand. Calls for “Number One!” flared here and there from the orchestra and balcony. “Number One!” Time stood still.

Ryan knew there was no God if they came this close and lost. In the pause, Number Nine hit his best Most Muscular. Kick raised both fists into his best double-biceps shot of the night and killed the guy with his arms.

“Number One! Number One! Number One!”

“Quiet, please.” The judge was a sadist. “We have three trophies to award before we announce the winner of the Mr. Western Pacific Coast Contest.” Ryan knew. He knew that he knew the verdict. “The trophy for Best Legs goes to Number One, Kick Sorensen!”

Kick hit a severe leg pose then threw his arms up in salute. Number Nine reached to shake his hand. The young blonde woman carried the Best Legs trophy to Kick. She leaned forward to give the winner his customary kiss. Ryan watched Kick deftly turn his mouth away. The blonde bussed his cheek. Kick set the trophy down at his feet.

“The trophy for Best Arms,” the trophy Kick coveted most, “Number One, Kick Sorensen.”

Kick hit a single side-biceps pose. The crowd cheered. He was sweeping the competition. Number Nine realized he was going to place second. Kick received the second trophy from the blonde girl and placed it near the first.

“Number One! Number One!”

Kick was a generous poser. He obliged the cheers, roiling a double-bicep shot down into one last Most Muscular pose. Number Nine, a sport to the end, followed suit. The audience screamed as Kick took the trophy for Best Posing.

Under the roar, the judge’s words were lost as he named the second runner-up. Number Nine heard. He raised his arms in valedictory and turned to shake Kick’s hand.

The audience rose screaming to their feet.

“The winner of the Mr. Western Pacific Coast title is...Number One! Kick Sorensen!”

Ryan nearly died. “Omigod! I love you, Kick!”

Kick pumped off a succession of killer poses. He raised his prizewinning arms high over his head. The cheering rose as he accepted his First Place trophy and headed toward the posing platform. He mounted the dais and placed the four trophies at his feet. The four finalists grouped themselves on the platform’s lower levels with Kick in top place. Photographers crowded to the foot of the stage to shoot the winners with cameras and flash guns.

Ryan toyed with his own anonymity. “Wasn’t that Number One somethin’?” he said to a small group of three huge powerlifters.

“Yeah,” they said.

“I hear this is his first contest.” Ryan cast bread on the water.

“You’re shittin’ me.” The guy curled his twenty-inch bicep up to stroke his thick moustache.

“Not me,” Ryan said.

“Then the guy’s even more of a dude.” He turned to his partner. “Hey, Doyle. This is Blondie’s first contest.” Then he saluted Ryan with his big meat hook. “Yeah, buddy.”

That night Ryan drove the red Corvette, crammed with the four big trophies, back to the Motel San Diego. Laughing and exhausted, Ryan stripped and lay back on the bed.

“Lie still, coach.” Kick arranged the muscle trophies carefully on the sheets around him.

“Now I know,” Ryan was hot with anticipation, “what Oscar winners do when they get home.”

Kick, smiling, moved back from the bed. Slowly, sensually, he stripped himself out of his green Adidas warm-up suit. His tanned body still glistened with the olive oil and sweat of the competition. With his thumbs, he pulled his tailored brown posing briefs down from his waist, down past the brass cock ring circling the root of his big blond dick and balls, down his official Best Legs in Ten Western States.

He had become very serious. For a moment, he stood and studied Ryan who was awestruck at this intimacy following so quickly the public physique presentation. The applause was nothing compared to what they saw in each other’s eyes. In all their private nights of making love, no night had begun with such wide-open celebration of Kick’s exquisite manliness. The world for the first time had acknowledged what they had privately known and pursued so intensely for so long together. The victory belonged to them both. They were united. They had gone public in their quest for manly excellence, and the crowds were eating it up.

Naked, in his All-American prize-winning glory, Kick moved toward the bed. He lowered himself slowly down on Ryan’s naked body.

“I’ve wanted all my life to do this,” Kick said. “This way. This time. On a night like this. Tonight’s a special one.”

He meant make muscle-love man-to-man, lover-to-lover, bodybuilder-to-coach, in those triumphant first hours after the winning of his first physique contest. Their separate boyhood dreams of manhood had conjoined.

“It’s you, Ry. This is my personal best. From me to you. There’s no other man.”

At the start, the only promise they had made was never to become ordinary to each other.

“I want to lay it all on you, coach.”

The Energy between them was stronger than ever.

Hours later, exhausted in each other’s arms, in the quiet before the

San Diego dawn, Kick whispered to Ryan.

“You won’t laugh,” he said. He rubbed Ryan’s belly frosted with dried glaze. “I mean it seriously.”

He moved his golden face in close to Ryan’s and announced it like a mandate to the writer whose cheek rested in the fragrant under-cove where Kick’s arm and shoulder joined his chest.

“Someday,” Kick said, “I want us to be a story told at night in beds around the world.”

Ryan’s hungry heart came running.